

# The People of Saba and the Arim Flood

H A R U N   Y A H Y A

The community of Saba was one of the four biggest civilisations which lived in South Arabia. This people is estimated to have been established some time between 1000-750 BC and to have collapsed around 550 AD with the two centuries-long attacks of the Persians and the Arabs.

The date of the establishment of the civilisation of Saba is a subject of much discussion. The people of Saba started recording their governmental reports around 600 BC. This is why there are no records of them prior to this date.

The oldest sources which refer to the people of Saba are annual war chronicles left from the time of the Assyrian King Sargon II. (722-705 BC) While Sargon records about the people that pay taxes to him, he also refers to the King of Saba, Yith'i-amara (It'amara). This record is the oldest written source that yields information about the Saba civilisation. Yet, it would not be right to draw the conclusion that the Saba culture was established around 700 BC depending only on this source, for it is highly probable that Saba had existed for quite some time before it was recorded in written records. This means that the history of Saba may predate the above. Indeed, in the inscriptions of Arad-Nannar, one of the latest kings of the state of Ur, the word "Sabum", which is thought to mean "the country of Saba", was used.<sup>(1)</sup> If this word does mean Saba, then, this shows that the history of Saba goes back as far as 2500 BC.

Historical sources telling about Saba usually say that this was a culture, like the Phoenicians, particularly involved in commercial activities. Accordingly, these people owned and administered some of the trade routes passing across Northern Arabia. In order for the Sabaeans to carry their goods to the Mediterranean and Gaza, and thus pass across Northern Arabia, they had to get permission from Sargon II, the ruler of all the region, or pay a certain amount of tax to him. When the Sabaeans started paying taxes to the Assyrian Kingdom, their name began to be recorded in the annals of this state.

The Sabaeans are known to have been a civilised people in history. In the inscriptions of the rulers of Saba, words such as "restore", "dedicate" and "construct" are frequently used. The Ma'rib Dam, which is one of the most important monuments of this people, is an important indication of the technological level this people had reached. However, this did not mean that the military power of the Sabaeans was weak; the Sabaeans army was one of the most important factors contributing to the endurance of their culture over such a long period without collapse.

The Sabaeans state had one of the strongest armies in the region. The state was able to adopt an expansionist policy thanks to its army. The Sabaeans state had conquered the lands of the Old Qataban state. It owned many lands on the African continent. During 24 BC, during an expedition to Magrib, the Sabaeans army utterly defeated the army of Marcus Aelius Gallus, the Governor of Egypt for the Roman Empire which was definitely the strongest state at the time. Saba can be portrayed as a state that pursued moderate policies, yet did not hesitate to use power when necessary. With its advanced culture and army, the Sabaeans state was definitely one of the "super powers" of the region at the time.

**This extraordinarily strong army of the Sabaeans state is also described in the Qur'an. An expression of the commanders of the Saba army related in the Qur'an, shows the extent of the confidence this army had in itself. The commanders call out to the female ruler (queen) of the state: "We are endued with strength, and given to vehement war: but the command is with thee; so consider what thou wilt command." (Surat an-Naml: 33)**

The capital city of the Sabaeans state was Ma'rib, which was quite wealthy thanks to the advantageous position of its geography. The capital city was very close to the River Adhanah. The point where the river reached Jabal Balaq was very suitable for the construction of a dam. Making use of this condition, the Sabaeans people constructed a dam at this location at the time when their civilisation was first established, and they began irrigation. They indeed reached a very high level of prosperity. The capital city, Ma'rib, was one of the most developed cities of the time. The Greek writer Pliny, who had visited the region and greatly praised it, also mentioned how green this region was. <sup>(2)</sup>



**With the Ma'rib Dam, which they had constructed with very advanced technology, the Sabaeans people became owners of a great irrigation capacity. The fruitful lands they thus obtained and their control over the trade routes allowed them to lead a magnificent and luxurious lifestyle. However, they "turned away" from Allah to whom they should have been grateful for all those bounties mentioned above. Therefore, their dam collapsed and the "flood of Arim" destroyed all their attainments.**



**The Ma'rib Dam seen above in ruins was one of the most important works of the Sabaeen people. This dam collapsed because of the flood of Arim mentioned in the Qur'an and all the cultivated areas were swamped. Its territory destroyed with the collapsing of the dam, the Sabaeen state lost its economic strength in a very short time and was soon completely demolished.**

destruction of the dam.

