

ISLAM RISING¹

By Paul Penno Jr.
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Sincere Christian people who love the Bible, whose hearts are moved by the love of Christ demonstrated at His cross, wonder at Islam. What is it? What is the secret of its immense appeal to over a billion people? It's the second religion in the world, Hinduism lagging behind with only 881 million.² Is it a God-ordained religion gone awry?

There is a Judeo-Christian Bible translated into Arabic in which the ordinary word for "God" is "Allah." But is the Muslim "Allah" the same heavenly Father to whom Jesus directs us to pray? The Islamic Koran has no such idea; the Muslim's Allah requires the worshiper to prostrate himself in a mindless, blind submission to His capricious will, which rides roughshod over humanity's feelings. Some Christians may think of God that way, and may be closer to Islam than they are to Biblical revelation. The God of the Bible says, "Come now, and let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18). In other words, He welcomes His own trial and is ready to take on questions and charges.

His Son tells us, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:44, 45).

Humble our hearts before Him as we may want to do, we find it difficult to see that spirit actuating those bloodthirsty mobs who riot in their streets chanting *jihad* and "death to America." Why does God permit Islam to be such a thorn in the flesh of the so-called Christian West?

As the second religion in the world statistically, does Islam merit mention in the Bible? God said to Abraham: "one who will come from your own body shall be your heir" (Gen. 15:2-4).

But Abraham doesn't get the point. He stumbles and staggers in unbelief. "Your own body" means with Sarah his lawfully wedded wife, because away back in Eden God has decreed that man and wife shall be "one flesh." No third party shall enter that "one flesh" intimacy. But Sarah is a bundle of old covenant unbelief; she bitterly blames God for her failure to be able to get pregnant (Gen. 16:2).

She comes up with the bright idea (popular among the surrounding nations) of adopting her Egyptian servant girl Hagar and constituting Hagar's offspring as hers and again helping God out of His dilemma. If Abraham is to be "the father of all who believe," true faith should have had some discernment to recognize the fallacy of this counterfeit "faith." But he falls headlong into this trap.

Still, God has already "made [Abraham] a father of many nations" by calling "things which do not exist as though they did" (Rom. 4:17), so God is caught in this blunder. He has promised

¹ Revelation 9:3-4. 227; 370.

² Statistics from *Islam for Dummies* by Malcolm Clark.

Abraham to bless his descendants, and Ishmael is one of them, though not “the child of promise” as Isaac was later to be; but God must bless him too. Hence the terrible aftermath of Middle East hatred and strife, especially between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Poor Abraham! You will have buckets of tears to shed in the final judgment, even though you will personally be saved.

IS THE RISE OF ISLAM PORTRAYED IN BIBLE PROPHECY?

There is a fascinating time prophecy set in the “sixth trumpet” of Revelation 9 constituting the nearly unseen foundation on which the faith of millions in one church rests. But most have no idea of what that one-verse time prophecy means or of its historical importance in the existence of a world church that remains virtually the only Protestant church still “protesting” the claims of the Papacy.

For over a thousand years, thoughtful readers of the Bible have believed that its prophecies pinpoint Islam’s phenomenal career.

But enlightened understanding was rare in the Dark Ages. Martin Luther in the early sixteenth century led the vanguard of Reformers who first clearly recognized Islam in the lineup of terrestrial upheavals symbolized by the seven “trumpets” of Revelation 8 and 9.

John Foxe (1516-1587), author of the famous *Book of Martyrs*, said, it is “clearer than light itself” that the sixth trumpet describes the Muslims and their military and political triumphs

that for centuries kept Europe teetering on the brink of horror. Well into the nineteenth century a chorus of Protestant prophetic scholars identified Islam's niche in prophecy as being those fifth and sixth trumpets.

The inspired prophet saw “a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit [abyssos, a Greek term that denotes a desolate wilderness or desert]” (Rev. 9:1). Modern Muslim writers use that same word to describe the Arabian society from which Islam sprang: “Arabia—the abyss of darkness. In that benighted era, there was a territory where darkness lay heavier and thicker. . . . Arabia . . . stood isolated, cut off by vast oceans of sand.”³

Doubtless these Muslim publishers had no idea they were repeating the vivid word used in John’s revelation to describe the political and social milieu which spawned the meteoric career of Mohammed, the “fallen” star.

