

The Arabic Story: Mirror Of A Culture A Curriculum For The West

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Abstract

For so long the Americans did not see the need to learn a foreign language. They did not perceive this dire need.

Speaking a language is not about making a noise of different sounds. It is about culture, mannerism, history, literature, customs, religion (s), mentality, and wisdom that translate into a language.

Today, the West is forced to learn Arabic and understand the complexities of the Middle East, as a matter of survival. Arabic is one of the most difficult languages. Because when a person says something, it is not necessarily exactly what they mean. In other words Arabic is a very rich language and hence is far from literal. In the West our speech is more direct and our language is more specific.

The following manuscript is the foundation for a pre-Arabic language course to facilitate learning of the Arabic language.

Introduction

Hurry! The bells are tolling. It is time for class.

“On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.”¹

The above quotation from the book of Isaiah in the Bible’s Old Testament is fascinating. It cites the spread of the geographic Middle East. The area is small. And yet it boasts a wide history of empires and vaunts a fantastic selection of cultures and religions. It is an invitation to delve into the worldview of inclusive monotheism; the ideal view of inclusive monotheism as it should be in the Middle East in particular. This is the drama of our time. We are not dealing with past history or a prophecy for a distant future. We are caught in the unfolding of a new present.

We are at that crossroads. We need to choose understanding and knowledge of this viable area, while acquiring the Arabic language, for our survival in the West. The Arabic language is

¹Isa.19: 23-25.

the major language of this region. It is sister to Hebrew, both pointing to Aramaic as their mother language. However, the Arabic language is the younger of the two.

For this course study, the beginning of the quest of learning the Arabic tongue, the undertaking of the language will remain abecedarian. The recommendation, based on a broad experience of teaching and research, indicates that comprehension of the complexities of the cultures and the intertwining of the religions in the area at hand is essential in facilitating the actual grasp of the Arabic language.

Thesis

Arabic is considered a sanctified language. It is the language of the Qur'an, the sacred Scriptures of Islam, and is believed to be the speech of Allah. "Allah" is the word for "God" in Aramaic and Arabic. Allah is not a proper name. It is a contraction of the word 'al- ilah', meaning simply god. Allah was originally a deity for rain and sky, who eventually became a supreme god in pre-Islamic Arabia. The pagan Arabs praised him as they approached the "Ka'bah" in Mecca, a sacred place before the advent of Islam, from the time of Abraham:

"Here I am, O Allah, here I am.

You have no partner,

Except such a partner as you have.

You possess him and all that is his."²

This song parallels surah 112: "He is Allah, the One! Allah, the eternally besought of all! He begetteth not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him."³

² Reza Aslan, *No god but God*, (New York: Random House, 2005), 8.

³ Qur'an 112: 1-4 (Pickthall).

However, in the time before Islam referred to as “Jahiliyah”, Arabic ignorance, Allah had three daughters: Allat, the goddess; al-Uzza, the mighty, who the Egyptians knew as Isis, and Manat, from the Hebrew ‘manna,’ the goddess of fate.⁴ “Have you considered Lat and ‘Uzza, Manat, the other third (of the deities)?”⁵ “Those who do not believe in the Hereafter give the angels names of females.”⁶

The choice is ours to make at the crossroads. My proposal is to outline a curriculum to provide a context for perceiving the intricate cultures of the Middle East, while learning the Arabic language. We will look at the inception of the Middle East as the cradle of the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and the culmination of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as they permeate the daily lives of Middle Easterners.

The Jews, Christians, and Muslims have the common belief that the Divine is transcendent. They concur that the creator belongs to all. He is whole, the one for the aggregate. However, they are brawling constantly. According To Emile Durkheim, “the idea of the sacred is of social origin and can be explained only in sociological terms. If it influences individual minds and is developed in them in an original manner, it is by way of secondary effect. The forms it takes cannot be understood if they are not related to the public institutions of which they are only the extension.”⁷ And “Religious ideas arise out of interpreting a particular kind of social, not personal, sentiment, namely, a sentiment in which individuals see themselves linked to society as a whole. Thus, personal religious beliefs arise out of social religion, which dictates the dogmas to be believed and rites to be practiced.”⁸ Therefore, the Jews, Christians, and Muslims live in

⁴ Reza Aslan, *No god but God*, (New York: Random House, 2005), 7.

⁵ Qur’an 53: 19-20 (Ahmad Ali).

⁶ Qur’an 53: 27 (Ahmad Ali).

⁷ Michael Peterson et al., *Philosophy Of Religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

⁸ Ibid. 12.

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perpetual conflict pointing to their respective exclusive monotheisms inherited from their foundations: Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

El, the universal God, called Abraham from Mesopotamia. Yahweh's prophet Moses, the receiver of the Ten Commandments, was raised in Ancient Egypt. These two men are the founders of Judaism. El and Yahweh are names for the same God. However, they represent two different worldviews. It is important to note that Islam is modeled on Judaism, and Christianity, which sprang from Judaism - took another path by claiming that its kingdom is not of this world. Those three religions claim to worship the same god, known as God, Yahweh, and Allah. In Islam, he has 99 names, in Judaism he has 12 names and in Christianity he has one. These comprise the religions inhabiting the Middle East.

Moses was raised in Ancient Egypt, where people believed that they abided in the living temple of God. Their culture was dictated by the naturally fenced environment: the Mediterranean Sea to the north, high mountains and the Red Sea to the east, vast quick-sanded desert to the west, and a predictable climate which they enjoyed. Their language, the Egyptian Hieroglyphics, was presumed to be a gift from God. It had several words expressing immortal and eternal concepts and lacked a word to precisely indicate "evil." Life in the Nile valley was anticipated and calm, except to the south on the border with Nubia. Existence was ordered, the Nile flooded on schedule, harvest was plenty, and people were satisfied. People in Ancient Egypt trusted the gods. They had one god, "Amun," meaning the invisible one. The rest of the gods were Amun's manifestations, which people experienced. The secret of the enduring stability and prosperity of Egypt resides in the fact that the Pharaoh was considered God incarnate on earth. His rule was absolute. His office was divine. Women carried the royal blood, and by marriage to the right woman, pharaohs were in the making. Thus, in Egypt they enjoyed a balance - neither a

patriarchate nor a matriarchate - but an “idealchate.” While alive, the pharaoh was identified with the falcon Horus, the eye of God, son of Osiris. In his death, the pharaoh was identified with the resurrected Osiris.

Life in Egypt was based on the concept of Ma’at - truth, order, and justice. The goddess Ma’at was usually depicted with an ostrich feather on her head. The ideal of cosmic and social order is Ma’at. Her symbol - the feather - was more than a symbol. It was that which the heart of the deceased person was weighed against at the time of his judgment. Beware if the heart is heavier than the feather because the deceased will then be in for a troubled eternal afterlife.

The Ancient Egyptians were known for their wisdom: “So Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds.”⁹ In the 11th century B.C. the king of Byblos, Syria addressed an Ancient Egyptian official, saying: “True, Amun fitted out all the lands. He fitted them out after having earlier fitted out the land of Egypt whence you have come. And craftsmanship came forth from it reaching to the place where I am. And learning came forth from it reaching to the place where I am.”¹⁰

Psalm 104 in the Bible has been compared to the Hymn to Aten, the sun disk, which was written by the pharaoh Akhenaten. The comparison is to the point of suggestion that the Hebrews learned about monotheism, and the idea of one god from Akhenaten, during their sojourn at the time of Joseph, his brothers, and their descendents.

