Muḥammad and His Followers in Context

The Religious Map of Late Antique Arabia

BY

ILKKA LINDSTEDT

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Muḥammad and His Followers in Context

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Cover illustration: An undated but possibly second/eighth-century Arabic inscription found in NE Jordan during the Badia Epigraphic Survey 2018 led by Ali Al-Manaser and Michael Macdonald. The writer of the inscription, one ʿAmmār, asks God to bless Muḥammad and to forgive the male and female believers. The writer also asks the prophet's words and intercession to be accepted. Photograph by the author.

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Acknowledgements

Over the years, I have written various articles on early Islamic identity, as well as pre-Islamic Arabia; this book brings together the different strands of research I have been pursuing. However, writing this book ten or twenty years ago would not have been possible. Much of the (in particular epigraphic) evidence that I rely on has been published in the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s. I have had the privilege and pleasure of learning from and socializing with the great Arabian epigraphists, linguists, and historians Ahmad Al-Jallad, Iwona Gajda, Michael Macdonald, Laïla Nehmé, and Christian Robin. I am truly grateful for their collegiality throughout the years and for the painstaking scholarly work that they have done to revolutionize the field. It is a real pity that their work is still not always acknowledged by Arabists and Islamicists.

I am grateful for receiving funding from various outlets. I was working with a research grant from the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation in 2015–2016. During 2016–2019, when the bulk of the research that has resulted in this book was carried out, I was a Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. I have the fondest of memories of the time spent there. My fellowship period allowed for an immersion into the world of Arabic (and more generally Arabian) epigraphy.

In 2019, I joined the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki. It is here that I have found my intellectual home and received the warmest of welcomes. This book has been written in the framework of the Finnish Cultural Foundation-funded project "The mediation of identity in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," led by Jutta Jokiranta. I am extremely grateful to Jutta and the other scholars in the project for valuable feedback that they have given on the manuscript of this book. Extra special thanks to Nina Nikki, who got me interested in the social identity theory in the first place. During the writing of this book, Nina, Riikka Tuori, and I also edited a volume with the title *Religious Identities in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Walking Together & Parting Ways* (Leiden 2021), which was, in turn, based on a symposium we organized (with Maijastina Kahlos) at and with the kind financial help of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, "Ideas and Identities in Late Antiquity: Jews, Christians, and Muslims," March 12–13, 2018. The symposium and the volume explored many of the same themes that this book discusses.

My *Doktorväter* Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila and Kaj Öhrnberg read the whole manuscript of this book and proffered numerous invaluable comments and suggestions. Without them, I would never have become interested in early Islam; and without their help on the manuscript, this book would have been

much less detailed. Jaakko pushed me to engage with Arabic poetry, which I was at first hesitant to do but which, I now think, became significant for my arguments. Throughout the years, Kaj has had the patience to read and comment on my studies. What is more, without his tips, I would have missed many valuable pieces of secondary literature.

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In spring 2021, I taught a course titled "The biographies of Muḥammad and social memory." Throughout the course, we discussed how the biographical literature constructs a portrait, or rather many different portraits, of the prophet Muḥammad, and how those depictions aligned, or not, with what scholars have recovered of pre- and early Islamic Arabia. Thanks to the students, it was an extremely rich course. The students put forward ingenious and creative readings of the biographical texts that we went through. Quite a few of the insights presented in this book are due to these inspiring classes.

This book reproduces some passages from my published articles. I am very grateful to the publishers for permission to do this. These articles are: "'One Community to the Exclusion of Other People'—A Superordinate Identity in the Medinan Community," published in a book by de Gruyter; and "Religious Warfare and Martyrdom in Arabic Graffiti (70s–110s AH/690s–730s CE)," published in a book by the Oriental Institute, Chicago (for exact references, please refer to the bibliography of this book).

I also want to warmly thank Heli Alamaunu and Petteri Koskikallio for their invaluable assistance with the formatting of the book. Without their help, this book would probably have not seen the light of day.

The most influential person with regard to this book is yet to be named: Professor Fred Donner. I spent the year 2014 as a visiting postdoctoral researcher at the University of Chicago with a grant from the Finnish Cultural Foundation. The importance of Fred's studies to me is probably visible to every reader of this book, on every page of it: in a way, this book is simply an extended footnote to his research. It took me a long time to start to understand and appreciate the importance of Fred's studies: when I read his books and articles as a student, in the 2000s, the ideas struck me as rather outlandish. I was so hardwired to read the Qurʾān as a text that must talk about "Muslims" and "Islam" and cannot say anything good about Jews and Christians. It took me quite some time to see the Qurʾān, and early Islamic history more generally, with a new set of goggles. However, over the years, Fred's influence got me thinking of, in particular, social categorizations and their development in early Islamic times.

My stay in Chicago in 2014 had very much importance for my scholarly outlook and thinking. The PhD students that Fred advised comprised the brightest young minds in the study of early Islam. I should mention in particular Suleyman Dost, Richard Heffron, Nathaniel Miller, Jessica Mutter, and Jeremy Vecchi for friendship, discussions, and good times during my sojourn in Chicago.

Fred's scholarship, learning, hospitality, and kindness characterized my year 2014, forming memories that I often go back to. It is to Fred Donner that I humbly dedicate this book.

Figures

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A Note on Style

I have tried to keep my book as reader friendly as possible: pre-modern texts are given in English translation; transliterated passages are adduced somewhat sparingly. The idea in this is to present the evidence and arguments of this book in plain English and in a way that would make the book readable for scholars, students, and others with backgrounds in different academic disciplines. The Bible citations are given in accordance with the NRSV translation. The Talmud is given in the translation from Sefaria (https://www.sefaria.org/). The Qur'ānic passages are given in an English rendering of my own. I have, however, often consulted the English translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem and am often indebted to him. I have also used the Finnish translation of the Qur'ān by Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, which has affected my renderings significantly. The translations of other texts (from Arabic and other languages) are also my own if I do not specifically mention where the translation is taken from.

The reader should note that, in the case of Safaitic and Sabaic inscriptions, for example, it is often impossible to give the vocalizations of the personal names present in them with any certainty. Because of this, personal names sometimes appear as consonants only, as "Ḥmd" or the like. Transliterations of Sabaic, Safaitic, and Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions follow the conventions of the respective fields, which differ somewhat from how Arabic is transliterated in this book. I should also remark that, because of the meter, Arabic poems are often transliterated in full vocalization, in contrast to prose: in the latter case, the case endings are not given, as is common in the field.

Since this work deals with a rather large number of themes which are usually seen as rather distinct but which, I argue, should be understood as interlinked, I have been somewhat restricted in giving references to the existing scholarship, favoring recent studies to the exclusion of older ones. The bibliography of the work is already rather long and would have been even more outsized if I had included more copious notes and discussion of earlier works.

FIGURE 1 The map of the localities mentioned in the book
THE MAP WAS DRAWN BY NORA FABRITIUS; USED WITH PERMISSION

Abbreviations

Book Series

AAIW	Arts and Archaeology of the Islamic World
AKM	Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes
AOS	American Oriental Series
ATS	Arabistische Texte und Studien
CCME	Culture and Civilization in the Middle East
FCIW	The Formation of the Classical Islamic World
IPTS	Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
RSHIT	Routledge Studies in the History of Iran and Turkey
RSMEH	Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern History
SILS	Studies in Islamic Law and Society
SLAEI	Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam
SPCH	Studies in Persian Cultural History
SSL	Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics

Journals & Periodicals

Arabica	*Arabica. Revue d'Études Arabes*
ARAM	*ARAM Periodical*
BEO	*Bulletin d'Études Orientales* (*de l'Institut Français de Damas*)
BJMES	*British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*
BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
Der Islam	*Der Islam. Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients*
IJMES	*International Journal of Middle East Studies*
IOS	*Israel Oriental Studies*
JA	*Journal Asiatique*
JAIS	*Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*
JAL	*Journal of Arabic Literature*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JESHO	*Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*
JIQSA	*Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association*
JIS	*Journal of Islamic Studies*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JQS	*Journal of Quranic Studies*

JRAS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JSAI	*Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
MW	*The Muslim World*
Oriens	*Oriens. Zeitschrift der Internationalen Gesellschaft für Orientforschung*
Qanṭara	*al-Qanṭara. Revista de Estudios Arabes*
SI	*Studia Islamica*

Encyclopaedias & Lexica

EQ	*Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006
CSAI	*Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions*
OCIANA	*The Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia*

Handbooks

CHI	*The Cambridge History of Islam*
ThG	van Ess, Josef, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 6 vols., Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991–1996.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This is a book about the community of the prophet Muḥammad (d. 632 CE) and its social and religious context. I suggest that the prophet and his believers should be interpreted in their Arabian context, which can be construed on the basis of epigraphic and other contemporary sources. In the book, I also try to reconstruct and contextualize how the earliest audience (those who believed in this message and those who perhaps did not) might have understood his revelations, later collected in the book known as the Qurʾān. How did the Jews, Christians, and gentiles in Mecca, Medina, and elsewhere perceive the message present in these revelations? What was the community like that believed in the prophet Muḥammad's message and formed around him? What was its social (ethnic, religious, and so on) composition?

My work and approach is historical.[1] I present a continuous narrative of the religious[2] map of late antique Arabia, starting in the first centuries CE and end-

1 It should be remarked that, in my work, I make no suggestions as to how Muslims nowadays understand or should understand the Qurʾān as scripture.

2 Scholars such as Asad (Asad, Talal, *Genealogies of religion: Discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and Barton and Boyarin (Barton, Carlin A. and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine no religion: How modern abstractions hide ancient realities*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2016) have suggested that the concept "religion" does not really fit in the pre-modern world, given how the features and beliefs we call "religious" were interwoven into all aspects of life. Thus also Boyarin, Daniel, *Judaism: The genealogy of a modern notion*, New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018, 24: "Where there is no word 'religion,' religion is not meaningful as a concept, ergo 'religion' does not exist in that linguistic-cultural system." I agree. We owe our understanding of religion to the Enlightenment, first and foremost. However, as modern scholars of pre-modern times, our task is, ultimately, translation. I use the word "religion" to describe those aspects of life (social and otherwise) in late antique Arabia in which worship of and belief in a supernatural agent or agents was central. Not all "religions" of late antiquity formed formal structures, naturally, and they were, in most cases, not delineated from other facets of life lived, often permeating into what we might nowadays call "ethics," "legislation," "worldview," and "ethnicity." A good working definition for religion is given in Jaffee, Martin S., *Early Judaism*, Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997, 5: "Religion is an intense and sustained cultivation of a style of life that heightens awareness of morally binding connections between the self, the human community, and the most essential structures of reality. Religions posit various orders of reality and help individuals and groups to negotiate their relations with those orders." This definition is suitable for my uses in this book, since I, too, understand religion as first and foremost a social phenomenon, with specific characteristics (namely, belief in some sort of supernatural agent or agents) that sets it apart from, e.g.,

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ing with the events after the death of the prophet until around 700 CE. By this I hope to show that a dichotomic periodization of Arabian and Near Eastern history into "pre-Islamic" and "Islamic" is possibly misleading. Though the rise of Islam was an impressive and formidable historical development, we should not entertain the false idea that what was before it was somehow totally different from what came with and after it.

I prefer, and in many parts of the discussion use only, sources that are contemporary with the events that they describe. Epigraphic sources (rock inscriptions) receive much space in my study, for they are true first-hand evidence. Although there is more and more awareness among scholars of the epigraphic and other contemporary sources on pre-Islamic Arabia, there still is a sizeable gap in scholarship of early Islam concerning them. The prophet Muḥammad is more often still approached with non-contemporary sources than the contemporary ones. The historical inquiry into Islamic origins has been lopsided, with late and secondary sources being preferred to contemporary and primary ones. There has been little discussion on how the religious map that we can reconstruct on the basis of material evidence would fit the life, mission, and community of Muḥammad. Arabia has been viewed as something alien, remote, severed from the wider world of the Near East. Through this work, I endeavor to put forward one such attempt in contextualizing Muḥammad and his followers. I try to shed many pre-conceived notions (what we "know") and start anew, as it were, basing my treatment on contemporary evidence.

1 Prolegomena and Methodological Considerations

Imagine Arabia on the eve of Islam. Perhaps you are thinking of sand, and camels too. Arab Bedouin roaming the desert in search of pasture for their sheep. Idolatry is rife. People erect stones, that is, idols, that they worship as

"culture" more generally. For a treatment of what specifically religious identity is (vis-à-vis other social categorizations), see the important study by Ysseldyk, Renate, Kimberly Matheson and Hymie Anisman, "Religiosity as identity: Toward an understanding of religion from a social identity perspective," in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14/1 (2010), 60–71. However, it should be underlined that, during the period under discussion in this book, many religious groups were also understood in ethnic terms (that is, somehow connected with descent). While this is true today as well, at least in the connection of some religions, it seems to have been more common to conceptualize religious groups thus in late antiquity.

deities and sacrifice meat and wine on them. This depiction is familiar to us from the Islamic-era Arabic historiography. For instance, Hishām ibn al-Kalbī (d. ca. 204/819) writes the following of an Arabia before Islam:

> The [pre-Islamic] Arabs were known for their idol worship. Some of them took for themselves a temple (*bayt*), others an idol (*ṣanam*). The ones that could not visit or build a temple, erected a stone in front of a sacred enclave (*ḥaram*) or other place where they saw fit. Then they would circumambulate it [the stone] like a temple. They called them [the stones] idols.[3]

This view is habitually echoed in modern scholarly literature. Witness, for example, this passage from Michael Lecker's pen:

> The Arab idol worshippers were polytheists, but they also believed in a High God called Allah whose house was in the Kaʿba and who had supremacy over their tribal deities. Despite the diversity in the forms of idol worship, on the whole it was a common characteristic of pre-Islamic Arabian society.[4]

This book argues that these views are wrong. Or, at the very least, they are not broadly representative of pre-Islamic Arabia, where most people lived in towns and villages and were monotheists of sorts. Around the year 600 CE, worshipping stones as representations of deities had already faded into the background (or vanished altogether). Moreover, a broader Arab identity was yet to emerge: most people in late antique Arabia categorized their descent through and within tribal groups rather than broader ethnic affiliations.

Hishām ibn al-Kalbī or Michael Lecker do not mention Jews and Christians as being an essential part of the religious map of Arabia before Islam. But they were: in fact, the sixth-century epigraphic evidence attests *only* Jews, Christians, and perhaps other (gentile) monotheists. Jews and Christians formed in all likelihood the majority in pre-Islamic Arabia.[5] My aim, in this book, is to

---

3 Ibn al-Kalbī, Hishām, *Al-Aṣnām*, ed. Aḥmad Zakā Bāshā, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1995, 33.

4 Lecker, Michael, "Pre-Islamic Arabia," in Chase F. Robinson (ed.), *The new Cambridge history of Islam*, 6 vols., i: *The formation of the Islamic world: Sixth to eleventh centuries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 153–170, at 161.

5 Since no research on pre-Islamic inscriptions and archaeological remains in and in the immediate vicinity of Mecca and Medina has been conducted, we cannot say much that is certain

proffer a continuous narrative, without a juncture, of late antique Arabia of which the prophet Muḥammad is an intrinsic part. This narrative is, I suggest, based on solid historical evidence, since I give much weight to the epigraphic record, which is a dated (or datable), first-hand, insider source. Too often in scholarly (and even more so in popular) literature early Islam is presented as a clear break, *sui generis*, and without a context. In popular imagination, the prophet and his movement have become disjointed.

Fortunately, the research of the recent years has put late antiquity in Islamic origins, so to speak, shining much light on historical phenomena.[6] The Qurʾān's

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about the religious groups in those towns. But from other parts of Arabia there is enough evidence for me to argue my case. Mecca and Medina were not islands severed from other parts of Arabia, though only one of them (Yathrib/Medina) is mentioned in pre-Islamic evidence and seems to have been located on the most important Arabian trade routes; Crone, Patricia, *Meccan trade and the rise of Islam*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987; cf. her "How did the Quranic pagans make a living?" in *BSOAS* 68/3 (2005), 387–399, and "Quraysh and the Roman army: Making sense of the Meccan leather trade," in *BSOAS* 70/ 1 (2007), 63–88; Bukharin, Mikhail D., "Mecca on the caravan routes in pre-Islamic antiquity," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in context: Historical and literary investigations into the Qurʾānic milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 115–134. The Qurʾān clearly supposes Jews and Christians living in both towns, as can be seen in the course of this book. There is epigraphic evidence from al-Ḥijāz more generally, however. The geographically closest (to Mecca or Medina) Jewish and Christian inscriptions have been found in Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ/Hegra, al-ʿUlā/Dadan, al-Jawf/Dūma, Taymāʾ and Umm Jadhāyidh (near Tabūk). See Hoyland, Robert G., "The Jews of the Hijaz in the Qurʾān and in their inscriptions," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *New perspectives on the Qurʾān: The Qurʾān in its historical context 2*, London: Routledge, 2011, 91–116; Nehmé, Laïla, "New dated inscriptions (Nabataean and pre-Islamic Arabic) from a site near al-Jawf, ancient Dūmah, Saudi Arabia," in *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 3 (2017), 121–164; Nehmé, *The Darb al-Bakrah: A caravan route in North West Arabia discovered by Ali I. al-Ghabban: Catalogue of the inscriptions*, Riyadh: Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, 2018, 185, 285, 291. Inscriptions from ancient and late ancient al-Ḥijāz that are written by identifiable Jews and Christians number over thirty, which is not a meager amount, given that epigraphic surveys in al-Ḥijāz have been fewer than in northern and southern Arabia. What is more, it is fair to suppose that, given this overall picture, many of the (say, late Nabataean) inscriptions in which the writer does not signal his or her religious affiliation or beliefs in any way were actually written by Jews or Christians.

6 Well-articulated by Stroumsa, Guy G., *The making of the Abrahamic religions in late antiquity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 146: "the Arabian Peninsula, considered earlier to have been located on the margins of the *oikoumenē* and to have played a rather limited historical and cultural role, must now be seen as an integral part of the world of late antiquity. This is particularly true, in our present context, in the realm of religious ideas and practices." Also, Hughes, Aaron W., "South Arabian 'Judaism', Ḥimyarite Raḥmanism, and the origins of Islam," in Carlos A. Segovia (ed.), *Remapping emergent Islam: Texts, social settings, and ideological tra-*

connections and allusions to other Near Eastern texts (be they scripture or something else) have been explored in much detail.[7] However, there is still a need for a work that deals with Muḥammad's message and community in its *Arabian* context.[8] What is more, the issue of the social identity of the

jectories, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 15–43, at 16: "Islam must be firmly situated within the context of late antiquity, rather than presented as that which terminated it."

7 See, e.g., al-Azmeh, Aziz, *The emergence of Islam in late antiquity: Allāh and his people*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014; Bakhos, Carol and Michael Cook (eds.), *Islam and its past: Jahiliyya, late antiquity, and the Qur'an*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; Bowersock, Glen Warren, *The crucible of Islam*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017; Cole, Juan, *Muhammad: Prophet of peace amid the clash of empires*, New York: Nation Books, 2018; Crone, Patricia, *The Qur'ānic pagans and related matters: Collected studies in three volumes* (IHC 129), ed. Hanna Siurua, 3 vols., Leiden: Brill, 2016; Déroche, François, Christian J. Robin and Michel Zink (eds.), *Les origines du Coran, le Coran des origines*, Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 2015; el-Badawi, Emran Iqbal, *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic gospel traditions*, London: Routledge, 2014; Fowden, Garth, *Before and after Muhammad: The first millennium refocused*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014; Fowden, Garth and Elizabeth Key Fowden, *Studies on Hellenism, Christianity and the Umayyads*, Paris: De Boccard, 2004; Hoyland, Robert G., *Seeing Islam as others saw it: A survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1997; Penn, Michael P., *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the early Muslim world*, Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015; Reynolds, Gabriel Said, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical subtext*, London: Routledge, 2010; *The Qur'ān and the Bible: Text and commentary*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2018; *Allah: God in the Qur'an*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2020; Sarris, Peter, *Empires of faith: The fall of Rome to the rise of Islam, 500–700*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; Segovia, Carlos A., *The Quranic Noah and the making of the Islamic prophet: A study of intertextuality and religious identity formation in late antiquity*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015; *The Quranic Jesus: A new interpretation*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018; Segovia (ed.), *Remapping emergent Islam: Texts, social settings, and ideological trajectories*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020; Shoemaker, Stephen J., *The death of a prophet: The end of Muhammad's life and the beginnings of Islam*, Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012: *The apocalypse of empire: Imperial eschatology in late antiquity and early Islam*, Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018; Sinai, Nicolai, *The Qur'an: A historical-critical introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017; Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions*; Toral-Niehoff, Isabel, *Al-Ḥīra: Eine arabischen Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext*, Leiden: Brill, 2014; Wood, Philip (ed.), *History and identity in the late antique Near East*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

8 Dost, Suleyman, *An Arabian Qur'ān: Towards a theory of peninsular origins* (PhD Diss.): University of Chicago, 2017, presents a remarkable study in this regard. However, the social identity aspect is not the focus of his work; this is, I posit, the novel contribution of the present study. Robin, Christian J., "L'Arabie préislamique," in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye (eds.), *Le Coran des historiens*, 2 vols., i, Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2019, 53–154, at 53, also deplores the fact that there still has not been enough empirical research in Arabia at the time of Muḥammad.

group that coalesced around the gentile prophet in the early seventh century remains to be connected with the religious map of late antique Arabia.

I will concentrate in this book on aspects that are relevant when interpreting the prophet Muḥammad's message, as well as on the community around him. What follows is not, then, fully representative of late antique Judaisms and Christianities.[9] What is more, I mostly disregard political (in the sense: imperial) history here. The Qur'ān is, I submit, scarcely interested in, for example, the power struggles of Sasanian Persia versus the Byzantine Empire or Ḥimyar versus Aksum. In my reading, as an eschatological prophet, Muḥammad's career was not about politics but about promulgating a religious message that would proffer a pathway to the gentiles in addition to those who had already received the scriptures. He thought that, in a very real sense, the world was going to end. The eschatological aspect, and the salvific promise that it entails, are at the forefront of my interpretation of the prophet Muḥammad.

Next, I will note a few things about my methodological premises. What is the Arabian "context" I try to reconstruct for early Islam and how do I go about reconstructing it? Here, a recent note by a scholar of late antiquity and early Islam can be adduced: Stephen Shoemaker has remarked the following: "the emergence of Islam must be situated within the broader religious context of the late ancient Near East and likewise must be investigated using the same historical-critical methods and perspectives that have guided the study of early Judaism, Christianity, and other religions for well over a century now."[10] This is indeed how I see the context of early Islam as well, though in what follows I

9 The reader will notice that Manichaeans, Zoroastrians, and some other religious groups are mostly missing in my book. This is because there is very little evidence at the moment for their presence in Arabia (though small groups of them are naturally possible or probable) or for their importance as a context for Qur'ānic discourse. Note, however, that Q 22:17 mentions Zoroastrians (*al-majūs*) and the mysterious *al-ṣābi'ūn*, which might or might not be a reference to Manichaeans (usually it is understood as denoting Mandeans). The issue of smaller religious groups in late antique Arabia requires more probing. At the moment, no surviving material evidence is known to scholars that would point toward a Zoroastrian or Manichaean presence in Arabia.

