

HEIKKI PALVA

NORTH ARABIAN BEDOUIN'S CONCEPTION OF THE BEYOND

The religious ideas of the North Arabian Bedouin are not very well known. It is a sweeping statement of common occurrence that before their conversion to the Wahhabi faith they had no religious conviction.¹ At least they have not been interested in the ritual aspect of religion. Thus, Anne Blunt in her book *Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates* (I-II, 1879) reports that she does not remember having noticed an instance of prayer among the 'Anaze, and of all the noble tribes she visited, only the Šammar possessed a *mulla*. She tells that the Bedouin believe in one God, but continues: "Their belief in God is of the simplest kind [...] God is the fate to which all must bow, the cause of the good and of the evil in life, of the rain and of the sunshine."² In the same vein, she goes on telling:

"The Bedouin knows that he shall die but he does not fear death. He believes that he shall perish utterly, yet he does not shudder at the grave [...] In his scheme of the universe there has *never been room for a heaven or a hell.*"³ (My italics)

"Their fancy has never taken wing beyond the grave."⁴

Also Burckhardt and Doughty describe the North Arabian Bedouin as being in almost total lack of religious instruction.⁵

Among the scattered pieces of information, perhaps the most interesting accounts

¹ Cf. Jaussen, p. 287: On a dit et écrit: "Le nomade n'a point de religion." [...] l'assertion est inexacte.

² Blunt II, p. 216f.

³ *ibid.*, p. 221.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 223.

⁵ Burckhardt, p. 57: "The Bedouins, until within a few years, had not any priests among them, neither *mollas* nor *imams*: but since their conversion to the Wahaby faith, mollas have been introduced by a few sheikhs [...]" ; p. 58: "It is since their conversion to the Wahaby faith, (about fifteen years ago,) that the Aenezes have begun an observance of the regular prayers [...] different opinions about the Wahabys' tenets, and I never met in Syria any person who even pretended to have a true knowledge of their religion [...]"; p. 59: "The Jews and Christians are not molested in exercising the respective religions of their ancestors, on condition of paying tribute"; p. 61: "Their chiefs abstained from tobacco, and professed the Wahaby faith; but the common people care little about the new doctrine; they sing and smoke"; p. 161: "Those Bedouin sheikhs who are connected with the government towns in the vicinity of their tribes, keep up the practice of prayer whenever they repair to a town, in order to make themselves respected there. But the inferior Arabs will not even take that trouble, and very seldom pray either in or out of town." Doughty I, p. 17: "These Peraean Beduw are more easy in their religion than the Wahabish tribesmen of Arabia; they make little account of pattering the daily formal prayers, nor do they rightly know them.[...] The Aarab have no religious elders dwelling in their miserable encampments, nor have any of them learned letters: who then should teach the Beduw their religion?" Doughty speaks of Wild 'Ali and Bani Šaxar.

are those given by Alois Musil for the Rwala Bedouin and the tribes of the so-called Arabia Petraea, and by Harold Dickson for the tribes living in Kuwait. As far as the more limited subject of conceptions of the life hereafter is concerned, the information is still more scanty, and only rarely can it be complemented from other sources.

The Rwala are one of the great tribes of the ʿAnaze confederation (Fedʿān, Sbaʿa, ʿAmarāt, Ḥsene, Wild ʿAlī, Rwala), and, as characterized by Musil, "recognized by all their neighbors as the only true Bedouin tribe of northern Arabia".⁶ Its tribal area lies in the Syrian Desert, between the river Euphrates and the settled regions of Syria and Jordan. The time of Musil's report is the beginning of this century; Musil traveled and camped with the tribe for several months in 1908-09.

In the eighteenth century the tribal area (*dīra*) of the Rwala comprised the region of Wādī Sirḥān southeast of the Jordanian border and the southern part of the Syrian Desert. During the war against the Wahhabites they were compelled to move farther northward. About 1800 the tribe, as well as all the tribes of the ʿAnaze confederation, was converted to the Wahhabi doctrine. However, they tried in all possible ways to avoid any contact with the Wahhabites, mainly in order to escape from paying taxes to them.⁷

A prerequisite to the conception of the beyond is, of course, that there is life after death, that the fancy does take wing beyond the grave. Thus, according to Musil, the concept of *soul* is well known among the Rwala:

"Every living man has a soul, *nesem*. [...] The soul cannot be seen but can be heard, being identical with the breath, *ar-rūḥ hw annesem*. The soul of the first man was breathed by Allāh into the nostrils. [...] The *nesem* dwells in the man's inside, *be-ḥabdeh wa-b-ṣadreh*. On the man's death the soul leaves his body through the nostrils."⁸

Even though the term *nesem* does not occur in the Qur'an, the concept is undoubtedly Qur'anic, and ultimately derived from Biblical tradition, displaying close affinities with the creation of Adam according to the *locus classicus* in the Yahwistic story of Paradise, Gen. ii, 7 ("then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath [*nēšāmā*] of life; and man became a living being." Cf. Qur. 32,9: "then He shaped him, and breathed His spirit in him", *naḥaxa fihi min rūḥihi*; almost the same formulation in Qur. 15,29 and 32,72; the word *nasama* does occur in other Islamic writings: Mālik's *al-Muwaṭṭaʿ*, Ṭalāq 95; Ibn Ḥanbal's *Musnad* uses *nasam*, *nafs*, and *rūḥ*).

