

The Hallucinations of Mahomet and Others. By WILLIAM W. IRELAND, M.D. Edin., Medical Superintendent of the Scottish National Institution for the Education of Imbecile Children, Larbert, Stirlingshire.

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To one who does not admit the divine mission of Mahomet it is very difficult to explain the pretensions of that remarkable man, and at the same time to uphold his sincerity. There have undoubtedly been instances where mere politicians have resorted to religious impostures as temporary expedients to advance their ends; for example, the woman whom Pisis-tratus got dressed up in the traditional costume of Pallas, and who conducted him back to Athens from exile, or the milk-white hind which followed Sertorius in Spain, and by means of which he was reputed to hold converse with the Gods. But a contrivance of this kind is a very different thing from the foundation of a religion which now numbers about a hundred and forty millions of votaries, and which possesses to this day a very singular power over the minds of its followers. By the persistent claim of being a messenger from God, after a struggle of twenty-one years Mahomet made himself master of the greater part of Arabia, and roused a mighty religious movement which continued after his death. In a few years more a number of wandering tribes, who had previously no more cohesion than the sands of their deserts, had run a mighty career of conquest, which bore them to the banks of the Loire and of the Oxus. It is generally admitted that men cannot excite in others feelings which are wanting in their own breasts. A man without honesty and destitute of religious faith could no more found a religious system like that of Islam than a man without an ear for music could compose an opera. The old notion that Mahomet was a mere impostor appears so difficult of belief that no one of any recognised skill in historical inquiry now upholds it. But it has always been a great difficulty to explain how Mahomet could in good faith say that he had seen the angel Gabriel, and heard voices from heaven calling him the Messenger of God, and revealing chapter after chapter of the Koran. It had long seemed to me that the question was beyond human solution, and that it might have been a very difficult one, even had the inquirer

lived in Mecca or Medina during the time of Mahomet's mission.

It has been several times suggested that Mahomet was subject to some nervous disease accompanied by hallucinations, and if this could be proved it might help to solve a very interesting historical problem. A theory of this kind has been advanced, and worked out in some detail by Sprenger in his life of Mahomet;* and this learned writer, by printing many of the traditions on which his narrative was founded, allows us, to a certain extent, to exercise our own judgment in the matter. In preparing this paper Sprenger is our principal authority; and when we take a statement from another writer the reference will be given. It is necessary to remember that though the text of the Koran is not disputed by Arabic scholars, the traditions which have come down to us are often very doubtful and full of corruptions and legends. Even Mussulmans are not expected to receive them without criticism; and it is likely that the mythical theory could be applied to many of them.

When Mahomet received his first revelation he was a man of forty-two years of age. He had lost his father in infancy and his mother in childhood, had followed the calling of a travelling merchant, and had been raised to a good position in Mecca by his marriage with a wealthy widow whom he had always treated with the greatest affection, although she was fifteen years older than himself; nor did he ever take another wife as long as she lived.

There are several traditions about Mahomet's first revelation; the following, given by Sprenger, is one of the fullest in detail:—

The revelations of the Prophet began with visions in his sleep as bright as the dawn of the morning. Then a love of solitude came upon him. He used to live alone in a cave of the mountain Hira, where he spent several days and nights together in prayers and devotional exercises, and when he returned to his family it was but to get provisions. He came home then to Kadija, and fetched food for a certain number of days. This lasted until suddenly the truth came to him when he was in the cave of Hira. The angel came to him, and said, "Read." He tells, I answered, "I will never read." He seized on me, and pressed me till my strength went away. Then he loosed me, and said, "Read." I answered, "I will never read."

* *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammed nach bisher grössentheils unbenutzten Quellen bearbeitet von A. Sprenger. Berlin. 1861.*

This was repeated twice with the same answer. After pressing him the third time, the angel said—

Read, in the name of thy Lord who has created you. He has created men from blood. Read; the Lord is the greatest who has taught men. He has taught man by writing what he did not know.