10 Shoemaker, *The apocalypse* 1. As the reader will notice, though Shoemaker and I agree on the methodological premises, the same interpretations do not necessarily ensue. In Shoemaker's interpretation, as in mine, Muḥammad is an eschatological prophet. In his reading, Muḥammad was also a conqueror who endeavored to found an empire and liberate Jerusalem (my interpretation differs significantly on this part).

also wish to stress the importance of late antique Arabia in particular, not only the Near East in general (though that also plays a role in my description). As for sources, I use the following (in descending order of importance):[11]

1) Dated or datable material evidence (archaeological remains, coins, inscriptions, papyri, and so on): for pre-Islamic Arabia, the most important set of material remains are the inscriptions, which will be much utilized in my exposition of the religious map of late antique Arabia. However, it must be noted that almost none of the pre-Islamic inscriptions stem specifically from Mecca or Medina, since no systematic epigraphic surveys have been carried out there.[12] This problem is somewhat mitigated by the fact that we do have an extensive corpus of dated and datable epigraphic evidence from all other parts of Western Arabia: the north, the south, and (in lesser quantities) the central. The inscriptions are especially important since they are written by the actual Arabian Jews, Christians, and gentiles themselves: they are not outsider evidence.
2) Contemporary literary evidence: in the case of Arabia before Islam, one should note in particular Greek and Syriac texts written by scholars and writers living in the Near East. Much of this material is very useful, though it must be noted that many writers did not have first-hand experience or information of Arabia. However, one should also note the importance of Arabic poetry, some of which seems to be authentically pre-Islamic (this is discussed in more detail below in this chapter). Poetry proffers a significant source for the religious map of the Ḥijāz. As I argue in this book, the Qurʾān and the "Constitution" of Medina are contemporary with the

11 See also the methodological remarks in Anthony, Sean W., *Muhammad and the empires of faith: The making of the prophet of Islam*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020, 1–21, which I agree with. Rather differently, see Tannous, Jack, *The making of the medieval Middle East: Religion, society, and simple believers*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018, 505–524. The most recent comprehensive treatment of the questions of sources, historiography, and epistemology of early Islam is the important book by Sirry, Mun'im A., *Controversies over Islamic origins: An introduction to traditionalism and revisionism*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021.

12 But see the blog discussion by al-Jallad (al-Jallad, Ahmad, "What was spoken at Yathrib [Medinah] before the spread of Arabic?" https://safaitic.blogspot.com/2021/07/what-was-spoken-at-yathrib-medinah.html [2021]; "A new Paleo-Arabic text from Bādiyat al-Madīnah," https://safaitic.blogspot.com/2021/07/a-new-paleo-arabic-text-from-badiyat-al.html [2021]) of some inscriptions found mostly by amateurs (which I do not intend to be a pejorative term; important finds have been found in recent years by people who are outside academic circles properly speaking).

prophet Muḥammad and can be used to gather significant amounts of information about him and his followers.

3) Non-contemporary literary evidence: this is a vast pool of texts, in Arabic, Persian, Greek, Syriac, and so on. In my approach, near-contemporary sources are preferred to texts written much later. As a general principle, a text, whatever its language, is taken to tell as much, or in many cases more, about the views of the author and the discourses prevalent around her/him as/than the events that it purports to describe. Hence, non-contemporary literary evidence is relegated, in my treatment, to the role of a secondary source. For instance, Arabic historiography yields information, first and foremost, about how pre-Islam, the prophet, and his community were viewed some 100+ years after the events,[13] though as I note here and there, there appear to be important nuggets of authentic historical information scattered in the sources. Indeed, some authentic documents, at least the "Constitution" of Medina, are preserved in Arabic historiography. Moreover, Arabic poetry appears to contain poems that go back to pre-Islamic times; this issue will be discussed in more detail below in this chapter.

During the late 20th century, it was common to approach Arabic literary evidence on pre-Islamic times through two mutually exclusive approaches: i) Arabic literature (historiography, geographical and genealogical literature, and so on) contains much credible information on pre-Islamic Arabia; ii) Arabic literature is late, stemming from the eighth century CE or later, so using it to study events in the sixth century or before cannot be entertained; hence, we lack the context for the Qurʾān. The first approach underpinned the work of, for example, Toufic Fahd,[14] Meir Kister[15] and Michael Lecker[16] (and more recently

13 See also Toral-Niehoff, Isabel, "Talking about Arab origins: The transmission of the *ayyām al-ʿarab* in al-Kūfa, al-Baṣra and Baghdād," in Jens Scheiner and Damien Janos (eds.), *The place to go: Contexts of learning in Baghdād, 750–1000 C.E.*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2014, 43–75.

14 Fahd, Toufic, *Le Panthéon de l'Arabie centrale à la veille de l'Hégire* (Institut Français d'Archéologie de Beyrouth, Bibliothéque archéologique et historique 88), Paris: P. Geuthner, 1968.

15 Kister, Meir Jacob, "Mecca and Tamīm: Aspects of their relations," in *JESHO* 8 (1965), 113–163; *Society and religion from Jāhiliyya to Islam*, Aldershot: Gower Publishing, 1990.

16 Lecker, Michael, "Kinda on the eve of Islam and during the *ridda*," in *JRAS* (*Third series*) 4/3 (1994), 333–356; *The Banū Sulaym: A contribution to the study of early Islam*, Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1989; *Muslims, Jews and pagans: Studies on early Islamic Medina* (IHC 13), Leiden: Brill, 1995; *Peoples, tribes and society in Arabia around the time of Muḥammad*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2005.

Tilman Nagel).[17] The second was exemplified by Günter Lüling,[18] John Wansbrough,[19] Gerald Hawting,[20] and others.[21] This notion made Wansbrough and Hawting take the Qurʾān out of seventh-century Arabia, where they could not make it fit.[22]

In the 21st century, both approaches appear problematic. It is true that Arabic historiography is late and, in many ways, problematic (as a source for pre-Islamic rather than Islamic views). However, this does not mean stepping into full darkness. We know much about the late antique Near East and, increasingly too, Arabia, so the context of the prophet Muḥammad and the Qurʾān is not lacking *even if* we approach the Arabic prose literature with large amounts of criticism (as we should).[23] This is the point that this book tries to make.[24]

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17 See Nagel, Tilman, *Muhammad's mission: Religion, politics, and power at the birth of Islam*, trans. Joseph Spoerl, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020, which is very disappointing as regards the approach to sources (among other things).

18 Lüling, Günter, *Über den Ur-Qur'an: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'an*, Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1974.

19 Wansbrough, John E., *Quranic studies: Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (London Oriental Series 31), ed. Andrew Rippin, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, repr. Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2004; *The sectarian milieu: Content and composition of Islamic salvation history* (London Oriental Series 34), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, repr. Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2006; "Res ipsa loquitur: History and mimesis," Jerusalem 1987, repr. in Herbert Berg (ed.), *Method and theory in the study of Islamic origins* (IHC 49), Leiden: Brill, 2003, 3–19.

20 Hawting, Gerald R., *The idea of idolatry and the emergence of Islam: From polemic to history* (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

21 See, e.g., Luxenberg, Christoph, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Berlin: H. Schiler, ^{3}2004; Nevo, Yehuda D. and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The origins of the Arab religion and the Arab state*, Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2003.

22 See also the more recent study, Shoemaker, Stephen J., *Creating the Qur'an: A historical-critical study*, Oakland CA: University of California Press, 2022.

23 As Rubin notes (Rubin, Uri, *The eye of the beholder: The life of Muhammad as viewed by the early Muslims* [SLAEI 5], Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1995, 7), the portrayals of Muḥammad served as a means to articulate a distinctive identity and historical memory: "The traditions about the Prophet were designed to provide the Islamic community not only with the legal basis for everyday life, but also with the historical dimension of the Islamic collective self-image." Moreover, the story of his life was fitted to Biblical models; Rubin, *The eye of the beholder*, 21.

24 For similar methodological reflections, see the insightful study by Grasso, Valentina A., "The gods of the Qurʾān: The rise of Ḥijāzī henotheism during late antiquity," in Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen et al. (eds.), *The study of Islamic origin: New perspectives and contexts* (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—Tension, transmission, transformation 15), Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021, 297–324.

As regards my theoretical approach, I will concentrate on exploring the social identities of the different Arabian religious groups and their development. *Social identity*, as defined in social psychology, refers to a person's perception of who they are (their identity) with regard to social groups that they affiliate with (the in-group[s]) and that they construe as the opposites of them (the out-group[s]) as well as the different meanings and values that they attach to that perception. The research on these questions has been developed in particular in the so-called social identity approach, which I use as a background to my analysis.[25] I have, however, decided to keep the theoretical jargon mostly out of this book to make it more readable. For more theory-heavy discussions of early Islamic identity development, I refer the reader to my articles.[26]

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25 See Tajfel, Henri, *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations*, London: Academic Press, 1978; Haslam, S. Alexander, *Psychology in organizations: The social identity approach*, London: Sage Publications, 2001; Haslam, S. Alexander, Stephen D. Reicher and Michael J. Platow, *The new psychology of leadership: Identity, influence and power*, Hove: Psychology Press, 2011, London: Routledge,[2]2020. Ysseldyk, Matheson and Anisman, "Religiosity as identity," discuss what is peculiar to religious group affiliation, pointing out that "religion differs substantially from these [other] constructs [gender, ethnicity, etc.] in that it may also invoke epistemological beliefs regarding what can (or cannot) be known as well as ontological beliefs regarding what can (or cannot) exist" (p. 61). The social identity approach has been used in several works in Biblical studies, see Barentsen, Jack, *Emerging leadership in the Pauline mission: A social identity perspective on local leadership development in Corinth and Ephesus*, Eugene OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011; Esler, Philip F., *Galatians*, London: Routledge, 1998; *Conflict and identity in Romans: The social settings of Paul's letter*, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2003; Hakola, Raimo, "Social identities and group phenomena in Second Temple Judaism," in Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen and Risto Uro (eds.), *Explaining Christian origins and early Judaism: Contributions from cognitive and social science* (Biblical Interpretation Series 89), Leiden: Brill, 2007, 259–276; *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity: A social identity approach*, New York: Routledge, 2015; Hakola, Raimo, Nina Nikki and Ulla Tervahauta (eds.), *Others and the construction of early Christian identities*, Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2013; Heimola, Minna, *Christian identity in the Gospel of Philip*, Helsinki: The Finnish Exegetical Society, 2011; Jokiranta, Jutta, *Social identity and sectarianism in the Qumran movement*, Leiden: Brill, 2012; Marohl, Matthew J., *Faithfulness and the purpose of Hebrews: A social identity approach*, Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2008; Nikki, Nina, "Contesting the past, competing over the future: Why is Paul past-oriented in Galatians and Romans, but future-oriented in Philippians?" in Samuel Byrskog, Raimo Hakola and Jutta Jokiranta (eds.), *Social memory and social identity in the study of early Judaism and early Christianity*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016, 241–256; *Opponents and identity in the Letter to the Philippians* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 173), Leiden: Brill, 2018.

26 Lindstedt, Ilkka, "Who is in, who is out? Early Muslim identity through epigraphy and theory," in *JSAI* 46 (2019), 147–246; "Signs of identity in the Quran," in Ilkka Lindstedt, Nina Nikki and Riikka Tuori (eds.), *Religious identities in Antiquity and the early Middle Ages:*

1.1 *Inscriptions and Graffiti*

Lapidary (rock) inscriptions form an important source set for this study.[27] Though inscriptions form an invaluable first-hand source that will be utilized *in extenso* in the present study, it has to be remembered that they can be, in a sense, biased. This is for (at least) three reasons: First, certain communities did not develop or have an epigraphic habit. This does not necessarily mean that literacy was not known or common among them: they simply did not have a culture of engraving texts on rock—a writing material that can weather millennia and be a boon for later readers of these texts (such as historians). Second, it is common that inscriptions (both monumental and graffiti) follow and repeat certain epigraphic formulae. Though this should be acknowledged, it should not be overemphasized: as the reader of this book will notice, there is actually considerable variety in the inscriptions written in the same language and roughly during the same time. Moreover, there was probably a good reason why a certain formula became important in epigraphic texts: the attitude or belief contained in and expressed through that formula was, in all likelihood, considered important. Third, the accident of survival affects what the historian "sees." Though rocks and stones do not break easily, and the texts inscribed on them are not easy to efface, they are not indestructible: weather or human beings can

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Walking together & parting ways, Leiden: Brill, 2021, 66–91; " 'One community to the exclusion of other people': A superordinate identity in the Medinan community," in Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen et al. (eds.), *The study of Islamic origin: New perspectives and contexts* (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—Tension, transmission, transformation 15), Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021, 325–376; "Religious groups in the Quran," in Raimo Hakola, Outi Lehtipuu and Nina Nikki (eds.), *Common ground and diversity in early Christian thought and study: Essays in memory of Heikki Räisänen* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 495), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022, 289–311.

27 The importance of epigraphic evidence for antique and late antique Arabia is also underscored in Gajda, Iwona, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar à l'époque monothéiste: L'histoire de l'Arabie du Sud ancienne de la fin du IVe siècle de l'ère chrétienne jusqu'à l'avénement de l'islam*, Paris: De Boccard, 2009, 14–15; Harjumäki, Jouni and Ilkka Lindstedt, "The ancient north Arabian and early Islamic Arabic graffiti: A comparison of formal and thematic features," in Saana Svärd and Robert Rollinger (eds.), *Cross-cultural studies in Near Eastern history and literature* (Intellectual heritage of the ancient Near East 2), Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2016, 59–94; Robin, Christian J., "Les inscriptions de l'Arabie antique et les études arabes," in *Arabica* 48 (2001), 509–577. This section reproduces some material from my "Religious warfare and martyrdom in Arabic graffiti (70s–110s AH/690s–730s CE)," in Fred M. Donner and Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee (eds.), *Scripts and scripture: Writing and religion in Arabia circa 500–700 CE* (Late antique and medieval Islamic Near East 3), Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2022, 195–222, at 196–199.

and have destroyed them.[28] As regards this point, too, it should not be exaggerated. As regards pre-modern Arabian inscriptions, it is probably safe to say that the bulk of them have survived. A bigger problem (in the case of Arabia at least) is, in fact, that many areas remain to be surveyed meticulously. Epigraphists searching for Islamic-era inscriptions have not always recorded or published the pre-Islamic ones (and vice versa). However, rather than bewailing this fact, it could be construed as something inspiring: many novel epigraphic data remain to be found, analyzed, and incorporated into our reconstruction of the history of the region.

Inscriptions can be roughly divided into a) monumental/commissioned inscriptions and b) graffiti/non-commissioned. Monumental inscriptions can comprise, for instance, building inscriptions or inscriptions set up to commemorate an event (these are rather common in the Ancient South Arabian corpus). Graffiti are a more diverse set of texts. All Safaitic inscriptions and most Nabataean Aramaic and Old Arabic inscriptions mentioned in this study are graffiti. The South Arabian inscriptions also contain some graffiti, though most are commissioned inscriptions. The main difference between the two is that while monumental inscriptions often have both an author (who might or might not be identical with the commissioner of the inscription) and a hand (scribe) who are two different persons, the writer of a graffito is both the author and the hand of her or his text. This commissioned and planned nature of monumental inscriptions sets them apart from most graffiti. Indeed, graffiti are often written spontaneously, and composing and writing the text are one and the same course of action, although we must of course allow that some time and thought went into planning the text of a graffito. The division into monumental inscriptions and graffiti does not result from pre-modern categorizations of these texts. The division proposed here is, then, a modern, etic, and contextual categorization, but nevertheless one which I hope is useful. Though this might be obvious, the reader should note that the word "graffiti" is used neutrally in this book, without pejorative connotations. The word is used as an analytical, value-free, concept in the study of Greco-Roman,[29] Ancient Arabian,[30] and Arabic epigraphy.[31]

28 Ameling, Walter, "The epigraphic habit and the Jewish diasporas of Asia Minor and Syria," in Hannah M. Cotton et al. (eds.), *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and linguistic change in the Roman Near East*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 203–234, at 205.

29 Baird, Jennifer A. and Claire Taylor (eds.), *Ancient graffiti in context*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2011.

30 Macdonald, Michael C.A., "On the uses of writing in ancient Arabia and the role of palaeography in studying them," in *Arabian epigraphic notes* 1 (2015), 1–50.

31 Imbert, Frédéric, "Le Coran dans les graffiti des deux premiers siècles de l'Hégire," in *Arabica* 47 (2000), 381–390.

It must be noted that the mode or tool of writing does not play a role in my classification: both monumental inscriptions and graffiti can be either engraved or painted, produced with chisel, charcoal, brush, or other means.[32] However, usually only graffiti are scratched on a surface. The script of graffiti can be as or even more elegant or beautiful—obviously subjective criteria in any case—than monumental inscriptions.[33] Many of the Arabian graffiti are very skillfully and charmingly engraved, but this does not make them any less graffiti according to the classification I am using in this book. The surface of writing, however, is somewhat different in the case of monumental inscriptions and graffiti: whereas the latter were written wherever a suitable surface was found, the stones where monumental inscriptions were written were often specifically shaped for that purpose. In any case, most surviving Arabian inscriptions are lapidary (instead of on portable items) and engraved (instead of painted). Indeed, all the texts used in the present study are lapidary, engraved inscriptions. All of them have been published in scholarly studies. This study, then, does not present new finds of inscriptions. Rather, the study analyzes published inscriptions and uses them, among other sources, as evidence for the religious and social history of late antique Arabia.

I should remark that modern graffiti are a somewhat different case than pre-modern ones. The main difference between the former and their pre-modern counterparts is that the majority of the former are anonymous or pseudonymous while the majority of the latter are signed. Furthermore, it seems to be a modern phenomenon for graffiti to be seen (by some at least) as somehow illicit or subversive; producing graffiti did not seem to have held these projections in antiquity. Some of the graffiti were actually written by the elite members of the society.[34] Many of the graffiti used in this study are expressions of piety, and writing them would not have been seen as anything other than a legitimate, even commendable, activity.

Who wrote graffiti?[35] John Bodel remarks that, in the framework of Roman epigraphy at least, the prevalence of graffiti in some regions and eras offers

32 Cf. Baird, Jennifer A. and Claire Taylor, "Ancient graffiti in context: Introduction," in Jennifer A. Baird and Claire Taylor (eds.), *Ancient graffiti in context*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2011, 1–19, at 3.

33 Chaniotis, Angelos, "Graffiti in aphrodisias: Images–texts–contexts," in Jennifer A. Baird and Claire Taylor (eds.), *Ancient graffiti in context*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2010, 191–207, at 194.

34 Baird and Taylor, "Ancient graffiti" 3–4.

35 For interesting ideas on who wrote Safaitic graffiti and why (as well as much else besides), see Macdonald, Michael C.A., "Literacy in an oral environment," in Piotr Bienkowski, Christopher Mee and Elizabeth Slater (eds.), *Writing and ancient Near Eastern society: Papers in honour of Alan R. Millard*, New York: T & T Clark, 2005, 45–114.

clues that the skill of reading and writing permeated beyond the educated elite,[36] although it does not in most cases mean that the writers and readers of graffiti possessed significant amounts of formal learning or literary proficiency.[37] Graffiti are often formulaic, so many of the writers perhaps mastered (or copied) only a few pious phrases, but there are a number of cases of very original graffiti where the engraver reveals significant skill in composing a text. Were pre-modern Arabian graffiti written by the upper echelons or the lower classes of the society?[38] There is no simple answer to this. In any case, graffiti often offer us evidence of and are written by individuals who are (usually) silent in other types of evidence: if they had not put their mark on stones and rocks, we would not have any idea that they ever existed, much less have access to their thoughts. What is more, the epigraphic record is often explicitly dated by its writers, which gives us invaluable evidence to trace historical trajectories.

Both monumental inscriptions and graffiti from pre-modern Arabia proffer an invaluable, insider, contemporary set of data.[39] Many of the epigraphic sources that this book relies on have been published somewhat recently, changing the scholars' reconstruction of the religious map of late antique Arabia considerably. In this book, I try to make extensive use of these new epigraphic finds.

1.2 *The Qurʾān as Evidence for the Prophet and His Community*

In 1977, John Wansbrough (in)famously suggested that the Qurʾānic corpus was not collected or canonized before ca. 800 CE.[40] He might be said to have been right in the sense that the reading traditions (*qirāʾāt*) of the Qurʾān were not canonized before that, but recent research suggests that he was wrong on multiple other points. Some of the surviving manuscripts are early (probably stemming from the seventh century and later) and they evidence a very stable consonantal text. There is an emerging consensus according to which the Qurʾān, or at least the bulk of it, is indeed a text contemporary with the prophet Muḥammad and based on his revelations.[41]

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36 Bodel, John, "Inscriptions and literacy," in Christer Bruun and Jonathan C. Edmondson (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Roman epigraphy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 745–763, at 746.

37 Bodel, "Inscriptions and literacy" 758.

38 For the same question in the Greco-Roman environment, see Baird and Taylor, "Ancient Ggraffiti" 11–16.

39 *Pace* Shoemaker, *Creating the Qurʾan* 117–133, who sees little significance in the Arabian graffiti.

40 Wansbrough, *Quranic studies*.

41 See, e.g., Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 11; van Putten, Marijn, *Quranic Arabic: From its Hijazi origins to its classical reading traditions*, Leiden: Brill, 2022, 215–231.

This argument can be approached from two viewpoints: i) the contents of the Qurʾānic text; ii) the surviving manuscripts of the text. Let us take the first point first. Fred Donner has shown that Qurʾānic Arabic—vocabulary and form—differ considerably from later Arabic literature, such as the *ḥadīth*s (traditions on and dicta of the prophet). Moreover, there are very few or no passages in the Qurʾān that could be called anachronisms or post-Muḥammadan interpolations, such as predictions of things to come put into the mouth of the prophet. If the Qurʾān stemmed, partially or in full, from the time after the death of the prophet, the text would probably contain indications of, for example, the fact that the early Muslims conquered most of the known world.[42] Moreover, as recently pointed out by Gabriel Said Reynolds, the difficulties that the earliest (late second/eighth century) Qurʾānic commentators (*mufassirūn*) had with certain passages of the text corroborate this argument.[43] If the Qurʾān included much material that is more or less contemporary with the commentators, why would the latter struggle with its vocabulary and expressions?

Stephen Shoemaker has nonetheless challenged Donner's argument: "Yet following an identical logic, one could similarly make the argument that the Christian Gospel according to John, which does not assign any predictions to Jesus beyond his own lifespan (or a few days thereafter), must accurately reflect his life and teaching and date to sometime before 60 CE. To my knowledge, however, no serious New Testament scholar has proposed such an argument, and in general John is thought to be perhaps the latest canonical gospel. Accordingly, the mere absence of predictive material in a text cannot be used to date it close to the events that it purports to describe or verify its authenticity."[44] But Shoemaker's argumentation is rather strained as regards this point. It is exactly certain aspects and anachronisms in the Gospel of John (the high Christology at the beginning of the text and the anti-Jewish features in some passages,

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42 Donner, Fred M., *Narratives of Islamic origins: The beginnings of Islamic historical writing* (SLAEI 14), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1998, 35–60. See also Sinai, *The Qurʾan* and "When did the consonantal skeleton of the Quran reach closure? Parts I–II," in *BSOAS* 77 (2014), 273–292, 509–521 for a defense of the early collection of the Qurʾān.