The phenomenal Islamic conquest of the Christian Eastern Empire is symbolized by the statement, “The sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit” (verse 2). The hordes of Arabic Muslims on the warpath are depicted thus: “There came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth” (verse 3). Islam’s paradoxical policy of scourging arrogant apostasy while befriending humble, self-denying followers of Christ is revealed in the prophecy: “It was commanded them

³ Abul A’La Maududi, *Towards Understanding Islam*. Nairobi: The Islamic Foundation, Qur’an House, pp. 41, 42.

that they should . . . hurt . . . only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads” (verse 4).

For many centuries it has been recognized that the “five months” (verse 5) during which the “locusts” should “torment” the corrupt Eastern Roman Empire are to be understood by the accepted year-day principle of prophetic interpretation. Thus this time period constitutes the 150 years from 1299 when Osman first invaded Nicodemia to 1449 when the Muslims had become so powerful that the new emperor dared not ascend his throne without the Sultan’s approval. The fall of Constantinople followed quickly, in 1453.

Methodist Josiah Litch in 1838 built upon this long-held understanding of the 150 years by tying to them (on the year-day principle) the succeeding prophetic symbols of “an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year, for to slay the third part of men” (verse 15). On this basis he boldly predicted well in advance that on or about the eleventh of August, 1840, the Muslim Ottoman Empire would surrender its independence as dramatically as the Byzantine Emperor had surrendered his to the Muslims in 1449.

To the surprise of thousands of deists and infidels, the predicted event did take place exactly on August 11, 1840. Many were convinced that Bible prophecy is indeed inspired by an omniscient God.

“Insignificant past history, forget it!” No! This prophetic drama on the stage of world history established for all the world

to see that the biblical prophecies of Daniel and Revelation are true, because they can be understood even by a child. Children will begin preaching them. This prophecy establishes the year for a day principle which is the divinely inspired key to reading them, and human life makes sense in the context of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. A world movement of present day Christians who believe the second coming of Christ is imminent was strengthened by this remarkable prophecy of August 11, 1840. Even atheists were converted when they saw the clear evidence of the inspiration of the Bible.

Reverent-minded Bible scholars for centuries have said yes. Islam is the “star fallen from heaven to the earth” and the “smoke. . . . out of the [bottomless] pit like the smoke of a great furnace. And the sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke of the pit” in Revelation 9:1-21. “Fallen from heaven”!

Our pioneers’ understanding of the seven trumpets of Revelation 8-11 is confirmed by *The Great Controversy*, pp. 334, 335.⁴ Ellen White emphatically recognizes the fifth and sixth trumpets as fulfilled in the rise of Islam, and the history of its Ottoman Empire which lost its independence in 1840.

The Revelation context is important: the “seven trumpets” have sounded the proclamations of truth that professed

⁴ “Two years before, Josiah Litch, one of the leading ministers preaching the second advent, published an exposition of Revelation 9, predicting the fall of the Ottoman Empire.” *The Great Controversy*, p. 334.

Christianity has also “fallen” so that God must declare at last, “Babylon the great is fallen” (Rev. 18:2).

The simple, clear Biblical truths that once “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) have been perverted by the impregnation of paganism into Christian teaching. God permitted Islam to arise in its beginning as a protest against this spiritual “fall of Babylon”—Christians venerating images, for example.

The phenomenon of “post-Christian” culture today has afforded Islam another “*jihad*” fodder to fuel the original zeal that lured the Middle East and North Africa from Christianity to Islam. Even Billy Graham said that God must apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah for the immorality that so-called “Christian” “democracy” tolerates. The *jihad* enthusiasts shout, “We don’t want what you have!”

The God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not asleep. Now let’s stay awake in these tough times and “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth” (Rev. 14:4, KJV).

Riding the crest of a cultural and religious renaissance, Islam today is the world’s fastest-growing religious force. Why?

America’s Christians are a pathetic minority compared with the billions of awakened Muslims zealous for world reformation. Adherents of the crescent are urging the world to recognize Allah as Supreme Ruler through submission to His *sharia*, or law.

Humbled by centuries of military, social, and economic subservience, Islamic peoples in over 70 countries are today riding the crest of a cultural and religious resurgence. Oil, Middle East politics, and 9-11 terrorism have catapulted Islam into world prominence. America’s decades-long support of Israel has also helped to recast Arabs in a heroic David-challenging-Goliath stance. Westerners seem fascinated by the mystique of a renascent Islam on the world stage.

Islam’s present zeal in propagating itself, rivals Christianity’s traditionally aggressive evangelism. In countries where it is indigenous, the faith of Allah is enjoying a rebirth of militancy. In lands that have always been considered safely Christian, Islam is busy rearing mosques and minarets with a zeal like that of nineteenth century missionaries building churches in heathen lands.

