

Another Lesson From History

By Jim Seghers

The narrative that follows describes distant events. You decide if they have an applicability to the moral decay in the USA, our wars in the Middle East, our skyrocketing national debt and the looming threat of China.

When Justinian I became emperor in 527 A.D. he devoted 38 years to the task of reestablishing the greatness of the Roman Empire aided by Belisarius, one of history's greatest generals. The empire had long been in a state of decline from moral and political corruption together with the assaults from barbarian tribes. North Africa was reconquered from the Vandals in March 534. Italy was the next target. Belisarius launched his assault in Sicily in 535. His army was composed of barbarians, who must be regularly paid. They would face the Goths, who could still fight like tigers. This war would last until 554 – 11 years. In the end Belisarius was victorious, but the empire was exhausted and its treasury was depleted.

In the Spring of 568 just three years after Justinian's death, the wildest barbarians Rome had yet seen poured into Italy through the Julian Alps. They were called Longbeards, which was corrupted to Lombards. The people of Italy hardly had the will to live, much less the heart to fight. The Lombards conquered most of northern Italy with hardly a battle. Only the coastal cities held out in the vain hope they would receive help from Constantinople.

The inept Emperor Justin II was a pale shadow of his uncle Justinian. His general, Tiberius, had little interest in fighting the Lombards, because the greatest challenge was the threat from Persia. As a result barbarism reigned supreme in the western part of the empire, while mismanagement and doctrinal anarchy ruled in the East. By the year 608, just forty-three years after Justinian's death, Persian armies advanced triumphantly through Byzantine Mesopotamia. In addition, the Slavs were overrunning the Balkans and penetrating deep into Greece. The situation seemed desperate when the governor of North Africa, Heraclius, was crowned emperor in 610. At the same time a significant historical event was unfolding elsewhere.

In a dusty town in one of the most inhospitable spots on earth there lived an undistinguished member of the area's ruling clan. His name was Muhammad. He was an orphan by the age of six, and was raised by an uncle. He worked as a camel driver and became a merchant by means of the capital provided by the wealthy widow he married. Five of his 6 children died except his daughter Fatima. He liked to meditate alone in the caves in the barren mountains above Mecca. In the year 610 during the month of Ramadan according to the Arabs crude lunar calendar, Mohammad was meditating at night in a cave on Mount Hira. Then, according to the legend, a voice rang in his mind: "O Mohammad, thou are the Messenger of God. Read!"¹ When he came

¹ Carroll, *The Building of Christendom*, p. 204.

out of the cave, he seemed to see a huge figure looming in the sky, with its feet on the horizon. This was one of the few visions Muhammad claimed to have seen. He never worked a miracle.

Soon Muhammad began to announce that he was the “Messenger of God.” He insisted his messages contained the actual words of God that were eventually written in a book, the Koran. This God, who had no Son, was a lonely sky-spirit totally transcendent from men. He was not Father, but Master. In his name men were to kill from the gates of China to the Atlantic Ocean, forging a gigantic engine of aggression that threatened to obliterate both the empire and Christianity.

In the spring of 611 the Persians launched a massive assault on Byzantium. They engulfed Edessa, Antioch and all of Syria, swept through Asia Minor and ran through Cappadocia. A second assault overwhelmed Damascus and Galilee and approached the walls of Jerusalem around Easter 614. In 30 days the Persians undermined the walls of the city and took Jerusalem by storm. The Holy City was sacked for three days. About 35,000 prisoners were carried off to the Persian capital along with the greater part of the True Cross, which was then carefully preserved by Persian Christians. While one Persian army faced Constantinople at Chalcedon, the Persians in 615 were preparing to invade Egypt. The next year the Persians marched through Egypt. Alexandria, which was probably the largest city west of China and India, fell to the Persians with an army of 80,000. With the fall Byzantium lost its granary.

In this desperate situation Heraclius made huge loans to raise a new army. He used part of this wealth to buy peace from the Avars and Slavs, securing his rear. Then for two years he recruited, equipped, and trained his army. His Byzantine Crusade began with a solemn ceremony on Easter Monday 622.