Below is the hymn to Aten:

I

“May you always appear thus gloriously in the horizon of the sky,

O living Aten, origin of life!

⁹ Book of Acts 7: 22.

¹⁰ J. R. Harris, *The Legacy of Egypt*, (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press 1971), 198.

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Arisen from the eastern horizon,
You have filled all earth with your splendor;
You are beautiful, great, dazzling, exalted above each land,
Yet your rays encompass the lands to the limits of all, which you have created;
There in the Sun, you reach to their boundaries, making them bow to your Son, whom
you love;
And though you are far, your rays are over the earth, and you are in the faces of those
who watch your journeying.

II

You go to rest in the western horizon, and earth is in darkness like death,
With the sleepers in bedchambers, heads covered - the eye cannot discern its companion;
All their goods might be carried off - though they are near - without their knowing.
Every lion comes forth from his doorway, insects and snakes bite and sting
Darkness shrouds, earth is silent - he who created them is at rest in his tomb.

III

Dawn rises shining on the horizon, gleams from the sundisk as day,
You scatter the darkness, bestow your sunbeams, and the Two Lands offer thanksgiving.
The Sun folk awaken and stand on their feet, for you have raised them up;
Their bodies are bathed, they put on their clothing, their arms raised in praise at your
appearing. Throughout the land they take up their work.

IV

The herds are at peace in their meadows, trees and the vegetation grow green,
Birds fly from their nests, their wings spread wide in praise of your Person;

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All the small beasts leap about on their feet, and all who fly up or settle to rest, live because you have shone upon them.

Ships go downstream or upstream as well, each path lies open because of your presence; The fish in the river dart about in your sight, and your beams are deep in the great Green Sea.

V

It is you, who create the seed in women, shape the fluids into human beings, Make the son alive in the womb of his mother, soothe him, ending his tears, Nurturer from the womb to those given breath to bring into life all that he has created. He descends from the womb to breathe on the day of his birth, And you open his mouth, determine his nature, and minister to his needs.

VI

The fledgling in the egg speaks in the shell, so you give him breath within it to succor him. And you have given to him his allotted time so that he might break out from the egg. To come forth peeping at that time and move about upon his own two feet when he emerges from it.

VII

How various are the things you have created, and they are all mysterious to the sight! O sole God, without another of your kind, you created the world according to your desire, while you were alone,

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With mankind and cattle and every sort of small beast, all those upon land, those who go upon feet, those who are on high soaring upon their wings, the foreign lands of Khor and Kush, and all that belongs to Egypt.

VIII

You give each person his place in life, and you provide for his needs;

Each one has his sustenance, and his lifetime is reckoned for him.

Tongues are separated by words, the natures of persons as well; and their skins are made different so you can distinguish the peoples.

IX

You create Hapy, the Nile, in the Underworld to bring him, at your desire, to nourish the people, just as you create them for yourself,

Lord of them all, who is weary for them, O Lord of all earth, who shines for them, O Aten of day, awesome in majesty.

All the foreign lands are far away, yet you make their lives possible,

For you have placed a Hapy in the sky that he might come down upon them –

Making waves upon the mountains like those of the Great Green Sea to water the fields in their villages.

X

How well ordered it is, your governing, O Lord of Eternity, Hapy in heaven!

You belong to the foreign peoples, to the small beasts of each land who go upon feet.

And Hapy comes from below to beloved Egypt as well, while your rays are nursing each meadow, You shine, and they live, they grow strong for you;

You fashion the seasons to make all your creation flourish –

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The winter for cooling and the heat which ripen;
And you have made the sky far off in order to shine down from it, to watch over all you
have created.

XI

You are one alone, shining forth in your visible form as the living Aten,
Glorious, giving light, far-off yet approaching nearby.
You create the numberless visible forms from yourself –
You who are one alone –
Cities, towns, fields, the road, the river, and each eye looks to you as its shining example:
You are in the sun-disk of day, overseer of wherever you go and whatever shall be;
For you fashion their sight so that you may be complete – as they celebrate with one
voice your creation.

XII

And you are in my heart; there is no other who knows you
Except for your son, Akhenaten, Nefer-Kheper-re Wa-en-re.
Let him be wise with your counsel, your strength, that the world may approach your
condition just as when you created it.
You have risen, and they are alive; you go to rest, and they die.
For you are the measure of Time itself, one lives by means of your Eyes shall be filled
with beauty until your setting; all labor is set aside when you go to rest in the West.
Then rise! Let the creatures of earth thrive for the king!
And let me hasten on with every footstep as I have since you founded the world.

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And raise them up for your son who came forth from your very body.”¹¹

Psalm 104

”Bless the Lord, O my soul, O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty; wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent, you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers. You set the earth on its foundations so that it shall never be shaken. You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight. They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them. You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth. You make springs gush forth in the valleys, they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animals; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation, they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the full of your work. 14. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart. The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted, in them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney. You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. You make darkness, and it is right, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out. The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.

¹¹ James M. Brophy et al., *Perspectives from the Past, primary sources in Western Civilizations*. Third Edition Volume I (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 64-66.

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When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens. People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening. O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it. These all look to you to give them their food in due season. When you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works. Who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke. I will sing to the Lord as long as I live. I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord. Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord! ”¹²

The influence of Ancient Egypt on literature is seen mainly in wisdom texts. According to J. R. Harris that messianic literature came into being in the First Intermediate Period when men had need of hope.

In the Old Testament God is referred to as a potter. Isaiah 29:16; 45:9; 64:8; Jeremiah 18:2; Job 10:9; 33:6). And in the New Testament, Saint Paul writes: “Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use?”¹³ Amenemope, the Ancient Egyptian author writes: “As for man –(mere) clay and straw –

¹² Psalm 104.

¹³ Roman 9:21.

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The god is his builder. He tears down and builds up daily, He makes a thousand poor men at will, and makes a thousand men into inspectors, while he is in his hour of like”¹⁴

Still, many parallels are seen between the Ancient Egyptian literature in the form of instruction and advice for young people and Proverbs and the Book of Job in the Old Testament of the Bible. An example: “Give ear, hear what is said,

Set your mind to interpret them;

It is profitable to fix them in your mind,

But detrimental to him who ignores them.

Let them rest in the casket of your body,

That they may be a doorpost in your mind;

Indeed, when there is a gale of speech,

They shall be a mooring-post for your tongue.”¹⁵

The following is from Proverb 22:17: “Give ear, and hear my words,

Set your mind to know them;

For it is fine that you keep them within you,

That they be fixed as a tent-peg on your lips.”¹⁶

From Mesopotamia, the land between the two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates- modern-day Iraq - Abraham was called by El to follow him to the Promised Land. Mesopotamia, a broad alluvial plain responded to its natural environment and to the unpredictability of the climate by breaking into city-states. The north is bounded by the Zargos Mountains and the southwest is bordered by the Arabian Desert. The Tigris and the Euphrates flow into the Persian Gulf. No wonder then in these densely populated city- states, the urban centers gave rise to legal codes.

¹⁴ J.R. Harris, *The Legacy of Egypt*. Second Edition. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1971), 268 and 269.

¹⁵ Ibid. 279.

