

Islam in Robert Southey's epic Thalaba

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The history of contact between the Islamic East and Christian West is one of prolonged hostility and mutual distrust. It is not surprising, therefore, that the image the West has formed of Islam and the Muslims has been a quite distorted one. As Jones (1942:202) observes, "The Occidental conception of Mohamet and his teachings come from literary sources than from actual observation of the Muslim people ... and the result is a combination of a little fact and much imagination of a very biased Character."

By the eighteenth century the European image of Islam and the Muslims had long been stereotyped. Indeed, it went all the way back to the Middle Ages, where Islam as a religion figured largely in polemic writings, and the Muslims, almost universally called Saraceans, were present in the popular literature of the time.

The strategy of the Christian Polemicists, who varied greatly in the degree of their knowledge of Islam, remained the same from the beginning: to discredit Islam by using a rather limited number of standard criticisms. As Daniel (1960:1) points out, "The points in which Islam and Christianity differ have not changed, so that Christians have always tended to make the same criticisms; and even when, in relatively modern times, some authors have self-consciously tried to emancipate themselves from Christian attitudes, they have not generally been as successful as they thought themselves."

Common to all literature was the attack on the religion of Islam through the character of the Prophet. The attack upon the life of the Prophet was carried to great lengths. Daniel (1960) observes that the constant theme was that this man could not have been the bearer of true revelation. Muhammad they said, was a man of war, and more than war, of assassination; and he was a man of lust; and he was deceitful, a breaker of oaths. Two criticisms of Islam were explicitly related to the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The first is the imputation of violence as essentially a part of Islam. This was much stressed in the Middle

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Ages by the very people who practiced the Crusade. The other characteristic of Islam which was said to derive directly from Muhammad's life was the sexual laxity which was so popular a theme .

The diminishing danger of the Ottoman Empire; the growing supremacy of British sea power increased contact between East and West , which resulted in an ever increasing output of travel books of more reliable nature than those of earlier ages; the rise of modern scholarship , which resulted in increased number of direct translations from Oriental languages , Particularly Arabic ... all of these elements , among others , contributed towards modifying the old image , until practically a new one was created . In it's own way, it was not completely accurate one either. If the earlier image was conditioned chiefly by religion, the new one was conditioned chiefly by aesthetics, as it were. The translation, early in the eighteenth century ,of Galland's version of the Arabian Nights, stimulated an interest in the Orient that pushed religious matters to the background and nourished, instead a growing romanticism that was being fed by other contributory sources as well.

This paper will study this changing image in the Romantic Age, to see what Islam and the Muslims meant to Robert Southey who wrote major works utilizing Islamic materials, and who is chosen here as a representative of a continuing tradition of Oriental English literature.

To the poetry of this period, Robert Southey made the most notable contribution on Islamic themes. Smith (1939:179) points out that "He had planned, even as a boy, to write epic poems based on the various religious systems and mythologies of the world, and he turned to Islam for his initial effort."

Of the poems actually written to carry out this plan ... Thalaba (1801), Madoc (1806), The Curse of Kehama (1801), and Roderick (1814)... the first and the last deal with Islamic material.

The interest in the imaginative Orient was complemented by something very much like scholarly research, so that although the total picture in Thalaba remains unreal, the details are painstakingly authenticated. In Thalaba, the world of the poem is purely imaginative, with deserts of sand and snow that are never clearly located, and with caverns, magicians and strange creatures that are never sufficiently delineated. Yet every detail is verified from the best scholarship available to the author. The ratio of notes to the text in Thalaba is as large as in Beckford's Vathek. It is as though Southey were consciously imitating Beckford's tale in all its aspects. Haller (1917:255) observes, "The poem compares more fairly with Vathek than with any existing work, and I think may stand by it's side for invention." Southey admired not only the invention of Vathek but also the extensive annotations of the translator, who had added in

Southey's view, " Some of the most learned notes that ever appeared in any book whatever."