Islam has become the second largest religion in Europe, the continent that was once the cultural center of world Christianity. It claims millions of adherents in conservative Britain. And Americans, long accustomed to the superior feeling of sending missionaries to benighted lands, now are experiencing the strange sensation of being recipients of mission zeal by a foreign faith. The framers of the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution hardly dreamed it would become the umbrella under which Mohammed’s followers would flourish, but protected by its guarantee of religious freedom

Islam dreams of an America-to-be someday bowing toward Mecca.

Where is Islam reaping huge gains? In animistic Africa south of the Sahara, many Africans see Islam as making more sense than Christianity. Thoroughly devoted to the worship of one God (Allah), Islam seems to satisfy the human yearning for a worship that is free of idolatry, yet it also accommodates itself to the polygamous culture of Africa. A Muslim African husband can, without stigma, have as many as four wives. And Islam has the further advantage of not being identified with Europeans. Islamic missionaries claim their religion and way of life is perfectly (even divinely) suited to Third World social needs.

What is the secret of Islam's strange appeal to modern man, whether in Africa or in sophisticated Western cities? In particular, why is it making such an appeal to Britons, whose grand cathedrals so often sit nearly empty on Sunday mornings? The answer lies in a seldom-understood ancient confrontation between early Christianity and Mohammed himself.

The pure faith of Christ as proclaimed by His apostles was so perfectly adapted to the universal needs of human nature that it made phenomenal world progress in the first century. A built-in, almost irresistible appeal made its propagation so effective that rival religions paled before it. The vast network of organized, institutionalized paganism that for

millenniums had enthralled world empires, including Rome, collapsed before the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A news magazine had a lead article, "The Year One A.D."⁵ discussing life under the Roman Empire 2000 years ago. It was "a world of unrelenting cruelty. . . . men and women being fed to beasts as people of all classes shrilled their delight, . . . a superpower that conquered cities by enslaving the men and killing the women and children. Owning . . . people, the Romans believed, was as natural as water running downhill, . . . a father's tossing an infant into the village dung heap for being female, sick, or a surplus mouth to feed." "People didn't think of whether anything was unjust." Life expectancy was in the 30's.

Into this world stepped the Son of God, born in a cowshed in Bethlehem, taking upon Himself fallen humanity, teaching that God loved each human being with an infinite love. A new idea began to grip people's thinking—the apostles' message of *agape*, the one little word that turned the Roman world upside down. "Have you heard the news?" neighbors asked each other. "God is a Good Shepherd who has come down to our world seeking His lost sheep, a totally backward idea!

We have always thought that the gods were hiding from us, that we have to curry their favor, climb up the mountains to find them, propitiate them. This new idea says that the one true God is stepping down to where we are, revealing, not hiding,

⁵ *U. S. News & World Report.*

Himself, currying our favor, seeking to win our love and devotion. 'God is *agape*! The Son of God has joined our family, become one of us, condemned sin in our fallen sinful flesh, outlawed sin and cruelty, gave Himself for us, purchased us with an infinite price, has died in our place! We have become somebody important! I have decided to worship Him! Come, join me!"

The vast majority of people were slaves, poor; the elite and wealthy "made up less than one tenth of 1 percent of the population." But the poor welcomed the gospel, and it slowly transformed the society of the Roman world.

Had the simple fidelity to Christ and His teachings that marked first-century Christians continued, Islam could never have prospered, for it would have found no fertile soil for its roots. The early church was clearly the conqueror, but to a great extent it succumbed to a sinister temptation that turned it into the conquered.

After vanquishing the superstitions of past ages, Christianity began to absorb many ideas that the apostles had decidedly abhorred. Pagan doctrines and practices, given a Christian veneer, began to infiltrate the church—the worship of images, the idea of natural immortality, penance, a human priesthood in place of the all-sufficient priesthood of Christ, the free use of wine, and the adoption of pagan festivals such as the first day of the week dedicated to the sun in place of the Bible seventh-day Sabbath. Islam arose essentially as a protest

against pagan corruption more than as a protest against pure Christianity itself.

Probably illiterate, but possessed of tremendous natural ability and shrewd perception, Mohammed was outraged by the decadent church as he saw it in his day. Judaism, he felt, had already failed to meet the needs of people; now it seemed that established Christianity, with an infusion of paganism into its very soul, did little better. As many Muslims today stigmatize America as the "Great Satan," so Mohammed felt he was facing the "Great Satan" of his day manifested in idolatry, arrogance, intemperance, and dissipation posing as religion.