¹⁶ Ibid. 279.

The temple – ziggurat - was at the middle of the city-state. The political and economical components were controlled by the temple's administration. Religion, political and economic affairs were intertwined. Life in Mesopotamia was characterized by a continuous struggle for supremacy between the powerful city-states.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the most celebrated literary works beside the Bible that come from the Middle East. Gilgamesh was an actual ruler of the city of Uruk in the early third millennium B.C. The epic tells the story of the flood. It is a parallel account to the story of the flood of Noah according to the Bible. The Gilgamesh epic is also a profound commentary on the human condition as experienced in Mesopotamia. The epic entertains the idea of immortality and the ending settles for the notion of the inescapable destiny of the human being. Humanity is mortal. Following is a quotation from Gilgamesh in his search for immortality:

“Gilgamesh, wither are you wandering?
Life, which you look for, you will never find.
For when the gods created man, they let
Death be his share, and life
Withheld in their own hands.”¹⁷

Unlike the language of the Ancient Egyptians, the Hieroglyphics, the early form of the language of Mesopotamia and their creation stories indicate that there is no afterlife. The language lacks words for eternity and immortality, but has a word for ‘evil.’ The beliefs likewise do not promise any existence after this one, as humankind was created to serve the gods. People did not trust the gods in Mesopotamia.

The local population in Mesopotamia did not dare contest the leaders of the city-states. They believed that the gods ordained their leaders. However, when a powerful invader overtook

¹⁷ Niels Nielsen, et al., *Religions of the World*. Third edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993),58.

the city-state, they accepted him and served him. Hammurabi, the lawgiver who ruled the Babylonian Empire of Mesopotamia from 1792 to 1750 B.C. aimed to achieve justice by introducing fair punishments. It foreshadowed the Mosaic law of Judaism and the Shari'ah law of Islam. This is the foundation of the concept for 'an eye for an eye' found in Judaism and Islam.

The Code of Hammurabi was religiously legitimized by the following introduction of the Code:

“When the august god Anu, king of the Anunnaku deities, and the god Enlil, lord of heaven and earth who determines the destinies of the land, allotted supreme power over all peoples to the god Marduk, the firstborn son of the god Ea exalted him among the Igigu deities, named the city of Babylon with its august name and made it supreme within the regions of the world, and established for him within it eternal kingship whose foundations are as fixed as heaven and earth, at that time, the gods Anu and Enlil, for the enhancement of the well-being of the people, named me by my name Hammurabi, the pious prince, who venerates the gods, to make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, to rise like the sun-god Shamash over all humankind, to illuminate the land. I am Hammurabi, the shepherd, selected by the god Enlil, he who heaps high abundance and plenty, who perfects every possible thing for the city Nippur, the city known as band –of-heaven- and earth, the pious provider of the Ekur temple...the capable king, the restorer of the city Eridu, the purifier of the rites of the Eabzu temple... the onslaught of the four regions of the world, who magnifies the reputation of the city Babylon, who gladdens the heart of his divine lord Marduk, whose days are devoted to the Esagil temple... When the god Marduk commanded me to provide

just ways for the people of the land in order to attain appropriate behavior, I established truth and justice as the declaration of the land, I enhanced the well-being of the people.”¹⁸

The Code of Hammurabi contains 282 laws. It is concerned with the organization of society. It divides the population in three classes: the amelu, the aristocrat; the muskinu, the beggar; and the ardu, the slave. The Code of Hammurabi administrates all aspects of daily life including family affairs, criminal behavior, civil ordinance, entrepreneurship, and trade. In this light Hammurabi Code of Law seems close to Shari’ah. It is not surprising that spiritual matters were absent from Hammurabi Law. For the proposition of the people to be governed was the main concern, so as to prevent chaos and eliminate destruction. They had to be punished fairly if they did something harmful. However the law #126 is problematic. It states: “If any one who has not lost his goods state that they have been lost, and make false claims: if he claim his goods and amount of injury before God, even though he has not lost them, he shall be fully compensated for all his loss claimed.”¹⁹ At this point then his punishment would probably come from God straight. The individual places himself in the hands of fate. I find this law still perplexing compared to the other laws of the Code, which I found very specific and to the point.

Shari’ah law is Islamic sacred law, and Shari’ah means the path to follow God’s law. In Islam, there is no separation of church and state. Allah is in charge: “To each of you, we have given a law and a pattern of life.”²⁰ Muhammad represents Allah: “Accept what the Apostle gives you, and refrain from what he forbids.”²¹ “Say: If you love God then follow me”²² There are four sources of Shari’ah: the Qur’an, the sacred scriptures of Islam. Sunna is the teachings of

¹⁸ James M. Brophy, *Perspectives From The Past, From the Ancient Near East through the Age of Absolutism, Primary sources in Western Civilizations* Third edition Volume 1, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 23 - 24.

¹⁹ The Code of Hammurabi the Avalon Project at Yale Law school (<http://elsinore.cis.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/medieval/hamcode.htm>).

²⁰ Qur’an 5: 48 (Ahmed Ali).

²¹ Qur’an 59: 7 (Ahmed Ali).

²² Qur’an 3: 31 (Ahmed Ali).

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the Prophet Muhammad. Consensus is known as Ijma'. Analogy is known as Qiyas. In Islam, there are two kinds of crimes: crimes against Allah (known as Hadd), and crimes against society. The Hadd crimes are the most serious crimes. The punishments due Hadd crimes are found in the Qur'an. For the Muslims, God's word was transmitted to Muhammad through the archangel Gabriel.

The Judaic Laws are found in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible attributed to Moses. Yahweh promises his people, "if you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land."²³ For the Jews, God's word was delivered through Moses.

It is important to note that the law handed to Moses was not unique in the fact many instructions and regulations concerning the worship of Yahweh. The many feasts and sacrifices and the celebration of the weekly Sabbath was outlined. The Qur'an indicates the five pillars of Islam in details. Hammurabi indicated that anyone who stole from the god would be put to death in law #6 "If anyone steals the property of a temple or of the court, he shall be put to death, and also the one who receives the stolen thing from him shall be put to death."²⁴

²³ The Book of Leviticus 26: 3-7.

²⁴ The Code of Hammurabi . Law # 6. <http://www.wsu.edu/dee/MESO/CODE.htm>.

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Abraham came from Mesopotamia, called by the universal god El, later introduced to Moses as the personal god Yahweh, who said of him: “Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”²⁵

Some Old Testament Prophets are commemorated in the Qur’an in a special way. Following are the references in the Qur’an.

“Commemorate the beneficence of your Lord on Zachariah, His devotee.”²⁶

“Commemorate Mary in the Book. When she withdrew from her family to a place in the east.”²⁷

“Commemorate Abraham in the Book: He was upright, a prophet.”²⁸

“Commemorate Moses in the Book. He was a chosen one, both an apostle and a prophet.”²⁹

Commemorate Ishmael in the Book. He was true of his promise, and a messenger, a prophet.³⁰

“Commemorate Enoch in the Book. He was a truthful person and a prophet, And We raised him to an exalted station.”³¹

“And make mention in the Scripture of Idris. Lo! He was a saint, a Prophet; and we raised him to high station.”³² In this translation of Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall a footnote explain that Idris is Enoch.

“[Remember] Ishmael, Edris and Dhu’l-Kifl. They were men of fortitude, and they were admitted to our grace. Verily they were among the doers of good.”³³

²⁵ The Book of Genesis 26:5.