The basic story of Thalaba come from The Arabian Tales, or, a Continuation of the Arabian Nights (1792) translated by Robert Heron from Lasuits des milles et une units , Contes Arabes (1783) by Don Chavis and Jacques Cazotte. The story entitled " The History of Mougraby the Magician " gave Southey the suggestion for his poem. To quote from his preface to the first edition of Thalaba : "In the continuation of the Arabian Tales, the Domdaniel is mentioned – a Summary for evil magicians under the roots of the sea. From this seed the present romance has grown."

The action of the poem consists of the attempts made by the witches and warlocks of the Domdaniel to find and destroy Thalaba, and of Thalaba's attempts to find and destroy the Domdaniel. At the beginning of the story, the members of Thalaba's family have been massacred by Okba, a Domdaniel magician. Thalaba grows to manhood as the word of the noble Moath; and falls in love with Moath's daughter, Oneiza. His quest of the Domdaniel involves him in a great number of adventures, from which he always emerges unscathed, like Arthur in the Faerie Queene, through the agency sometimes of magic, sometimes of his own strong arm. As can be seen from this brief summary, the poem involves a conflict between villains who are completely evil and a hero who is completely good. The outcome of the conflict, therefore, is never really in doubt.

Thalaba, as Southey (1838:VII;XIV) tells us , is "professedly an Arabian Tale." The poet is therefore , required to bring into view the best features of the system of belief and worship which had been developed under the covenant with Ishmael , placing in the most favorable light the morality of the Koran ... " This artistic exigency , however, placed Southey in the awkward position of having to represent Islam as the "good" that must vanquish the indisputable evil of the sorcerers, while in reality he had no sympathy with the Prophet Muhammad and his religion, as the rest of the previous quotation clearly shows:

It would have altogether incongruous to have touched upon the abominations engrafted upon [the patriarchal faith developed under the covenant of Ishmael] ; first by the false prophet himself, who appears to been far more remarkable for audacious profligacy than for any intellectual endowments, and after wards by the spirit of Oriental despotism which accompanied Mahommedanism wherever it was established (Ibid).

This condemnation of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam is taken from the 1838 preface to The Curse of kehama, and so it might be taught harmless to the imaginative world of Thalaba. Actually however, Southey was so careless that

he undermined the artistic credibility of his Arabian epic in the text itself as well as the notes. Very early in the poem he puts in Zeinab's mouth some words from the Bible "He gives, he takes away..." (Job,1:21) Furthermore, "It had been easy to have made Zeinab speak from koram could be remembered by the few who have toiled through it's dull tautology. I thought it better to express a feeling of religion in that language with which our religious ideas are connected . "(IV,28) Had Southey Omitted this note altogether, the reader might have accepted Zeinab's speech with out much difficulty, for the idea of the Biblical verse is not alien to Islam. But the disparagement of the language of the Quram and it's " dull tautology " works against the imaginative world the poet is trying to establish, the world in which the Quran is the law. For artistic purposes, " The language with which our religious ideas are connected "must not intrude . As Beyer (1963:235) remarks " Southey may be excused for not Knowing the prodigious mnemonic powers of the language of the Quran in Arabic." But his personal views of the power or tameness of the language of Sale's (1734) translation should not have caused him to commit an artistic blunder of this sort.

However, Southey deliberately choose to distract the reader's attention at every point with endless authentications, explanations, and comments. In stanza b in Book 57, for example, Thalaba is approaching Baghdad; instead of continuing the story, the poet stops his narrative to deliver the following apostrophe :

Thou too art fallen, Bagdad ! city of peace
Thou too hast had thy day
!. And loathsome Ignorance and brute Servitude
Pollute thy dwellings now. Erst for the
Mighty and the wise renown'd, O yet illustrious
for remember'd fame, ... The founder the
victorious, and the pomp of Haroun, for
whose name by blood defiled, Yahia's and
the blameless Barmecides, Genius hath
wrough Salvation,...and the Years when
science with the good Al-Maimon dwelt:
So one day may the Crescent; from thy
Mosques Be pluck'd by wisdom, when the
enlighten'd arm. Of Europe conquers to
redeem the East !