The description of the Rwala vision of paradise and hell by Musil is not only interesting but also unusually fascinating. I quote it in full:

"Paradise is somewhere *below ground*. There *it rains regularly*, there is always *rabīʿ*, abundance, good pasture, *xeyr*, and there also *the moon shines* all the time. In paradise all the Rwala live together, are *young*, and never grow older. They can *marry* there and have grown children at once. Every one has a *big*

⁶ Musil, Rwala, Preface.

⁷ Oppenheim, *Beduinen I*, p. 98.

⁸ Musil, Rwala, p. 673.

tent, big herds, and many children. They raid hostile tribes which have been condemned to hell, where all the enemies of the Rwala are sent."

"Hell is situated either *on the sun* or in some other place *above the earth*. There *the sun scorches by day and night, rains are very rare, the breeding of camels meets with no success, the soil has to be irrigated artificially—and the Bedouins there must work long and hard. They serve the fellāhīn, have to obey the government, are conscripted, perform military duty, and Allāh himself knows all their torments. Some call hell *ḍlalfāt* and think that in that place neither the moon nor the stars ever shine.*"⁹ (My italics).

The Rwala vision of paradise and hell is typically Islamic in one respect: the picture is very *concrete*. The description of the geography and climate of the places as well as the pleasures of paradise and the torments of hell is strikingly concrete. However, the scenes differ fundamentally from the Islamic idea: Paradise and hell are not populated with those who have done right and those who have done wrong. They are seen *in purely tribal terms*. All the Rwala are in paradise. All their enemies are in hell. This idea seems to be perfectly incompatible with the Islamic concept of God's righteousness on the Day of Judgement. Yet this is not necessarily the case. Musil also reports that God "weighs both the good deeds and the sins of the deceased, and punishes those sins which he has not wholly punished in this world already. In this world God punishes by disease, by sending robbers, by taking away the sinner's sons, or by having him murdered. There are four sins which are punished both in this world and hereafter, viz. *az-zena* (sexual intercourse with a girl betrothed to another or with another's wife); *al-xowne* (the robbery of a guest or companion who has trusted one while on the road); *dabḥ az-zelema* (killing of a man not subject to the blood feud or of an enemy who did not attack one); *az-zeḷīme* (false testimony under oath before the court)."¹⁰

As a matter of fact, this picture does not contradict the essential Islamic idea of the last judgement. But how is it possible to fit this idea together with the vision of paradise, where all the Rwala are living together while hell is inhabited by their enemies? The plausible answer is not very sophisticated: According to Musil, "the Rweyli is certain that, as far as he is concerned, the scales will always dip in his favor and that he will enter paradise intact with both his body and his soul." It is perfectly apparent that the inherited collective idea still remains predominant, and—by the turn of the 20th century—the Wahhabi Islamic education has not given the ordinary tribesman anything but a very superficial picture of the last judgement.

This is in accord with Anne Blunt's notice, even though she compares the Bedouin's morality with its Christian counterpart; for it, Islamic morality could be substituted:

"In morality the Bedouins differ from ourselves as widely as in religion. With us morality is deduced from certain divinely instituted laws, but with them it is

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 674f.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 674.

accepted as a natural order of things. They make *no appeal to conscience or the will of God in their distinctions between right and wrong, but appeal only to custom.*"¹¹ (My italics)

The Rwala idea of paradise is in every respect *culturally determined*; it is in fact "a utopian vision of exuberant *domesticity*". But, as further pointed out by Michael E. Meeker who has studied the idealization of violence in North Arabian literature, in this domestic vision *a violent feature is included*:

"At the same time, all the Rwala in paradise are free to raid their former, worldly enemies at will. In paradise one can enjoy all the pleasures of peace while preserving all the excitement of adventure."