43 Reynolds, *Allah* 268, n. 4.

44 Shoemaker, *The death of a prophet* 153. In a more recent study, Shoemaker, *Creating the Qurʾan* 230–258, he has changed his mind and asserts that there are, in fact, a number of anachronisms in the Qurʾān. However, Shoemaker's list of these features is hardly persuasive. Elsewhere in the book (*Creating the Qurʾan* 59), he claims that the Qurʾānic passages that indicate a "parting of ways" between Islam and other religions are also post-prophetic. However, as I argue in this study, such a parting can scarcely be read in the Qurʾān. If my overall arguments are accepted, there is no need to suggest a post-prophetic date to (even) the most polemical passages found in the Qurʾān.

for instance) that are used to date the text somewhat late (second century), whether or not the text actually assigns predictions to Jesus. Anachronisms come in many shapes and forms. Similarly, the Qurʾān can be considered early because it, for instance, does not attribute Muḥammad the exemplary role he was to receive later in classical Islamic theology.[45] Donner's point remains valid.

Moreover, painstaking work on (including radiocarbon dating of) early surviving Qurʾānic manuscripts shows that the consonantal script was very stable. Recently, Marijn van Putten has demonstrated (convincingly, I believe) that early Qurʾānic manuscripts go back to a single written archetype, which was codified in the first century AH/seventh century CE.[46] This he does by considering and comparing idiosyncratic spellings in Qurʾānic manuscripts: "idiosyncratic spellings of certain words are not due to the whims of the scribe, but are reproduced with the same spelling in all early Quranic manuscripts. The only way that such a consistent reproduction can be explained is by assuming that all the documents that belong to the Uthmanic text type go back to a single written archetype whose spelling was strictly copied from one copy to the next, showing that these copies were based on a written exemplar."[47] Hence, the Qurʾān (or at least its consonantal skeleton, the *rasm*) was a) canonized rather early and b) transmitted in a written fashion early on. Among the many early manuscripts of the Qurʾān that have survived, only one non-canonical text has been identified.[48]

If the Qurʾān appears, as regards its contents, to contain almost no anachronisms and the Qurʾānic manuscripts are early and rather stable (the differences have mostly to do with the details of how a word is written), what about its geographical origins? Even if we accept the early date (first/seventh century), one could perhaps put forward the argument that the Qurʾān would contain reve-

45 The idea of the *sunna* of the prophet emerges toward the end of the first Islamic century. See Crone, Patricia and Martin Hinds, *God's caliph: Religious authority in the first centuries of Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

46 Van Putten, Marijn, "'The grace of God' as evidence for a written Uthmanic archetype: The importance of shared orthographic idiosyncrasies," in *BSOAS* 82 (2019), 271–288.

47 Van Putten, "'The grace of God'" 286.

48 This is the so-called Sanaa palimpsest, on which see Hilali, Asma, *The Sanaa palimpsest: The transmission of the Qur'an in the first centuries AH*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; Sadeghi, Behnam and Uwe Bergmann, "The codex of a companion of the Prophet and the Qurān of the Prophet," in *Arabica* 57.4 (2010), 343–436; Sadeghi, Behnam and Mohsen Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿāʾ 1 and the origins of the Qurʾān," in *Der Islam* 87/1 (2012), 1–129.

lations of an Arabic-speaking prophet (or prophets)[49] somewhere other than Mecca and Medina. In fact, this was included in John Wansbrough's argument, which suggested that the Qurʾānic collection consists of a layered tradition of texts from the fertile Near East. After Wansbrough, Gerald Hawting took up this point of a different geographical context, though he did not date the text so late.[50] (Both Wansbrough and Hawting were affected by their supposition that there were few Jews and Christians in late antique Arabia; this notion is false, as this book tries to elucidate.)

Suleyman Dost has taken up this issue in a detailed study.[51] His, in my opinion persuasive, research first surveys what religious texts and ideas were current in pre-Islamic Arabia, and, after that, he explores how the Qurʾān would fit there. The answer is: very well. He underscores the importance of certain texts and notions that were present in Ethiopic Judaism and Christianity as well as ancient Arabian inscriptions (in particular those from Yemen). The Qurʾān contains many aspects that can be compared with them. If we acknowledge that the Qurʾān is in dialogue with Syriac Christian texts[52] and notions *as well as* south Arabian[53] texts and notions, the Qurʾān finds its natural geographical place in Arabia, and there does not seem to be much reason to doubt its exact location in the Ḥijāz.

This, then, appears to me to be the budding consensus: at least the majority of the Qurʾānic text goes back to the revelations of the prophet Muḥammad; they were collected early into a codex form (possibly in the 30s/650s); and the manuscript tradition is (astonishingly) stable. Naturally, questions remain

49 For the argument that the Qurʾān must be the product of multiple authors, see Shoemaker, Stephen J., "A new Arabic apocryphon from late antiquity: The Qurʾān," in Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen et al. (eds.), *The study of Islamic origin: New perspectives and contexts* (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—Tension, transmission, transformation 15), Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021, 29–42, at 30–31. I agree that the Qurʾān might include some post-Muḥammadan interpolations and, furthermore, the issue of the role of the collectors of the text has to be considered, but I do not see much compelling evidence for the multiple authors thesis (in the sense that much of the Qurʾān should be ascribed to multiple persons, "prophets" or otherwise).

50 See Hawting, *The idea of idolatry*.

51 Dost, *An Arabian Qurʾān*.

52 The Qurʾān's relationship with some Syriac texts is nowadays taken for granted. See, e.g., Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical subtext*; *The Qurʾān and the Bible*. El-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions*, 48, n. 228, notes: "It is difficult to overstate the depth and the complexity of the dialogue between the Qurʾān and late antique Syriac Christian literature." As Shoemaker, "A new Arabic apocryphon" has wittily argued, the Qurʾān can be understood as a late antique Biblical apocryphon.

53 As will be seen in this study, Ethiopic Christianity was tangibly present in Yemen in the sixth century.

somewhat unanswered. For example, the exact identity of the collectors/editors of the standard Qurʾān cannot be said with much certainty. Moreover, we do not know in detail how the collectors/editors worked: on what criteria did they organize the pericopes in the chapters? Was something left out? Were (minor or major) interpolations inserted?[54] What are the exact linkages of the reading traditions (*qirāʾāt*) to the consonantal script as it is preserved in early manuscripts? What should we make of the reports that later caliphs (such as ʿAbd al-Malik) and governors (such as al-Ḥajjāj) reworked or refined the canonical text?[55] The scrutiny of the later Arabic traditions on the issue of the collection,[56] compared with the manuscript evidence, might one day shine more light on these issues. But Donner's argument remains persuasive: surely, if the Qurʾān contained much post-Muḥammadan material, it would be visible to us as anachronisms and "predictions," as we know that has happened with other scriptures (and, for instance, the *ḥadīth* corpus). This is not say that all of the Qurʾānic text stems from the message and preaching of the prophet Muḥammad[57] nor that the contents of his revelations were remem-

54 There is nowadays much interesting and important scholarship exploring the possibilities of such interpolations. See, e.g., Powers, David S., *Zayd*, Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014, 120–121 and Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 142, for the suggestion that Q 61:6 was toned down during the process of the standardization of the Qurʾān. In this study, my premise is that the great majority of the material in the Qurʾān goes back to the revelations of the prophet Muḥammad. For significant studies problematizing this, see, e.g., Gilliot, Claude, "Reconsidering the authorship of the Qurʾān: Is the Qurʾan partly the fruit of a progressive and collective work?" in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qurʾān in its historical context*, London: Routledge, 2007, 88–108; Dye, Guillaume, "Le corpus coranique: Contexte et composition," in Amir-Moezzi and Dye (eds.), *Le Coran des historiens* i, 733–846; and the extensive study Shoemaker, *Creating the Qurʾan*. See also the intriguing study by Reynolds, Gabriel Said, "The Qurʾānic doublets: A preliminary inquiry," in *JIQSA* 5 (2020), 5–39, at 38, which notes: "The present preliminary inquiry, by emphasizing the existence of doublets in the Qurʾān and highlighting the distribution of the doublets into Meccan/Meccan and Medinan/Medinan categories, suggests that the Qurʾān's doublets are likely redactional doublets. Accordingly, they point to a stage in between the Qurʾān's original composition and its final redaction, a stage involving two subcorpora."

55 Robinson, Chase F., *ʿAbd al-Malik*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2005, has made the case that the Qurʾān might have been standardized during his reign.

56 On the Sunnī narratives of the collection of the Qurʾān, see Schoeler, Gregor, "The codification of the Qurʾan: A comment on the hypotheses of Burton and Wansbrough," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in context: Historical and literary investigations into the Qurʾānic milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 779–794; on the Shīʿī ones, see Kara, Seyfeddin, *In search of Ali Ibn Abi Talib's codex: History and traditions of the earliest copy of the Qurʾan*, Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2018.

57 Painstaking work on the Qurʾānic passages can reveal instances of secondary edition. E.g., Stewart suggests that Q 74 was arguably put together from distinct passages by later editors

bered and transmitted with word-by-word precision;[58] but the great majority of the text appears to go back to the prophet and, in my opinion, it makes sense to assume that the wording, as it stands today, at least somewhat faithfully reflects his revelations.[59] It should be conceded, however, that the redaction history of the Qur'ān is still somewhat unknown. We can say that many *sūra*s underwent literary growth and developments,[60] but much remains to be studied. Long Medinan *sūra*s such as Q 2, Q 5, and Q 9 appear to be "secondary compilations"[61] that were put together from different pericopes, probably (I would hypothesize) by the later editors of the Qur'ān, not by the prophet himself. This does not mean that the majority of the contents in them would not go back to him.

In addition to other premises stated in this chapter, I view Theodor Nöldeke's chronological division of Qur'ānic chapters as still basically sound, although more an approximation.[62] As Nicolai Sinai notes, Nöldeke's approach is

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or collectors of the Qur'ān, who also made some changes to the wording (Stewart, Devin J., "Introductory oaths and the question of composite surahs," in Marianna Klar [ed.], *Structural dividers in the Qur'an*, London: Routledge, 2021, 267–337). Sinai, *The Qur'an* 52–54 proposes that Q 3:7 could be a post-prophetic interpolation.

58 Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an*, argues that the message of the prophet was mostly transmitted orally in a fluid fashion and hence prone to change. However, he does not take into account such Qur'ānic aspects as rhyme and rhythm which in all likelihood helped to preserve the wording of the revelations too; van Putten, *Quranic Arabic*, 216 notes: "considering that the Quran is a rhyming text, and the QCT [Qur'ānic consonantal script] normally agrees with the phonetics that seem to be reflected in the rhyme, it seems fairly safe to say that the language of the QCT was close to the language Muhammad would have used during his career as a prophet in the early seventh century."

59 Rather similarly, Déroche, François, *The one and the many: The early history of the Qur'an*, trans. M. DeBevoise, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2021.

60 See, e.g., Neuwirth, Angelika, "Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon: Zur Entstehung und Wiederauflösung der Surenkomposition im Verlauf der Entwicklung eines islamischen Kultus," in Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Qur'ān as Text* (IPTS 27), Leiden: Brill, 1996, 69–105; Sinai, Nicolai, "Processes of literary growth and editorial expansion in two Medinan Surahs," in Carol Bakhos and Michael A. Cook (eds.), *Islam and its past: Jahiliyya, late antiquity, and the Qur'an* (Oxford studies in the Abrahamic religions), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 106–122.

61 Sinai, Nicolai, "Towards a redactional history of the Medinan Qur'an: A case study of Sūrat al-Nisā' (Q 4) and Sūrat al-Mā'idah (Q 5)," in Marianna Klar (ed.), *Structural dividers in the Qur'an*, London: Routledge, 2021, 365–402, at 366.

62 Nöldeke, Theodor, *Geschichte des Qorâns*, 2 vols., ed. Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträßer and Otto Prezl, Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, [2]1909–1938. Nöldeke was, naturally, much dependent on the classical Islamic tradition. For a defense of at least the basic outlines of Nöldeke's chronology, with suggestions for development, see Neuwirth, Angelika, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang*, Berlin:

> based on a convergence of different, and to some extent mutually independent, sets of criteria, such as structure, introductory formulae, verse length, overall surah length, rhyme profile, and content. It is very unlikely, I think, that convergence on such a significant scale is accidental; and if it is not accidental, then there must be an explanation for it; and the best explanation is arguably the evolutionary one put forward by Weil and Nöldeke, since it best accommodates the presence of what appear to be hybrid texts marking the transition from one of the above classes to the next.[63]

Nöldeke's division will be followed in this book, though I do not utilize his Meccan subdivisions.[64] The ascription of the material to Meccan or Medinan

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Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010, 276–331; Sinai, Nicolai, "The Qur'an as process," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in context: Historical and literary investigations into the Qurʾānic milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 407–439; Sinai, *The Qur'an*. The biggest problem of the Nöldekean paradigm is that whole *sūra*s, which are too big as units (if we exclude the shortest ones), are classified. For a criticism of this paradigm, see Reynolds, Gabriel Said, "Le problème de la chronologie du Coran," in *Arabica* 58 (2011), 477–502, who, however, does not proffer anything meaningful in its stead. It is rather obvious to assume that the Qurʾān, like any other text of such bulk, came together as a process that took some time. It makes little sense to take the whole of the Qurʾān (or any other text), without taking into account the fact of such a process. One can of course disagree with Nöldeke's methods and conclusions, or even radically redate the Qurʾān, but one should not, I submit, reject the endeavor to date Qurʾānic passages (internally or externally). Reading the Qurʾān as one whole comes rather close to the confessional understanding of the text as the eternal word of God.

63 Sinai, "The Qur'an as process" 417.

64 Namely, Mecca I, II, and III. However, it should be noted that later researchers have pointed out that they, too, seem to hold water, to an extent at least, see Neuwirth, Angelika, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981; *Der Koran: Handkommentar mit Übersetzung*, i: *Frühmekkanische Suren: Poetische Prophetie*, Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011; *Der Koran: Handkommentar mit Übersetzung*, ii/1: *Frühmittelmekkanische Suren: Das neue Gottesvolk: 'Biblisierung' des altarabischen Weltbildes*, Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2017. The "Constitution" of Medina has social categorizations that are similar to those present in Mecca II and Mecca III (according to the subdivision by Nöldeke), as one might suppose, given the probability that the "Constitution" stems from the first years of the Medinan phase. The later Medinan Qurʾānic pericopes have somewhat different views on the believers, Jews, and Christians: Lindstedt, "One community." See also the important studies Dayeh, Islam, "Al-Ḥawāmīm: Intertextuality and coherence in Meccan surahs," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in context: Historical and literary investigations into the Qurʾānic milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 461–498, and Saleh, Walid A., "End of hope: Sūras 10–15, despair and a way out of Mecca," in Angelika Neuwirth and Michael A. Sells (eds.), *Qur'anic studies today*, London: Routledge, 2016, 105–123, reading contemporaneous Qurʾānic chapters

periods does not necessarily mean, in my opinion, that they always actually belong to those geographical places in the prophet's career. "Meccan" simply means earlier, and "Medinan," later. Holger Zellentin, discussing the legal material in the Qurʾān, has also noted the usefulness of the differentiation into the Meccan and Medinan strata.[65]

The consensus of the field (that is, that the Qurʾān was standardized rather early and contains the message of the prophet Muḥammad) has been recently challenged by Stephen Shoemaker.[66] According to his view, the Qurʾān has its origins in the prophet's locutions, but it was transmitted mostly orally in the first decades (stored, as it were, in the collective memory of the community), and standardized during the reign and at the instigation of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik and his governor al-Ḥajjāj, not before.[67] Shoemaker also argues that the radiocarbon dates are problematic.

This portrayal of the Qurʾān's history has some merit. It is true that the scholars of the Qurʾān and early Islam should continue to keep open the question of when the standard Qurʾān was produced. Laboratories performing radiocarbon dating have given inconsistent dates on the early manuscripts, as Shoemaker elucidates.[68] I also agree with the notion that the exact wording in the Qurʾān might not always faithfully reflect the prophet's locutions.

However, Shoemaker's study has significant shortcomings, too. His claim that the inhabitants of Mecca and Medina were almost all illiterate and cut off from the religious milieu of late antique Arabia[69] is improbable to say the least. He asserts: "we can discern that both Mecca and the Yathrib oasis were very small and isolated settlements, of little cultural and economic significance—in short, hardly the sort of place one would expect to produce a complicated religious text like the Qur'an … during the lifetime of Muhammad, the peoples of the central Hijaz, which includes Mecca and Medina, were effectively non-

as "booklets." For a significant online commentary (currently under development), with notes on the dating of the *sūra*s, see https://corpuscoranicum.de/de/commentary.

65 Zellentin, Holger M., "Judeo-Christian legal culture and the Qur'an: The case of ritual slaughter and the consumption of animal blood," in Francisco del Río Sánchez (ed.), *Jewish-Christianity and the origins of Islam: Papers presented at the colloquium held in Washington DC, October 29–31, 2015*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2018, 117–159, at 121, n. 12: "I argue for spatial and chronological differentiation between these materials; the identification of 'Mecca' and 'Medina' with the actual places on the Arabian Peninsula is likely, yet not yet verified."

66 Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an*.

67 Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an* 43–69.

68 The chapter on radiocarbon dating, Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an* 70–95, is of great interest and importance.

69 Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an* 96–147.

literate."[70] This book opts and argues for a different reconstruction: though it is true that Mecca and Medina were rather small towns[71] and of rather little economic significance in Arabia, it is not true that they were isolated and, furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that Meccans or Medinans were any more illiterate than inhabitants elsewhere in Arabia (or even the wider Near East).

According to Shoemaker, the received text of the Qurʾān contains many interpolations, in particular narratives of Christian origins,[72] that were not part of Muḥammad's proclamation, since, Shoemaker claims, there were (almost) no Christians in Mecca and Medina. But this is conjectural, I argue in this study; it is much more likely that there were (somewhat) sizeable Jewish and Christian communities in both towns.

Shoemaker also claims that Qurʾānic Arabic is similar to Levantine (and Classical) Arabic,[73] which, according to him, proffers proof for his idea that the standard Qurʾān was produced in Syria during the time of ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj.[74] This is definitely not so, as Marijn van Putten has shown in detail in a recent study.[75] Qurʾānic Arabic, as it can be reconstructed from the consonantal script and with the help of rhyme and comparative linguistics, is clearly *different* from Levantine and Classical Arabic.[76] What is more, the reconstructed Qurʾānic Arabic has features (for example, the loss of the *hamza* and nunation)

70 Shoemaker, *Creating the Qurʾan* 14.

71 See Robinson, Majied, "The population size of Muḥammad's Mecca and the creation of Quraysh," in *Der Islam* 99 (2022), 10–37, at 17–18, who characterizes Mecca as a settlement of a few hundred people. One assumes that Medina was somewhat or much bigger, however.

72 Shoemaker, *Creating the Qurʾan*, 230–258.

73 Shoemaker, *Creating the Qurʾan*, 141: "All we know for certain is that it [the Qurʾān] is written in the prestige dialect of the Umayyad Levant." However, Shoemaker does not proffer tangible evidence for this linguistic statement, so the reason for his certainty remains a mystery.

74 Shoemaker, *Creating the Qurʾan*, 117–147. Shoemaker's treatment of the history of the Arabic language contains, to be frank, a large number of misunderstandings and errors.

75 Van Putten, *Quranic Arabic*. See also al-Jallad, Ahmad, *The Damascus Psalm Fragment: Middle Arabic and the legacy of Old Ḥigāzī*, Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2020.

76 Van Putten, *Quranic Arabic*, 120, who discusses "some of the phonetic isoglosses that can be deduced from the QCT [Qurʾānic consonantal text], in order to connect them with the phonetic features discussed by the grammarians … we will compare the isoglosses to those found in Northern Old Arabic like Safaitic and Nabataean Arabic, showing that several important innovative features are indeed unattested in northern varieties, while they are attested in the QCT." These isoglosses of the Qurʾānic Arabic include, for example, the demonstratives *dhālika* and *tilka*; pausal shortening of the word final -(*n*)*ī*; and forms like *ẓalta*, "you have remained" (Q 20:97) for geminated stative verbs.

that the later Arabic philologists and lexicographers place in Western Arabia.[77] Linguistic study of Qurʾānic Arabic does not support the Syrian (or Iraqi) origins of the Qurʾān, as Shoemaker would have it: in contrast, it disproves the idea.

1.3 *Arabic Poetry*

Arabic poetry was, supposedly, at least, originally oral poetry that was collected in books in the first centuries of Islam. The question of the authenticity of the corpus in general or a *dīwān*, a collection of poems, of an individual is thorny. In the 1920s, D.S. Margoliouth and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn suggested, in their respective studies, that the *jāhilī* (pre-Islamic) poetic corpus could have been forged.[78] However, a case can be made that the formal features of these poems (meter, rhyme) guaranteed that they were transmitted in a way that was more or less faithful to their original form(s).[79] The arguments of Margoliouth and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn appear mostly obsolete today. To take issue with some claims presented in Margoliouth in his article, it can be noted that his arguments only work if certain (I suggest, wrong) premises about pre-Islamic Arabia are made. For instance, he posits that:[80]

1. Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry is suspicious, since its contents suggest that the poets were monotheists. This, Margoliouth asserts, is dubious and does not align with the *jāhilī* Arabia of the received tradition.
2. The language of Arabic poetry is out of place because it is in the same dialect as the Qurʾān.

Both assertions are wrong. As I argue below, the religious features present in Arabic poetry align rather well with what we know from Arabian archaeology and epigraphy. Margoliouth is correct to note that Arabic poetry presents different religious notions and discourses from later Arabic historiography. But this

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77 Though this is naturally non-contemporary evidence, it at least appears to be independent evidence: the philologists and lexicographers portraying the Arabic of Western Arabia do this (often) outside of the context of the interpretation of the Qurʾān or its Arabic. See van Putten, *Quranic Arabic*, 145–146.

78 Margoliouth, David Samuel, "The origins of Arabic poetry," *JRAS* 1925/3 (1925), 417–449; Ḥusayn, Ṭāhā, *Fī al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī*, Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Salafīyah wa-Maktabatuhā, 1926.

79 On the issue of transmission, see Krenkow, Fritz, "The use of writing for the preservation of ancient Arabic poetry," in Thomas W. Arnold and Reynold A. Nicholson (eds.), *ʿAjab-nāmah: A volume of Oriental studies presented to Edward G. Browne*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922, 261–268; Zwettler, Michael, *The oral tradition of classical Arabic poetry: Its character and implications*, Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press, 1978.

