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Was Arabian Idol Worship Declining on the Eve of Islam?*

People, Tribes and Society in Arabia Around the Time of Muḥammad

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The role of idol worship is of crucial importance for the study of Arabia on the eve of Islam. The very existence of the Arabian idols has recently been questioned, but the thorough investigation of the primary sources undertaken here suggests that their existence is beyond doubt.¹ A great many idols of various kinds must have been known all over Arabia. Idolatry was perhaps in retreat in other places, but in Arabia it showed no signs of weakening. It may well be impossible to gauge the Arabs' devotion to their idols, but it stands to reason that their worship formed a major obstacle for Muḥammad both in Mecca and in Medina.

The rejection of idol worship is a permanent element in the accounts of the pre-Islamic *hanīfs*. Idols also appear in legendary and stereotypical conversion stories of the Prophet's Companions who lived in various parts of Arabia. I shall argue that the details regarding the idols are reliable since they belong to the background information on which the stories were based. More significantly, in Medina, where the spiritual influence of the dominant Jewish population was considerable, idol worship flourished on every level of tribal organization. If idol worship flourished in Medina, it flourished everywhere, or in any case in the Arabian settlements; there is no indication that the people of Medina were more devoted to their idols than the people of other places. Claims in the primary sources purporting to reflect indifference to idols among the Jāhīlī Arabs must be considered apologetic and tendentious.

It is widely assumed that on the eve of Islam idol worship in Arabia was in decline and hence did not form a major challenge for Muḥammad. Nöldeke ascribed the ease with which the Arabs gave up idol worship to the spiritual progress that they had achieved before the rise of Islam.² Wellhausen argued that the

*The following is an extended translation of a lecture delivered at Yad Ben Zvi in Jerusalem, 1999 (Hebrew).

¹G.R. Hawting (see Abbreviations) is of the opinion that the Qur'anic *mushrikūn* were not real idolaters but monotheists. See Y. Dutton's review of Hawting's recent book in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 12,ii (2001), 177-179.

²"Die Araber hatten bis zum Anfang des 7. Jahrhunderts ausserordentliche geistige Fortschritte gemacht wie nicht leicht ein Volk in so ungünstigen Wohnsitzen. Sie waren ihrer alten Religion entwachsen und liessen diese daher fast ohne Widerstand fallen, als sich ihnen der

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