²⁶ Qur’an 19: 2 (Ahmed Ali).

²⁷ Qur’an 19: 16 (Ahmed Ali).

²⁸ Qur’an 19: 41 (Ahmed Ali).

²⁹ Qur’an 19: 51 (Ahmed Ali).

³⁰ Qur’an 19: 54 (Ahmed Ali).

³¹ Qur’an 19: 56-57 (Ahmed Ali).

³² Qur’an 19: 56-57 (Pickthall).

Among those mentioned prophets is Abraham the father of the Abrahamic Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He is the one who was called from Mesopotamia, went to Egypt and settled in the Promised Land of Canaan. We are familiar with the other prophets. Nonetheless, the one that is known the least is Idris. Idris becomes a point of interest when connecting the dots among these religions. Idris figures prominently in the Qur'an albeit in only a few verses; however, he was exalted by Allah. That sounds important, rather intriguing.

Idris is Enoch in the Old Testament of the Bible he roamed with God until a time when God took him to himself. Enoch did not even die, but was taken into heaven during his lifetime. "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him."³⁴ The letter of Jude in the New Testament of the Bible mentions Enoch as well, in reference to the Books of Enoch."³⁵ It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, 'See the Lord is coming with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all, and to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.'³⁶

This realization compels one to go back to ancient Egypt to look for this enigmatic prophet. "For the Egyptians, the god Thoth was the inventor of all science, the guardian of the secrets of past and future, not least the master of the magic arts. Plato already wrote about him, calling him the father of letters, transcribing his name as 'Theuth.' Thoth was also the helper of the dead."³⁷ Roger Bacon, who helped steer alchemy into chemistry, in the thirteenth century at

³³ Qur'an 21: 85-86 (Ahmed Ali).

³⁴ The Book of Genesis 5: 24.

³⁵ R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder editors, *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965) 129.

³⁶ The epistle of Jude 14-15.

³⁷ J.R. Harris, *The Legacy of Egypt* (Oxford: At The Clarendon Press, 1971), 146.

Oxford, called Thoth “the father of philosophers.”³⁸ The Greeks and the Romans identified him with Hermes, who they accepted as the great prophet of remote antiquity.”³⁹ He is known to have written 42 books dealing with “law, education of priests, history of the world, geography, hieroglyphics, astronomy, astrology, religion, and medicine.”⁴⁰

“Thoth is the founder of natural theology: The way to discover the unique God through his work in nature. ‘Mortal and eternal blended and mingled so that Man may perform the demands of both sources of his nature. Firstly, to serve God, venerating and praising the things of heaven. Secondly, to assist and administer the things of Earth, by tilling the soil, navigating the waters, building on the land, and by serving each other that strongest of bonds that links the human race together’ (Thoth, Corpus Hermeticum).” Professor Rachad Mounir Shoucri explains “Knowledge in ancient Egypt was a secret well kept by the Egyptian priests, which explains why many scientific and philosophical writings of ancient Egypt were preserved to us through their Greek translations.”⁴¹

The Arabs recognized Thoth/Hermes as Enoch/Idriss According to Professor Shoucri, “The Suhrawardi [c.1186 A.D.] wrote: But we find ourselves in agreement (also) with the father of the secular men of learning, namely, Hermes of Egypt, who is known under the name of the prophet Idriss, and was the founder of the Haramisa (i.e. Hermetists).”⁴²

The following is a Hermetic prayer of Thanksgiving:

“We give thanks to You! Every soul and heart is lifted up to You, undisturbed name, honored everyone and everything (comes) the fatherly kindness and affection and love, and any

³⁸ Frederick G. Vosbirgh, *The Age of Chivalry* (National Geographic Society: A volume in the Story of Man Library, 1969), 295.

³⁹ J. R. Harris, *The Legacy of Egypt* (Oxford: At The Clarendon Press, 1971), 146.

⁴⁰ Robert A. Armour, *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001), 129.

⁴¹ Rachad Mounir Shoucri, *Ancient Egyptian Philosophy, Thoth, Hermes and the Prophet Idriss (Part 1)* (Watani International Newspaper March 24, 2002).

⁴² Ibid.

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teaching there may be that is sweet and plain, giving us mind, speech, (and) knowledge: mind, so that we may understand You, speech, so that we may expound You, Knowledge, so that we may know You. We rejoice, having been illuminated by Your knowledge. We rejoice because You have shown us Yourself. We rejoice because while we were in (the) body, You have made us divine through Your knowledge. The thanksgiving of the man who attains to You is one thing: that we know You. We have known You, intellectual light. Life of life, we have known You. Womb of every creature, we have known You. Womb pregnant with the nature of the Father, we have known You. Eternal permanence of the begetting Father, thus have we worshipped Your goodness. There is one petition that we ask: we would be preserved in knowledge. And there is one protection that we desire: that we not stumble in this kind of life.”⁴³

The following are the prayers repeated all day long in the Middle East by the Jews, Christians, and Muslims respectively.

The Jews have to recite The “Shema” several times a day, meaning “Hear” in Hebrew: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”⁴⁴

The Christians recite the “Our Father”: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. In the name of Jesus Christ for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. Amen.”⁴⁵

⁴³ James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*. Revised edition. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1988), 329.

⁴⁴ The Book of Deuteronomy 6: 4.

⁴⁵ The Gospel of Matthew 6: 9-13.

The Muslims recite the opening of the Qur'an, the first chapter called 'Al-Fatihah' in Arabic: "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Owner of the Day of Judgment, Thee [alone] we worship; Thee [alone] we ask for help. Show us the straight path, the Path of those whom Thou hast favoured; not [the path] of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who stray."⁴⁶

The West first noticed the similarities between the teachings of Thoth/Hermes and Christianity in the middle ages. But, of course, the Ancient Egyptians who converted to Christianity recognized the strong resemblance.

The influence of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics on the formation of the Arabic alphabet was not direct. However, in their more simplified forms of Hieratic and Demotic they served as a model in developing early Semitic writing, which in turn led to the formation of the Arabic alphabet. It should be noted that the following non-Semitic languages are written in the Arabic script: Turkish -until 1930s- Persian, and Urdu.

The Qur'an was revealed in the Arabic language, in Arabia to the Arabs. The Qur'an, indicates the reason of the Revelation's chosen language in the following verses:

"Lo! We have revealed it, a Lecture [Qur'an] in Arabic that ye may understand."⁴⁷

"Thus have We revealed it, a decisive utterance in Arabic; and if thou shouldst follow their desires after that which hath come unto thee of knowledge, then truly wouldst thou have from Allah no protecting friend nor defender."⁴⁸

"Thus We have revealed it as a Lecture [Qur'an] in Arabic, and displayed therein certain threats, that peradventure they may keep from evil or that it may cause them to take heed."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Qur'an: The Opening chapter (Pickthall).

⁴⁷ Qur'an 12: 2 (Pickthall).

⁴⁸ Qur'an 13: 37 (Pickthall).

⁴⁹ Qur'an 20: 113 (Pickthall).