The imperialistic Sentiment in the last lines does not Surprise us because it was the ruling passion of the time. What is really Surprising is Southey's undermining the very world he is trying to create in his poem.

A later in the story we find Thalaba, who is a devout Muslim, going to Babylon to ask Haruth and Maruth, the two fallen angels supposedly able to tell the future, for the talisman that will aid him in his mission. The angels tell him that the talisman is faith, which he had all along. According to the world of the story it is faith in Allah and in his prophet. If the poet tells us beforehand that this faith is false and that the enlightened arm of Europe will pluck the Crescent from the mosques where it is practiced and replace it with the cross, we must

conclude that Thalaba's faith is misplaced, and, consequently, the divine protection that he receives when ever danger is near is also misplaced. In other words, Southey's imaginative world is confused; he is unable to keep his personal prejudices to himself. Evidently, Southey approached his subject with the wrong frame of mind. In the words of Haller (1917:257), Southey "traveled to the Orient in the same spirit in which he had gone to Spain,...to congratulate himself at every step that he was an Englishman.

He wore his Arabian plumage precisely as the English ladies wore the rich Indian shawls sent home by kinsmen free-booting in the train of Warren Hastings." The chief weakness of Southey's Orientalism as Beyer (1963:235) remarks, is that "unlike the medievalism of Scott, [it] lacked true poetic empathy and for the most part remained mechanical and external vitiated withal by middle – class Anglican values, as by Southey's two dimensional characters." The comparison of Southey with Scott is illuminatingly elaborated further in Haller's (1917:257-8) excellent study:

The great innovations of Scott was that in far larger measure he succeeded in showing, not merely the costume, manners, and mythology of strange times and places, but life itself regardless of all strangeness of time and place. For life in all its forms he had no contempt, but abundant love and that imaginative sympathy which enabled him to reveal it as he saw it. Never do we find Scott, upon the basis of some meager second hand information damning a whole civilization, expressing a wish that it might entirely be Swept away, and at the same time utilizing it as "machinery" for the explication of a totally foreign moral doctrine of his own.

Southey's altitude towards the East, on the other hand, exhibits, besides the jingoistic posture of Superiority, Something very much like what might be called cultural blindness. Describing how buildings in East, especially mosques, are sometimes gilded, Southey comments:

A waste of ornament and labour characterizes all the works of the Orientalists. I have been illuminated Persian manuscripts that must each have been the toil of many years, every page painted, not with representations of life and manners, but usually like the curves and lines of a Turkey carpet, conveying no idea .Whatever, as absurd to the eye as nonsense – verse to the ear.(IV:29)

Southey can not imagine any valuable art outside the tradition of Europe. What he cannot appreciate must be worthless . "The little of [the Oriental] literature that has reached us is ... Worthless." Those English scholars who have dared to call Ferdusi "The Oriental Homer" are nothing short of "barbarians". Southey is willing to grand that the "Arabian Tales is abound in

genius", but only because "they lost their metaphorical rubbish in passing through the filter of a French translation."