The prophet returned home trembling, and said to Kadija, "Wrap me up." She covered him up until his agitation was past; then he said, "Oh, Kadija; what has happened to me?" and he told her the story, adding, "I fear for myself." Kadija answered, "Surely not. Be of good courage. Allah will never make you miserable; for by Allah you are faithful to your relations. You speak the truth; you assist the needy; you are active in your calling; you are hospitable to strangers, and help people who have fallen into undeserved misfortune." Then Kadija went to her relation Waraka. "This was a man who had become a Christian in the time of heathendom, could write in Arabic, and had copied as much of the Gospel as it pleased God." He was very old and had become blind. Kadija spoke, "Oh, uncle, hear what thy relation has to tell thee." Waraka said, "Tell what you have seen;" and Waraka said, "This is the spirit which God hath sent upon Moses. Oh, that I were young! Oh, that I should be in life when thy people persecute you!" "What!" broke in the prophet, "will they persecute me?" "Yes," said Waraka; "never has a man brought what you bring without having enemies."

According to another tradition on this first occasion, wherever the prophet turned his gaze, he always saw the same figure; but another account simply says that he heard a voice crying, "Oh Mohammed!" and looking round, and seeing no one, he hastened to his wife and told her of it, saying he feared that he was deranged or enchanted.

Another tradition tells that when

Mahomet was walking in the defiles and valleys about Mecca, every stone and tree greeted him with the words, "Hail to thee, oh, messenger of God." He looked round to the right and to the left, and discovered nothing but trees and stones. The prophet heard these cries as long as it pleased God that he should be in this condition; then the angel Gabriel appeared, and announced to him the message of God in the mountain Hira, in the month of the Ramadan.

In the Koran his interviews with Gabriel are rather alluded to than described, so we are obliged to depend upon traditions

which are not always authentic. According to some of these accounts, after the first interview with the angel, there was a very long silence, and Mahomet was so much troubled in mind that he went sometimes to Mount Thabyr, and sometimes to Mount Hira, with the thought of throwing himself over a precipice. On Mount Hira he heard a voice from Heaven.

He stood still, for he felt faint on account of the voice, and he turned his face upwards, and behold Gabriel sat with crossed legs upon a throne between heaven and earth and cried out, "Oh, Mohammed, thou art in truth the messenger of God, and I am Gabriel." The prophet then turned back. God had gladdened his heart and filled it with courage. Then followed revelation upon revelation.

According to another tradition, when questioned upon the manner of his inspiration, Mahomet replied*—

Inspiration descendeth upon me in one of two ways. Sometimes Gabriel cometh and communicateth the Revelation unto me, as one man unto another, and this is easy; at other times it affecteth me like the ringing of a bell, penetrating my very heart, and rending me as it were in pieces; and this it is which grievously afflicteth me.

In the later period of life Mahomet referred his grey hairs to the withering effect produced upon him by the terrific Suras, or passages of the Koran. Ayescha, his favourite wife, said, "I observed the prophet when he got a revelation on a very cold day, and when it was over the drops of sweat stood upon his forehead." Othman was speaking to him one day, when he remarked that his eyes were suddenly turned towards Heaven and then to the right. His head moved as if he were speaking; after some time he looked again towards Heaven, and then to the left, and then to Othman. His face was covered with sweat. Othman asked him what ailed him, when he repeated a verse of the Koran which had just been revealed to him.

There is another tradition that a Bedouin had a strong desire to see the prophet when a revelation came on. Mahomet was lying under a cloth which had been stretched out to shade him from the sun, with Omar and some other followers. Omar allowed the man to put his head under the awning, and he saw that the prophet was red in the face, and seemed unconscious. After awhile he came to himself and gave the Bedouin the advice of which he came in quest. There are

* The "Life of Mahomet," by Wm. Muir, Esq., Vol. ii., p. 378. London, 1858.

other traditions which might favour the idea that he was subject to epileptic fits; for example, he made a sound like that of a young camel. On another occasion he fell upon Zayd's lap with such a force that he feared his leg was broken. Sprenger thinks this attack was so *à propos* that it might have been feigned. Another tradition says that when the prophet had a revelation he fell into a coma as if he were drunk.