80 Margoliouth, "The origins."

does not disprove the authenticity of the corpus but rather buttresses it. As I have noted above, there is good reason to doubt that Arabic prose literature transmits authentic information from the pre-Islamic era. That data on religion contained in Arabic poetry agrees, more or less, with what we know on the basis of epigraphy and the Qurʾān but disagrees with Arabic prose (such as historiography). As regards Margoliouth's second notion, it is based on a misconception. Rather, recent scholarship has proved that Qurʾānic Arabic (with for example its simplified case system) differs considerably from both pre-Islamic poetry and Classical Arabic. That Qurʾānic Arabic was later classicized is naturally true; but it is not true that the dialect of the Qurʾān and the poetry were the same.[81] It is, it must be noted however, an important question to pose why Arabic poetry represents, more or less, one and the same dialect (with a full and functioning case system). Perhaps it too was classicized in the transmission process (though this would also mean that the system of meter changed in the centuries of transmission). More research is needed on this question, but such linguistic conundrums are beyond the scope of this book.

Two essential recent studies, by Nathaniel Miller and Nicolai Sinai,[82] make the case that the corpus includes much that is authentic and it can be used to mine historical data, including on religious phenomena.[83] Miller's study deals at length with the corpus of poetry produced by the tribe of Hudhayl, while Sinai looks at how God (*Allāh*) is conceptualized in the *jāhilī* corpus more generally. Nevertheless, scholars are still of the opinion that there is much inauthentic material in the corpora as well, the case of Umayya ibn Abī al-Ṣalt being a clear example of a poet whose name accrued much forged poetry composed

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81 See van Putten, Marijn, "The feminine ending -at as a diptote in the Qurʾānic consonantal text and its implications for proto-Arabic and proto-Semitic," *Arabica* 64 (2017), 695–705; *Quranic Arabic*, 2–7, 15–19, and *passim*.

82 Sinai, Nicolai, *Rain-giver, bone-breaker, score-settler: Allāh in pre-Quranic poetry* (AOS, Essay 15), New Haven CT: American Oriental Society, 2019; Miller, Nathaniel A., *Tribal poetics in early Arabic culture: The case of Ashʿār al-Hudhaliyyīn* (PhD Diss.): University of Chicago, 2017. On pre-Islamic poetry as a source, see also Bravmann, Meïr Max, *The spiritual background of early Islam: Studies in ancient Arab concepts*, Leiden: Brill, 1972; Stetkevych, Suzanne Pinckney, *The mute immortals speak: Pre-Islamic poetry and the poetics of ritual*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993; Stetkevych, Jaroslav, *Muḥammad and the golden bough: Reconstructing Arabian myth*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996; however, all of these works are now somewhat obsolete and do not take into account the Arabian material evidence.

83 See also the important study Bauer, Thomas, "The relevance of early Arabic poetry for Qurʾanic studies including observations on *kull* and on Q 22:27, 26:225, and 52:31," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in context: Historical and literary investigations into the Qurʾānic milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 699–732.

by Muslim scholars.[84] Because the issue of Umayya's verse is especially contentious, I will not use it as evidence in this book and, rather, concentrate on other poets.

It has long been suggested that the later Muslim transmitters modified the poetical corpus, more or less in toto, expunging references to polytheist beliefs and rites and making the poets look monotheist.[85] This is naturally possible but, I would suggest, behind the idea of such modifications lies the (false) belief of Arabia having been rife with idolatry on the eve of Islam. Since Arabic prose literature is wont to emphasize (or construe) the polytheist nature of pre-Islamic Arabia, one wonders why possible modifications to the poetic corpus would have not gone the other way from what they allegedly did. In fact, taking into account the evidence marshalled in this chapter of the spread of Christianity in Arabia, I view it more likely that Christian, rather than polytheist, features were purged from the poems. Christian features do sometimes arise

84 See Hämeen-Anttila, Jaakko, "Al-Khansāʾ's poem in -ālahā and its Qurʾānic echoes: The long and the short of it," in *JRAS* 29/1 (2019), 1–15, at 10, n. 38: "In Umayya's case, the stakes were—and are—high: his poems can be used to prove the existence of widespread monotheism on the Peninsula, necessary for the monotheistic movement around the Kaʿba and a major piece in the background of Muḥammad's mission." Sinai, *Rain-giver*, 28, is more optimistic about the authenticity issue: "A lengthy poem about the creation of the world by Allāh, including a detailed description of the heavens and of God's throne, is preserved under the name of Umayya ibn Abī l-Ṣalt and has been accepted as authentic by most scholars who have examined it, on the grounds that it constitutes a highly idiosyncratic and, in many respects, obscure adaptation of a wide range of cosmological and angelological traditions that are conspicuously independent of the Quran." However, Hämeen-Anttila has noted to me (personal communication) that it is not simply the vocabulary and contents that make the authenticity of Umayya ibn Abī l-Ṣalt's poems suspect, but also their aberrant form. On Umayya ibn Abī l-Ṣalt and the poems ascribed to him, see also Borg, Gert, "The divine in the works of Umayya b. Abī al-Ṣalt," in Gert Borg and Ed de Moor (eds.), *Representations of the divine in Arabic poetry*, Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2001, 9–23; Power, Edmond, "Umayya ibn Abī-ṣ-Ṣalt," *Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale de l'Université Saint Joseph* 1 (1906), 117–202, and "The poems of Umayya ibn Abī-ṣ-Ṣalt," in *Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale de l'Université Saint Joseph* 2 (1911–1912), 145–195; Schultess, Friedrich, "Umayya b. Abi-Ṣalt," in Carl Bezold (ed.), *Orientalische Studien Theodor Nöldeke zum siebzigsten Geburstag*, 2 vols., i, Giessen: Verlag von Alfred Töpelmann, 1906, 71–89; Seidensticker, Tilman, "The authenticity of the poems ascribed to Umayya ibn Abī al-Ṣalt," in Jack R. Smart (ed.), *Tradition and modernity in Arabic language and literature*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996, 87–101; Sinai, Nicolai, "Religious poetry from the Quranic milieu: Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt on the fate of the Thamūd," in *BSOAS* 74/3 (2011), 397–416.

85 E.g., Schultess, "Umayya b. Abi-Ṣalt" 71, where it is claimed that the poems were modified and censored to align with Islam. But, as I argue here, they do *not* actually fit the Islamic image of the *jāhiliyya* (as a period where the great majority of the Arabians were polytheists and idolaters), rather the opposite.

(as will be seen in chapter 3) but, for instance, almost all references to Jesus or Christology are missing. If, as seems obvious, some pre-Islamic Arabic poets were Christians, why do they never discuss Christ at any length? I suggest that such omissions should be considered alongside other possible ones.

In his study, Sinai proffers methodological considerations and criteria for how to discern what could be authentically pre-Islamic, and what is not, in the poetical corpus. The comparison with the Qurʾānic data on the gentiles makes his arguments credible. Sinai's criteria contain the following principles:[86] The poetry of the *dīwān*s is preferred to that contained in historiographical, exegetical, and other such works that often adduce poetry for theological or ideological arguments. If verses of a poem are clearly Qurʾānic in content (i.e., in their vocabulary or expressions), there is reason to suspect that the verses are not authentically pre-Islamic but, rather, produced (or at least, considerably reworked) by scholars of the Islamic era.

Nonetheless, Sinai suggests that the poetical corpus can and should be compared with the Qurʾān, in particular what it says about its opponents. That is to say, "if beliefs about Allāh that are expressed in poetry align with views that the Qurʾan ascribes to its pagan opponents, we can at least be confident that the poetic verses are voicing ideas that are non-anachronistic in a pre-Islamic context."[87] The cumulation of contents is, Sinai puts forward, an argument for their authenticity: "even if doubts could be raised about this or that single proof-text, they do not imperil the likely pre-quranic status of the general idea under consideration,"[88] if the same notion is attested in many other instances of the poetical corpus.

In some cases, a verse survives in different variants. As an example, Sinai notes that one of the variants might have a mention of *al-dahr*, "(the destructive course of) time," while another reads Allāh instead. Sinai argues that it makes sense to assume that, in such a case, the original poem had *al-dahr*, which was replaced by Allāh by Muslim scholars.[89] There was, in the course of transmission of these poems, a tendency to Islamicize their contents.[90]

With these criteria and methods in mind, it makes sense to assume that it is indeed possible to separate the wheat from the chaff (though this is never

86 See Sinai, *Rain-giver* 22–26.
87 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 25.
88 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 25.
89 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 23.
90 For an illuminating case study focusing on a poem by al-Khansāʾ (d. 20s–40s/640s–660s?), see Hämeen-Anttila, "Al-Khansāʾs poem." The poem was Islamicized in the transmission process. Hämeen-Anttila corroborates Sinai's point that the *dīwān* versions are more reliable.

an objective scientific endeavor) and use the Arabic poetic material to study beliefs among Arabians on the eve of Islam.

1.4 *The Date of Arabic Historiography*

There is a large literature on early Arabic historiography.[91] In what follows, I treat some important figures and works of Arabic historical literature that I

91 In addition to the works discussed in more detail below, see the important studies Berg, Herbert (ed.), *Islamic origins reconsidered: John Wansbrough and the study of Islam* (Special Issue of Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 9), Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997; Boekhoff-van der Voort, Nicolet, Kees Versteegh and Joas Wagemakers (eds.), *The transmission and dynamics of the textual sources of Islam: Essays in honour of Harald Motzki* (IHC 89), Leiden: Brill, 2011; Bonner, Michael Richard J., *Al-Dīnawarī's* Kitāb al-Aḫbār al-Ṭiwāl: *An historiographical study of Sasanian Iran* (RO 22), Leuven: Peeters, 2015; Cahen, Claude, "L'historiographie arabe des origins au VIIe s. H.," in *Arabica* 23/2 (1986), 133–198, and "History and historians," in M.J.L. Young, J. Derek Latham and Robert B. Serjeant (eds.), *Religion, learning and science in the ʿAbbasid Period* (The Cambridge history of Arabic literature), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; el-Calamawy, Sahair, "Narrative elements in the *ḥadīth* literature," in Alfred Felix Landon Beeston et al. (eds.), *Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period* (*CHI* 1), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 308–316; Calder, Norman, *Studies in early Muslim jurisprudence*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, and "History and nostalgia: Reflections on John Wansbrough's The Sectarian Milieu," in *Method & theory in the study of religion* 9/1 (1997), 47–73; Cameron, Averil and Lawrence I. Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East I: Problems in the literary source material* (SLAEI 1), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1992; Conrad, Lawrence I., "The conquest of Arwād: A source-critical study in the historiography of the early medieval Near East," in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East I: Problems in the literary source material* (SLAEI 1), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1992, 317–401, and "Seven and the tasbīʿ: On the implications of numerical symbolism for the study of medieval Islamic history," in *JESHO* 31/1 (1988), 42–73; Crone, Patricia, *Slaves on horses: The evolution of the Islamic polity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, repr. 2003; Crone, Patricia and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The making of the Islamic world*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; Di Branco, Marco, "A rose in the desert? Late antique and early Byzantine chronicles and the formation of Islamic universal historiography," in Andrew Fear and Peter Liddel (eds.), *Historiae mundi: Studies in universal history*, London: Duckworth, 2010, 189–206; Donner, Fred M., "Modern approaches to early Islamic history," in Chase F. Robinson (ed.), *The new Cambridge history of Islam*, 6 vols., i: *The formation of the Islamic world: Sixth to eleventh centuries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 625–647; "Periodization as a tool of the historian with special reference to Islamic history," in *Der Islam* 91/1 (2014), 20–36; "The historian, the believer, and the Qurʾān," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *New perspectives on the Qurʾān: The Qurʾān in its historical context 2*, London: Routledge, 2011, 25–37; Duri, ʿAbd al-ʿAziz, "Al-Zuhrī: A study on the beginnings of history writing in Islam," in *BSOAS* 19 (1957), 1–12, and *The rise of historical writing among the Arabs*, ed. and trans. Lawrence I. Conrad, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983; Elad, Amikam, "The beginnings of historical writing by the Arabs: The earliest Syrian writers on the Arab conquests," in *JSAI* 28 (2003), 65–152; Faizer, Rizvi, "Muhammad and the Medinan Jews: A comparison of the texts of Ibn

use, in particular in chapters 4, 5, and 6, which contain treatments of Arabic historiography concerning the events in question as "excursuses."

Ishaq's *Kitāb Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* with al-Waqidi's *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*," in *IJMES* 28/4 (1996), 463–489; Goldziher, Ignác, *Muhammedanische Studien*, ii, Halle: Niemeyer, 1890, trans. as *Muslim Studies*, 2 vols., ed. Samuel M. Stern, trans. C. Renate Barber and Samuel M. Stern, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966–1971; Görke, Andreas, "Eschatology, history, and the common link: A study in methodology," in Herbert Berg (ed.), *Method and theory in the study of Islamic origins*, Leiden: Brill, 2003, 179–208; "The relationship between *maghāzī* and *ḥadīth* in early Islamic scholarship," in *BSOAS* 74/2 (2011), 171–185; "Authorship in the *sīra* literature," in Lale Behzadi and Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila (eds.), *Concepts of authorship in pre-modern Arabic texts* (Bamberger Orientstudien 7), Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2015, 63–92; Haider, Najam, *The rebel and the imām in early Islam: Explorations in Muslim historiography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020; Hämeen-Anttila, Jaakko, *Khwadāynāmag: The Middle Persian Book of Kings* (SPCH 14), Leiden: Brill, 2018; Hasson, Isaac, "*Ansāb al-ašrāf* d'al-Balāḏurī est-il un livre de *ta'rīḫ* ou d'*adab*?" in *IOS* 19 (1999), 479–493; Hinds, Martin, *Studies in early Islamic history* (SLAEI 4), eds. Jere L. Bacharach, Lawrence I. Conrad and Patricia Crone, Princeton NJ: The Darwin Press, 1996; Horovitz, Josef, "Alter und Ursprung des Isnād," in *Der Islam* 8 (1917), 39–47, and *The earliest biographies of the prophet and their authors* (SLAEI 11), ed. Lawrence I. Conrad, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2002; el-Hibri, Tayeb, *Reinterpreting Islamic historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the narrative of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate* (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Howard-Johnston, James, *Witnesses to a world crisis: Historians and histories of the Middle East in the seventh century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, and "The earliest Christian writings on Muḥammad: An appraisal," in Harald Motzki (ed.), *The biography of Muḥammad: The issue of the sources* (IHC 32), Leiden: Brill, 2000, 276–297; Hoyland (ed. and trans.), *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle and the circulation of historical knowledge in late antiquity and early Islam* (Translated Texts for Historians 57), Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010; Humphreys, R. Stephen, *Islamic history: A framework for inquiry*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991 (rev. ed.); Judd, Steven C., "Narrative and character development: Al-Ṭabarī and al-Balādhurī on late Umayyad history," in Sebastian Günther (ed.), *Ideas, images, and methods of portrayal: Insights into classical Arabic literature and Islam* (IHC 58), Leiden: Brill, 2005, 209–226, and "Medieval explanations for the fall of the Umayyads," in Antoine Borrut and Paul M. Cobb (eds.), *Umayyad legacies: Medieval memories from Syria and Spain* (IHC 80), Leiden: Brill, 2010, 89–104; Kennedy, Hugh, "Caliphs and their chroniclers in the Middle Abbasid period (third/ninth century)," in Chase F. Robinson (ed.), *Texts, documents and artefacts: Islamic studies in honour of D.S. Richards* (IHC 45), Leiden: Brill, 2003; Kennedy, Hugh (ed.), *Al-Ṭabarī: A medieval Muslim historian and his work* (SLAEI 15), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2008; Khalidi, Tarif, *Islamic historiography: The histories of al-Masʿūdī*, Albany NY: State University of New York, 1975, and *Arabic historical thought in the classical period* (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Khoury, Raif Georges, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1972; Kister, Meir Jacob, "The expedition of Bi'r Maʿūna," in George Makdisi (ed.), *Arabic and Islamic studies in honor of Hamilton A.R. Gibb*, Leiden: Brill, 1965, 337–357; "'A bag of meat': A study of an early *ḥadīth*," in *BSOAS* 33/2 (1970), 267–275; "'... *illā bi-ḥaqqihi* ...': A study of an early *ḥadīth*," in *JSAI* 5

For a long time, scholars viewed Arabic historical lore and literature as having its origin in oral traditions that were, at some point, collected in books that

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(1984), 33–52; "The massacre of the Banū Qurayẓa: A re-examination of a tradition," in *JSAI* 8 (1986), 61–96; Landau-Tasseron, Ella, "Sayf Ibn ʿUmar in medieval and modern scholarship," in *Der Islam* 67/1 (1990), 1–26, and "On the reconstruction of lost sources," in *Qanṭara* 25/1 (2004), 45–91; Lecker, Michael, "Biographical notes on Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī," in *JSS* 41 (1996), 21–63; Leder, Stefan, "Features of the novel in early historiography: The downfall of Xālid al-Qasrī," in *Oriens* 32 (1990), 72–96; *Das Korpus al-Haiṯam ibn ʿAdī (st. 207/822): Herkunft, Überlieferung, Gestalt früher Texte der Aḫbār Literatur* (Frankfurter wissenschatfliche Beiträge, kulturwissenschaftliche Reihe 20), Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1991; "The literary use of the *khabar*: A basic form of historical writing," in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East I: Problems in the literary source material* (SLAEI 1.1), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1992, 277–315; Lindsay, James E., *Ibn ʿAsākir and early Islamic history* (SLAEI 20), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2001; Meisami, Julie Scott, "History as literature," in Charles P. Melville (ed.), *Persian historiography* (A history of Persian literature 10), London: I.B. Tauris, 2012, 1–55; Motzki, Harald, "The author and his work in the Islamic literature of the first centuries: The case of ʿAbd al-Razzāq's Muṣannaf," in *JSAI* 28 (2003), 171–201; "The question of the authenticity of Muslim traditions reconsidered: A review article," in Herbert Berg (ed.), *Method and theory in the study of Islamic origins* (IHC 49), Leiden: Brill, 2003, 211–257; "Whither *ḥadīth* studies?" in Harald Motzki, Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort and Sean W. Anthony (eds.), *Analysing Muslim traditions: Studies in legal, exegetical and maghāzī ḥadīth* (IHC 78), Leiden: Brill, 2010, 47–124; Newby, Gordon D., *The making of the last prophet: A reconstruction of the earliest biography of Muḥammad*, Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989; Noth, Albrecht, "Der Charakter der ersten großen Sammlungen von Nachrichten zur frühen Kalifenzeit," in *Der Islam* 47 (1971), 168–199, and *The early Arabic historical tradition: A source-critical study*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad, trans. Michael Bonner (SLAEI 3), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1994; Peacock, Andrew C.S., *Mediaeval Islamic historiography and political legitimacy: Balʿamī's Tārīkhnāma* (RSHIT), London: Routledge, 2007; Peters, Francis E., "The quest of the historical Muhammad," in *IJMES* 23 (1991), 291–315; Petersen, Erling L., *ʿAlī and Muʿāwiya in early Arabic tradition: Studies on the genesis and growth of Islamic historical writing until the end of the ninth century*, trans. P. Lampe Christensen, Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1964; Powers, *Zayd*; Robinson, Chase F., *Islamic historiography* (TIH), Cambridge University Press, 2003, and "A local historian's debt to al-Ṭabarī: The case of al-Azdī's *Taʾrīkh al-Mawṣil*," in *JAOS* 126/4 (2006), 521–535; Roohi, Ehsan, "The murder of the Jewish chieftain Kaʿb b. al-Ashraf: A re-examination," in *JRAS* 31/1 (2021), 103–124; Rosenthal, Franz, *A history of Muslim historiography*, Leiden: Brill, ^{2}1968 (rev. ed); Rubin, Uri, *Between Bible and Qurʾan: The children of Israel and the Islamic self-image* (SLAEI 17), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1999, and *The eye of the beholder*; al-Samuk, Sadun Mahmud, *Die historischen Überlieferungen nach Ibn Isḥāq: Eine synoptische Untersuchung*, (PhD Diss.): Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main, 1978; Scheiner, Jens, *Die Eroberung von Damaskus: Quellenkritische Untersuchung zur Historiographie in klassisch-islamischer Zeit* (IHC 76), Leiden: Brill, 2010; Schoeler, Gregor, "Mūsā b. ʿUqbas *Maghāzī*," in Harald Motzki (ed.), *The biography of Muḥammad: The issue of the sources* (IHC 32), Leiden: Brill, 2000, 67–97, and *The biography of Muḥammad: Nature and authenticity*, trans. Uwe Vagelpohl, ed. James E. Montgomery, London: Routledge, 2011; Shboul, Ahmad M.H.,

were transmitted in a written environment. However, the whole oral-written dichotomy has been taken issue with. There have been many studies concerning the culture of knowledge production and transmission in the early Islamic era,[92] but the most important studies have been authored by Gregor Schoe-

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Al-Masʿūdī & his world: A Muslim humanist and his interest in non-Muslims, London: Ithaca Press, 1979; Shoshan, Boaz, *Poetics of Islamic historiography: Deconstructing Ṭabarī's history* (IHC 53), Leiden: Brill, 2004, and *The Arabic historical tradition and the early Islamic conquests: Folklore, tribal lore, Holy War*, London: Routledge, 2016; Wansbrough, *The sectarian milieu*.