The height of the dam in Ma'rib was 16 metres, its width was 60 metres and its length was 620 metres. According to the calculations, the total area that could be irrigated by the dam was 9,600 hectares, of which 5,300 hectares belonged to the southern plain, while the remaining part belonged to the northern plain. These two plains were referred to as "Ma'rib and two plains" in the Sabaeen inscriptions (3). The expression in the Qur'an, "two gardens to the right and to the left", points to the imposing gardens and vineyards in these two valleys. Thanks to this dam and its irrigation systems, the region became famous as the best irrigated and most fruitful area of Yemen. The Frenchman J. Holevy and the Austrian Glaser proved from written documents that the Ma'rib dam existed since ancient times. In documents written in the Himer dialect, it is related that this dam rendered the territory very productive.

This dam was extensively repaired during the 5th and 6th centuries AD. Yet, these reparations could not prevent the dam from collapsing in 542 AD. The collapse of the dam resulted in the "flood of Arim" mentioned in the Qur'an which caused great damage. The vineyards, gardens and the cultivated fields of the Sabaeen people, which they had cultivated for hundreds of years, were completely destroyed. It is also known that the Sabaeen people quickly went into a period of recession after the destruction of the dam. The end of the Sabaeen state came at the end of this period which had begun with the

## THE FLOOD OF ARIM WHICH WAS SENT TO THE STATE OF SABA

When we examine the Qur'an in the light of the historical data above, we observe that there is very substantial agreement here. Archaeological findings and the historical data both verify what is recorded in the Qur'an. As mentioned in the verse, these people, who did not listen to the exhortations of their prophet and who ungratefully rejected faith, were in the end punished with a dreadful flood. This flood is described in the Qur'an in the following verses:

**There was, for Saba, aforetime, a Sign in their home-land - two Gardens to the right and to the left. "Eat of the Sustenance (provided) by your Lord, and be grateful to Him: a territory fair and happy, and a Lord Oft-Forgiving!" But they turned away (from Allah), and We sent against them the Flood (released) from the dams, and We converted their two garden (rows) into "gardens" producing bitter fruit, and tamarisks, and some few (stunted) Lote-trees. That was the Requital We gave them because they ungratefully rejected Faith: and never do We give (such) requital except to such as are ungrateful rejecters. (Surah Saba: 15-17)**

As emphasised in the above verses, the Sabaeen people were living in a region noted for its outstanding aesthetic, fruitful vineyards and gardens. Situated on the trade routes, the country of Saba had quite a high standard of living and was one of the most favoured cities of the time.

In such a country, where standards of living and circumstances were so positive, what the Sabaeen people should have done was to "Eat of the Sustenance (provided) by their Lord, and be grateful to Him" as is said in the verse. Yet, they did not do so. They chose to lay claim to the prosperity they had. They thought that this country belonged to themselves, that it was they who made all these extraordinary circumstances possible. They chose to be arrogant instead of being grateful, and, in the expression of the verse, they "turned away from Allah"...

Because they laid claim to all the prosperity they had, they lost it all. As related in the verse, the flood of Arim destroyed everything they had.

In the Qur'an, the punishment sent to the Sabaeen people is named as "Sayl al-Arim" which means the "flood of Arim". This expression used in the Qur'an also tells us the way this disaster occurred. The word "Arim" means dam or barrier. The expression of "Sayl al-Arim" describes a flood that came about with the collapse of this barrier. Islamic commentators have resolved the issue of time and place being guided by the terms used in the Qur'an about the flood of Arim.

Mawdudi writes in his commentary: As also used in the expression, Sayl al-Arim, the word "arim" is derived from the word "arimen" used in the Southern Arabic dialect, which means "dam, barrier". In the ruins unearthed in the excavations made in Yemen, this word was seen to be frequently used in this meaning. For example, in the inscriptions which was ordered by Yemen's Habesh monarch, Ebrehe (Abraha), after the restoration of the big Ma'rib wall in 542 and 543 AD, this word was used to mean dam (barrier) time and again. So, the expression of Sayl al-Arim means "a flood disaster which occurs after the destruction of a dam."

**"We converted their two garden (rows) into gardens producing bitter fruit, and tamarisks, and some few (stunted) Lote-trees" (Surah Saba: 16).** That is, after the collapse of the dam-wall, all the country was inundated by the flood. The canals that had been dug by the Sabaean people, and the wall that had been constructed by building barriers between the mountains, were destroyed and the irrigation system fell apart. As a result, the territory, which was like a garden before, turned into a jungle. There was no fruit left but the cherry-like fruit of little stumpy trees. (4)

The Christian archaeologist Werner Keller, writer of "The Holy Book Was Right" (*Und Die Bible Hat Doch Recht*), accepted that the flood of Arim occurred according to the description of the Qur'an and wrote that the existence of such a dam and the destruction of the whole country by its collapse proves that the example given in the Qur'an about the people of the garden was indeed realized. (5)

After the disaster of the Arim flood, the region started to turn into a desert and the Sabaean people lost their most important source of income with the disappearance of their agricultural lands. The people, who had not heeded the call of Allah to believe in Him and to be grateful to Him, were in the end punished with such a disaster as this. After the great destruction caused by the flood, the people started to disintegrate. The Sabaean people started to desert their houses and emigrate to Northern Arabia, Makkah and Syria. (6)

Since the flood took place after the revelation of the Tawrah and the Bible, this event is described only in the Qur'an.