It is said that his face turned white, and that he moved his lips as if he were speaking.

One can scarcely wonder at the prophet being represented in a trance, as this was the accredited form in which a divine revelation was communicated. It is a question of great interest, as Sir William Muir remarks, whether the ecstatic periods of Mahomet were simply reveries of profound meditation, or swoons connected with a morbid sensibility of the mental or physical constitution.

Gibbon tells us that it was an absurd calumny of the Greeks that Mahomet was subject to epilepsy.

If we are to believe that Mahomet fell into some species of trance, accompanied by hallucinations, this appears different from ordinary epilepsy. An epileptic entirely loses consciousness, and when it returns he is generally in a confused and sleepy state, quite different from that of Mahomet, who had always his rhymed verse of the Koran ready after having had a revelation. Epilepsy, especially when the fits are frequent, is a disease most destructive to mental force and soundness of thought, and must be fatal to an active and difficult career; yet Mahomet had to encounter much opposition, both before the flight to Medina and after it. He showed great activity in war; he led twelve military expeditions, underwent much exposure, and was many times in extreme danger. Setting aside his claims to divine communications, there is no proof that he was in the least deranged. He evidently possessed an intellect of the highest order for managing and controlling affairs, and was skilful both in conducting war and treating with his adversaries. It is common in works about insanity to repeat the statement that Julius Cæsar and Napoleon Bonaparte were both epileptics. What we know about Cæsar seems to rest on the authority of Suetonius,* who says that Cæsar had good health, except that

* *Valetudine prospera, nisi quod tempore extremo repente animo linqui atque etiam per somnium exterreri solebat. Comitiali quoque morbo bis inter res agendas correptus est.—Suetonius xii Cæsares, cap. 45.*

towards the end of his life he would suddenly swoon away, and was frequently terrified in his sleep, and that he was twice seized with epilepsy while transacting business. Plutarch mentions a report that Cæsar had a fit during the time the battle of Thapsus was fought, but this was one of his last battles. It is likely that these fits came on towards the close of his life, for a man subject to repeated attacks of epilepsy could never have run the great career that Cæsar did, though it is possible that had the daggers of Brutus and Cassius not abruptly ended his life, the splendid intellect of Julius might have sunk into insanity, perhaps after a period of extravagance and furious tyranny like that of his successor, Caligula, who, from the description of Suetonius, was an epileptic lunatic.

As for Napoleon, the testimony of Bourrienne seems to me decisive—

It has been everywhere said that he was subject to epilepsy; but during more than eleven years that I was constantly with him, I have never seen in him any symptoms in the least degree indicative of that malady.

But to return to the Arabian prophet.

There is a tradition that Akra b. Habis visited the prophet just at the time he was getting cupped on the back of the head, and said to him, "Oh, son of Abu Habscha! why do you allow yourself to be cupped in the middle of the head?" Mahomet answered, "It is a remedy against headache, toothache, drowsiness, leprosy," and Layth adds, "I believe he said also against delusions."

Sprenger tells us that Mahomet used cups for a great variety of complaints. They were made of horn, and probably resembled those described by Celsus, and were brought into use even on the occasion of eating the poisoned mutton which the Jewish woman at Chaibar gave him.

Weighing all the testimony that remains to us together, it seems likely that Mahomet, at the commencement of his mission, was subject to hallucinations of hearing and sight which, taking the tone of his deeply religious feelings, and his dislike to the idolatry and polytheism of the people of Mecca, were interpreted by him as messages from God. In this belief he was prompted and encouraged by his wife, Kadija, and some of his relations, and was thus induced to commence his remarkable course of apostleship. How far these hallucinations accompanied the remaining twenty-one

years of his life it would be difficult to say. There are some reasons to believe that they became less frequent after the flight to Medina; but it is evident that after his claim to divine inspiration was fairly settled by himself and admitted by others, he would be disposed to regard his dreams and omens, and the impulses of his own thoughts and feelings, as so many signs from Allah, whose messenger he believed himself to be.