92 In addition to the references given below, see, e.g., Abiad, Malaké, *Culture et éducation arabo-islamiques au Šām pendant les trois premiers siècles de l'islam*, Damascus: Presses de l'Ifpo, 1981; Atassi, Ahmad N., "The transmission of Ibn Saʿd's biographical dictionary *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*," in *JAIS* 12 (2012), 56–80; Athamina, Khalil, "The sources of al-Balādhurī's *Ansāb al-Ashrāf*," in *JSAI* 5 (1984), 237–262, and "The historical works of al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī: The author's attitude towards the sources," in Hugh Kennedy (ed.), *Al-Ṭabarī: A medieval Muslim historian and his work* (SLAEI 15), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2008, 141–155; Brown, Jonathan, *The canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim: The formation and function of the Sunnī ḥadīth canon* (IHC 69), Leiden: Brill, 2007; Calder, *Studies in early Muslim jurisprudence*; Cohen, Hayyim J., "The economic background and the secular occupations of Muslim jurisprudents and traditionists in the classical period of Islam (Until the middle of the eleventh century)," in *JESHO* 13/1 (1979), 16–61; Cook, Michael, *Early Muslim dogma: A source-critical study*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, and "The opponents of the writing of tradition in early Islam," in *Arabica* 44 (1997), 437–530; Cooperson, Micheal, *Classical Arabic biography: The heirs of the prophets in the age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; Dickinson, Eerik, *The development of early Sunnite* ḥadīth *criticism: The* Taqdima *of Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (240/854–327/938)* (IHC 38), Leiden: Brill, 2001; Drory, Rina, "The Abbasid construction of the jahiliyya: Cultural authority in the making," in *SI* 83/1 (1996), 33–49; Dutton, Yasin, *The origins of Islamic law: The Qur'an, the* Muwaṭṭa' *and Madinan* ʿamal, London: Curzon, [2]2002; Fleischhammer, Manfred, *Die Quellen des Kitāb al-Aġānī* (AKM 55/2), Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2004; Gilliot, Claude, "La formation intellectuelle de Tabari," in *JA* 276 (1988), 203–244, and "Le traitement du *ḥādīth* dans le *Tahdhīb al-ātār* de Ṭabarī," in *Arabica* 41 (1994), 309–351; Görke, Andreas, *Das Kitāb al-Amwāl des Abū ʿUbaid al-Qāsim b. Sallām: Entstehung und Überlieferung eines frühislamischen Rechtswerkes* (SLAEI 22), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2003; Günther, Sebastian, *Quellenuntersuchungen zu den "Maqātil aṭ-Ṭālibiyyīn" des Abū 'l-Farağ al-Iṣfahānī* (ATS 4), Hildesheim: Olms, 1991; "*Maqâtil* literature in medieval Islam," in *JAL* 25 (1994), 192–212; "'… nor have I learned it from any book of theirs': Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī: A medieval Arabic author at work," in Rainer Brunner et al. (eds.), *Islamstudien ohne Ende: Festschrift für Werner Ende zum 65. Geburtstag*, Würzburg 2002, 139–153; "Assessing the sources of classical Arabic compilations: The issue of categories and methodologies," in *BJMES* 32/1 (2005), 75–98, and "Praise to the Book! Al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn Qutayba on the excellence of the written word in medieval Islam," in *JSAI* 32 (2006), 125–143; Judd, Steven C., *Religious scholars and the Umayyads: Piety-minded supporters of the Marwānid caliphate* (CCME), London: Routledge, 2014; Juynboll, Gualtherüs Hendrik Albert, *Muslim tradition: Studies in chronology, provenance and authorship of early ḥadīth* (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization),

ler.[93] According to Schoeler's influential model, early Arabic literature (including historiography) was not oral or written; rather, it was aural. That is to say, it was transmitted through lectures (*samāʿ*), where a teacher taught a (sometimes fairly numerous) group of students. The teacher had a notebook (*kitāb*) from which he or she read; the students took (usually abridged) notes during the lectures. Hence, writing was used from the beginning, but it was merely an aid. Schoeler suggests that books proper start to emerge around the year 800 CE.

If writing was used from the beginning of Arabic historical literature, *when* was that beginning? In the 20th century, there were some scholars arguing for a very early composition and transmission of Arabic literature, including historiography.[94] These views, it seems to me, are now the minori-

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Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, and *Studies on the origins and uses of Islamic ḥadīth*, Aldershot: Variorum Reprints, 1996; Kennedy, Hugh, "From oral tradition to written record in Arabic genealogy," in *Arabica* 44 (1997), 531–544; Melchert, Christopher, *The formation of the Sunni schools of law, 9th–10th Centuries C.E.* (SILS 4), Leiden: Brill, 1997; "The early history of Islamic law," in Herbert Berg (ed.), *Method and theory in the study of Islamic origins* (IHC 49), Leiden: Brill, 2003, 293–324; "The etiquette of learning in the early Islamic study circle," in Joseph E. Lowry, Devin J. Stewart and Shawkat M. Toorawa (eds.), *Law and education in medieval Islam: Studies in memory of Professor George Makdisi*, Chippenham: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004, 33–44; Osman, Ghada, "Oral vs. written transmission: The case of Ṭabarī and Ibn Saʿd," in *Arabica* 48 (2001), 66–80; al-Qāḍī, Wadād, "Biographical dictionaries as the scholars' alternative history of the Muslim community," in Gerhard Endress (ed.), *Organizing knowledge: Encyclopaedic activities in the pre-eighteenth century Islamic world* (IPTS 61), Leiden: Brill, 2006, 23–75; Schacht, Joseph, *The origins of Muhammadan jurisprudence*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950; Toorawa, Shawkat M., *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr and Arabic writerly culture: A ninth-century bookman in Baghdād* (RSMEH), London: Routledge, 2005; Vajda, Georges, "De la transmission orale du savoir dans l'Islam traditionnel," in *L'Arabisant* 4 (1975), 1–9; Weisweiler, Max, "Das Amt des *Mustamlī* in der arabischen Wissenschaft," in *Oriens* 4 (1951), 27–57; Werkmeister, Walter, *Quellenuntersuchungen zum Kitāb al-ʿIqd al-farīd des Andalusiers Ibn ʿAbdrabbih (246/860–328/940): Ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*, Berlin: K. Schwarz, 1983.

93 Schoeler, Gregor, *The oral and the written in early Islam*, trans. Uwe Vagelpohl, ed. James E. Montgomery, London: Routledge, 2006; *The genesis of literature in Islam: From the aural to the read*, trans. Shawkat M. Toorawa, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

94 E.g., Abbott, Nabia, *Studies in Arabic literary papyri I: Historical texts* (The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications 75), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957; *Studies in Arabic literary papyri II: Qurʾānic commentary and tradition* (The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications 76), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967; "*Ḥadīth* literature-II: Collection and transmission of *ḥadīth*," in Alfred Felix Landon Beeston et al. (eds.), *Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period* (*CHI* 1), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 289–298; al-Azami, M. Mustafa, *On Shacht's origins of Muhammadan jurisprudence*, Riyadh: King Saud University, 1985; Watt, W. Montgomery, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953, and *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.

ty.[95] Fred Donner has, in my opinion convincingly, suggested that there was scant interest in Arabic historical narration before the end of the first/seventh century.[96] Before this, there might have been some oral lore circulating, but the actual birth of Arabic historiography (which was transmitted in an aural context) should be placed around the year 700 CE. Scholars using the so-called *isnād-cum-matn* method, which analyzes both the chains of transmissions and the texts of the reports,[97] have arrived at similar results. Of importance have been in particular the reconstructions of the Medinese ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr's (d. 94/713) corpus of traditions about the prophet Muḥammad.[98] It is, then, with ʿUrwa and his generation where things start to emerge. This is similar to what Donner suggested earlier about the beginning of Arabic historiography. It has to be remembered that the corpus of ʿUrwa and his contemporaries was still very bare-bones. Their traditions about the prophet contained few if any dates, for example, nor did they transmit (or have) any information about Muḥammad before the start of his revelations.

Recently, Sean Anthony has shed more light on ʿUrwa's corpus, transmitting and analyzing correspondence between ʿUrwa and the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik.[99] According to him, the letters are, in all likelihood, authentic. ʿUrwa circulated (via letters and lectures) traditions on different events of the prophet's biography, from his earliest revelations to the conquest of Mecca (but nothing, it seems, on his life before the revelations). ʿUrwa's main

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95 Though see, e.g., Brown, Jonathan, *Muhammad: A very short introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; Elad, Amikam, "Community of believers of 'holy men' and 'saints' or community of Muslims? The rise and development of early Muslim historiography," in *JSS* 47/1 (2002), 241–308.

96 Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins*. On the beginnings of Muslim historiography, see also Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 85–101. Aziz al-Azmeh (*The Arabs and Islam in late antiquity: A critique of approaches to Arabic sources*, Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014) puts forward a sanguine (or naïve) view of the early date and authenticity of Arabic historiography. However, there is very little new methodology in the book and its—very traditional—conclusions are, in my opinion, not credible.

97 For this method, see Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 5–8.

98 Görke, Andreas, "The historical tradition about al-Ḥudaybiya: A study of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr's account," in Harald Motzki (ed.), *The biography of Muḥammad: The issue of the sources* (IHC 32), Leiden: Brill, 2000, 240–275; Görke, Andreas and Gregor Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte über das Leben Muḥammads: Das Korpus ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubair* (SLAEI 24), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2008. For a critical take on these efforts, see Shoemaker, Stephen J., "In search of ʿUrwa's Sīra: Some methodological issues in the quest for 'authenticity' in the life of Muḥammad," in *Der Islam* 85/2 (2011), 257–344. For a refutation of Shoemaker's criticism, see Görke, Andreas, Harald Motzki and Gregor Schoeler, "First century sources for the life of Muḥammad? A debate," in *Der Islam* 89/2 (2012), 2–59.

99 Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 102–128.

interest was the Medinan phase of the prophet's life.[100] ʿUrwa also passed on a few narratives about the events after the death of the prophet.[101] ʿUrwa supplied *isnād*s (chains of transmission) to his reports sparingly. Moreover, the reports do not form a continuous narrative, nor did he mention many dates or try to arrange the material chronologically.[102] Indeed, chronology appears to be a secondary consideration in Arabic historical tradition, not present in the narratives of the very earliest authors.[103] Moreover, in contrast to some other authors, ʿUrwa was not interested in pre-Islamic Arabian history.[104]

Among the many students of ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr, two, in particular, should be mentioned: Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742) and ʿUrwa's son, Hishām ibn ʿUrwa (d. 146/763). Whereas ʿUrwa did not provide his narrative material with much chronology, Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī did so.[105] He learned many traditions from his teacher, ʿUrwa, as well as other sources. Al-Zuhrī was sponsored by the Umayyad caliphs.[106] Al-Zuhrī was, like ʿUrwa and some other scholars discussed here, from Medina, though the former moved to Damascus, perhaps at the end of the second *fitna*, civil war (680–692 CE). Al-Zuhrī's range (as a collector and, perhaps, originator of historical narratives) was wider than ʿUrwa's: in contrast to the latter, al-Zuhrī was interested in pre-Islamic and Biblical history, narrating lore about the patriarchs, for instance. Al-Zuhrī's traditions about Muḥammad deal with all phases of his life, while, as noted above, ʿUrwa's story about Muḥammad started with the latter's first revelation. Al-Zuhrī also disseminated narratives about the later history of the community up to the Umayyads.[107] Al-Zuhrī was an esteemed scholar of prophetical and other traditions. However, some *muḥaddith*s (transmitters of prophetical traditions) raised critical voices concerning him, possibly because of his close ties with the Umayyads.[108]

Juynboll notes that al-Zuhrī was the "the first to make consistent use of *isnād*s" (chains of transmission).[109] The device of *isnad* was not yet used by

100 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte* 19.
101 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte* 15.
102 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte* 291–292.
103 Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins* 230–248.
104 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte* 10–21, 290–291.
105 See Ibrahim, Ayman S., *Conversion to Islam: Competing themes in early Islamic historiography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, 41–45; Duri, "Al-Zuhrī."
106 Lecker, "Biographical notes."
107 Duri, "Al-Zuhrī" 3–11.
108 Lecker, "Biographical notes" 34.
109 Juynboll, *Muslim tradition* 19.

ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr or his generation, at least with any frequency. What is important to underscore is that neither ʿUrwa, nor al-Zuhrī, nor anyone else in their generations, envisioned their narratives as forming books proper. Instead, their narratives existed, in addition to in their memories, in notebooks, which they transmitted during lectures. The notebooks and the ensuing lectures were revised during their lives. As for ʿUrwa, his knowledge was also dispersed in the form of letters—an important means of knowledge transmission in this era.

Perhaps the most famous biographer of the prophet was, and is, Ibn Isḥāq, who was born around the year 85/704 in Medina.[110] As already noted, important transmitters (and originators) of prophetical traditions hailed from that town.[111] Ibn Isḥāq came from a scholarly family: his father and two uncles, we are told, were traditionists. The famous scholar al-Zuhrī, mentioned above, was one of the most important teachers of Ibn Isḥāq. We can see that Medina, with its famous scholars that formed teacher-student relationships (ʿUrwa, al-Zuhrī, Ibn Isḥāq, and naturally many others besides) formed a nexus for the scholarly study (and formatting) of the biography of the prophet and its contextualization in Arabian and Biblical history. Interestingly, Ibn Isḥāq had a habit of consulting Jewish and Christian scholars and informants as well as the text of the Bible itself. For these reasons, he was denigrated by some other Muslim scholars.[112] That the social, scholarly, and epistemic borders between Muslims, on the one hand, and Jews, Christians, and so on, on the other hand, was deemed firm by some Muslim scholars but not by others (such as Ibn Isḥāq) is an interesting example of the identity negations underway in the second/eighth century.[113] Ibn Isḥāq traveled to other parts of the Near East, such as Egypt, in pursuit of knowledge and teachers. In addition, his sojourn in Medina became at some point impossible because of the enmity of two famous Medinese scholars and traditionists, Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/795) and Hishām ibn ʿUrwa (d. 146/763). Because of this, Ibn Isḥāq moved elsewhere, going from place to place in Iraq and Iran, and finally settling down in Baghdad in 146/763,

110 For his life and works, see Sellheim, Rudolf, "prophet, Chalif und Geschichte: Die Muhammad-Biografie des Ibn Isḥāq," in *Oriens* 18–19 (1965–1966), 33–91; al-Samuk, *Die historischen Überlieferungen*; Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 150–171.

111 Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins* 219–221.

112 See Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 167.

113 On the articulation of the distinct Islamic identity, see chapter 8 of the present work. The work of Ibn Isḥāq, in itself, proffers a narrative of rather early and rather bounded social formation. But, as will be discussed in chapters 4–6, there are some stories in his corpus in which the dichotomic (and imagined) delineation Muslim vs. non-Muslim falls apart.

the new capital of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate, where he died ca. 150/767. During his rather short stay of some five years in Baghdad, he became befriended by the caliph al-Manṣūr.[114]

When he came to Baghdad, Ibn Isḥāq had already composed works (read: lecture series and notebooks) containing historical narratives. However, these cannot be considered books proper, with a fixed form. According to a (possibly spurious) narrative, the caliph al-Manṣūr asked Ibn Isḥāq to write a work from the creation of Adam to the present day for his son, the crown prince al-Mahdī. The result of this was a work called *al-Kitāb al-Kabīr* or *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* (the latter title might refer only to a subsection of the work), which was stored in the caliphal library. This work, if it existed in the real world and not just in the imagination of later scholars, could be considered an authored book, with a finalized form. However, this version is not extant: what we have today are different recensions of the works that Ibn Isḥāq transmitted in a lecture-based environment, written down by his students and transmitted by his students' students.[115] Because of the context of the aural knowledge transmission and the dynamic process included in it, Ibn Isḥāq modified his oeuvre throughout his life. As Sean Anthony remarks: "Any attempt to reconstruct a pure, unadulterated original [of Ibn Isḥāq's *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*] is, therefore, a fool's errand—there is no putative 'original' to be reconstructed, only multiple versions of accounts transmitted multiple times over."[116]

For these reasons, and the divergences in the extant citations of Ibn Isḥāq's material, there is some uncertainty about the names and scopes of the individual works. The *Kitāb al-Kabīr* apparently consisted of three different parts: *al-Mubtadaʾ*, "The Beginning (i.e., pre-Islamic history)"; *al-Mabʿath*, "The Mission (of the prophet, i.e., his Meccan phase)"; and *al-Maghāzī*, "The War Campaigns (of the prophet, i.e., his Medinan phase)". Ibn Isḥāq is also credited with a *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, "The Book of Conquests," a *Kitāb al-Khulafāʾ*, "The Book of Caliphs," which probably dealt with the first four caliphs, as well as what seems to be a possibly misattributed *ḥadīth* work, *Kitāb al-Sunan*. If Ibn Isḥāq saw himself as composing a single work (which is far from certain), then we should describe it

114 The court impulse behind the genesis of Arabic historiography is explored in two important recent works: Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 129–171 (biographies of the prophet) and Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag* 59–130 (translations of Middle Persian texts into Arabic).

115 On the recensions and their transmissions, see Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 158–171.

116 Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 160. On the question of reconstructing second/eighth-century Arabic historical works, see also Zychowicz-Coghill, Edward P., *The first Arabic annals: Fragments of Umayyad history*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021.

as a proto- or semi-universal history, albeit of limited, Arabian, scope. It appears that, in Ibn Isḥāq's vision, the life of the prophet was the culmination of sacred history. The narrative was not, however, continued to contemporary events, even if the first four caliphs (but perhaps not the Umayyads) were the subject of his *Kitāb al-Khulafāʾ*. In any case, the latter does not seem to have been part of the *Kitāb al-Kabīr*.

Quotations of his *Kitāb al-Mabʿath* and *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* are extant in three recensions (though at the time they existed in many more): first, and best-known, that of Ibn Hishām (d. ca. 218/833) from his teacher al-Bakkāʾī (d. 183/799); second, that of Yūnus ibn Bukayr (d. 199/814); and third, that of Salama b. al-Faḍl (d. 191/806), whose recension is adduced by the famous historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923).[117] The most famous of these is Ibn Hishām's recension, which is titled *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*, "The Prophetic Biography." This is, it appears, the first instance of the word *sīra* in this meaning ("the life/biography").[118] Ibn Hishām's *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* consisted of the *mabʿath* and *maghāzī* parts, which he reworked to some extent, purging some information he considered repugnant to the prophet or offensive to the ʿAbbāsids and clarifying some Arabic words.[119] Ibn Isḥāq's *Kitāb al-Mubtadaʾ*, which dealt with Biblical history and pre-Islamic Arabia and relied on, for example, Wahb ibn Munabbih's narratives,[120] has been the object of a modern reconstruction attempt.[121] A case can be made that Ibn Isḥāq's narratives on the Meccan period contain less authentic information than the Medinan ones. To quote Guillaume, the translator of Ibn Hishām's *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*: "The impression one gets from this section [on Mecca] is of hazy memories; the stories have lost their freshness and have nothing of that vivid and sometimes dramatic detail that make the *maghāzī* stories [of the Medinan era] … so full of interest and excitement. Thus while the Medinan period is well documented, and events are chronologically arranged, no such accuracy, indeed no such attempt at it, can be claimed for the Meccan period."[122] One should note, however, that "vivid" and "dramatic

117 On the transmission of his work(s), see, in detail, al-Samuk, *Die historischen Überlieferungen*.

118 Though it is possible that Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's Arabic translation of the Persian *Khwadāynāmag*, with the ostensible title *Kitāb Siyar al-Mulūk*, already evidences such a usage; see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag* 91.

119 Guillaume, Alfred, *The life of Muhammad: A translation of* [*Ibn*] *Isḥāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955, xxii; Crone, *Slaves on horses* 6.

120 Guillaume, *The life of Muhammad* xviii, xxx–xxxi.

121 Newby, *The making of the last prophet*; cf. Conrad, Lawrence I., "Recovering lost texts: Some methodological issues," in *JAOS* 113/2 (1993), 258–263.

122 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* xviii–xix.

detail" are not, in itself, proof of authentic historical information but can, in fact, be literary embellishments, the basis of which are not reliable memory or historical documents but imagination.

Another early *maghāzī* scholar was Maʿmar ibn Rāshid (d. 153/770). A recension of his *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* is preserved in ʿAbd al-Razzāq's (d. 211/827) *al-Muṣannaf*.[123] Many of the *maghāzī* authorities were from Medina, but Maʿmar was instead Basran and of Persian slave origin. Later in his life, he moved to Yemen. Like Ibn Isḥāq, Maʿmar was a pupil of al-Zuhrī. Judging from the surviving quotations, his *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* included narratives mostly on the Medinan part of the prophet's life, with some Meccan and pre-Islamic Arabian information. The work continues up to the first *fitna*, civil war; the conquests after the prophet are also mentioned so the *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* contains material that was later discussed under the rubric *futūḥ*. The narratives appear to have been not very strictly chronologically organized. Compared to Ibn Isḥāq's magnum opus, Maʿmar's work was more slender; it is also not so strictly organized chronologically.[124] The two works do not proffer totally differing pictures of history but, rather, much of the same material; this probably is owed to the fact that both Ibn Isḥāq and Maʿmar's most important source was al-Zuhrī and that the grand narrative about the prophet's life had already crystallized, though there was naturally (much) disagreement about the details.[125]

Somewhat later than Ibn Isḥāq and Maʿmar is al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822), whose *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* concentrates on what later came to be seen as the *maghāzī* proper, that is, the Medinan period of the prophet. Indeed, al-Wāqidī appears to have been the first scholar "who restricted the term *maghāzī* to the narrower (and subsequently a conventional) sense of the expeditions, raids and other major events of the prophet's Medinan period, as distinct from any broader sense."[126] What is more, he endeavored to give dates and chronological order for events that were still somewhat disorganized in Ibn Isḥāq's work; however, this does not mean that the dates given by him are reliable.[127] Al-Wāqidī was from Medina but he moved to Baghdad where he had contacts with the ʿAbbāsids. It can be seen that many of the scholars treated here were sponsored by the

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123 For a discussion, edition, and translation, see *Maʿmar ibn Rāshid: The expeditions*, ed. and trans. Sean W. Anthony, New York: New York University Press, 2014.

124 Maʿmar ibn Rāshid, *al-Maghāzī* xxviii.

125 See also Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte* 267–280, 291–294.

126 Hinds, Martin, "*Maghāzī* and *sīra* in early Islamic scholarship," in T. Fahd (ed.), *La vie du prophète Mahomet: Épitomé ou abrégé*, Paris: Le Grand Livre du Mois, 1983, 57–66, at 64.

127 Jones, J. Marsden B., "The *maghāzī* literature," in Alfred Felix Landon Beeston et al. (eds.), *Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period* (*CHI* 1), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 344–351, at 349.

powers-to-be. In al-Wāqidī's work, the founding of the early Muslim community and its struggles, ultimately successful, against the Meccans are at the center. The Muslim community comes through the hardship triumphant, subduing most of the Arabian tribes. The conquests outside Arabia form a future aspect in the *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* since the work ends with the prophet's incitement to fight the Byzantines, which results in the battle at Mu'ta. Modern scholarship has shown that al-Wāqidī forged *isnād*s: for example, he drew some material from Ibn Isḥāq without acknowledging this.[128] All in all, he created composite accounts on the basis of various informants and sources.[129]

A contemporary of al-Wāqidī is Hishām ibn al-Kalbī (d. ca. 204/819), who composed works on pre-Islamic Arabian history with little regard for later Islamic sacred history. Three works of his are extant: the *Jamharat al-Nasab*, dealing with tribes and genealogies and formatting an "Arab" lineage to all individuals mentioned in the work;[130] the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, a famous work listing the idols worshipped by the pre-Islamic Arabs (a passage from this work was adduced above in this chapter); and the *Nasab al-Khayl*, which offers information on horses. The *ḥadīth* scholars did not view Hishām ibn al-Kalbī at all favorably, probably because of his interest in historical subjects that they deemed vain. Though in previous scholarship Hishām ibn al-Kalbī's *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* was used as a repository of information and facts about idolatry and deities of pre-Islamic Arabia, scholars have tread more carefully with this work, at least since the study of Gerald Hawting on it in 1999.[131] In fact, not only is the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* an example of Islamic mythical and salvation history, it also echoes general monotheistic tropes and stereotypes about idolatry and idolaters.[132]

I agree with Hawting's conclusions on the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*.[133] The contents of that work (as well as Islamic-era historiography on pre-Islamic Arabia more

128 See Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte* 286.

129 Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins* 258.