The city of Ma'rib, which was once a residence for the Sabaean people, but is now only a desolate ruin, undoubtedly is a warning to those who repeat the same mistake as the Sabaean people. The Sabaean people were not the only people that were destroyed by a flood. In Surat al-Kahf of the Qur'an, the story of two garden owners is told. One of these men possesses a very imposing and productive garden like those of the Sabaean people. However, he makes the same mistake as them: turning away from Allah. He thinks that the favour bestowed on him "belongs" to him himself, i.e. he is the cause of it:

**Set forth to them the parable of two men: for one of them We provided two gardens of grape-vines and surrounded them with date palms; in between the two We placed corn-fields. Each of those gardens brought forth its produce, and failed not in the least therein: in the midst of them We caused a river to flow.**

**(Abundant) was the produce this man had. He said to his companion, in the course of a mutual argument: "more wealth have I than you, and more honour and power in (my following of) men." He went into his garden in a state (of mind) unjust to his soul: He said, "I deem not that this will ever perish, Nor do I deem that the Hour (of Judgment) will (ever) come: Even if I am brought back to my Lord, I shall surely find (there) something better in exchange."**

**His companion said to him, in the course of the argument with him: "Dost thou deny Him Who created thee out of dust, then out of a sperm-drop, then fashioned thee into a man? But (I think) for my part that He is Allah, My Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord. Why didst thou not, as thou wentest into thy garden, say: 'Allah's will (be done)! There is no power but with Allah!' If thou dost see me less than thee in wealth and sons, It may be that my Lord will give me something better than thy garden, and that He will send on thy garden thunderbolts (by way of reckoning) from heaven, making it (but) slippery sand!- Or the water of the garden will run off underground so that thou wilt never be able to find it."**

**So his fruits (and enjoyment) were encompassed (with ruin), and he remained twisting and turning his hands over what he had spent on his property, which had (now) tumbled to pieces to its very foundations, and he could only say, "Woe is me! Would I had never ascribed partners to my Lord and Cherisher!" Nor had he numbers to help him against Allah, nor was he able to deliver himself. There, the (only) protection comes from Allah, the True One. He is the Best to reward, and the Best to give success. (Surat al-Kahf: 32-44)**







As understood from the verses, the mistake of this garden owner was not to deny the existence of Allah. He does not deny the existence of Allah, on the contrary he supposed that "even if he is brought back to his Lord" he would certainly find something better in exchange. He held that the state he is in, was due to his own successful efforts.

Actually, this is exactly what associating partners to Allah means: attempting to lay claim to everything that belongs to Allah and losing one's fear of Allah thinking that one has some particular grace of his own, and Allah will somehow "show favour" to one.



The Qur'an tells us that the Queen of Saba and her people were "worshipping the sun besides Allah" before she followed Sulayman. The information on the inscriptions verify this fact and indicate that they were worshipping the sun and the moon in their temples, one of which is seen above.  
On the pillars, there are inscriptions written in the Sabaean language.

This is what the Sabaean people also did. Their punishment was the same - all of their territory was destroyed - so that they could understand that they were not the ones who were the "owners" of power but that it was only "bestowed" on them...

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- 1 "Seba" Islam Ansiklopedisi: Islam Aleml, Tarihi, Coğrafya, Etnografya ve Bibliyografya Lugati, (Encyclopedia of Islam: Islamic World, History, Geography, Ethnography, and Bibliography Dictionary) Vol.10, p. 268 
  - 2 Hommel, Explorations in Bible Lands, Philadelphia: 1903, p.739 
  - 3 "Marib", Islam Ansiklopedisi: Islam Aleml, Tarihi, Coğrafya, Etnoğrafya ve Bibliyografya Lugatı, Volume 7, p. 323-339. 
  - 4 Mawdudi, Tefhimul Kuran, Cilt 4, Istanbul: İnsan Yayınları, p.517. 
  - 5 Werner Keller, Und die Bibel hat doch recht (The Bible as History; a Confirmation of the Book of Books), New York: William Morrow, 1956, p.207. 
  - 6 New Traveller's Guide to Yemen, p.43. 
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