“And lo! It is a revelation of the Lord of the Worlds, which the true spirit hath brought down upon thy heart, that thou mayest be [one] of the warners, in plain Arabic speech. And lo, it is in the Scriptures of the men of old. Is it not a token for them that the doctors of the children of Israel know it? And if We had revealed it unto one of any other nation than the Arabs, and he had read it unto them, they would not have believed in it.”⁵⁰

“A Lecture [Qur’an] in Arabic, containing no crookedness, that haply they may ward off [evil].”⁵¹

“And thus we have inspired in thee a Lecture [Qur’an] in Arabic that thou mayest warn the mother-town [Mecca] and those around it, and mayest warn of a day of assembling whereof there is no doubt. A host will be in the Garden, and a host of them in the flame.”⁵²

“Lo! We have appointed it a Lecture [Qur’an] in Arabic that haply ye may understand”⁵³

“When before it there was the Scripture of Moses, an example and a mercy; and this is confirming Scripture in the Arabic language, that it may warn those who do wrong and bring good tidings for the righteous.”⁵⁴

The Qur’an was revealed to a specific group of people that speak Arabic. It is meant to be eloquent and clear so people who speak this language will understand. Thus the Arabic language is considered sacred to Muslims. It has been said that “in the Islamic tradition, the Arabic language is sufficient for spiritual and physical expression and fully replaces imagery with its illustrative vocabulary.”⁵⁵ This allows for calligraphy. The Qur’an is against representation in art: “He is Allah, the Creator, the Shaper out of naught, the Fashioner. His are the most beautiful

⁵⁰ Qur’an 26: 192-199 (Pickthall).

⁵¹ Qur’an 39: 28 (Pickthall).

⁵² Qur’an 42:7 (Pickthall).

⁵³ Qur’an 43:3 (Pickthall).

⁵⁴ Qur’an 46: 12 (Pickthall).

⁵⁵ Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics, an Introduction* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 17.

names. All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifieth Him, and He is the Mighty, the Wise.”⁵⁶ None can create art nor produce wonders except Allah. Therefore, presentational art is out of the question. No wonder the art of Arabic calligraphy is a high art in Islam.

A legend that Bruce Barton retells in his book *What Man Can Believe*, explains the character of the Arab of the desert. As a quick reminder, here that the Persians and the Arabs do not get along, for they are of different races and embrace different branches of Islam: “A Persian prince taunted an Arab saying that the Arabs were inferior to every other race. The Arab demanded, in reply, what other nations measured up to the Arabs’ strength, beauty, piety, courage, munificence [generosity], wisdom, fidelity, pride, or hospitality. They only, of the neighbors of the Persians, had maintained their independence. Their fortresses were the backs of their horses, their beds were the earth, and their roof was the sky. Other nations had a need to entrench themselves behind walls of stone and brick, but the Arab trusted in his sword and his courage. Other nations were able to trace their pedigree but a few generations; the Arabs could trace theirs back to Adam, the father of the human race. The Arab was so liberal he would slaughter his camel, his sole wealth, to give a meal to a stranger. No other nation had so elaborate a literature, such noble poetry. Theirs were the finest horses, the most beautiful and chaste women. No distance was too great for their camels. So sacred was their word that a sign or a look was a binding covenant. So hospitable were they that a guest was protected at the risk of the life of his host. To the Arabs belonged splendid raiment; theirs were mountains filled with gold and silver and gems. (I may add oil) Other nations obeyed kings, but they paid no tribute to a central government; every man among them was fit to be a king.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Qur’an 59: 24 (Pickthall).

⁵⁷ Bruce Barton, *What Man Can Believe* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1927), 129.

This description of the Arab characteristics sets forth the elements of national vitality in which the Arabs are taking pride. From such a proud race Mohammad and his religion sprang. And the Qur'an is deeply affected by the cultural norms of the society in which it was revealed. This story reinforces the idea of different races in the Middle East. The Arabs are Semitic and the Persians are Aryans; even though Islam does not recognize borders, this adds to the intense undercurrent that figures prominently in the Middle East. Also the Middle East has Berber and Caucasian population in North Africa. Caucasians inhabit Lower Egypt and along the Nile River and Nubians are found in the south of Egypt.

Islam is a religion, a culture, a thought process, and a way of life. This way of life structured the Ummah, in Arabic meaning "nation," of Islam governed by the Shari'ah. The Muslims, followers of Islam, make up one-fifth of the world population. The prophet of Islam, Muhammad is believed to be the seal of the prophets by the Muslims. The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad, who was illiterate from 610 to 632 A.D.

Muhammad was a shrewd businessman. He traveled a lot to Damascus in Syria and enjoyed meeting intellectual people. He loved poetry. He had a reputation of being fair and was a hakam, an arbiter among his people. He was married to Khadigah, a wealthy woman fifteen years his senior. They lived in Mecca. He was a member of Quraysh tribe, which controlled Mecca. Around the age of forty he started to meditate in a cave on Mount Hira near Mecca when he was approached by the Archangel Gabriel and received the first revelation.

The first revelation is presumed to have been in 610 A.D: "Recite in the name of your Lord who created, created man from a clot. Read: And thy Lord is the most bounteous, who teacheth by the pen, teacheth man that which he knew not."⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Qur'an 96: 1-5 (Pickthall).

The second revelation: “Nun. By the pen and that which they write [therewith]. Thou are not, for thy Lord’s favor into thee, a madman. And Lo! Thine verily will be a reward unfailing. And Lo! Thou art of a tremendous nature. And thou will see and they will see which of you is the demented.”⁵⁹ This revelation was an assurance to Muhammad that he was not hallucinating. Allah reassured him that he would be the victor over the doubter.

The Qur’an has 114 surahs, or chapters. The longer surahs are arranged in the front and followed by the shorter surahs. It is not set chronologically or by topics. The shorter surahs read like poems, the longer ones are written in prose. The shorter ones were revealed in Mecca, the longer ones revealed in Medina after the Hijrah in 622 A.D. The shorter ones carry a universal message and the longer ones tend to be more specific, laying out the Islamic laws.

The Qur’an talks about itself: “And this Qur’an is another book that We have revealed, blessed, affirming the earlier revelations, so that you may warn the people of Mecca the town of towns, and those who live around it. Those who believe in the life to come shall believe in it and be watchful of their moral obligations.”⁶⁰ The role of the Qur’an extends to the organization of temporal life. It regulates the Muslim community, which the Qur’an defines: “Of all the communities raised among men you are the best, enjoining the good, forbidding the wrong and believing in God. If the people of the Book had come to believe it was best for them; but only some believe, and transgressors are many.”⁶¹

In Islam the idea of obedience to Allah extended historically to the obedience of the rulers. Life in the desert is built on tribal loyalty. Islam is organized around the five duties of Islam known as the pillars, which support the foundation of the faith. Islam maintains that Muhammad is the one prophet who addresses all humankind.

⁵⁹ Qur’an 68: 1-6 (Pickthall).

⁶⁰ Qur’an 6: 92 (Ahmed Ali).

⁶¹ Qur’an 3: 110 (Ahmed Ali).

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Therefore a true Muslim has to follow the five pillars of Islam:

- Prayers five times a day (salat) proceeded with ablution
- Fasting during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Hijrah calendar
- Zakat, from the phrase “to purify,” the Arabic word for almsgiving
- Shahadah, the Arabic word for “witness.” To bear witness in Islam is to repeat the phrase: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger.”
- Pilgrimage to Mecca once in the course of one’s life if possible

Those five pillars are referenced in the Qur’an.