Heraclius met, outmaneuvered and defeated the Persians in three successive battles. By 624 his army, now numbering over 120,000, stormed into Persian Armenia conquering the holy city of Dvin. The decisive moment in the life and death struggle against the Persians came in 626. The Persian army slammed into the defenses of Constantinople for three days, but the city held. After the Byzantines won a major naval battle in the Bosphorus, reinforcements of men and supplies aided the besieged city. The balance of power now shifted in favor of the Byzantines.

The final victory was achieved near the ruins of the ancient city of Nineveh in December 627. The opening scene of this great battle was like an event out of mythology as Heraclius met and killed the Persian commander in single combat. In the peace negotiations that followed, Byzantium regained Syria, Palestine, Egypt and the large portion of the True Cross. However, the victorious Byzantines suffered under a massive imperial debt. As a result Heraclius imposed a burden of heavy taxation, which strangled economic growth. He also downsized his military believing that the external danger was over. This was not the reality.

While Heraclius was preparing to stake everything against the Persians in 622, the beginning of a hurricane that would rip apart his empire was forming 1,500 miles away in Medina. That summer Muhammad fled Mecca because of the hostility he provoked by proclaiming himself the sole oracle of God. He demanded a personal loyalty to him that transcended tribal and even family ties. The journey to Medina of 250 miles came to be called the *Hegira* – the Flight, or the Emigration. After Muhammad arrived in Medina most of the non-Jews accepted him as their leader.

Muhammad's religion is called Islam. It means "submission" to the will of Allah – God. Those who follow this religion are called Muslims. Their creed is simple. It is proclaimed five times a day from the minarets in every Muslim city: "There is no God whatsoever but Allah; Muhammad is the messenger of God." Merely affirming this creed makes someone a Muslim. The penalty for abandoning Islam is death, including all ones family members. The Koran, which is claimed to be the literal word of God given through the Archangel Gabriel, was not written down until after Muhammad's death. There have been long and bitter disputes as to which of its variant texts is correct.

Unbelievers should be attacked without mercy and converted or subjected to the Islamic state, but Jews and Christians were permitted to practice their faiths. However, they were obligated to pay a special tax (*Jizya*) and were excluded from the most important positions of political, military, and social authority. There was no separation of religion and government. The *imam*, the leader in faith and public prayer, was also the *khalifah* (caliph), the commander of the faithful in war and the chief of the state.

Islam is both a mystery and an enigma to Westerners. The evidence of history demonstrates that it is a religion of aggression and blood: the great conquests of the 7th century, the 770-year war for Spain, the wars against the Byzantine empire which occasioned the Crusades, the immense Turkish assault on Europe in the 16th century, the attack on Vienna in 1683, and the terrorists of our time. It has remained impenetrable to Christian missionaries. The Koran downgrades and distorts Christ, but devotes a whole chapter to the Blessed Mother, whose virginity is affirmed and whose holiness is exalted.

While Heraclius was in his winter quarters after three major victories in 625, the leader of Mecca attacked the Muslims of Medina with 3,000 men. The Muslims, who declared a *jihad* (holy war), charged with only 700 men shouting *Allahu akbar!* (God is great!). They were winning the battle when an Ethiopian slave slew Hamza, Muhammad's uncle and the most famous warrior among the Muslims. Then Khalid² made a charge with 200 reserved Calvary straight for Muhammad. His standard-bearer was knocked down and

² Khalid, would later become a Muslim and one of the greatest generals of history. The Muslims would call him "the Sword of God."

the cry went up: "Muhammad is dead!" The Muslims began to break up. A group gathered around Muhammad. A stone knocked out one of Muhammad's teeth. A sword struck his helmet and cut his scalp. His cousin Talha saved Muhammad's life by warding off a sword-thrust with his bare hand.

During the last Meccan attack the Muslims carried the day by the simple expedient of digging a defensive trench. When Muhammad led a pilgrimage to Mecca in 628, the Meccans made a peace treaty with him. Then in January 630, just two months before Heraclius brought the True Cross back to Jerusalem, Mecca submitted outright to Muhammad. The next year Muhammad moved decisively to establish his authority over the whole of Arabia. Three months after his pilgrimage to Mecca in 632, he was dead of a sudden fever.