Little did he realize that he was witnessing the fulfillment of heaven-inspired prophecies made in the biblical book of Daniel six centuries before Christ. In prophetic vision Daniel was shown the rise of a professedly Christian power which in fact would be a masterpiece of deception and apostasy. The vision he saw symbolized this power as a "little horn" that should "speak great words against the most High, and . . . wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws" (Dan. 7:25). Describing this power, Daniel said it "magnified himself even to the prince of the host" and "practiced, and prospered" (Dan. 8:11, 12).

This cosmic development was a tragic scene in the drama of the great conflict of the ages between Christ and Satan. What better way could Christ's enemy attempt to stamp

out the pure faith of Jesus than to corrupt it from within the church itself? And it gave Islam its opportunity!

The New Testament foretold the falling away. Paul warned the true believers of his day that “after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, . . . speaking perverse things” (Acts 20:29, 30). “There [shall] come a falling away . . . and that man of sin be revealed [the same power that Daniel had seen in vision], the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God” (2 Thess. 2:3, 4).

John the Revelator saw the same religious-political power achieving such success that “all the world wondered,” and “it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations” (Rev. 13:3, 7). This little-known series of Bible predictions discloses the otherwise inexplicable mystery of why so much that professes to be Christianity differs markedly from the simple, pure teachings of the Bible.

Mohammed could not understand the prophetic secret; nothing in the Koran reveals that he had any insight into the real reason for the depravity he saw masquerading as Christianity. The Arab prophet found a religious vacuum and rushed in to fill it with his strange, authoritarian teachings. Islam was born, and its roots fed on the decay of a vitiated Mediterranean Christianity.

One of the great phenomena of history is the improbable, but lightning-like military success of early Islam. Within a few years of the Prophet's death, both the Byzantine Roman and Persian empires fell like overripe fruit into Muslim hands. Allah's untutored horsemen routed these proud rulers of the world in daring campaigns like nothing the world had seen since Alexander the Great. The raw sons of the desert found themselves suddenly possessing undreamed of wealth and power, heirs to an advanced culture beyond their understanding.

One Bedouin sold a rich man's daughter for a thousand *dirhems* only because he had never dreamed a greater number existed.

Thousands of Christians in North Africa and the Middle East became Muslims almost overnight, and the once-orthodox land of Augustine mysteriously and disgracefully surrendered its Christian identity so completely, that the richest Roman province of Christ became fanatically devoted to the star and crescent. In North Africa, home of many of the church fathers, hardly a vestige remains of its once-brilliant Christian history. One wonders if the Bishop of Hippo's doctrines somehow programmed his followers to capitulate so ingloriously.

Islam frightened Europe for centuries. By A.D. 712 Islam had stormed the Pillars of Hercules and established a presence in Spain that was to last for 700 years. The Arabs reached even as far as the Alps, maintaining a foothold at Valais in

Switzerland until the tenth century. Europe, shaken by the specter of a Muslim conquest, feared Islam in those days almost as we fear Muslim terrorists today.

“*Jihad*” Islam banging on the gates of Vienna diverted Charles V’s attention from his plan to expunge the empire of Protestantism. Islam has had a profound political impact since the days of Abu Bakr. The hordes of locust-like followers of the Arabian prophet saw nothing in the Christianity of their day that they could respect; but curiously, they did respect the self-denying devotion of small pockets of isolated Christians who sincerely sought to maintain the faith of the first apostles.

The noontide of the medieval church proved to be the midnight of the world. Ignorance and superstition settled over Europe like a pall. But a light shone in the lands of Islam. Education was widespread, with libraries in many cities. (The library at Cairo was tremendous.)

The Arabs gave us our numeral system, inventing the cipher for zero. Six centuries before Copernicus they knew that the earth revolves around the sun. In medicine they practiced both asepsis and anesthesia, and as early as the fourteenth century an Arab doctor demonstrated the circulation of the blood.

Many Christian scholars equate the Allah of Islam with the God of the Bible. Islam’s holy book, the Koran, recognized Old Testament prophets as His messengers and Jesus as the true Messiah, born of Mary the virgin. Although it appears not to

concede Jesus’ divinity, it does accord Him unique status as the Word of God. The Koran teaches high ethical and moral principles in an epic poetic style that is music to Arab ears. The Koran has done for Arabic what the King James Bible has done for English.