Ummah is a community of people that makes up a nation embracing a religion. The Qur’an claims that originally all people were one ummah: “Men were once a community of one faith; but they differed [and followed different ways]. Had it not been for the word proclaimed by your Lord before, their differences could have been resolved”⁶² Muhammad understood his mission, as a prophet of Islam, was to establish a new ummah which would embody Allah’s design for humanity and would result in uniting humankind into one ummah, one religion. This work began in 622 A.D. on the day of the Hijra to Medina, when the prophet fled to Yathrib, later named Medina, to save his life. In Medina he assumed two roles, the ruler and the preacher. In Medina the pattern of the ummah was established. There is no separation of church and state. There is no apparent division between the secular and the religious. Furthermore, the political and the spiritual are one. The Shari’ah rules the ummah. The jurisdiction of the ummah is known as Dar al-Islam, meaning the abode of Islam. However, Islam does not recognize borders or political boundaries; if people submit to God and his prophet then they are equal to each other no matter where they are. They all belong to the brotherhood and sisterhood of Islam. They are all

⁶² Qur’an 10: 19 (Ahmed Ali).

equal. God's unity: Allah is one. The ummah defines itself as an expression of unity. The Qur'an says: "O men, We created you from a male and a female, and formed you into nations and tribes that you may recognize each other. He who has more integrity has indeed greater honor with God. Surely God is all-knowing and well-informed."⁶³

The unity of the ummah is best demonstrated when Muslims perform daily ritual prayers all over the world, repeating the same words. It is also apparent when all males and females of all races, nations, and languages come to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage. This is the ideal of Islam. This is the ultimate goal of Islam when the world becomes Dar al-Islam with no more infidels (non-believers).

The word "Islam" comes from the root of the word "salam," meaning peace. Islam means to surrender completely in peace to the will of Allah, (God). The most important thing you do as a Muslim is to surrender to the will of Allah in peace. The Qur'an says "The Arabs of the desert say: We believe. Tell them: You do not believe. Better say: We submit; for belief has not yet penetrated your hearts. If you begin to obey God and His Apostle, He will not withhold the least (of the recompense) of your labor. Verily God is forgiving and Kind."⁶⁴ In other words, complete submission to the will of Allah is the prerequisite of belonging to the religion of Islam. "Say: Should I find some other protector besides God the creator of the heavens and the earth, who nourishes all and is nourished by none? Say: I am commanded to be the first to submit to Him, and not be an idolater."⁶⁵ Islam is considered the ideal religion chosen for all humanity. "Today I have perfected your system of belief and bestowed my favours upon you in full, and have chosen submission (al-Islam) as the creed for you."⁶⁶

⁶³ Qur'an 49: 13 (Ahmed Ali).

⁶⁴ Qur'an 49: 14 (Ahmed Ali).

⁶⁵ Qur'an 6: 14 (Ahmed Ali).

⁶⁶ Qur'an 5: 3 (Pickthall).

Jews and Christians, the ‘Dhimmi’ (people of the Book), are tolerated in the Qur’an. They can live under the Shari’ah. The Qur’an states: “There is no compulsion in matter of faith.”⁶⁷

At the time of Muhammad in Arabia, there were Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Hanifs, belonging to the monotheistic movement of Hanifism. Hanifism arose in the sixth century in west Arabia, in the Hizaz region. Hanifism is a return to the religion of Abraham. It is about turning away from the idols. The Qur’an identifies Abraham as a Hanif: “They say: ‘become Jews or become Christians and find the right way.’ Say: ‘No. We follow the way of Abraham the upright, who was not an idolater.”⁶⁸ “Neither was Abraham a Jew nor a Christian, but upright and obedient, and not an idolater.”⁶⁹

The Arabs believe that they are descendants from Abraham, who is connected with the Ka’bah and is believed to have started the pilgrimage to Mecca where the Ka’bah is (one of the five pillars of Islam). The Islamic Scriptures affirm that through the story of Abraham when God asked him to sacrifice his beloved son. The Qur’an presents Ishmael as the sacrificed son. That sacrifice took place in Mecca at the black stone [known as the Ka’bah] is precisely, according to the Muslims, this is the altar that Allah told Abraham and Ishmael to build to commemorate that incredible event. “Remember, when his Lord tried Abraham by a number of commands which he fulfilled, God said to him: I will make you a leader among men. And when Abraham asked: From my progeny too?’ The Lord said: My pledge does not include transgressors. Remember, we made the House (of Ka’bah) a place of congregation and safe retreat, and said: Make the spot where Abraham stood the place of worship; and enjoined upon Abraham and Ishmael to keep our House immaculate for those who shall walk around it and stay in it for contemplation and prayer,

⁶⁷ Qur’an 2:256 (Ahmed Ali).

⁶⁸ Qur’an 2: 135 (Ahmed Ali).

⁶⁹ Qur’an 3: 67 Ahmed Ali).

for bowing in adoration. And when Abraham said: 'O Lord, make this a city of peace, and give those of its citizens who believe in God and the Last Day fruits for food, He answered: To those will I also give a little who believe not, for a time, then drag them to Hell, a dreadful destination!' And when Abraham was raising the plinth of the House with Ishmael (he prayed): 'Accept this from us, O Lord, for you hear and know everything; and make us submit, O Lord, to your will, and our progeny a people submissive to you. Teach us the way of worship and forgive our trespasses for you are compassionate and merciful. And send to them, O Lord, an apostle from among them to impart your messages to them, and teach them the Book and the wisdom, and correct them in every way; for indeed you are mighty and wise.'⁷⁰

This thought culminates in the following verse from the Qur'an: "Who will turn away from the creed of Abraham but one dull of soul? We made him the chosen one here in the world, and one of the best in the world to come. For when his Lord said to him: 'Obey,' he replied: 'I submit to the Lord of all the worlds.'"⁷¹

The story of the sacrifice of Abraham's other son Isaac, is found in Genesis. It is the same story with a different son and a different place. Isaac was about to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, where King Solomon chose to build the Temple for Yahweh, the God of the Jews. On that same rock, Abraham built an altar for God and named God 'Yahweh-Jireh,' meaning Yahweh provides. "Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father! And he said: 'Here I am, son.' he said, 'the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son...When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar...Do not lay your hand on the boy...for

⁷⁰ Qur'an 2: 124-129 (Ahmed Ali).

⁷¹ Qur'an 2: 130-131 (Ahmed Ali).

now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me...Abraham called that place 'the Lord will provide [transliterated Jehovah Jireh] as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'"⁷²

Upon the rock, where Isaac was about to be sacrificed, Baruq - Muhammad's white, beautiful, and mystical beast on which he was riding - stood on their way to heaven during the nightly journey, "al-isra wa al-mi'raj." This is when Muhammad went from Mecca to Jerusalem to Heaven and back to Mecca in the same night. In heaven, Muhammad talked to God. He met Moses and Idris, and saw Jesus and Abraham. "And reached the highest pinnacle...Indeed he saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord."⁷³ Upon that rock and on this spot the mosque called 'Dome of the Rock' was built in 691 A.D. to commemorate Muhammad's ascension to heaven.

The following verse from the Qur'an identifies the nightly journey as a vision. "And (it was a warning) when We told thee: Lo! Thy Lord encompasseth mankind, and We appointed the 'vision' which We showed thee as an ordeal for mankind, and [likewise] the Accursed Tree in the Qur'an. We warn them, but it increaseth them in naught save gross impiety."⁷⁴ Please note the word 'vision' stands for the nightly journey, al-isra' wa al- mi'raj.

