

AN INCLUSIVE STUDY OF SEMITIC TRADITION

SEMITIC RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

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Term “Semites” or adjective “Semitic” may not be perhaps new for many, but its literal implication is still a point of ambiguity amongst the majority of the world population. Moreover, a huge number of the adherents of the Abrahamic religions namely Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are utterly unfamiliar of this religio-historical term on the account of orthodox confines. Jews wrongly perceive of the word as another exclusive name for their race. Whatever the grounds for this historical ignorance and ambiguity, it is a fact that the apposite understanding of any of the three aforementioned religions is inconceivable without an extensive study of “Semitic religious heritage”. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share this religious heritage claiming respectively to be the rightful heir of Abraham, the Friend of God. Although, Semites is a term that is also used for genetic distribution of races in anthropology, yet we are concerned with its theological connotations here.

“Semitic heritage” is a new entry as a compound term in the religious terminology of Semitic religions; therefore, even the best possible definition might be inept in many virtues. Succinctly speaking, Semitic religions possess an organic whole of precepts, traditions, historical facts, and myths expanded, hypothetically speaking, over the span of some three millennia—an unprecedented heritage that other religions can only envy. This inconvincible heritage was the bedrock that set in motion a unique slogan of *Monotheism* long ago, which universally changed the direction of religious thinking *en toto* irrespective of geography and race. Man-made religions, thenceforth, shaped their theories and philosophical tenets in the light of monotheistic traditions of Semitic provenance. Despite the established fact of verbal and written sources of religious heritage, we cannot deviate from the archaeological path of religious remains, which introduces yet another branch in Semitic religious heritage

i.e. the centrality of the ancient religious architecture. Temple of Solomon, for instance, must not be overlooked owing to its central importance for all three aforementioned religions, so that we may well be able to carefully comprehend all those tenets that have been assigned to this rocky edifice over millennia. *Ka'bah*, the holiest sanctuary of Islam at Mecca, can be taken as another sound example in this regard.

Shem, one of the three surviving sons of Prophet Noah, is the forebear of the most celebrated Biblical patriarch *Abraham*. In spite of seeking a common origin in the person of Abraham, it is Shem after whose name the three religions attribute their mainstream in general. Our phrase *Semitic Religions* is an exclusive description of what is related to Abraham and his descendants from both of his sons Ishmael and Isaac.

Abraham, an eighteenth century BC *Habiru* of Ur, a city-state of ancient Mesopotamia, received visions from God proceeded with a commandment to move west of his motherland and a promise of being ordained by God to the designation of “Friend”. Abraham’s migration to west was not just a subjective activity of a transient nature, but a move of history that exercised such a deep impact on mankind that could no longer be withstood anywhere. It was the first potential “Covenant” of God with mankind since the committing of the “*sin of disobedience*” by man, as the Bible portrays. The ‘sign’ for this new bond between God and man was *circumcision* of the foreskin of males. Hordes of *Habiru* people, already semi nomadic tribes, left their homeland and settled firstly in Asia Minor, and latterly in a land that has been spoken of in the Bible as “Promised Land”. Abraham was a noble among those *Habiru* hordes who also served as mercenaries on an instance for the king. The expanse of present day Middle East was the land that God promised to Abraham, saying; “I will give unto thee and thy seed.” Thus,

it was the land of Abraham, his son Isaac and grandson Jacob, and the descendants of Jacob (afterwards renamed *Israel*) from his twelve sons.

The whole account of Abraham and his family is found in the first book of Bible, Genesis. We are, however, left with no secular records of this remarkable man of ancient Mesopotamia. Genesis is the first of the five books of Pentateuch that is believed to have been written by Prophet Moses in 14th or 15th century BC. We are, therefore, uncertain of the original picture of Abraham and his belief, for a period of half a millennium had elapsed by the time when Pentateuch was composed. In this particular situation, all of the three religions are compelled to rely upon the writings ascribed to Moses, which logically play the role of “foundation” for the subsequent stockpiling of Semitic heritage. We must be open to reality, however bitter, when facing the missing links in the record of pre-Mosaic Prophets, for we have no authentic information on their lifestyle and teachings. This discrepancy is oft dealt apologetically through the records found in Pentateuch, but this is a highly controversial approach. This very discrepancy is the motive of contention between three religions, and its extant outcome is the variant perception of early prophets and the prophetic office itself. Variation in interpretations and mutually distinct or divergent destinations of the three religions of the same house draw a very ambiguous picture of human faith. We, therefore, need an utterly impartial approach to understand the subject of Semitic heritage, so that we can reconstruct the true faith-foundation of Abraham and his immediate descendants.