Behind all these delusions, there was a keen and powerful intellect, well acquainted with the passions and motives which most act upon men, and gifted with a wonderful power of forcible speech; and if Mahomet is to be called insane, his insanity was of a very rare type. It is one thing to account for a succession of hallucinations, occurring without order or purpose in a man whose conduct shows his brain to be deranged, and quite another to account for a series of visions or hallucinations, each going to support a revelation of a systematic character. The hallucinations of Mahomet took a definite shape and sequence, adapting themselves to difficulties, opposition, and criticism, in the end working out a religion which, from its rapid extension and durability, must have been well adapted to the races who have made it their own. It seemed as if there were some one behind, directing the hallucinations or delusions of Mahomet, or arranging them so that they should produce a given effect. Sir William Muir suggests that the prophet yielded to the suggestions of the devil. Sprenger, who laughs at his fellow-biographer, remarking that, if people still believe in a personal devil, there is no reason why they should not give him something to do—nevertheless is evidently much at a loss for a personage of this kind to help out his theory; for though he affirms that Mahomet was subject to hallucinations and what he calls hysterical attacks, he abandons the theory again and again to accuse the prophet of deceit and trickery, and pious and political frauds.

It is admitted that a man can habitually have hallucinations without being insane; the well-known case of Nicolai is one to the point. It is often said that, if the man recognises the hallucination to be something unreal, he may be sane; on the other hand, if he believe and act upon the hallucination, that he is insane. Much, however, must depend upon what a man's preconceived opinions are. One brought up from his childhood to believe in ghosts will take any figure he sees in the dark for a spectre, if it appear at an

hour or in a situation when and where no man could be expected to be. In the same way, a man who believes that angels are in the habit of appearing to men, would not take up the idea that a similar apparition to himself was a mere hallucination. Mahomet had heard of many apparitions of angels to the old Hebrew prophets, he believed in djins, and bad and good spirits; his mind had outgrown the polytheism and idolatry of Mecca; he was deeply religious, and felt himself in possession of truths which raised him above the stupid idolatry of his fellow-citizens. He knew nothing about the physiology of the brain, but he believed that a man could be deceived by bad spirits, and, doubtful whether this might not be his own hap, he took the opinion of those whom he loved and trusted most. Viewed in this way, I cannot call him insane.

In ancient times, and amongst half-civilized nations, things were done in the name of religion which none but men of the weakest mental structure would now do; but the rule we would apply to the one time will not hold good for the other.

If to claim to be an inspired prophet be a sufficient proof of insanity, then of course Mahomet was insane; but if this be not assumed, on what grounds can such an imputation be made good against the son of Abdallah? If we had an account of him written by Abu Sophian, or some of his other opponents, no doubt the unfavourable points of his character would be brought out; but, as far as the accounts of his friends go, he appears to have possessed a great deal of *savoir faire*. His manner of speaking and acting impressed even his enemies very favourably. The Koran is his undoubted work, and though it seems to me, through a translation, an irregular and often tiresome production, it certainly affords no proof of insanity. A claim is persistently put forward by the Mussulman, originally stated by Mahomet himself, that the composition of the Koran bears in itself the impress of divine wisdom. Truly, if the Iliad and the Odyssey were written without divine inspiration, Mahomet had need of no such help in composing the Koran!

According to the theory of Dr. Luys,* hallucinations are produced by a diseased condition of the *corpora quadrigemina*. Irritations of different parts of these *ganglia* are

* See his views explained in a pamphlet by Dr. Ant. Ritti, "Theorie physiologique de l'Hallucination." Paris, 1874.

believed by him to produce abnormal sensations of vision, hearing, and feeling; but the interpretation of such sensations is determined by the prevailing tone of the mind. As disease of the *corpora quadrigemina* may exist without disease of the hemispheres, we may have hallucinations without insanity.