"The love of free political action, which is implicit in the vision of paradise, appears more emphatically in the vision of hell. Unlike paradise, a covered and therefore protected place, hell is uncovered and therefore exposed place. Scorched by the sun and without rain, there is no basis for a domestic life. But, worse than this, the Bedouins *must labor to survive*. Camels do not breed, and so the Bedouins must farm, and for lack of water, their farming involves a great deal of work (irrigation). And worse than this, the Bedouins are *the political subjects of the peasants*. They even have to *obey the government*. And misery upon misery, they are even *conscripted*. [...] In hell there is only a tedious, domestic labor and a demeaning political subjugation. Surely this self-serving myth [...] should raise some questions about the idealization of myth as a vehicle for cultural truth."¹²

As mentioned above, descriptions of the popular Bedouin conception of the beyond are very few. Therefore one is inclined to read the reports with a certain suspicion as to the representativeness of the data. The accounts could be based on occasional statements of one or two informants, who might not have taken the matter very seriously. However, if Dickson's account of the Kuwaiti Bedouin¹³ is independent of Musil's description of the Rwala—Dickson does not give any references at all—it is most significant in this respect, since it does not differ substantially from Musil's account. In paradise the sun, moon and stars always shine, in hell never. In paradise it is always spring, the pastures are abundant, there is no hunger, no lack of water, no dried-up pasture, no camel disease, etc. All a man's tribe live together, and he meets all his friends and relatives. No one grows old, they marry and give in marriage, and every person has a large tent, large herds of camels and sheep and many children. In paradise no unpleasant things are met with, but in hell all things hated in this world are met with. Incidentally, no mention of raiding enemies occur in this description. The picture differs from the Rwala idea in one further interesting respect: While the Rwala consider it the most demeaning for a Bedouin to serve the peasants and to obey the government, the Kuwaiti Bedouin regard it as the greatest humiliation to be servant to an "inferior" tribe, without honour (*šaraf*), name (*ism*) or tribe (*ʿašīra*). Here, again, we see the influence of the local cultural context: the Kuwaiti Bedouin were not

¹¹ Blunt II, pp. 221-224.

¹² Meeker, p. 105f.

¹³ Dickson, *The Arab of the Desert*, p. 212f.

neighbours to peasants as many Rwaylis were.¹⁴

The Bedouin idea of the beyond, such as described above, is composed of two major components: One is the *Islamic conception* of the last judgement, paradise and hell. The other is the *traditional tribal culture*, practically independent from Islam. The Islamic conception is used as a vessel which is filled with traditional tribal ideas.

The above picture can be complemented with data for Bedouin tribes living in contact with settlers in southern Jordan and the Negev. Here, again, our source is Alois Musil who gives an ethnographic account of this area in his early work *Arabia Petraea* (1908).

According to Musil, the Rwala believe that the soul of the deceased floats over his head until the *hbāta* sacrifice is brought, after which the soul departs, "no one knows where".¹⁵ Among the tribes of southern Jordan and the Negev, on the other hand, the place where the souls gather (*majma' al-arwāḥ*) is well known: it is of common knowledge that the place is situated *beneath Jerusalem*. After burial the soul of the deceased takes the shape of a fly and flies to Jerusalem, where it enters the place of gathering, the Well of souls (*Bi'r al-arwāḥ*) in the Temple area, under the Rock. There the souls are waiting for the last judgement. Most Bedouin also believe that paradise and hell are situated side by side beneath Jerusalem. The only exception among the tribes described by Musil is the Bani Ṣakhar: some of the tribesmen do know the Jerusalem tradition while it is unknown to others. The plausible explanation to this is the late advent of the tribe—in the 16th and 17th centuries—to the area.¹⁶

In the religious ideas of the Rwala, no room seems to be found for the last judgement as a *universal eschatological event*, and consequently there is no need of localizing it either. On the other hand, the tribes living in the neighbourhood of the holy places in Palestine share many traditions with the settlers. Even though several religious traditions have in the sphere of Islam been moved from Jerusalem to Mecca—among others Adam's grave (at the navel of the earth), the *omphalos* of the earth (Mount Moriah, the Rock in particular; cf. Delphi), part of Abraham traditions—the position of Jerusalem as the scene of the last judgement remains unshaken, and in the popular religion it is firmly attached to exactly defined places.

In light of comparative material, admittedly scanty, a pattern is apparent: The Rwala conception of the beyond clearly reflects a tribal aspect which the doctrines of Islam have influenced only superficially. The same is, generally speaking, true of the Kuwaiti Bedouin, who display a few differences from the Rwala ideas, due to slight differences in the cultural context. In southern Jordan and the Negev, on the other hand, the Bedouin living in the neighbourhood of Palestine—and thus within the sphere of the influence of religious ideas connected with the holy places in Jerusalem—have embraced a considerable amount of local traditions of the settlers.

¹⁴ Dickson, Kuwait, p. 40: the great majority of the permanent Kuwaiti population are Arabs of the ʿAtūb, ʿAwāzim, Rašāyda, Bani Khālid, Duwāsir, ʿAjmān, ʿAnaze, Ḍafir.

¹⁵ Musil, Rwala, p. 573f.

¹⁶ Musil, Arabia Petraea III, p. 448; Oppenheim, Beduinen II, p. 232.

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