130 Kennedy, "From oral tradition" 542.

131 Hawting, *The idea of idolatry* 88–110.

132 Hawting, *The idea of idolatry* 110: "Muslim literature about the idols of the Arabs appears as a continuation of a tradition well attested in the Middle East before Islam … Works such as Ibn al-Kalbī's *Aṣnām* are Islamic in that they adapt traditional monotheistic stories about, and concepts of, idolatry to Muslim concerns. They should not be understood, as it seems they often are, as collections of authentically Arabian ideas and traditions. Any concrete information they contain about idols and sanctuaries in Arabia is presented in stories and reports which are typical of monotheist critiques of 'idolatry' more generally and presented in a stylised way."

133 Similarly, see Ibrahim, *Conversion to Islam* 116–118.

generally) are the stuff of mythical history. Its depiction of Arabia on the eve of Islam as a place rife with idolaters is not supported by material evidence which, as will be seen in the next chapters, suggests that polytheism and idolatry were all but extinct in the fifth and sixth centuries.

The majority of scholars nowadays think that the early Arabic historical tradition is not contemporary with the prophet or the earliest caliphs, let alone pre-Islamic events and figures. How, then, do we use it as a historical source? The answer of some scholars has been that it should *not* be employed as such. Instead, Arabic historiography could be analyzed as literature (belles-lettres): according to this view, the narrative strategies, topoi, and motifs can be understood as being motivated not about transmitting historical knowledge about the past but telling stories. Narratives and works can be read as short stories and novels.[134]

Arabic historical writing has also been approached through the concept of "social" or "cultural" memory.[135] The concept of social memory was introduced by the French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs (d. 1945), and, more recently, scholars such as Jan Assmann (b. 1938) have theorized the concept further. By social memory, the exterior (social) dimensions of human memory are denoted. The interesting and important aspect of this framework is that it supposes a connection between historical narration, memory, communal identity, and cultural continuity. This social or cultural memory is, according to Assmann, part of a culture's connective structure. The connective structure, underlying for example shared narratives, myths, and rituals, "links yesterday with

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134 E.g., el-Hibri, Tayeb, *Parable and politics in early Islamic history: The Rashidun caliphs*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, and *Reinterpreting Islamic historiography*; Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic historiography*; *The Arabic historical tradition*; Wansbrough, *The sectarian milieu*.

135 E.g., Borrut, Antoine, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir: L'espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbassides (v. 72–193/692–809)* (IHC 81), Leiden: Brill, 2011; "La *memoria* omeyyade: les Omeyyades entre souvenir et oubli dans les sources narratives islamiques," in Antoine Borrut and Paul M. Cobb (eds.), *Umayyad legacies: Medieval memories from Syria and Spain* (IHC 80), Leiden: Brill, 2010, 25–61; "Vanishing Syria: Periodization and power in early Islam," in *Der Islam* 91/1 (2014), 37–68, and "Remembering Karbalāʾ: The construction of an early Islamic site of memory," in *JSAI* 42 (2015), 249–282; Lassner, Jacob, *Islamic revolution and historical memory: An inquiry into the art of ʿAbbāsid apologetics* (AOS 66), New Haven CT: American Oriental Society, 1986, and *The Middle East remembered: Forged identities, competing narratives, contested spaces*, Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000; Savant, Sarah Bowen, *The new Muslims of post-conquest Iran: Tradition, memory, and conversion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; Savran, Scott, *Arabs and Iranians in the Islamic conquest narrative: Memory and identity construction in Islamic historiography, 750–1050*, London: Routledge, 2017.

today by giving form and presence to influential experiences and memories, incorporating images and tales from another time into the background of the onward moving present, and bringing with it hope and continuity."[136] Hence, narratives about the prophet can be understood as the community's endeavor to connect themselves to the memory about the prophet. Many aspects and phenomena present in the era of the transmitters of these narratives (for example, distinctive Islamic identity) were retrojected to the time of Muḥammad.[137] The biographies of the prophet are the community's foundation myths. Both approaches (literary and that of social memory) have been, in my opinion, very fruitful, opening new avenues of research.

For the reasons outlined above, in particular its late date, Arabic historiography (such as the *sīra* literature) will be relegated to a secondary role in my study. I do adduce and discuss some narrative cycles in historical works. This is not to buttress my arguments, which I present on the basis of contemporary evidence. I simply note some examples of historiographical narratives that become more understandable in the light of the interpretations on the basis of the religious map of late antique Arabia that I put forward here. However, it has been credibly noted that Arabic historiography reproduces actual authentic and early documents[138] (though many documents cited are spurious). In chapter 6, I discuss the so-called "Constitution" of Medina in some detail—a treaty text that I deem authentically stemming from the time of the prophet. Moreover, in this book I accept the basic information about the prophet's life as contained in Arabic biographical and other historical literature as sound: Muḥammad began his prophetical career in Mecca and he died in Medina. I take the year of the *hijra* (1/622, "emigration" from Mecca to Medina) and the year of the death of the prophet (11/632) as facts until proven otherwise. However, as will be seen in the course of this book, there is much in the tradition that I question. Moreover, apart from the two dates just mentioned, the chronology of the prophet's life cannot be known in any detail.[139]

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136 Assmann, Jan, *Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 2.

137 See also Wansbrough, *The sectarian milieu* 39–40.

138 Al-Qāḍī, Wadād, "Early Islamic state letters: The question of authenticity," in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East I: Problems in the literary source material* (SLAEI 1), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1992, 215–275; "An Umayyad papyrus in al-Kindī's *Kitāb al-Quḍāt*?" in *Der Islam* 84 (2008), 200–245, and "The names of estates in state registers before and after the Arabization of the 'dīwāns'," in Antoine Borrut and Paul M. Cobb (eds.), *Umayyad legacies: Medieval memories from Syria and Spain* (IHCS 80), Leiden: Brill, 2010, 255–280.

139 There is wide disagreement in Arabic sources on even the very basics. When was he born? A variety of views are preserved in the sources. Did his mission in Mecca last 10, 12, 15, or

It must also be noted that the non-Arabic literary evidence corroborates some of the details in Arabic historiography. I agree with the following statement by Sean Anthony, summarizing the key facts about the life of Muḥammad:

> Based on these early cardinal sources, it seems beyond doubt that in the first half of the seventh century there emerged a law-giving claimant to prophecy from Arabia, a Saracen/Ishmaelite merchant from an Arabic-speaking tribe named Muḥammad,[140] who claimed to culminate a long line of monotheistic Abrahamic prophets gifted with divine revelation. Furthermore, we can deduce on a well-sourced evidentiary basis that this prophetic claimant, whose earliest followers regarded themselves as descendants of the biblical patriarch Abraham, formed a community in Western Arabia and became a ruler in Yathrib [Medina]. This community coalesced around the prophet's teachings, instantiated in a revelation called the Qur'an. Inspired by this prophet's teachings, the new community embarked on wide-reaching campaigns of conquest, which from the mid-seventh century on swiftly engulfed much of Near East, including Sasanid Persia and much of the Eastern Roman Empire.[141]

This (minimalist) reconstruction of the life of the prophet is, I believe, beyond reasonable doubt and forms the backbone of my discussion of the prophet and his community. Moreover, the basic dates of Muḥammad's life (*hijra* and death) and that he began his career in Mecca are,[142] in my opinion, credible. However, in this book I endeavor to operate with these few details emerging from the Islamic-era Arabic historiographical tradition: most of the evidence adduced is from other sources.

perhaps only 7 years? The texts put forward varying views, which to me suggests that they were only guessing. See Rubin, *The eye of the beholder* 111, 189–214, on the chronology of the prophet's life (and its problems).

140 Though see Reynolds, Gabriel Said, "Remembering Muhammad," in *Numen* 58 (2011), 188–206, for the problematization of the idea that "Muḥammad" was his given name.

141 Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 237.

142 Mecca is rarely mentioned in the earliest sources, which poses a conundrum. Besides the Qurʾān, Yathrib/Medina, on the other hand, appears first in the anonymous *Khuzistan Chronicle*, written ca. 660 CE; see Shoemaker, Stephen J., *A prophet has appeared: The rise of Islam through Christian and Jewish eyes: A sourcebook*, Oakland CA: University of California Press, 2021, 133. Though the community in Medina appears rather firmly attested, the linkage of the prophet and Mecca is dependent on accepting or rejecting the Arabic literary evidence, such as the corpus of ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr (and later works).

2 Ethnic, Linguistic, and Tribal Situation in Arabia before Islam

Pre-Islamic Arabia was not a place inhabited by a monolithic ethnic group, "the Arabs." Nor was it monolingual: Arabic was simply one of the languages spoken, and occasionally written, in Arabia. Though some open questions remain, the academic knowledge on Arabian ethnic groups and languages has cumulated significantly in recent years, thanks to scholars such as Fergus Millar, Michael Macdonald, Laïla Nehmé, Ahmad Al-Jallad, and Peter Webb.

Let us start with the issue of ethnicity. We still do not know enough about how ethnicity and ethnic groups were perceived by the people living in late antique Arabia. However, the epigraphic corpus as well as outsider sources give some information on the different social groups that people affiliated with. The most important social groups were tribes and tribal confederations, such as Sabaʾ, Kinda, Ṭayyiʾ, Maʿadd, and others that are attested in both epigraphy and (often) Arabic poetry as well.[143] It is possible that these tribal groups should be considered, from the point of view of a modern observer, ethnic groups and not "merely" tribes (though the border between a tribe and an ethnos is, naturally, arbitrary).

The ethnonym "Arab" is attested, rarely, as an endonym (a name used by the group itself) in pre-Islamic sources and, much more frequently, as an exonym (outsider appellation).[144] The endonym attestations are not always what we might perhaps expect from our preconceived notions of what the word "Arab" means. It does not seem to have always meant that the person spoke Arabic. Nor did it often entail pastoral nomadism as a lifestyle.[145] It is fair to conclude that the pre-Islamic evidence does not proffer confirmation for the supposition

143 See Macdonald, Michael C.A., "Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic before late antiquity," in *Topoi* 16 (2009), 277–332; Webb, "Identity and social formation in the early caliphate," Herbert Berg (ed.), *Routledge handbook on early Islam*, London: Routledge, 2018, 129–158.

144 On the ethnonym Arab and its usages, see also Retsö, Jan, *The Arabs in antiquity: Their history from the Assyrians to the Umayyads*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, and Ephʿal, Israel, *The ancient Arabs: Nomads on the borders of the Fertile Crescent, 9th–5th Centuries B.C.*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984, though both treatments are somewhat obsolete nowadays. Ephʿal understands "Arab" as synonymous with "nomad," an untenable idea. Retsö tries to recover the original meaning of the word Arab, surely an essentialist and futile undertaking. In *The Arabs in antiquity*, 623, he suggests that "the term 'Arab' designates a community of people with war-like properties, standing under the command of a divine hero, being intimately connected with the use of domesticated camel." Such simplistic, normative, and stereotypical descriptions of "the Arabs" should be discarded.

145 See Macdonald, "Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic" 281–290, for the occurrences in extant evidence of both endonym and exonym usages, and 294–297 for the criticism of the (still common) idea that the word "Arab" signified "pastoral nomad."

that many people self-identified as Arab.[146] Though thousands of examples of different social identifications, such as tribal ones, survive in Arabian epigraphy and other contemporary sources, the "Arab" one is very scarce indeed. If an argument from scarcity[147] is accepted, then it would ensue that, for many people, the Arab identity did not exist or, at least, it was not the salient one among the social categories that they affiliated with. As Fergus Millar has noted: "In speaking without hesitation of 'Arabs', modern historians are retrojecting an ethnic identity for which there is no contemporary justification … 'Arabia', in the sense of the peninsula, was not dominated by a population who either were described as 'Arab', or (so far as we know) used Arabic as their main language."[148]

Indeed, from the point of view of modern scholarship, the word "Arabs" should not be arbitrarily thrown around when discussing pre-Islamic Arabia, since many of the people living there did not speak Arabic. As recently demonstrated by Peter Webb in great detail, Arab ethnogenesis seems to have been an Islamic-era phenomenon. It is only in the second century AH/eighth century CE when we have palpable evidence of the notion that whoever spoke Arabic or traced their lineage to pre-Islamic Arabia belonged to the Arab ethnos.[149]

If the ethnonym "Arabs" was often fuzzy in antiquity and late antiquity, "Arabia" was a toponym the location of which depended on the observer. It was used for the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen (South Arabia), as well as the Nabataean kingdom (which in 106 CE became the Roman province of Arabia). Or perhaps Arabia existed in Sinai, Lebanon, Mesopotamia, or even Iran: it did not have any fixed location.[150] Many writers in antiquity and late antiquity[151] were using a sort of circular logic: where there were "Arabs" (however construed), there was "Arabia"; and where there was "Arabia" (however understood), there were "Arabs."[152] In addition, though, outsiders did not often call the inhabitants of

146 As Macdonald, "Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic" 280, notes: "In the ancient sources which have come down to us, the term 'Arab' was applied to a large number of different individuals and peoples with a wide range of ways-of-life."

147 I borrow the phrase from Boyarin, *Judaism* 52.

148 Millar, Fergus, *Religion, language and community in the Roman Near East: Constantine to Muhammad*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 153, at 156.

149 Webb, Peter, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab identity and the rise of Islam*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. See also Bashear, Suliman, *Arabs and others in early Islam*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1997; and cf. al-Azmeh, *The emergence of Islam*.

150 Macdonald, "Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic" 281–283.

151 And, it might be noted, perhaps today as well.

152 Macdonald, Michael C.A., "Arabians, Arabias, and the Greeks: Contacts and perceptions," in Michael C.A. Macdonald, *Literacy and identity in pre-Islamic Arabia* (Variorum collected studies series), Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, Part 2, V, 1–33.

Arabia "Arabs"; rather, other exonyms were used in late antiquity. The Syriac texts often used *ṭayyāyē* (derived from the tribal name Ṭayyiʾ), while the Greek sources preferred the word "Saracens."[153] It is problematic to translate these words as "Arabs" or to suppose that the writers always used them to indicate speakers of Arabic.

Whereas the ways in which pre-Islamic Arabians perceived ethnicity is still somewhat murky, the linguistic situation is better known, thanks in particular to recent work on epigraphy and linguistics. The diversity of ethnic groups and categorizations aligns with the multitude of languages written and spoken in Arabia before Islam. Arabic was simply one of the languages of the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, we have epigraphic evidence of different Ancient South and North Arabian languages, forms of Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.[154] Many of these languages were probably spoken as well, though which ones were still actively used on the eve of Islam is somewhat unclear.[155]

According to the epigraphic evidence, the most frequently employed scripts were the script bundle of Ancient South and North Arabian scripts, which are interrelated and were used to write various languages (note that script names do not necessarily coincide with the languages that they were used to write in). In Ancient North Arabian scripts, we have for instance Taymanitic, Dadanitic, Safaitic, Hismaic, and different "Thamudic" scripts.[156] The linguistic classification of the languages expressed in the "Thamudic" inscriptions is still ongoing. However, they are not Arabic, but rather point toward a pre-Arabic phase in the linguistic map of the regions that they stem from. Some so-called Thamudic B and Thamudic D inscriptions have been found near Mecca and Medina, though these have not yet received a proper scholarly treatment.[157] Their languages are

153 See Macdonald, Michael C.A., "On Saracens, the Rawwāfah inscription and the Roman army," in Michael C.A. Macdonald, *Literacy and identity in pre-Islamic Arabia* (Variorum collected studies series), Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, Part 3, VIII, 1–26; "Arabians, Arabias, and the Greeks" 20 for the suggestion that "Saracens" is ultimately derived from Arabic (the Safaitic *ʾ-sh-r-q*, which means "to migrate to the inner desert"). Be that as it may, it does not occur as an endonym in any of the sources available today.

154 For a useful survey of (in particular Greek) late antique inscriptions from Northern Arabia and Palestine, see Di Segni, Leah, "Late antique inscriptions in the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*," in Katharina Bolle, Carlos Machado and Christian Witschel (eds.), *The epigraphic cultures of late antiquity*, Stuttgart 2017: Franz Steiner Verlag, 287–320, 609–615.

155 What follows relies much on Macdonald, Michael C.A., "Reflections on the linguistic map of pre-Islamic Arabia," in *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 11 (2000), 28–79; al-Jallad, Ahmad, "The linguistic landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia: Context for the Qurʾān," in Mustafa Akram Ali Shah and Muhammad A. Abdel Haleem (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Qurʾanic studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 111–127.

156 The Ancient North Arabian inscriptions can be accessed online through *OCIANA*.

157 Al-Jallad, "What was spoken at Yathrib."

not well understood; in any case, the scholarly consensus is that they belong to antiquity rather than late antiquity, and cannot be used to reconstruct religious or other social phenomena in the centuries before, much less on the eve of, Islam. The language of the Taymanitic inscriptions has Northwest Semitic affinities, and Dadanitic might form a branch of Central Semitic on its own; they too were written in antique rather than late antique times.[158]

As regards the Safaitic and Hismaic inscriptions, they form very sizeable epigraphic corpora, with tens of thousands of inscriptions published (with new ones being found all the time). It has recently been argued by Ahmad Al-Jallad, with imposing evidence, that these inscriptions are, in fact, written in what should be understood as dialects of Arabic, though they differ from Qurʾānic Arabic and Classical Arabic.[159] He has also suggested that at least some of the writers indeed called their language "Arabic,"[160] though evidence on this issue is rather scant. The Ancient North Arabian inscriptions (in particular the Safaitic ones) are an important source set when discussing the religious map of pre-Islamic Arabia. However, the problem is that, with few exceptions, the inscriptions are undated (some mention events related to the Roman empire or the Nabataean kingdom). Moreover, the Safaitic (or any Ancient North Arabian) inscriptions were not, according to the general consensus of the field, written after the third-fourth centuries CE, so they do not take us close to the time of the prophet Muḥammad. The Safaitic inscriptions were written in the basalt stone desert in modern-day Syria and Jordan, so their geographical context, too, is somewhat removed from Mecca and Medina.

The Ancient South Arabian and (the late) Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions, however, take us closer to the prophet's time: the sixth century and even later. Let us start with Ancient South Arabian epigraphy and its linguistic situation. Ancient South Arabian languages comprise, for example, Qatabanic, Hadra-

158 Kootstra, Fokelien, *Taymanitic: A linguistic assessment*, Leiden (MA thesis): University of Leiden, 2014; Farès-Drappeau, Saba, *Dédan et Liḥyān: Histoire des Arabes aux confins des pouvoirs perse et hellénistique (IVe–IIe s. avant l'ère chrétienne)* (Travaux de la Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée 42), Lyon: Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée—Jean Pouilloux, 2005.

159 Al-Jallad, Ahmad, *An outline of the grammar of the Safaitic inscriptions* (SSL 80), Leiden: Brill, 2015. It must be noted that the Islamic-era Arabic sources that discuss the dialects of Arabic also acknowledge much variety; see Rabin, Chaim, *Ancient West-Arabian: A study of the dialects of the western highlands of Arabia in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D.*, London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1951.

160 Al-Jallad, Ahmad, "ʿArab, ʾAʿrāb, and Arabic in ancient North Arabia: The first attestation of (ʾ)ʿrb as a group name in Safaitic," in *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 31 (2020), 422–435.

matic, and Sabaic,[161] the latter forming the most important epigraphic corpus. The two language bundles of Ancient South and North Arabian languages are part of the Semitic family, but they are not closely related: alongside the Ethiopian languages, South Arabian forms the South Semitic subdivision, while Ancient North Arabian languages and Old Arabic are part of Central Semitic.[162] The last Sabaic inscription with an explicit date is from 560 CE;[163] however, there are some examples of Muslim names written in the Sabaic script, so apparently the knowledge of the script continued to Islamic times, though the use of the language itself appears to have been in decline already in the sixth century. This seems to have been corroborated by an astonishing new find which was published in 2018 and which appears to derive from Islamic times. The reading of its two lines is clear, but the second line produces some problems in translation. In any case, this Sabaic graffito appears to say:

1. In the name of God, the Merciful, the Benevolent, Lord of heavens,
2. the Provider of grace to you [O human], the Giver of His favor; He has given you faith.[164]

This is very important evidence of the Arabic *basmala*, occurring at the beginning of every Qurʾānic chapter except 9, being reproduced in Sabaic. The inscription also evidences many lexical items that have not been previously encountered in Sabaic that appear to be loans from Arabic (e.g., *r*[*zq*]*n*, "the Provider"; *ʾymn*, "faith"). The text probably gives evidence of religious formulae

161 Nebes, Norbert and Peter Stein, "Ancient South Arabian," in Roger D. Woodard (ed.), *The ancient languages of Syria-Palestine and Arabia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 145–178. Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 171–174, underscores the linguistic and ethnic diversity of Yemen.

162 See Macdonald, "Reflections on the linguistic map."

163 The late Sabaic inscriptions, if they contain a date, follow the dating of the Ḥimyarī era, which according to the current scholarly view began in 110 BCE. Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 255–278; Robin, Christian J., "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and *Arabia Deserta* in late antiquity: The epigraphic evidence," in Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and empires before Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 127–171.

164 Al-Ḥājj, Muḥammad, "Naqsh Jabal Dhanūb: Naqsh jadīd bi-khaṭṭal-zabūr al-yamānī fī al-istiʿāna bi-l-lāh wa-taqwiyat al-īmān," in *Majallat al-Dirāsāt al-taʾrikhiyya wa-l-āthāriyya* 2 (2018), 12–43; Jabal Ḏabūb 1 in CSAI. I base my translation into English on the first of the two Arabic translation suggestions in al-Ḥājj, "Naqsh" 19. The Sabaic reads: 1. *b-*s^1*m-Lh Rḥmn Rḥmn rb* s^1*mwt* 2. *r*[*zq*]*n mfḍl-k w-ʾṯrn mḫh* s^2*kmt ʾymn*. CSAI (s.v. Jabal Ḏabūb 1) gives two translation suggestions of line 2 into French: "Celui qui te fournit la richesse et te rend plus favorisé (Ô homme) et qui t'apporte richesse lorsqu'Il t'a donné la foi"; or "(je Te demande) la richesse de Ta faveur et que Tu donne à son esprit (cœr) la force (beauté) de la foi."

and vocabulary being transmitted from Western Arabia to the South in the early Islamic period. Moreover, it evidences that the early followers of Muḥammad were a multiethnic bunch: this person knew, it appears, both a South Arabian language and Arabic and mixed them in his inscription. Naturally, the other option (that the inscription is pre-Islamic) would be as intriguing, though we would need more evidence to corroborate that suggestion (such formulae are not attested in any other Sabaic inscription).

Importantly, Sabaic was written on materials other than rocks, palm leaves functioning as writing material on which the so-called minuscule Sabaic script was used (the graffito just quoted is also written in the minuscule hand).[165] As will be seen in the course of this book, the Sabaic inscriptions are of utmost importance in reconstructing the religious map of late antique Arabia, since they are often dated (and sometimes datable) and take us all the way to the sixth century. However, it must be noted that they, too, are not from the immediate vicinity of Mecca and Medina, though some Sabaic inscriptions have been found in Central Arabia[166] and, in general, Sabaic inscriptions often refer to political events in Central and Western Arabia (the Yemenite rulers frequently tried to conquer and control these parts of Arabia). Arabic-speaking groups, in particular the Kinda, appear to have migrated and settled in Yemen in the course of late antiquity: Yemen, like other parts of Arabia, was a multi-linguistic zone.[167]

It must also be remembered that the Qurʾān itself shows interest in and awareness of things Yemenite. Q 34:16 mentions the flood (or collapse) of the South Arabian dam at Maʾrib, a notable sixth-century CE event,[168] as one of the acts wrought by God (the *sūra* itself is called *al-sabaʾ*, "Sheba," disclosing the interest in Yemen and mentioning the Queen of Sheba as well). And, moreover, the Qurʾānic divine epithet *al-Raḥmān*, "the Merciful," is in all likelihood derived from the Sabaic *Raḥmānān*, used by the Jews and Christians

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165 Ryckmans, Jacques, Walter W. Müller and Yūsuf Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh, *Textes du Yémen antique inscrits sur bois*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, Institut Orientaliste, 1994.