In the cases of hallucination given by Dr. Ritti, where an examination was made after death, both the hemispheres and the *corpora quadrigemina* were found to be diseased; but no one will hold that abnormal conditions of the one organ necessarily imply a similar state in the other.

Swedenborg, who made even more decided claims than Mahomet to hold communication with another world, and, indeed, said in so many words that he could converse with angels and the spirits of men in heaven at his pleasure, seems to have fallen into fits of reverie or trance. He was observed by his friend Sprenger, in an inn, raising the hands towards heaven, and moving his body about. He spoke a great deal for half an hour, and then let his hands fall, and cried, "My God;" then he lay quiet. They asked him if he were unwell. He said, "I had a long conversation with the angels and with my heavenly friends, and am now quite wet with perspiration."

One day, in his own house, he fell into an ecstatic state, and two Jews who were with him, thinking that he was insensible, took a gold watch from him; but he asked it back when he came out of the trance. On another occasion General Tuxen noticed him in a state of reverie, his face leaning on his hands with his elbows on the table. On speaking to him he came to himself, but seemed confused and agitated. Swedenborg himself gave a strange description of his feelings when the angel appeared to him in London, and told him not to eat so much. He felt as if a mist streamed out at the pores of his body that was quite visible, and fell upon the ground, where a carpet appeared, upon which the mist gathered and changed itself into worms of all species, and were instantly burnt up. A fiery light appeared in their place, and a crackling was heard.

But it would be taking up your time in an unjustifiable manner to go on comparing the Swedish mystic with the Arabian prophet, especially after the able articles on Emmanuel Swedenborg, by Dr. Maudsley, in the "Journal of Mental Science."*

* See the numbers for July and October, 1869.

It is possible a careful study of the lives of other religious pretenders might help us to some useful generalisations; but such an undertaking would be very difficult, for the origin of old religions is generally lost in an uncritical antiquity, and the presence of philosophical observers will ever be a hindrance to the appearance of new ones.

If Luther did not profess to found a new religion, he was at least the leader of a great religious movement. As is well known, he was subject to delusions about the devil; nor is this very difficult to explain. Though gifted with extraordinary penetration of mind, a learned scholar, and a keen critic upon books, he had in common things all the superstition of a Saxon peasant. Of anything like physical science he was entirely ignorant, and his observations of the external world were merely used to give illustration to his preachings and controversies. One of the commonest sources of error and speculation is for men to attribute things they are unacquainted with to causes of which they know something, or think they know something. Luther's attention was entirely directed to the operations of the mind, the aspirations and struggles of the soul, and the political changes of the time; hence he gave psychical explanations of physical events. One day, when there was a great storm abroad, Luther said, "'Tis the devil who does this; the winds are nothing else but good or bad spirits. Hark! how the devil is puffing and blowing,"* Then, again, "Idiots, the lame, the blind, the dumb, are men in whom devils have established themselves; and all the physicians who heal these infirmities, as though they proceeded from natural causes, are ignorant blockheads, who know nothing about the power of the demon." It is well known that he wished a Cretin to be thrown into the Moldau on the theory that the Cretin was a fabrication of the devil.

The credulity of this great man on everything connected with the devil is very strange to men of this time. One-tenth of the critical power which was lavished upon the theses of Wittemberg, or the claims of the Apocalypse or the Epistle of St. Jude to rank as canonical books, would have made him distrust the silly stories about the devil which are so prominent in his table-talk. But he was a man of very powerful imagination, and subject to neurotic affections, which, as usual, he put down to diabolical agency.

* These quotations are all taken from "Michelet's Life of Luther," translated by William Hazlitt. London. 1856. See pp. 321, 338, 339, 208, 430, 102, 318.

This toothache and earache I am always suffering from (says he) are worse than the plague. When I was at Coburg, in 1530, I was tormented with a noise and buzzing in my ear, just as though there was some wind tearing through my head. The devil had something to do with it.