A significant division happened in Islam as a result of a rift in the family of the Prophet. The two main sects of Islam are: the Sunni, which is the majority, and the Shi'ah, which is considered a radical minority. (The story of Aisha, Fatimah, Ali, and Muhammad.)

The city of Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia, is named after Eve, because she is presumed to be buried there. In the book *The Gold of Exodus*, the author Howard Bloom proposes that the actual Mount Sinai is in Saudi Arabia. This is not a new idea, but Bloom develops it well. This idea is

⁷² The Book of Genesis 22: 7-14.

⁷³ Qur'an 53: 7-14, & 18 (Ahmed Ali).

⁷⁴ Qur'an 17: 60 (Pickthall).

shared by Middle Eastern scholars; from centuries past. A team from Trinity College, in Deerfield, IL is digging in Sinai to prove that the real Mount Sinai is there.

Islam believes in the virgin birth of Jesus. It reveres the Virgin Mary. It awaits the second coming of Jesus Christ. However, Muslims believe that Jesus Christ will come back as a Muslim and people will follow him, and that Abraham was the first Muslim. The Qur'an does not agree with the Christian belief that Jesus died on the cross. Muslims maintain that somebody who looked like him was crucified. They believe that Jesus ascended to the Heavens without dying and that he is with God.

The proximity of the religions in the Middle East is evident in how the qiblah, prayer direction, in Islam changed from facing the city of Jerusalem to facing the city of Mecca the birth place of Muhammad and the site of the Ka'bah over a fallout between Muhammad and the Jews of Yathrib. Around the eighth century, the direction of prayer changed from facing Jerusalem to facing Mecca and a change appeared in the architecture of the mosque, regarding the 'mihrab,' Arabic for 'prayer niche.' In the prayer niche there is usually a lamp. This is according to the Qur'an: "God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The semblance of His light is that of a niche in which is a lamp, the flame within a glass, the glass is glittering star as it were, lit with the oil of a blessed tree, the olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil appears to light up even though fire touches it not, light upon light, God guides to His light whom He will. So does God advance precepts of wisdom for men, for God has knowledge of everything."⁷⁵

Muhammad died in Medina, which is known as the city of the Prophet. Non-Muslims are forbidden to enter both Mecca and Medina.. In 622 A.D. Muhammad fled to Yathrib, later renamed Medina. The year of the flight or Hijrah, 622 A.D. is the beginning of the lunar Islamic calendar. When Muhammad was in Yathrib he declared it to be a sanctuary city [haram].

⁷⁵ Qur'an 24: 35 (Ahmed Ali).

According to Reza Aslan in his book *No god but God*, this declaration was formalized in the constitution of Medina. This meant that Yathrib could now become both a religious pilgrimage site and a trade center, like Mecca was in the time before Islam, and still is for Muslims. Those two, the religious and secular aspects, went hand in hand in Ancient Arabia.

Muhammad in Medina “became the paradigm for the Muslim empires that expanded throughout the Middle East after the Prophet’s death, and the standard that every Arab kingdom struggled to meet during the Middle Ages. The Medina ideal inspired the various Islamic revivalist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, all of which strove to return to the original values of Muhammad’s unadulterated community as a means to wrest control of Muslim lands from colonial rule (though they had radically different ideas about how to define the memory of Medina that launched the Islamic State.”⁷⁶

Aslan continues to describe The Medina of the Prophet as the sought-after ideal of the Muslims. He inserts that now “Medina is simultaneously the archetype of Islamic democracy and the impetus for Islamic militancy.”⁷⁷

Aslan asserts “Muslim extremists in Afghanistan and Iran have used the same community to fashion various models of Muslim theocracy. In their struggle for equal rights, Muslim feminists have consistently drawn inspiration from the legal reforms Muhammad instituted in Medina, while at the same time, Muslim traditionalists have construed those same legal reforms as grounds for maintaining the subjugation of women in Islamic society. For some, Muhammad’s actions in Medina serve as the model for Muslim-Jewish relations, for others, they demonstrate the insurmountable conflict that has always existed, and will always exist, between

⁷⁶ Reza Aslan, *No god but God* (New York: Random House, 2005), 52.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 52.

the two sons of Abraham...All Muslims regard Medina as the model of Islamic perfection...Medina is what Islam was meant to be.”⁷⁸

As an attempt to grasp, digest, and understand the above delineation of the Arabic Story we will start reading Arabic literature in translation. The proposed book is *Arabian Nights and Days* by Naguib Mahfouz, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. The first time the prize was awarded for Arabic literature. This novel starts where the famous book *Thousand and One Nights* ends, when Sultan Shahriyar decides to marry Shahrzad.

Mahfouz invites us to plunge into the ancient book of fantasy to discover the tumultuous truth of modernity in the wisdom of the Middle East. A few examples follow from Mahfouz’s book:

[Shahriyar refers to Shahrzad tales reflecting the role of imagination in the Middle East] “Her stories are white magic” “They open up worlds that invite reflection.”⁷⁹ [The universal question] “What is a man?”⁸⁰ “Life gives opportunities for both reflection and repentance.”⁸¹ “He who does good is not troubled by the consequences.”⁸² “What an extraordinary Sultanate this is, with its people and its genies! It raises aloft the badge of God and yet plunges itself in dirt.”⁸³

[A trend common in the Middle East: people memorize and quote at needed times albeit ending up in hypocrisy]“...You people are skilled at memorizing, quoting, and hypocrisy...”⁸⁴ “So it was said that part of the perfection of zeal is caution.”⁸⁵ “The best kindness is the one

⁷⁸ Ibid. 52.

⁷⁹ Naguib Mahfouz, *Arabian Nights and Days* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1995), 2.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 17.

⁸¹ Ibid. 23.

⁸² Ibid. 23.

⁸³ Ibid. 33.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 33.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 60.

soonest done.”⁸⁶ “This world is weighed down with stupidity.”⁸⁷ “I resign myself to the will of the Lord of Worlds.”⁸⁸ “He who is at loss divulges his secret to a stranger.”⁸⁹ “The fact that stories repeat themselves is an indication of their truth.”⁹⁰ [This is the style of successful politicians in the Middle East] “Shahrazad taught me to believe what man’s logic gives the lie to...and to plunge into a sea of contradictions. Whenever night comes it seems to me that I am a poor man.”⁹¹ Speaking of the weak “God has granted them something better than you possess: a mind and a soul.”⁹² “It is only an old story with which the elderly warm themselves: the story of love, madness, and blood.”⁹³ “Woe to people under a ruler without a sense of shame.”⁹⁴

“The birth of the Saint Sidi-al Warraq) [This is acultural reference. However, the religion of Islam does not have a place for saints] “If Al-Warraq were to be resurrected he would draw his sword.”⁹⁵ One of the sayings of the Prophet: “The corruption of scholars is through heedlessness, and the corruption of the princes is through injustice, and the corruption of Sufis is through hypocrisy.” “Who are the associates of the Devil? A prince without learning, a scholar without virtue, a Sufi without trust in God, and the corruption of the world lies in their corruption.” “Man was created to be a hunter.”⁹⁶ “The logic of faith is everlasting and eternal, the path is one at first, then it splits inevitably into two. One of these leads to love and to obliteration of self, the other to holy war. As for people of obliteration, of self, they are dedicated

⁸⁶ Ibid. 71.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 79.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 86.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 96.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 98.