166 According to my searches in the digital database *CSAI*, the northernmost Sabaic inscription was found in Wādī Maʾsal, in Najd. There are also occasional finds from southern Saudi Arabia, though the vast majority of the corpus has been found in modern-day Yemen.

167 Piotrovsky, Mikhail B., "Late ancient and early mediaeval Yemen: Settlement traditions and innovations," in Geoffrey R.D. King and Averil Cameron (eds.), *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East II: Land use and settlement patterns* (SLAEI 1), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1994, 213–220.

168 In fact, the dam appears to have been collapsed a number of times; Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*, 60–63. It was not in use in the Islamic era anymore.

in Yemen to refer to God. All these features make it important to explore the cultural connections between Yemen and Western Arabia. The pre-Islamic Arabic poets mention Yemen matter-of-factly, referring to, for instance "the silk stuff of al-Yaman called *siyāra*"[169] and the "camel-saddles of Ḥimyar."[170] Cultural influences and produce moved across the peninsula: there was no strict geographical or political border hindering this.[171]

Though South Arabian languages continued to be spoken (indeed, up to this day), the knowledge of the Sabaic script and language started to evaporate in the Middle Ages. The important Arabic Yemeni author, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī (d. after 360/971) still knew the Sabaic script somewhat accurately but could not really understand the Sabaic inscriptions.[172]

As regards Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions, they stem, for the most part, from the time of the Nabataean kingdom (until 106 CE).[173] Many of the inhabitants of the kingdom spoke Arabic but they wrote in Aramaic (with occasional Arabic words). Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions continued to be written after the fall of Nabataea. Importantly, it is the Nabataean script that evolved into the Arabic script. This development has been explored in recent years with new epigraphic finds and painstaking work by Laïla Nehmé.[174] We have now at hand a continuous history of the progress of the script change from Nabataean

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169 Al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, ed. and trans. Charles James Lyall, 2 vols., ii, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918–1921, 178.

170 Al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, ii, 312.

171 Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an*, 304, n. 70, cites my "Pre-Islamic Arabia," 169, where I note that the Yemenites did not (for the most part at least) consider themselves "Arabs" in the pre-Islamic period, nor should we, as modern researchers, call them that. Shoemaker uses this as proof that the connections between Yemen and Western Arabia were negligible. However, my remark only concerns ethnonyms and ethnic identity: cultural and religious links are completely possible, regardless of what the Yemenites called themselves or what languages they used.

172 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*, 16.

173 They can be accessed online via *Corpus of Nabataean Inscriptions* (http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=42&prjId=6&corId=0&colId=0&navId=445433399).

174 Nehmé, Laïla, "A glimpse of the development of the Nabataean script into Arabic based on old and new epigraphic material," in Michael C.A. Macdonald (ed.), *The development of Arabic as a written language: Papers from the special session of the Seminar for Arabian Studies held on 24 July, 2009* (Supplement to the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 40), Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010, 47–88; Nehmé, "Epigraphy on the edges of the Roman empire: A study of the Nabataean inscriptions and related material from the Darb al-Bakrah, Saudi Arabia, 1st–5th century AD, Volume 1: Text & illustrations" (unpublished habilitation thesis): EPHE, Paris, 2013. This was already supposed in Gruendler, Beatrice, *The development of the Arabic scripts* (Harvard Semitic Studies 43), Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, published in 1993, though the evidence at hand back then was somewhat limited.

Aramaic to Arabic during late antiquity. Interestingly, the late (or transitional) Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions start to acquire more and more Arabic words and expressions amidst Aramaic. These inscriptions Nehmé calls "Nabataeo-Arabic."[175] They indicate that the writers of these inscriptions spoke Arabic, but they still used some Aramaic words (which functioned, perhaps, like the Aramaic logograms in Middle Persian) to express themselves in their inscriptions.

Arabic was not regularly written before Islam (excluding the Safaitic and Hismaic graffiti, which number in the tens of thousands).[176] Speakers of Arabic usually resorted to Greek or Nabataean Aramaic when communicating in written form. However, in the sixth century we start to have the first examples of inscriptions that are written both in "pure" Arabic (without recourse to any other language) and in Arabic script. Interestingly, Michael Macdonald argues that the Nabataean script developed into Arabic via the use of "pen and ink" for writing, though no such evidence is extant.[177] These inscriptions (and their script) are called "Old Arabic" to differentiate them from the Nabataeo-Arabic ones, on the one hand, and the Islamic-era ones, on the other. They are invaluable for the arguments of this book and will be discussed in detail. Most of them stem from northern Arabia, though some have been recently found near Najrān.[178] This appears to indicate that the Arabic language was spreading, in

175 Nehmé, Laïla, "Between Nabataean and Arabic: 'Transitional' Nabataeo-Arabic texts," in Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and empires before Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 417–421; Nehmé, "Aramaic or Arabic? The Nabataeo-Arabic script and the language of the inscriptions written in this script," in Ahmad al-Jallad (ed.), *Arabic in context: Celebrating 400 years of Arabic at Leiden University* (SSL 89), Leiden: Brill, 2017, 75–98.

176 Though note that Q 2:282–283 takes it for granted that one can find scribes in Medina—only when one is traveling might one struggle to find them. Naturally, this does not necessarily mean that the scribes would have written Arabic. Some form of Aramaic might also be meant. As one should be wary of equating Arabians with "nomads" or "Bedouin," one should also be wary of thinking that pre-Islamic Arabic-speaking people were illiterate all and sundry, *pace*, e.g., Toral-Niehoff, "Talking about Arab origins," 43, who talks about "the illiterate north Arabian tribes of pre-Islamic times." Granted, most Arabians, including the Arabic-speaking ones, were illiterate; but this applies to all groups, anywhere, in the pre-modern world.

177 Macdonald, "Reflections on the linguistic map" 21. He bases this on the development of the cursive Nabataean script during late antiquity (as attested in lapidary inscriptions) and "the confident handwriting of the earliest Arabic papyri." Incidentally, Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an* 122, cites this passage from Macdonald as if it would support his (Shoemaker's) thesis that Western Arabians were illiterate. This is a misinterpretation of what Macdonald says, if I understand him correctly. Rather, Macdonald notes that late Nabataean and early Arabic evidence (inscriptions and papyri) suggests "extensive use of writing with pen and ink" (that is, on parchment and perhaps papyri) in (Western) Arabia before Islam.

178 Robin, Christian J., ʿAlī Ibrāhīm al-Ghabbān and Saʿīd Fāyiz al-Saʿīd, "Inscriptions antiques de la région de Najrān (Arabie séoudite méridionale): Nouveaux jalons pour l'histoire

both its spoken and written forms, in sixth-century Arabia.[179] Only one Old Arabic inscription has been found in the immediate vicinity of Mecca or Medina because systematic surveys for pre-Islamic evidence have not been carried out there. The graffito in question stems from the desert area surrounding Medina. It has not received scholarly publication yet, though it has been preliminarily treated by Ahmad Al-Jallad. It reads: "this is the writing of al-Ḥārith son of Mālik" (*dhā kitāb al-ḥārith bar mālik*).[180] Although undated, paleographically the inscription belongs to the sixth century CE.[181]

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de l'écriture, de la langue et du calendrier arabes," in *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 3 (2014), 1033–1128.

179 However, this does not necessarily indicate, in my estimation, that Arab ethnic identity was becoming common as a salient social category, as Hoyland suggests in "Epigraphy and the emergence." If this were the case, we would supposedly have evidence of this in the Qurʾān. But we do not. The Qurʾān does note that it is revealed in Arabic, *ʿarabī*, but it does not communicate any sort of Arab group identity. Arab identity is not articulated in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry either, as noted by Miller, Nathaniel A., "Warrior elites on the verge of Islam: Between court and tribe in early Islamic poetry," in Saana Svärd and Robert Rollinger (eds.), *Cross-cultural studies in Near Eastern history and literature* (Intellectual heritage of the ancient Near East 2), Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2016, 139–173, at 168, and Webb, *Imagining the Arabs* 66–77. Like Hoyland, Sijpesteijn links the rise of the Old Arabic script with the rise of Arab identity: "A nascent Arab cultural identity seems to have started to develop before the rise of Islam with the coming into existence of an Arabic script with diacritical dots in the sixth century" (Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim state* 47). There are a number of problems with this statement. We can start with the obvious: the pre-Islamic Arabic script, as attested in the surviving late fifth-sixth century CE inscriptions, does *not* have diacritical dots. In any case, one wonders what the connection with diacritical dots and "Arab cultural identity" might be. It should also be noted that there is little to suggest that the development of a script (Arabic) would have something to do with the rise of an ethnic or cultural identity (Arab). After all, any language can be written in (almost) any script. Earlier, in modern-day Jordan and Syria, forms of Arabic were written in the so-called Safaitic and Hismaic scripts (which were, in fact, better suited for Arabic than the Arabic script that developed out of Nabataean)—following Sijpesteijn's logic, one could put forward that the emergence of "Arab cultural identity" should be placed there and then; but there is little to suggest that the writers of Safaitic or Hismaic inscriptions conceptualized themselves as "Arabs," at least as a salient category. All this is to say that the rise of a script does not necessarily entail the rise of an ethnic or cultural identity on the part of those people who used that script. Moreover, literacy must have been rather low in ancient and late ancient Arabia: what the development of the Old Arabic script meant for the illiterate is anyone's guess.

180 See al-Jallad, "A new Paleo-Arabic text." Note the archaic (Aramaic) *bar* for "son." Such finds indicate that important epigraphic material could be found near Mecca and Medina if systematic and sustained surveys were to be carried out there.

181 On the linguistic situation in Mecca, see also the important study Hoyland, Robert G., "*ʿArabī* and *aʿjamī* in the Qurʾān: The language of revelation in Muḥammad's Ḥijāz," in Fred M. Donner and Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee (eds.), *Scripts and scripture: Writing and reli-*

There is a rather widespread misconception, more so among the general audience but also sometimes repeated in scholarship, that all or most of the inhabitants of Arabia were nomadic (Bedouin) around the lifetime of the prophet Muḥammad.[182] But this is incorrect. As Fred Donner reminded us some forty years ago: "it is unlikely that nomadic peoples have ever formed more than a small fraction of its population … Most Arabians, then, are, and have been, settled people."[183] It has to be remembered that according to the traditional narrative, Muḥammad himself was a town-dweller, not a nomad of the desert. The Qurʾān, moreover, has little good to say about the nomads. Early Islam, then, should not be understood with nomadism as an explaining factor. In any case, recent scholarship emphasizes the coexistence, not conflict, of the nomads and settled groups (as well as the blurred lines between the two categories).[184]

Inhabitants of Arabia were divided along tribal lines that could, if necessary, be flexible and negotiable.[185] Individuals could, in certain contexts, join a new tribe, and, moreover, whole tribes could fuse together. There is a sizeable secondary literature on pre-Islamic Arabian tribal groups, mostly based on Islamic-era Arabic literature.[186] It can be assumed that the Arabic literary evi-

gion in Arabia circa 500–700 CE (Late antique and medieval Islamic Near East 3), Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2022, 105–115.

182 On nomadism in Arabia (and criticism of seeing it everywhere), see, e.g., Bulliet, Richard W., "Sedentarization of nomads in the seventh century: The Arabs in Basra and Kufa," in Philip C. Salzman (ed.), *When nomads settle: Processes of sedentarization as adaptation and response*, New York: Praeger, 1980, 35–47; Donner, Fred M., *The early Islamic conquests*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981, 16–20; Hoyland, Robert G., *Arabia and the Arabs from the Bronze Age to the coming of Islam*, London: Routledge, 2001; Macdonald, "Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic"; "Arabians, Arabias, and the Greeks."

183 Donner, *The early Islamic conquests*, 11. Similarly, Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*, 9: "la société de l'Arabie préislamique était en grande partie sédentaire." Though King suggests that central Arabia, in particular, might have been dominated by nomads (King, Geoffrey R.D., "Settlement in Western and Central Arabia and the Gulf in the sixth-eighth centuries A.D.," in Geoffrey R.D. King and Averil Cameron (eds.), *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East II: Land use and settlement patterns* [SLAEI 1], Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1994, 181–212, at 184).

184 Avni, Gideon, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition in Palestine: An archaeological approach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 281.

185 Tribalism and nomadism are not (necessarily) interconnected phenomena, it must be emphasized.

186 See, e.g., Kister, "Mecca and Tamīm"; Donner, Fred M., "The Bakr b. Wa'il tribes and politics in northeastern Arabia on the eve of Islam," in *SI* 51 (1980), 5–38; Shahîd, Irfan, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the fourth century*, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1984, 366–483 (on Tanūkh); Landau-Tasseron, Ella, "Asad from Jāhiliyya to Islām," in *JSAI* 6 (1985), 1–28; Lecker, *The Banū Sulaym*; Lecker, "Kinda"; Rihan, Moham-

dence did transmit *some* historically valid knowledge of the tribes on the eve of Islam. However, information present in it should be compared with more contemporary material (Arabian epigraphy and non-Arabic literature). One aspect of the social life in late antique Arabia that gets little attention in my book is that of gender. Though there have been, in recent decades, important and insightful gender-studies approaches to the Qurʾān, Islamic jurisprudence, and similar topics,[187] the issue of how gender was construed in Arabia of the sixth and seventh centuries has not been much explored on the basis of an integrated reading of contemporary evidence. Unfortunately, this book will not remedy this situation.

To recapitulate, Arabia was not simply home to primordial Arabs, with their language, Arabic. There were various ethnic (or tribal) social categories that people affiliated with and a multitude of languages spoken and written. The linguistic situation changed rather dramatically in antiquity, with languages that are represented in Taymanitic, Dadanitic, Thamudic B, and Thamudic D inscriptions becoming extinct. The spread of Arabic was slow and, in any case, still unfinished around the time the prophet was born. The linguistic diversity continued up to the eve of Islam and beyond. Arabic was rising in importance, but South Arabian languages (such as Sabaic) were still written and spoken.[188] Though there is no tangible evidence of this, it would be somewhat of a miracle, I suppose, if Greek, Persian, Hebrew, some form(s) of Aramaic, and Ethiopic were *not* known by some sixth-seventh century Arabians as spoken or written languages. Moreover, those inhabitants of Arabia who spoke Arabic did not

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mad, *The politics and culture of an Umayyad tribe: Conflict and factionalism in the early Islamic period*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2014 (on ʿĀmila).

187 For notable studies, see Ahmed, Leila, *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1992; Ali, Kecia, *Marriage and slavery in early Islam*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press: 2010; *Sexual ethics and Islam: Feminist reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and jurisprudence*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2006, and *The lives of Muhammad*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014; Anwar, Etin, *Gender and self in Islam*, London: Routledge, 2006; Hidayatullah, Aysha A., "Māriyya the Copt: Gender, sex and heritage in the legacy of Muhammad's *umm walad*," in *Islam and Christian-Muslim relations* 21/3 (2010), 221–243, and *Feminist edges of the Qur'an*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Lamptey, Jerusha Tanner, *Never wholly other: A Muslima theology of religious pluralism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; and *Divine words, female voices: Muslima explorations in comparative feminist theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018; Wadud, Amina, *Qur'an and woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

188 Naturally, South Arabian languages are spoken up to this day. In contrast, there is no evidence of North Arabian languages other than Arabic existing anymore at the time of the prophet, though Arabic itself existed in different dialects.

necessarily self-identify as Arab; instead, for example, the affiliation Maʿadd appears to have been the most salient in the Ḥijāz.[189]

The next three chapters discuss different religious groups in late antique Arabia in particular and in the Near East more generally: Jews, Christians, and gentiles. The division between the chapters is, then, thematic rather than chronological. The contents in the chapters, on the other hand, is organized according to geographical localities and, to an extent, chronology. By this chapter division, I do not wish to claim or imply that these groups should be understood as reified, bounded, religious communities or clearly distinct units. In fact, I put forward a number of cases where people identified themselves through hybrid or in-between identities. What is more, there was obviously considerable overlap in the beliefs and praxes of these (in some cases) different social categories. Often, it is difficult or impossible to know with certainty what the self-identifications of the different Arabian individuals were. In other cases, the borderlines were interpreted and articulated as clear-cut and, indeed, bloody, as in the case of the incidents of aggression between Jews and Christians in Yemen. However, the point of the chapter division is to escape the cage of political history in the context of which late antique Arabia is often treated. Moreover, I want to highlight the fact that, for each of these communities, however understood, we actually have quite extensive evidence that has been produced by the people themselves and that is extant today. The evidence is important in its own right and has to be treated at some length for each case.

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189 See the discussion on Maʿadd in Webb, *Imagining the Arabs* 70–77.

CHAPTER 2

Judaism

1 Judaism in Late Antiquity

This chapter treats some general developments in Judaism in late antiquity, though the key theme is Judaism in Arabia.[1] The next chapter puts forward a lengthier discussion of late antique Christianity than what is offered here of Judaism. This is not to prioritize Christianity. My main topic in this book is the social makeup and identity of the seventh-century CE followers of the prophet Muḥammad, who emphasized strident monotheism and the importance of the law. Since these aspects are conceived to be important to the late antique Jews, but not necessarily to the late antique Christians (a somewhat mistaken view, I suggest), the treatment in the next chapter, on Christianity and Christians, requires more space.

Second Temple Judaism (up to 70 CE) was characterized by its great variety: the Qumran movement, Jesus movement, Pharisees, and Sadducees are only

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1 Though I use the words "Judaism" and "Jews" in what follows, I am aware that both words have been problematized in recent scholarship when discussing a religious group in antiquity and late antiquity. Esler, *Conflict and identity*, 62, opines that the word "Jews" should be avoided and, instead, "Judeans" be used, noting: "This is not simply a question of nomenclature, since it goes to the heart of how the identity of the people was understood by themselves and by their contemporaries." Esler suggests that the group that called itself "Judeans" should be understood as ethnically rather than religiously construed. Boyarin, *Judaism* 12, also notes that the concept "Judaism"—the religion of the Jews—is a modern one, not found in antiquity or the Middle Ages: "In general, users of the language who utilize 'Judaism' to refer to something that persists from Moses Our Rabbi to Moses Mendelssohn are indeed willy-nilly speaking normatively. They have an idea of that of which Judaism consists, believe that a certain essence can be traced in all forms of the alleged 'religion' throughout this history and that, therefore, even if 'Judaism' be a modern term, it picks out some unique thing in the world." Perhaps surprisingly, though Boyarin problematizes (and suggests avoiding) the word "Judaism" when discussing the pre-modern era, he does not take issue with "Jews." While I, in general, agree with the arguments presented by Esler, Boyarin, and others, here and elsewhere I use the words Jews and Judaism (and other perhaps anachronistic terms). In my usage, "Jews" refer to those people who self-identified as Judeans or Israelites; "Judaism" is the (vague and varied) collective of practices and beliefs that many if not most Jews held dear. It is my opinion that sometimes (often) we as scholars have to utilize words and concepts that are, to some degree, anachronistic. Words such as "identity," "ethnicity," "religion," and "Judaism," when defined and used in a lucid manner, can be concepts that bring analytical rigor to the issue at hand. For this question, see also in Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 9–15.

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some examples of the groups that formed it. The same is true of post-Second Temple Judaism (as well as all groups, whatever the historical period), though, during the late antique centuries, one form, namely rabbinic Judaism, rises to become dominant. Rabbinic Judaism develops side by side and contemporary with Christian Judaism.[2] Even their scriptures grew concurrently, the Mishnah and the New Testament being supplemented, as it were, to the Hebrew Bible during the second century CE: "Both the New Testament and the Mishnah gradually became the proposed keys: either the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible were announcing the coming of the Messiah, or they were to be understood as the Law of Israel, to be interpreted through the rabbinic authorities."[3] An important aspect to note here is the Jews' social categorizations vis-à-vis the Christians. According to Edwin Broadhead, rabbinic Judaism and Christianity became "definable entities" between 250 and 350 CE, though some people still lived "between synagogue and church."[4] That is to say, blurred lines continued, in some cases, after that.[5]

After the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, and more generally the first and second Jewish wars in 66–73 and 132–135 CE (the Bar Kokhba revolt), the Jewish community in Palestine was in dire straits. Anti-Jewish coercion and legal restrictions in the Roman empire were rather common, both before and after the adoption of Christianity as the official state religion in the fourth century. For instance, in late antiquity, Jews were barred from living in Jerusalem, until the Persians (614 CE), and later the Arabian believers (ca. 635 CE), conquered Jerusalem and let Jews back in[6]—though it is difficult to say if this ban was always enforced in practice.

The temple in ruins, sacrifices halted, and the priests without function, two important new developments, sometimes in tension, should be noted starting in the second century CE: 1) the rise of the rabbis and rabbinic interpretive tradition;[7] 2) the emergence of synagogues as the principal places of communal worship.[8] The distinctive characteristic in rabbinic Judaism was its production

2 Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 36.

3 Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 185.

4 Broadhead, Edwin K., *Jewish ways of following Jesus: Redrawing the religious map of Antiquity*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010, 236. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

5 Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 103, 110.

6 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 125.

7 Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 82, notes that, in the place of the Temple service, "in rabbinic communities, a host of ritual practices was developed and accepted as received tradition, part of what it meant to live in continual conversation with the covenantal obligations imposed by the Torah."

8 Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 46, 155–159, 176.

of a (somewhat) novel interpretive tradition, referred to as the "Oral Torah," though its solely oral phase appear to have been somewhat short.[9] The Mishnah was edited in the beginning of the third century;[10] it does not survive as such but forms the backbone of the two Talmuds: the Palestinian (ca. 400 CE) and the Babylonian (ca. 500 CE).[11] The Babylonian Talmud (the *Bavli* or simply "the Talmud") is the longer and more famous one. However, the corpus of rabbinic literature is actually much bulkier than the Talmuds, copious as they are. Rabbinic literature comprises both narrative and legal elements (and much more besides). It is diverse and multivocal through and through.[12] Though there is some agreement about the date of the final redaction of the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, this does not mean that, by the sixth century, the rabbinic form of Judaism had eclipsed all others (though it certainly was the dominant one); Martin S. Jaffee has suggested that rabbinic Judaism "did not finally succeed until well after 650 CE."[13] And, it has to be remembered, in the eighth century CE, the Karaite movement emerges to question and reject the authority of the Talmud.