A man was complaining to him one day of the itch; said Luther, "I should be very glad to change with you, and to give you ten florins into the bargain. You don't know what a horrid thing this vertigo of mine is. Here, all to-day, I have not been able to read a letter through, nor even two or three lines of the Psalms consecutively. I have not got beyond more than three or four words, when buzz, buzz, the noise begins again, and often I am very near falling off my chair with the pain. But the itch, that's nothing; nay, it is rather a beneficial complaint."

In 1530 he writes:—

When I try to work my head becomes filled with all sorts of whizzing, buzzing, thundering noises, and if I did not leave off on the instant I should faint away. For the last three days I have not been able even to look at a letter. My head has lessened down to a very short chapter; soon it will be only a paragraph, then only a syllable, then nothing at all. The day your letter came from Nuremberg I had another visit from the devil. I was alone, Vitus and Cyriacus having gone out, and this time the evil one got the better of me, drove me out of my bed, and compelled me to seek the face of man.

This is a very good description of what has been sometimes called irritability of the brain. The incapacity for mental exertion is frequently accompanied with hyperæsthesia. In his last illness he writes:—

I take it that my malady is made up—first of the ordinary weakness of advanced age; secondly, of the results of my long labours, and habitual tension of thought; thirdly, above all, of the blows of Satan; if this be so, there is no medicine in the world will cure me.

It seems to me an error to say that he wished it to be understood that the devil appeared to him and disputed with him about the mass. The truth is he was accustomed to refer all the evil thoughts that came into his head to the suggestions of the devil, and it is in this sense that he writes, "I awoke suddenly at midnight on one occasion, when Satan began to dispute with me in the following terms" (here followed a long argument about the mass).

During his strict retirement in Wartburg Castle his mind was in a very excited state. I do not know what contemporary authority there is for the story of his throwing the inkstand at the devil; as is well known, the mark is still

shown on the wall of the chamber he occupied, but the following is an instance of a hallucination of sight, if not also of hearing :—

When, in 1521, on my quitting Worms, I was taken prisoner near Eisenach, and conducted to my Patmos, the Castle of Wartburg, I dwelt far apart from the world in my chamber, and no one could come to me but two youths, sons of noblemen, who waited on me with my meals twice a day. Among other things, they had brought me a bag of nuts, which I had put in a chest in my sitting-room. One evening, after I had retired to my chamber, which adjoined the sitting-room, had put out the lights and got into bed, it seemed to me all at once that the nuts had put themselves in motion, and, jumping about in the sack, and knocking violently against each other, came to the side of my bed to make noises at me. However, this did not alarm me, and I went to sleep. By-and-bye I was wakened up by a great noise on the stairs, which sounded as though somebody was tumbling down them a hundred barrels one after another. Yet I knew very well that the door at the bottom of the stairs was fastened with chains, and that the door itself was of iron, so that no one could enter. I rose immediately to see what it was, exclaiming, "Is it thou? Well, be it so!" and I recommended myself to our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom it is written, "*Thou hast put all things under his feet*" (Psalm viii.), and I returned to bed. The wife of John Berblibs came to Eisenach. She suspected where I was, and insisted upon seeing me, but the thing was impossible. To satisfy her, they removed me to another part of the castle, and allowed her to sleep in the apartment I had occupied. In the night she heard such an uproar that she thought there were a thousand devils in the place.

It would appear that any noise he could not account for was attributed to Satan, who was perpetually haunting him.

Once in our monastery at Wittenberg (said he) I distinctly heard the devil making a noise. I was beginning to read the Psalms, after having celebrated matins, when, interrupting my studies, the devil came into my cell, and thrice made a noise behind the stove, just as though he were dragging some wooden measure along the floor. As I found he was going to begin again, I gathered together my books and got into bed. . . . Another time in the night I heard him above my cell, walking in the cloister; but as I knew it was the devil, I paid no attention to him, and went to sleep.

There is no proof that the delusions or hallucinations to which the German reformer was subject did in any way alter or modify his religious views. It is, however, easy to imagine circumstances under which they might have done so, and led Luther to become the founder of a new religion.