⁹¹ Ibid. 131.

⁹² Ibid. 136.

⁹³ Ibid. 137.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 146.

⁹⁵ Naguib Mahfouz, *Arabian Nights and Days* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1995), 159.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 161.

to themselves, and as for people of holy war they dedicate themselves to God's servants."⁹⁷ "For him whose happiness is not valid, that happiness bequeaths troubles; and for him whose sociability is not in the service of his Lord that sociability bequeaths alienation."⁹⁸ "Everyone thereon is transitory, except His face, and he who delights in the transitory will be beset by sorrow when that which delights him comes to an end. Everything is vanity except the worship of Him; sorrow and alienation throughout the world ensue from looking at everything but God." "He who has been endowed with three things alongside three other things has escaped from the banes of life: an empty stomach on a contented heart; continued poverty with present abstinence; and total patience with constant invocation of His Name." "You must, before receiving the wine, cleanse the container, removing from it all elements of dirt." "He is waging war against error, to the extend of his ability." "He is poor, but rich in bearing the worries of mankind." "A creed for the sword and a creed for love."⁹⁹ "Despite his state of bewilderment he was able to recall how he had hoped to emerge from his confusion to the sword of holy war or to divine love."¹⁰⁰

[If death is one's fate then death is what one tastes. Or, is it the snares of stupidity? The story of a sheikh in the book answers the question]:

"I fell into a hole and after three days there passed by a caravan of travelers. I told myself that I should call out to them. Then I went back on my decision, saying that no, it was not proper that I should seek help other than from Almighty God. When they approached the hole they found that it was in the middle of the road and they said, 'let's fill this hole lest someone fall into it.' I was so exceedingly perturbed that I lost all hope. After they had filled it in and gone on their way, I prayed to Almighty God and gave myself over to death, relinquishing all hope in human beings.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 165.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 166.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 167.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 170.

When night fell I heard a movement at the surface of the hole. As I listened to it the mouth of the hole was opened and I saw a large animal like a dragon. It let down its tail to me and I knew that God had sent it to rescue me. I clung on to its tail and it drew me up. Then a voice from the heavens called out to me, “We have saved you from death with death...”¹⁰¹

“I was frightened of the consequences of the truth being revealed and made known, for he who has killed a single soul has killed all people.”¹⁰² “There is no god but God. He brings to life and makes to die, and He is capable of everything.”¹⁰³ “There is time for everything”¹⁰⁴

[The following are examples of abundant wisdom of Middle Easterners found in Naguib Mahfouz’s novel].

“It is of God that one seeks help.”

“Man may be deceived by illusion so that he thinks it is the truth, and that there is no safety for us unless we dwell on solid land.”

“Sleep is not permissible if wakefulness is necessary.” “While there is life, there is no reason to despair.”

“Food is nourishment when taken in moderation but is a danger when taken gluttonously.”

“To continue with worn-out traditions is foolishly dangerous.”

“Freedom is the life of the spirit.”¹⁰⁵

The madman’s name is ‘Abullah al-Aqil.’ [The meaning of his Arabic name is ironic. This is typical in the use of the Arabic language, the play on words.] ‘The servant of God who is logical.’ He says: “It is an indication of truth’s jealousy that it has not made for anyone a path to

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 171.

¹⁰² Naguib Mahfouz, *Arabian Nights and Days* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1995), 176 a cultural statement reflects teaching from the Qur’an 5:32.

¹⁰³ Naguib Mahfouz *Arabian Nights and Days* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1995), 192 a cultural statement reflects teaching from the Quran.

¹⁰⁴ Naguib Mahfouz *Arabian Nights and Days* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1995), 209 a cultural statement that reflects teaching from the Bible.

¹⁰⁵ Naguib Mahfouz *Arabian Nights and Days* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1995, 211, 213, 214.

it, and that it has not deprived anyone of the hope of attaining it, and it has left people running in the deserts of perplexity and drowning in the seas of doubt; and he who thinks that he has attained it, it dissociates itself from, and he who thinks that he has dissociated himself from it has lost his way. There is no attaining it and no avoiding it - it is inescapable.”¹⁰⁶

A few Proverbs from the Middle East illuminate some of the cherished values of the Middle Easterners.

‘Fi at-ta’ni as-sallamah wa fi al-‘agallah an-nadammah.’ = Make haste slowly.

‘Al-ma’rifah qowa.’ = Knowledge is power.

An-nazafah min al-iman.’ = Cleanliness is next to godliness.

‘As-sadiq ‘inda ad-diq.’ = A friend in need is a friend indeed.

‘Ana was akhi ‘ala ibn ‘ami was ana wa ibn ‘ami ‘ala al-gharib.’ = Blood is thicker than water, (My brother and I against my cousin and My cousin and I against the stranger).

A favorite expression, in the Middle East, which actually includes a cluster of colloquial utterances, results in a bon mot is “IBM.”

‘I’ stands for ‘insha’ Allah,’ God’s willing.

‘B’ stands for ‘bokrah,’ tomorrow.

‘M’ stands for ‘ma’lehsh,’ never mind, it is not important, it is not a big deal, do not worry about it.

Conclusion

Hurry it is time for class.

What class?

Introduction to Arabic.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 228.

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Oh no. One more hard language to learn.

I promise you it will be rewarding.

Another way to say ‘borriing’!

Hardly! It is fun to know and easy to grasp.

How is that?

You already know Arabic.

That is amazing!

ARABIC

Amiral
Alkohol
‘Anbar
Al-gabr
Al-manakh
Kharshuf
Qutn
Sukkar
Sawahili
Lamoun
Al-Kimiyah
Ghazaal
Faqir
Khalifah

ENGLISH

Admiral
Alcohol
Amber
Algebra
Almanac
Artichoke
Cotton
Sugar
Swahili
Lemon/Lime
Alchemy. Chemistry
Gazelle
Fakir
Caliph

Everyone can produce Arabic sounds accurately. The language is phonetic. There are 28 letters in the Arabic Alphabet. It is written from the right to the left. Letters are connected in both print and handwriting.

I hear Procopius, a sixth-century Byzantine writer, shrieking loudly: “You see, it was not possible, during the life of certain persons, to write the truth of what they did, as a historian should.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ James M. Brophy et al., *Perspectives from the Past, Primary Sources in Western Civilizations*. Third edition Volume 1 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 300.

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Did you know that in the seventh century A.D. St. John of Damascus wrote a book titled *The Ishmailites* in it he described Islam as he understood it to be a new Christian Branch?

The Middle East is a complicated entity. Where to start to unravel its history? Where to decide to draw its borders? Geographically it is growing! Afghanistan, Pakistan and what's next on the list to be added? Different races, many languages, and religions make up a troubled reality. The Middle East is exciting. It should not be an enigma. Education takes care of that. We have the material. Let us disrobe the embellished facts. Remove the dust. Clean the looking glass. Open the treasure box. To delve into the Middle East is to discover wonders. The world is believed to have started in the Middle East and most likely it is where it will end, as we know it. It is a fervid actuality. We should remember that we are caught in the unfolding of a new present.

It is time to connect the dots while learning the Arabic language.

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