



## ***The state of the world before Islam\****

To fully appreciate the miracle of Islam, we must understand the state of the world before as well as after its advent.

### ***Rome and Iran:***

Before Islam, the world was dominated by two warring superpowers, the Roman and Persian Empires. Rome was renowned for its sophisticated system of government, architecture and unparalleled feats of engineering such as extensive road and sewer networks. The Romans had conquered a large part of the known world, and had well established trade links with places as far afield as Africa and China. Latin, the official language of Rome, became so widely used that up until only 100 years ago virtually all scholars were required to have knowledge of it. The Sassanid (Persian) Empire was the other main superpower in the pre-Islamic world, and was known as the 'cradle of civilisation' at this time. Similar to the Roman Empire, the Sassanid Empire was vast, enjoyed substantial wealth, and was known for excellence in the fields of literature and art.

The Empires of Rome and Iran were similar; both were comprised of very large areas of land, inhabited by various peoples with a clear governmental structure overlying the entire area. The Sassanid Empire was ruled mainly by one man – the king – who could only be influenced by the clergy. This meant that the success or failure of the entire government depended on the strengths or weaknesses of the king, and of the motives of the clergymen who could manipulate him: the general public had absolutely no say. This aggravated the differences between the working and upper classes, with the laws set up to benefit those who made them, and the rights of ownership and education restricted to the aristocrats. This reached a peak, until just before the advent of Islam the Sassanid government was a chaos of princes and nobles fighting for power, with coup d'etat staged in it fourteen times during a period of only four years. The power lay entirely in the hands of the upper classes who lived in luxury, while the craftsmen and common people were denied basic rights and taxed to fund the extravagant lifestyles of the rulers.

The government in Rome was a little better; although ultimately the Emperor wielded the power, the presence of the Senate allowed him to seek advice from nobles and scholars. The purpose of the Senate was to represent the will of the people and give advice that would benefit Rome, pushing the governmental structure more from that of a dictatorship to a democracy, despite the lack of an official public vote. This afforded a stability to the Roman system of government that the Sassanid Empire lacked, with the laws set up more to benefit the law-abiding majority and not just the rich and influential. However, when Christianity became the state religion of Rome the Church gained power and influence, and started pushing its opposition hard. Rome was a large empire, comprised of many political and religious groups, which faced oppression when their opinions clashed with those of the state. The population became divided both within and outside the church, pushing Rome to the brink of civil war as the various groups fought for power, or attempted to take advantage of the chaos and topple the existing government.

In general, both the Roman and Sassanid Empires were suffering from internal strife that, along with their 20-year war against each other, greatly weakened them, leaving only a shell of the power and strength they were once known for.

### ***Arabia:***

Almost lost between these two giants lay Arabia. At that time, it was composed of three almost separate regions; Yemen to the south, home of another great civilisation; Hijaz to the north; and the barren Arabian Desert between the two. While Yemen was a great centre of commerce and trade, and was famed for its architecture and art, the Hijaz was populated but far from being civilised. There was no overall governing body that spanned all parts Arabia; instead the smaller areas of Yemen and Hijaz had individually evolved their own political structure. The region of Yemen was world-famous for its successful government structure, where the king had access to some of the most learned men in the land for advice. Hijaz was at the other end of the scale, with very poor geographic conditions, and large stretches of land so inhospitable that Hijaz bore no influence from Yemen, Persia or Rome. Although it didn't have an overall governing system, Hijaz still implemented a form of democracy in the major towns and settlements. The tribal system and nomadic lifestyle adopted by the Arabs here helped maintain order; most groups enjoyed isolation from others, so two tribes at war did not have to live in the same area for any length of time. But despite this, the pride and sense of tribal solidarity of the Arabs were often blown out of proportion, and led them to start a number of wars lasting for decades over small matters.

### ***Religion in the World:***

By far the largest detriment to society in Rome, Iran and Arabia was the effect of the religious and moral ideas present at the time. In the Roman Empire, religion was originally adopted from ancient Greece and beyond, and developed into a bizarre mythology centred around figures who were as fallible and selfish as any human but had superhuman powers. Later on, the Roman state adopted Christianity, but this didn't really change the moral structure of society since it had been already defined by the pagan practices before it. In fact, instead of Christianity improving the pagan religious views held by the population, the ideas of Christianity became polluted with concepts like the trinity, which had filtered through from the previous faith. When Rome first adopted Christianity, the Emperor chose the four gospels of the Bible that most appealed to him from around 300 books and burnt the rest, effectively editing the religion to make it more suitable to the tastes of Rome. In other words the church had been drawn away from the original faith, becoming polluted and losing a large part of its ideology, and worse, violently oppressing those that stood against it, leaving the people without religious guidance or even the freedom to seek it.