No individual faith can lay such an assertion as to be in the possession of the true creed of Abraham unless it runs through the mainstream of Semitic religious tradition. Judaism indeed wins the honor of being the first container

and guardian of Semitic heritage, for it was the House of Israel that had been, in the first, entrusted with the divine ordinance. An empirical, neutral research upon Semitic heritage, however, disproves the capableness of Jewish race to be the guardian of true faith owing to their inability in recognizing Jesus Christ and Muhammad. Bible itself is a witness to Jewish treacheries against the very God of their own. Similarly, Jews could not, for whatever reason, manage to communicate with other world to bring them in the lot of God's commandments. They always seemed obsessed with the notion of retaining their authority of "chosen race". They made God's covenant with man into a so-called *national* revelation, which is, in the modern sense of egalitarian understanding, nothing better than a propagation of "henotheism".

Traditional Christianity, moreover, is baseless if we remove Judaism from its background as the forerunning receptacle of the true faith. Christianity is hardly a religion of its own without Jesus' claim of Christhood based upon Davidic ideal. Despite boasting claims, Christianity has been unable to prove itself the rightful custodian of Semitic heritage since its very birth, because the person of Jesus was never correctly understood by the succeeding generations in the light of Semitic heritage. If Christianity of today claims to have been the most befitting inheritor of Semitic heritage, here comes a logical question then: why do we discover enormous contradictions in the Christians' doctrine of the *nature* of God and *person* of Jesus Christ? Today, factions of Christianity have no agreement even on the most fundamental belief of the house of Semites, the one true God. Moreover, on the other hand, Christian interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures radically differs from that of Jews. If Christian claim is taken as truth, it rebuts long-held Jewish beliefs. However, a strange paradox develops if Christianity discredits Hebraic comprehension of Semitic heritage and the ultimate Old

Testament Messiah, it would be the best example of Christianity's self-denial. Such a matter will culminate in a baseless ideology that seems to have appeared all of a sudden from no mother faith. The non-Semitic, namely Hellenistic, traits of Christianity discern the assimilating capacity of traditional Christianity that it has remarkably displayed ever since distortion set in. In the light of history, therefore, it is safe to assert that the modern organization of Christianity has reduced to a conglomeration of heterogeneous metaphysics. However, in spite of all early and later corruption of Christian faith, there is at least one class of Christians that remains closest to the original faith. The above criticism of Christianity does certainly not apply to such a class of the believers of truth, even if they come of different groups.

Islam, being the last of the three, cannot stand solitarily beyond the need of having close linkage with the already amassed Semitic heritage. In this particular context, Islam cannot cut itself from both Judaism and Christianity. Islam is, as Glorious Qurân claims, the restoration and culmination of previously revealed divine substance. Western scholars take Islam for an imitation of both Judaism and Christianity, whereas its scripture, Qurân, is thought to be a twisted redaction of Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. Muslims, however, view this very imitation in a different perspective. They insist that Islam does not plagiarize anything of either Judaism or Christianity in the fashion of imposter religions, but it is a restitution of the original form of both prior religions. It is interesting that Islam is claimed to be, as famous Orientalist *Professor Philip Hitti* also supports the theory, the "original form of Hebrew religion" and a "logical perfection" of Semitic Heritage.¹

¹ Hitti, Philip K., *History of the Arabs*, London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1992, p.8]

As regards the Islamic claim, Islam as a religious system does not depart *per se* from the previous two. Moreover, it also claims to purge them of the ungodly constituents they assimilated in the span of time.² It is but a vital anthropological fact that Hebrews cannot be singled out from Arabs on any grounds, for their ethnic origin is admittedly one and the same. Cultural life can, however, vary on both sides owing to the geographical distances and differences. Islam reconciles itself with all of those religions that claim divine origin. According to the teachings of Qurân, all of the Prophets were raised in the very religion of *submission* to the one true God. Qurân, for instance, reasons that Abraham was neither a Christian nor a Jew, but he was in fact a *servant* of the one and only God. Islam at large gave an enlightening and welcoming effect to the effaced Semitic originals, which otherwise had been exposed against the hegemony of Greco-Roman philosophical thought. Islam indeed baptizes both Judaism and Christianity as the patchwork of divine plan embedded into the Muslim theology, whereas both Moses and Jesus possess a central importance in Quranic paradigm.

However, it is interesting to note that Islam's religious system also underwent a similar corruption as did Christian religion. Islamic problem of Hadith, Muslims' schism over political legitimacy of Caliphate, formulation of a rigid Orthodoxy, and emergence of the *Fiqh* system are all but reflections of the internal struggle of the Muslim Ummah against deterioration of Islamic ideals and influx of foreign ideas.

² The nucleus of Muslim theology is the belief that Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, is a universal Prophet—in the words of a celebrated Islamic authority a "world Prophet"—whose prophetic office was meant for the whole of mankind.