In view of this antipathy to most things Oriental, it would seem that Southey's attempt to write an epic in which Oriental values obtained was a mistake. But the attraction of Oriental literature, exemplified primarily by Beckford's *Vatek*, was too strong for him. Besides, Islam provided an interesting illustration of one of Southey's main preoccupations, namely, the presence of evil in the world and the necessity of banishing it by the mere presence of perfection. As Haller (1917:240) observes, the "Perennial theme" in Southey's work is the destruction of evil agents by missioned heroes "appointed from on high and with arm[s] made omnipotent by faith in the eternal good ." *Thalaba* is chosen from the start by Allah to be the destroyer of the Dom Daniel. His weapon is neither intellectual power nor physical prowess; he is more of an immature young man who has seen nothing of the world. His only strength lies in his faith, or what Southey calls "resignation", which the author tells us, "is particularly inculcated by Mohammed, and of all his precepts it is that which his followers have best observed." In addition to this virtue *Thalaba* learns what , for Southey, is purely Christian one, namely forgiveness. At a crucial point in the story the opportunity presents itself for *Thalaba* to avenge the death of his father, brothers, and sisters by killing Laila, the daughter of Okba, the murderer. Killing her is for a moment presented to him as the decree of God, but *Thalaba* refuses to kill the innocent girl, and she ends by being stabbed by her own father.

Thalaba recognizes that this is divinely ordained, pities the grief – stricken father, and gives up all intentions of revenge. In other words, *Thalaba* has been purified of all feeling of personal wrong and is there fore , ready to embark on his mission to destroy the forces of evil in this world.

The theme of the missioned hero would presumably have also been that of the projected long poem on the Prophet Coleridge. Ironically, as Ober (1958:448) points out, Southey speaks in a letter to Sir Humphry Davy of bullying innovations in metre " (i.e., the hexameter being adopted for the poem), and forgets his own flagrant prejudices against his prospective hero. We have seen how Southey regards The Prophet Muhammad as no more than a "false prophet " and an audacious profligate of no intellectual endowments. A more elaborate statement by Southey, quoted by Warter (1856;1:77-8) on the Prophet Muhammad and Islam is found in a letter to John May dated July 29,1799:

Of the few books with me I am most engaged by the Koran: It is dull and full of repetitions, but there is an interesting simplicity in the tenets it inculcates. What was Mohammed? Self- deceived, or knowingly a

deceiver? If an enthusiast, the question again recurs, wherein does real inspiration differ from mistaken? This is a question that puzzles me, because to the individual they are the same, and both effects equally proceed from the first Impeller of all motions, who must have ordained whatever he permits. In this train of reasoning I suspect a fallacy, but cannot discover it. But of Mohammed, there is one fact which in my Judgment stamps the imposter... he made too free with the wife of Zeid, and very speedily had a verse of the Koran revealed to allow him to marry her. The vice may be attributed to his country and constitution; but the dispensation was the work of a Scoundrel imposing upon fools. The huge and monstrous fables of Mohammedanism, his extravagant miracles, and the rabbinical tenants of his followers, appear no when in the written book. Admit the inspiration of the writer, and there is nothing to shock belief. There is but one God... this the foundation; Mohammed is his prophet... this is the superstructure. His followers must have been miserably credulous. They gained a victory over the Koreish with very interior numbers, and fought lustily for it. Yet Mohammed Says, and appeals to them for the truth of what he says, that not they beat the Koreish but three thousand angels won the victory for them. The system has been miserably perverted and fatally successful.

The question of deception on the part of the Prophet Muhammad is a matter of belief and cannot be proved or refuted by mere assertions. Muslims do believe that the Prophet Muhammad was Sincere even though they accept that he was human and fallible. Southey does not in fact need the "damaging" evidence of the storey of Zeid's wife to suspect the Prophet Muhammad of a being a "scoundrel". Southey was temperamentally predisposed to agree with the long tradition of Christian polemics asserting that the prophet was an imposter. The story of Zeid's wife was not Southey's discovery but had been a favourite tool of attack against the veracity of Muhammad's claim to prophet hood since the Middle Ages. Southey liked to see in it an irrefutable proof that Muhammad was an imposter.