Why is Islam so aggressive? The secret of Islam’s missionary success is its appeal to spiritual law, to a firm discipline embodied in a highly detailed program of “submission” to God. (The word Islam literally means “submission to Allah.”) It capitalizes on modern man’s idolatrous, lawless confusion, offering a sharply defined focus of worship. This is what appeals to many people in lands once considered bastions of Christianity. Many great churches in Europe stand nearly empty because they offer no clear challenge to man’s inner yearning for devotion and submission. Islam arose as a protest against an apostate church, and it flourishes today because our professedly Christian Western culture flouts the New Testament’s demand that one who follows Christ must also take up His cross. However, Islam cannot deliver what it promises because it lacks an all-important nutrient of truth.

Profound practical differences exist between Islam and the New Testament gospel. In the words of Paul, Islam can be characterized as “a form of godliness” without the “the power thereof” (2 Tim. 3:5). It is virtually a religion of salvation by works. This can be illustrated in Islam’s attitude toward women and sex.

Women are regarded in Islam as temptresses whose irresistible attractiveness rivals even Allah's power to secure the allegiance of men. "The Muslim order faces two threats: the infidel without and the woman within."⁶ "The whole Muslim structure can be seen as an attack on, and a defense against, the disruptive power of female sexuality." It is a "whole system . . . based on the assumption that the woman is a powerful and dangerous being."⁷ This is the reason why in Islam women must be veiled and hidden from public eyes. If a man and a woman are thrown together alone, the automatic assumption is that they cannot resist temptation. Muslim men are titillated by the open ingenuousness of Western women, which they readily interpret as an invitation, only to be perplexed by indignant refusal.

What is the root of Islam's difficulty. Islam knows no motivation imparted by the Holy Spirit operating from within the soul that enables one to deny illicit desires and realize genuinely motivated submission to God. It knows no way to say "No" to temptation as does New Testament righteousness by faith. If temptation presents itself, Islam assumes automatic indulgence—hence the necessity for physically removing the temptation itself. The faith of Islam remains as barren of gospel "good news" as are the Sahara sand dunes of flowers. It is a stranger to the motivation that transcends both fear of hell and

hope of reward, "the love of Christ [which] constraineth us" (2 Cor. 5:14).

Islam and the New Testament gospel remain locked in combat. But Christ foretold a worldwide penetration of His good news: "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matt. 24:14). Educated Muslims have confessed that many people in Arab society feel a spiritual emptiness in their lives.

That Arab emptiness must be met with a bread from heaven that satisfies the deepest longings of the human soul, a message that not only demands utter submission to God but makes clear the only way such submission can ever take place. The good news that God's Son submitted Himself to the cross for the world's redemption must be told in all its magnificent dimensions of reality. When the believer in Christ can say, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20), the sincere Muslim will sit up and listen.

Islam was "commanded" that it should "hurt . . . only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads" (Rev. 9:4). Abu Bekr, Mohammed's successor, strictly charged his armies not to harm consistent, loyal followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus asked for baptism because He genuinely identified Himself with sinners. If Adam represents the entire human race, Jesus became the "last Adam," taking upon Himself the guilt of

⁶ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p. 12.

⁷ Pages 14, xvi.

humanity's sin. Not that He sinned, but He felt how the guilty sinner feels. He put Himself fully in our place. He put His arms around us as He knelt down beside us on the banks of the Jordan, asking His Father to let Him be the Lamb of God. His submission to baptism indicates that "the Lord . . . laid on Him the iniquity of us all." His baptism therefore becomes an injection of healing repentance for sin into the body of humanity.

Christ did not bear our sins as a man carries a bag on his back. In His own "flesh," in His soul, in His nervous system, in His conscience, He bore the crushing weight of our guilt. So close did He come to us that He felt as if our sins were His own. His agony in Gethsemane and on Calvary was real.

Jesus' perfect compassion for every human soul is a direct result of His perfect repentance in behalf of every soul. He becomes the second Adam, partaking of the body, becoming one with us, accepting us without shame, "in all things . . . made like unto His brethren" (Heb. 2:17).

We freely recognize our need of this genuine, unfeeling, Christ-like love in order to be a caring church. But we can preach about it for a thousand years and never get it, except through the mature faith that comes with Laodicea's final repentance. And such faith is a heartfelt appreciation of His true character, seen more clearly in its true dimensions. His repentance is a vital aspect of Immanuel's sinless character.

Through union with Him by faith we become part of the corporate body of humanity in Him. "As in Adam all die, even so

in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). It is gross selfishness to want to appropriate Christ, yet refuse to appropriate His love for sinners.

In fact, we have infinitely more reason to feel close to them than did our sinless Lord, for we ourselves are sinners, but our human pride holds us back from the warm empathy that Christ felt. How to experience this closeness is the purpose of true repentance.

This is the true submission to God that the Muslim's hungry heart longs for.