

BACKGROUND TO JAHILIYYA

The time of Muhammad is generally known as pre-Islamic Arabia. For Muslims, however, it is also called jahiliyya, which means “ignorance”. It was an age in which there were beliefs and practices that were the total opposite of what submission to Allah required. The religion, morality, social structure, politics and the general chaotic state of the population underpinned this description.

Religion was polytheistic, animistic and driven by human greed. Idols were sold that they believed would cause their enemies to fear them and served to deliver protection to individual tribes. Religion was practical and through sacrifice and ritual it served the needs of the ignorant public; it was by no means a deep-rooted theological pursuit.

Society was rife with immorality. The tip of this was the feudal system in which life was cheap and there was nothing immoral about killing. Trading for profit and raiding other tribes was the norm; indeed, robbery was not considered immoral unless you stole the goods of kinsmen.

The strong ruled and the weak were oppressed and exploited. Poverty was ignored and charity a rarity. Population control was often by female infanticide and the life of a woman had little value. In general, women, like slaves, were not treated particularly well and had no specific rights, human or legal.

In political terms there was no overall system of government. Rules were there but not written or firmly established; they were also variable and inconsistent.

Many books, written from a monotheistic or Muslim perspective of jahiliyya, record mostly just negative accounts. However, this does not mean that the entirety of pre-Islamic life in Arabia was evil or debased. There were some good qualities of tribal society, such as honour, bravery, hospitality and generosity. There were also areas of society, as evidence by the example of Khadijah, where women were not routinely oppressed.