Muhammad named Abu Bekr, one of his oldest friends and his fourth convert, to lead the daily prayers. Therefore he was recognized in Mecca and Medina after Muhammad's death as imam and caliph. This was not true in the other areas of Arabia. This rebellion is known in Muslim history as "the apostasy." The whole of the habitable center of Arabia where the Saudi capital stands today was in revolt. Khalid now led the Muslims in the fall of 632 as they won three hard fought battles. By 633 Arabia was again under Muslim control. Then Khalid marched north to Kuwait near the head of the Persian Gulf where he confronted the tribe of Beni Bekr. They were given the choice Islam or war. They chose Islam. Augmented by 3,500 additional fighting men, Khalid launched the first Muslim attack on the weakened Byzantine kingdom.

All through the year 633 Khalid harried Lower Mesopotamia. He conquered the city of Anbar by filling its moat with dead camels. In July 634 Khalid won a major victory over General Theodore's Byzantine army in southern Palestine near Beersheba. Theodore's army ceased to exist as a fighting force. In January 635 the Muslims secured the Jordan valley. In September Damascus was taken. Now all of Palestine except Jerusalem and the coastal cities were under Muslim control. In the spring of 636 Heraclius sent an army of 40,000 men south from Antioch under Theodore Trithurius. Damascus was regained, and the outnumbered Muslims were temporarily put on the defensive.

However, only one third of Heraclius' army was experienced with the fierce desert conditions. Most of his soldiers came from mountainous regions of Greece and Armenia. For months the two armies faced each other as the weather turned into the blazing furnace of summer. Then on August 20, before dawn, a wind roared up from the endless sand of Nefud to the south. Khalid seized the bridge behind the Byzantine lines, and then he struck with his entire force. The sons of the desert could fight in a sandstorm, the sons of the hills and farms could not. It was a massacre. General Theodore Trithurius was killed with almost all of his men. This Battle of the Yarmuk River in 636 was one of the decisive battles of the world. Heraclius ordered the True Cross shipped from Jerusalem to Caesarea before the roads were cut, then taken by sea

to Constantinople. The Emperor returned home a broken man ring a crippled kingdom. Such is the fleeting nature of glory!

The caliph Umar assembled an army of 30,000 men to attack Persia. The battle was joined in February 637. It went back and forth without either side gaining an advantage. In the dead of night after the third day of the battle, the Muslims launched a night attack that gained ground. On the fourth day a sandstorm began to blow and the Muslims struck. The Persian army was destroyed. All Mesopotamia then fell into Muslim hands. It became Iraq. The Persians pulled back into Iran. In three years the armies of Islam defeated the Christian Emperor of the East and the King of Persia. The ancient Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine were in their control by the end of 637, except for Jerusalem and Caesarea.

In 639 The Muslims renewed their attacks on two fronts. One force invaded Egypt, while another took Susa in Khuzistan. Alexandria, which was strongly fortified and could be reinforced by sea, surrendered without siege. The Byzantine fleet abandoned the city on September 17, 642. The Byzantine kingdom would survive for many centuries, but only as a truncated version of the once great empire.

That same year an army of 30,000 Muslims crossed the mountains into Persia routing them at Nehawand. They used an ancient tactic. They pretended flight to lure the Persians from their strong defensive position, and then struck the fatal blow. The Arabs then swept through Persia and Christian Armenia. The Zoroastrian religion and its 1,200-year-old monarchy were wiped out. Christians remained in large numbers for many centuries, but the majority of the people of Iran quickly became Muslims. Most Iranians are Muslims today.

Reflection

These historical events first came to my mind when I saw the twin towers going down on 9/11. I realized with alarm that we would be going to war in the quagmire of the Middle East. Eleven years later have a tired military and enormous burden of more than sixteen trillion dollars in debts. Even more disturbing is the moral decline of our country. There is no guarantee that we will preserve in the Christian Faith. Nothing illustrates that sobering truth as clearly as the history of how quickly Islam engulfed so many lands and people that had been Christian for centuries. In a relatively short time the Christian Faith was almost completely eradicated from these areas. If we need further evidence we need only reflect on the spread of secularism in our own country within one generation. In public life we often assign Christ the status of irrelevancy. We need to reflect on the sobering words of Psalm 127:1:

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain” (Ps 127:1).

What is needed are authentic Christians who faithfully live their beliefs. Every Christian is called to be an ambassador for Christ (2 Cor 5:20), not ambassadors who undermine Christ. If real Christians didn't make a difference no one would want to martyr them. May the words of John the Baptist take root in our Land; "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:2).