But if Southey believed Muhammad to be an imposter, what kind of a hero was he liked to make out of him in his projected epic? The poem's outline that Ober (1976) has published in *Notes and Queries* and the one Warter (1856) has published in the fourth volume of Southey's Commonplace Book indicate that the two poets intended to follow the out line of the prophet's life as far as it was known to them. From the letter to John May quoted above, it seems that the poem would have involved the representation of the Prophet Muhammad as an enthusiast whose mission was of some value to the idolatrous Arabs. A hint of this is given by Southey himself. Towards the end of the plan as given in the

Commonplace Book, the author given the following sketch of "The Bader Book," i.e. those dealing with the battle of Bader:

...Pursuit of the caravans . Sebane and Miriam must feel respect and adoration for the enthusiast; but it is after the defeat and danger of Ohud, that his fearless yet wise, fanaticism inflects her, and makes her at once believe and love. (IV:20).

It appears that Southey wanted to give special emphasis to Miriam the Copt, a Christian convert, possibly to explain the origin of the similarities between some of the Quranic and Biblical stories. However, Southey does not seem likely to have succeeded in portraying a coherent and convincing characterization of the Prophet Muhammad; he was too unsympathetic to the man, his religion, and the culture it produced to be able to treat him fairly and dispassionately .

It was in a spirit of hostility that the Christians tended to view Islam. This resulted in a distorted image of the new religion and its followers that did not gain much in clarity until fairly recently. This image was largely the creation of the church polemicists, but it was not long before the image of the polemic literature of the Middle Ages filtered into the popular literature of the time and continued to appear in it up to the nineteenth century.

The main point of attack has always centered on the Character of the Prophet Muhammad, who was represented as a Christian heretic, an imposter, a magician, a god, an idol, an epileptic, and a Sensualist. The Strategy behind this defamation was the assumption that if Muhammad was shown to be unworthy of prophet hood, his religion would clearly be a creation of his own mind and not a divinely revealed religion.

But a marked improvement in the knowledge of Islam as a religion began to appear early in the eighteenth century. Translation of Oriental works, religious and literary, became available and soon commanded wide audiences. The literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflected this increase in knowledge. However, the total image of Islam and the Muslims presented by writers such as Southey is not quite accurate in every detail. This image being coloured sometimes by personal predilections or deep-rooted attitudes.

ملخص :

الإسلام في ملحمة روبرت ساوتي (طلاباً)

تاريخ العلاقة بين الشرق الإسلامي والغرب المسيحي مليئاً بالعداوة والتنافر وعدم الثقة المتبادلة، وهذا ليس بالغريب لأن صورة الإسلام والمسلمين التي صنعها الغرب كانت صورة خيالية مشوهة، ويرجع هذا إلى أن مفهوم الغرب إلى الدين الإسلامي وتعاليمه كان مبنياً على مصادر أدبية وليس على مراقبة ودراسة المسلمين. ترجع هذه الصورة إلى القرون الوسطى حيث كانت إستراتيجية المناظرين المسيحيين هي استخدام عدد محدود من الانتقادات لأن نقاط الخلاف الرئيسية بين المسيحيين والمسلمين في مجال العقيدة لم تتغير، والعامل المشترك بين جميع هذه الأعمال هو مهاجمة الدين الإسلام من خلال شخصية الرسول، وكانت الفكرة الثابتة هي أن محمداً كان نبياً مزيفاً، ورجل حرب وكان شهوانياً، وبهذا أصبح الإسلام دين عنف ودين الانحلال الجنسي.

في شعر الحركة الرومانية بالقرن الثامن عشر كان أسهام روبرت ساوتي ملحوظاً في المواضيع الإسلامية. تتناول ملحمة "طلاباً قصته مهمة البطل طلابا في البحث والقضاء على الشر، وطلاباً كما يقول ساوتي هي في الواقع قصة عربية والتي تحاول إظهار مزايا الدين الإسلامي والقرآن. ولكن هذه الرغبة وضعت ساوتي في موقف حرج لأنه كان عليه تقديم الإسلام كقوة الخير التي تهزم شر السحرة والمشعوذين بينما كان في الواقع لا يكن للرسول والسلام أي تعاطف. وبهذا تظهر الملحمة مليئة بالتناقضات.

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