The Sassanid Empire was in a slightly different situation to Rome; a Zoroastrian priest initially founded it. Zoroastrianism, considered by many to have once been a revealed religion, was supposed to have been a beautiful, simple faith with logical beliefs. However, the position of the clergy in founding the empire and their influence upon rulers led them to deviate from the faith, most notably with the introduction of fire-worship. Over time the religion was altered and edited, just as Christianity was in Rome, to suit the purposes of the priests and nobles, who neglected the spiritual and instead looked for material wealth. In this way the Sassanid Empire's state religion, as with Rome, had ceased to be a source of religious guidance to the people, who had become spiritually stranded as various groups fought over power or money.

Religion in Arabia was defined by the historical and spiritual influence of Hijaz. The most highly populated city in Hijaz was Mecca, founded centuries earlier by the Prophet Abraham (as) who built the Ka'bah and brought a pure and monotheistic faith to the region. Over time, as with faith in the Sassanid Empire, this pure religion was lost with the introduction of idols - first as intercessors then later as deities to be worshipped - until the Ka'bah had become filled by them and there were more than enough for one for each day of the year. The morals and collective intellect of the Arabs was

overshadowed by the meaningless superstitious rituals in their religion - in which animals were tortured and mutilated, and people were humiliated to the extent that they would wear dirty rags and bones, or even bray like a donkey before entering a village to repel 'evil spirits'. These pointless practices only served to stamp out the spirit of logic and reason within the people, depriving them of any mental development, and confining them to the prison of ignorance.

In Hijaz there was no system of law in place, and no government like Rome had, so the deterioration in morality seemed to have a greater effect. The decay was so strong that all kinds of awful rituals worked their way into common practice, such as the killing of baby girls at birth, and the treatment of women like possessions, or cattle to be abused and inherited against their will. Matters worsened until bloodshed, murder and pillage were considered worthy of praise. The good traits possessed by the pre-Islamic Arabs such as generosity, devotion, eloquence, sharp memory and bravery were brought to nothing before the overwhelming ignorance and immorality that ruled in their society.

### **Conclusion:**

The state of affairs before Islam was this: two faded superpowers locked in struggle over neighbouring lands, with all civilisation and progress present in them and in Arabia being blocked by political, moral and spiritual corruption. There was widespread disharmony and oppression as groups warred over wealth and power, and almost all faith (although initially pure and revealed) had become corrupted, and only made the situation worse.

The world was like a barren desert, dry, with barely any traces of life, but deep within its heart was the potential to bloom with the first coming of the rain. Allah sent his Last Prophet, the first of His creatures, the Best of His Creation and most beloved of His servants, may Allah's blessings be upon him and his family, to the world at its darkest hour. When the meaning of religion had been all but lost, Allah, the Most Merciful, illuminated the world with His complete guidance in a perfect faith, revealed through a perfect man. And at the moment of the final prophet's (saw) birth the whole world felt reverberations, spreading across the heavens and earth like great waves, indicating the great changes that were about to come.

Before the prophet (saw) was born, the world was in darkness and chaos. By the time he (saw) died, Arabia was a united whole, a growing civilisation that was being recognised by Rome and Iran, and one that would go on to lead the world in the scientific, medical, philosophical and literary fields for centuries to come.

### ***Salawat ala Muhammad wa ale Muhammad***

### **Did you know?\***

At the moment of the Prophet's (saw) birth, several great events took place all over the earth:

- All of the idols in the Ka'bah fell on their faces, and a voice from heaven said: "*Truth is revealed, and error is annihilated*"
- All idols across the rest of the world fell on their faces
- The palace of the emperor of Iran trembled and 14 of its towers fell
- A lake in Iran (lake Savah) which used to be worshipped disappeared
- The sacred fires of Iran which were worshipped stopped burning for the first time in 1000 years
- Magic and sorcery ended on earth
- The thrones of all kings were found facing backwards in the morning
- Iblees and the devils were at first allowed to go up even to the seventh heaven & listen to the angels, but when Isa (as) was born they were blocked from the highest 3 heavens. When

Muhammad (saw) was born the devils were blocked from all of the heavens, and driven away with arrows of fire.

- Hosts of angels descended to earth praising Allah, and encircled Meccah with lamps. The brightness of the city could be seen from as far away as Yemen
- The whole world was illuminated on that night, every stone and clod of earth and tree laughed for joy, and all things in heaven and earth praised Allah for the coming of the beloved Last Prophet (saw)

\* from chapters 1-4 of the Message, Jafar Subhani, available online at [www.al-islam.org](http://www.al-islam.org)

\*\* taken from Hiyat al Qulub volume 2 (the life and religion of Muhammad) by al Majlisi, chapter III