As the two Talmuds indicate, rabbinic learning revolved around two centers: Palestine and Babylonia. In the former, the patriarchate held sway until the early fifth century, disappearing for unknown reasons. In Babylonia, the exilarchate lasted longer. It thrived under the Umayyad dynasty (661–750 CE) and lasted until the later Middle Ages. Rabbinic learning in Babylonia was cultivated in the academies of Sura, Pumpedita, and, later, Baghdad.[14]

Though the rise of rabbinic literature and the interpretive tradition marks a clear shift in the history of Judaism, there were certain "basic markers" of Jewish social identity, as Jaffee calls them, throughout antiquity and late antiquity, present in all forms of Judaism. There were in particular four central markers, which many, and probably most, Jews espoused and practiced and which

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9 Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 55. The idea of the second revelation or some interpretive corpus of speech to understand the Torah is, however, also present in the Qumran texts or, for that matter, the *Book of Jubilees*.

10 Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 48.

11 For a recent and highly readable introduction, see Wimpfheimer, Barry S., *The Talmud: A biography*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.

12 Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 112–118. Idem 36 emphasizes the change by calling rabbinic Judaism "a real mutation of the religion of Israel."

13 Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 18.

14 Abate, Elisabetta, "'Until his eyes light up': Talmud teaching in Babylonian Geonic Yeshivot," in Jens Scheiner and Damien Janos (eds.), *The place to go: Contexts of learning in Baghdād, 750–1000 C.E.*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2014, 527–555; Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 48–51.

also caught the attention of outsiders: 1) monotheism; 2) dietary restrictions; 3) male circumcision; 4) the Sabbath.[15] These markers of identity served as signals to in- and outsiders of the presence, beliefs, and practices of the Jews, wherever they might live.

2 The Arabian Context

2.1 *Introduction*

Though the wider context of late antique Judaism(s) is important, it is the Arabian environment that I will concentrate on here.[16] Our main source for pre-Islamic Arabian Jews and Judaism is (perhaps unsurprisingly) epigraphy: inscriptions engraved by Arabian Jews themselves. There is little in the way of other (contemporary) sources; though, for instance, Greek and Syriac historiography can be used as supplementary evidence. The main regions where Jews are attested are northwestern Arabia (the Ḥijāz and nearby areas) and Yemen in the south, where the Jewish kingdom of Ḥimyar was the main political force of late antiquity.

The late antique Jews were not monolithic in linguistic terms. In the wider Near East, they spoke and wrote, for instance, Aramaic and Greek. Though Jewishness was understood in ethnic terms, the concept of one unifying language was not entailed (though Hebrew as a written language was held in reverence).[17] In Arabia, they spoke or wrote Greek, Aramaic, Arabic, and Sabaic. According to the evidence at hand, the Bible (the Tanakh or the New Testament) was not translated into Arabic or South Arabian languages before Islam. For many Arabian Jews and Christians, then, the Bible could be accessed through religious scholars only, who would translate the scripture orally and ad hoc, for instance in congregation.[18] As Sydney Griffith reconstructs the situation in Arabia before Islam:

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15 Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 132–133.

16 For an introduction, see Newby, Gordon D., *A history of the Jews of Arabia: From ancient times to their eclipse under Islam*, Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988. The book is, however, somewhat obsolete by now.

17 Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 34–37, 125.

18 See Griffith, Sidney H., *The Bible in Arabic: The scriptures of the "people of the book" in the language of Islam*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013, 41–53, for a detailed discussion of the extant evidence. In addition, it should be noted that few late antique people could read or write any language. Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East*, 35–36, notes that oral instruction and aural learning were the most important medium of Christian instruction and access to the Bible.

> Texts of the scriptures or of portions of them would normally have been in the possession of synagogues, churches, shrines, and monasteries, or in the hands of rabbis, priests, and monks, rather than in private hands. Aramaic, Syriac, and Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians would thus have heard scriptural passages proclaimed in the course of the celebration of the liturgies in their places of study and worship, followed by songs and homilies that unfolded the meaning of the texts for the congregants … Given the level of writing in Arabic in pre-Islamic times, and the lack of surviving, written texts of translations of the Bible or of the Christian homiletic literature, or, for that matter, of any kind of literature, including pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, one is left to conclude that knowledge of their contents normally spread orally among Arabic-speaking peoples. Originally Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, or Syriac-speaking rabbis, monks, and Christian clergy must have transmitted the biblical and homiletic literature orally in Arabic, perhaps even functioning within traditions of oral translation.[19]

However, there were definitely some (though perhaps not many) lay Jews and Christians that could, in addition to the religious scholars, read Hebrew, (a form of) Aramaic, Ethiopic, or (less likely) Greek texts of the Bible.[20]

It has to be pointed out that the categories of "canonical" and "non-canonical" books of the scripture functioned differently in late antiquity than in many modern communities. To begin with, the Ethiopian Christians considered (and consider) the Book of Jubilees, for example, as part of the canon.[21] First Enoch was also canonical in the Ethiopic Orthodox Church.[22] Moreover, even communities that would have perhaps considered some books, such as the Jubilees or the Protoevangelium of James, non-canonical, used them extensively (however, "non-canonical" books were not translated into Arabian languages either).

2.2 *Judaism in Northwestern Arabia*

Judaism and Jews came early to north Arabia.[23] The most important (and the only solid) evidence is formed by the epigraphic corpus. It does not naturally

19 Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic* 42–43.
20 Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic* 46.
21 As noted by Dost, *An Arabian Qur'ān* 30, the Book of Jubilees and the Book of Enoch were much read books in Ethiopia. Moreover, they are important subtexts to the Qur'ān, which interacts with and echoes them.
22 Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 16.
23 For an overview, see Bar-Asher, Meir M., *Jews and the Qur'an*, trans. E. Rundell, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021, 8–19.

take us far, for instance, as regards the exact beliefs and practices of these Arabian Jews, but this is the limit of historical inquiry that we have to accept. Islamic-era Arabic historiography, and other non-contemporary literary evidence, can only be used as a secondary source. Reconstructions based on it have to be treated as preliminary and tentative.[24]

In an article, Robert Hoyland has dealt with the northwestern Arabian inscriptions written or commissioned by Jews; their Jewish identity is deduced by Hoyland either on the basis of onomastics, language (Hebrew), or specifically Jewish content in the texts.[25] The dates of the inscriptions range from the first century CE to the fourth (though some might be Islamic-era); the adduced inscriptions number 31 altogether.[26] The evidence is not meager, by the standards of Arabian epigraphy at least. Many of the texts surveyed by him are short, but some are longer. For instance, one Nabataean Aramaic epitaph dated to 42–43 CE and found in Hegra (modern Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ) reads:

> This is the tomb which Shubaytu son of ʿAliʿu, the Jew (*yhwdyʾ*), made for himself and for his children and for ʿAmirat, his wife. They may be buried in it by hereditary title. And no stranger has the right to be buried in it, and if any of the children of Shubaytu mentioned above or their legal heirs seeks to write for this tomb a deed of gift or any document, he will have no share in this tomb. And this was on the first day of Ab, the third year of King Maliku, King of the Nabataeans. ʿAbd ʿObodat son of Wahballahi made it [i.e., the tomb and/or the inscription].[27]

A later epitaph from Dedan (later known as al-ʿUlā) is an example of an inscription where the Jewish identity of the family in question has to be deduced from their names. It simply reads: "This is the stele which Yaḥyā son of Simon has built for his father Simon who died in the month of Sīwan of the year 201 [307 CE]."[28] Nonetheless, it (and other similar inscriptions) proffer significant proof of the presence of Jews in different parts of Arabia.

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24 For a suggestion that the Medinan Jews were "orthodox" followers of the Talmud, see, e.g., Mazuz, Haggai, *The religious and spiritual life of the Jews of Medina* (The Brill reference library of Judaism 38), Leiden: Brill, 2014. However, as Mazuz's treatment is based (solely) on non-contemporary sources, his arguments cannot be taken at face value. Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan* 15–16, hypothesizes that Medinan Jews were descendants of the *cohanim* or priests who settled in Arabia after the destruction of the Second Temple. Such a suggestion has to be taken with a grain of salt, to say the least.

25 Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz."

26 Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz" 93–104.

27 Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz" 93–94.

28 Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz" 94.

A funerary stele, dated to 203 CE, from Tayma was built for "the headman" (*rʾš*) of that town. On the basis of his name, he can be classified as Jewish. The text reads:

> This is the memorial of Isaiah Neballaṭa son of Joseph, the headman of Tayma, which ʿImram and ʿAšmw, his brothers, erected for him in the month of Iyar of the year 98 of the province [of Arabia].[29]

The text indicates that Jews not only lived in western Arabia but rose to important positions. Another text from Hegra dated to 356–367 CE mentions individuals bearing Jewish names as headmen of *both* Hegra and Dedan. As Hoyland remarks, the two inscriptions "are very important texts for north Arabian Jewry, for they imply that some of them at least were members of the elite of this society. Since the texts are separated by more than 150 years, we can also assume some stability for this office."[30] Another text (a graffito) from Dedan reads: "Blessing to ʿAṭūr son of Menaḥem and rabbi Jeremiah" (*rb yrmyh*).[31]

The evidence surveyed by Robert Hoyland is very important indeed, though some of the inscriptions are undated or contain only names. In addition to the inscriptions treated by Hoyland, in 2018 Laïla Nehmé published an important dated (303 CE) Nabataeo-Arabic inscription (UJadhNab 538). Evidence adduced above showed the presence of Jewish groups and individuals in al-Ḥijāz. Nehmé's inscription shows that some of them were Arabic-speaking. I quote the text in its original and in translation:[32]

1 *bly dkyr šly br ʾwšw*
2 *bṭb w šlm mn qdm*
3 *mry ʿlmʾ w ktbʾ dnh*
4 *ktb ywm ḥg*
5 *ʾl-pṭyr šnt mʾt*
6 *w tšʿyn w šbʿ*

29 Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz" 95.
30 Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz" 96.
31 Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz" 101.
32 Nehmé, Laïla, *The Darb al-Bakrah: A caravan route in North West Arabia discovered by Ali I. al-Ghabban: Catalogue of the inscriptions*, Riyadh: Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, 2018, 185.

FIGURE 2 Inscription UJadhNab 538
PHOTOGRAPH BY FARĪQ AL-ṢAḤRĀʾ/ABDULLAH AL-SAEED, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION

1 Yea! May Shullay son of Awshū
2 be remembered in well-being and may he be safe in the presence of
3 the Lord of the world, and this writing
4 he wrote the day of the feast
5 of the unleavened bread, year one hundred
6 and ninety-seven [303 CE].

What is important to note is that even though the rest of the inscription is written in Aramaic, the words referring to "feast of the unleavened bread" (i.e., the week connected to the Passover) are in Arabic (*ḥajj al-faṭīr*).[33] I would suggest that we can infer two things on the basis of the text: a) Shullay son of Awshū was Jewish and b) Arabic was his spoken language, although he knew how to write Nabataean Aramaic. Late antique inscriptions in the Nabataean script are often a mixture of Arabic and Aramaic, and this text engraved by Shullay son of Awshū is no exception.

33 It is naturally true that the word *ḥg*, in the sense of "feast," is Hebrew; Nehmé, *Darb al-Bakrah*, 98. But, I would suggest, it is probable that the word was already used in Arabic among Jews in this sense.

The epigraphic record suggests that Jews settled in northwestern Arabia early, in late antiquity if not before. By 303 CE, some Arabian Jews had adopted Arabic as the language, or at least one of the languages, that they spoke and wrote.[34] Unfortunately, the evidence available presently does not take us further. However, I would posit that though the dated epigraphic evidence does not postdate the fourth century, there is not necessarily any good reason to suppose a reduction of the number of Jews in the region: as we will see in the next subsection on poetry, and in chapter 6 on the "Constitution" of Medina, these texts suppose and suggest the existence of Arabic-speaking Jewish groups in Medina and elsewhere in northwestern Arabia in the sixth-seventh centuries, as does the Qur'ān. Below, Judaism in Yemen is treated too; the extant evidence from this area is much more extensive and allows for a more detailed reconstruction.

2.2.1 Arabic Poetry and North Arabian Jews

In the corpus of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, there are a number of poems that are attributed to individuals that are identified as Jewish. In the previous chapter, I discussed the authenticity of this corpus, which is a debated question, though most scholars agree that some of the poems are, indeed, authentic. Arabic poetry will be used in this and the next two chapters as a sort of secondary evidence: its authenticity and dating are not as secure as those of inscriptions and the Qur'ān but, arguably and in contrast to Arabic prose literature, it contains some poems, or at least verses, that reliably stem from the pre-Islamic era. As was noted above in the previous chapter, the information provided in Arabic poetry aligns rather well with material remains and the Qur'ān.

Of the (purportedly at least) Jewish poets that composed Arabic poetry, the best-known is undoubtedly al-Samaw'al ibn ʿĀdiyāʾ.[35] Concerning the Arabic Jewish poets, Robert Hoyland claims that they are "comparable in sentiment and style to pre-Islamic Arabic poetry in general, and lack any specific historical detail or concrete religious expression."[36] As for the latter (religious expression), this is definitely not true, since there is a large amount of that in al-Samaw'al's surviving collection of poems. Unfortunately, the question of

34 The Qur'ān, incidentally, received quite a few loan words from Hebrew and Aramaic, which suggests that at least some of the Jews of Western Arabia used those languages (Aramaic as a spoken and written language and Hebrew as a written language). See Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qur'an* 59.

35 For a collection and short analysis, see Jawād ʿAlī, *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī Taʾrīkh al-ʿArab qabl al-Islām*, Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm lil-Malāyīn, 1976–1978, ix, 768–791.

36 Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz" 93.

the authenticity of al-Samaw'al's corpus is problematic. This is in particular the case as regards his poem no. 2,[37] which contains much pondering on death and the afterlife. It has been suggested that the poem was penned by a later Muslim scholar, perhaps a descendant of al-Samaw'al.[38]

Hypothetically, I proceed with the notion that poem no. 2, and other poems by al-Samaw'al as well, are authentic, though they in all likelihood changed their form over the centuries of transmission. Let me reiterate a few basic facts that are borne out by the epigraphic corpus: There were a number of Jews living in Arabia; some of these Jews were Arabic-speaking; moreover, one might suppose that some of these Jews also pondered the afterlife. The Jewish Arabic poet al-Samaw'al and his poetry fit very well in this context. I should note, however, that my reconstruction of Arabian Judaism and Jews is not dependent on the singular example of al-Samaw'al, though, if authentic, his poems cast interesting and needed light on the thoughts of Arabic-speaking Jews.

As Hoyland, quoted above, perhaps hints at, some of al-Samaw'al's poems contain similar heroic sentiments that were common to many pre-Islamic Arabic poets. For instance, he boasts that he and his fellow tribesmen crave death in battle, natural death being an anathema.[39] He furthermore notes that he feeds and treats his guests magnanimously,[40] thus representing the virtue of *muruwwa*,[41] present in different exemplars of the pre-Islamic poetic corpus.

Al-Samaw'al's poem no. 2, as already mentioned, represents a rich discourse on the afterlife. Though the last lines of the poem are somewhat suspect as to their authenticity,[42] there are, I would argue, no specific reasons why the bulk of the poem could not be genuine. In the poem, al-Samaw'al notes, for example, that "my life is dependent on the fact that I will die" (*wa-ḥayātī rahnun bi-an sa-amūtū*). However, "after life, a dead person will be resurrected" (*thumma baʿda l-ḥayāti li-l-baʿthi maytū*)[43] Concerning himself, al-Samaw'al propounds: "I have become certain that I will be resurrected after I die, even if my bones will decay."[44] Of his fate in the hereafter, the poem is not certain, because he con-

37 Al-Samaw'al, *Dīwān*, ed. Wāḍiḥ al-Ṣamad, Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1996, 82–88.

38 For the debate, see Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qur'an* 19–21; Hirschberg, Joachim Wilhelm, *Der Dīwān des as-Samau'al ibn ʿĀdijā'*, Crakow: PAU, 1931; Kowalski, Tadeusz, "A contribution to the problem of authenticity of the Dīwān of al-Samau'al," in *Archiv Orietální* 3 (1931), 156–161.

39 Al-Samaw'al, *Dīwān* 71, 73.

40 Al-Samaw'al, *Dīwān* 89.

41 On *muruwwa*, see Bravmann, *The spiritual background* 1–7.

42 Al-Samaw'al, *Dīwān* 87–88, that is, lines 16–21 of the poem.

43 Al-Samaw'al, *Dīwān* 83; literally: "a dead person belongs to resurrection."

44 Al-Samaw'al, *Dīwān* 85.

fesses that his sins are many.[45] The language of the poem in verses 1–15 does not seem to me to be Qur'ānically inspired, and the lines could, for this reason too, be genuine.

Lines 16–21 of the poem are suspicious and could indeed be forged by a later Muslim author.[46] They name-drop different figures and items of Jewish (and Christian, and Muslim) sacred history, such as Solomon, David, Torah, and the ark (*al-tābūt*). They look like they have been composed by someone who did not know much about Judaism but wanted to give the poem some extra "Jewish" flavor. Particularly suspicious is the mention of "the disciples of John [the Baptist]."[47] This phrase makes more sense if it is a forgery made by a Muslim author who knew that, in his/her day, Jews did not accept Jesus but who thought that they accepted John. The verse is difficult to attribute to a genuine Jewish author. Line 19 is interesting, as it mentions *al-ifrīs* who rebelled against God. The former is interpreted by the commentator of the *Dīwān* as Satan, known in Qur'ānic Arabic as *al-iblīs*.[48] Though it would be tempting to take the peculiar appellation *al-ifrīs* to support the authenticity of this line, it rather seems that it is simply constructed from the Qur'ānic *al-iblīs*, with some sound changes (*b* becomes *f*, and *l* becomes *r*). In other poems, there is little in the way of religious expression; though, in one verse, al-Samaw'al swears by God, *Allāh*.[49]

The corpus of Arabic poetry composed by Jewish authors is rather thin and may contain poems that are inauthentic. In the next chapter, there will be a longer discussion of Christian poets, of whom there were more than the Jewish ones. More abundant still are the gentile poets, from whom many poems and collections of poems have survived. These will be discussed in chapter 4.

2.3 *The Rise of Ḥimyar*

Yemen, the only part of the Arabia Peninsula able to sustain dry-farming and with vast natural resources,[50] was a rather affluent place in antiquity and late antiquity. Culturally and linguistically, pre-Islamic Yemen was different from the more northern parts of the peninsula: for the most part, the Yemenites spoke and wrote South Arabian languages (most importantly Sabaic) whereas

45 Al-Samaw'al, *Dīwān* 86.
46 Al-Samaw'al, *Dīwān* 87–88.
47 Al-Samaw'al, *Dīwān* 87.
48 Al-Samaw'al, *Dīwān* 88.
49 Al-Samaw'al, *Dīwān* 99. The reader should note that in chapter 4 I suggest that the gentile pre-Islamic poets, for instance, also swear by God, *Allāh*. Rather than polytheism, their poems indicate gentile monotheist beliefs.
50 Donner, *The early Islamic conquests* 11–12.

the inhabitants of the north spoke North Arabian languages. The two language bundles are part of the Semitic family, but they are not very closely related: alongside Ethiopic, South Arabian forms the South Semitic subdivision, while Ancient North Arabian languages and Old Arabic are part of Central Semitic.[51] Though the late antique South Arabian inscriptions are written in Sabaic, it appears that this was a prestige literary register: people spoke different dialects of Ancient South Arabian languages, but the evidence on them is at the moment unclear. There were also Arabic-speaking communities in Yemen.[52] It should be remarked that no South Arabian texts on parchment or papyri survive from the period under discussion, though one supposes that these writing materials were also used in Yemen.[53]

The Yemenites did not view themselves as Arabs before the coming of Islam and neither should the modern scholarship call them that. Though the Sabaic inscriptions refer to *ʾʿrb*, "Arabs" or "nomads," they are always groups that live outside Yemen proper. (To be sure, it was suggested in the introduction to this book that the term "Arab" was not necessarily used as an endonym by north Arabians in pre-Islamic times.) What is more, the Yemenites formed political units and states much earlier than they appear in the north. Their income was secured because Yemen produced, for instance, frankincense and myrrh, valuable products in antiquity that were transported to, for instance, Rome.[54] The trans-Arabian trade is intimately tied to the utilization of the camel as a pack animal.[55]

In antiquity, there were various kingdoms in the south, but for the era under discussion in this book—late antiquity—the kingdom of Ḥimyar[56] is the principal one. Around 300 CE, it had vanquished other political powers in Yemen and ruled over much of south Arabia.[57] It was the first time that south Arabia

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51 See Macdonald, "Reflections on the linguistic map"; al-Jallad, "The linguistic landscape."

52 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 173.

53 As also noted by Hughes, "South Arabian 'Judaism'" 34.

54 See, e.g., Bowersock, Glen Warren, *Roman Arabia*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983; Crone, *Meccan trade*. See also the inscription siglum Ag 2 in CSAI, which mentions the extraction of marble for the king's palace.

55 Bulliet, Richard W., *The camel and the wheel*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.

56 Though the ruling dynasty (and, more generally, the people) of Yemen is known as Ḥimyar in Greek and Arabic literature and modern scholarship, they rarely called themselves that in the surviving inscriptions; Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 188–189.

57 Prioletta, Alessia, *Inscriptions from the southern highlands of Yemen: The epigraphic collections of the museums of Baynūn and Dhamār* (Arabia Antica 8), Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2013, 51–70.

was ruled by a single kingdom.[58] The Yemenite kingdom of Ḥimyar is characterized by its close, and sometimes hostile, relationship with the kingdom of Axum in Ethiopia that had converted to Christianity by the 340s.[59] The extent to which Christianity also spread to some parts of Yemen this early can only be speculated; firm evidence of Christians in the south is difficult to find before the late fifth century (see the next chapter). However, interestingly and for reasons that we do not yet have a clear grasp of, towards the end of the fourth century, Yemen, or at least its ruling class, adopted Judaism.[60] New religious vocabulary was borrowed from Aramaic and Hebrew, such as *āmēn* ("amen"), *shālôm* ("greetings," literally, "peace"), and *ṣalōt* ("prayer").[61] This might have been to draw contrast to and form a distinct identity from the Christian Ethiopia. From that point onward, all surviving evidence from Yemen is monotheist, though it is naturally possible that the switch from polytheism to monotheism was much more piecemeal among the population than the extant data would suggest.

Before this, the Yemenites were polytheist, worshipping, among others, ʿAthtar, the sun goddess Shams and the moon god Almaqah.[62] The South Arabian deity Wadd is mentioned in the Qurʾān (71:23) along with other, unidentifiable deities, so it is possible that traditional South Arabian religions were practiced among (the minority of) the Yemeni population until the life of Muḥammad, even though they vanish more or less completely from the South Arabian inscriptions that are dated between 380 and 560.[63] (And note that Q 71:23 projects the worship of Wadd to the community around Noah.) There

58 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 10–13, 37–38.

59 Bowersock, Glen Warren, *The throne of Adulis: Red Sea wars on the eve of Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 67. Naturally, the process of Christianization was slow. The elite probably converted first, with the non-elite members of the society slowly, over centuries, embracing the new faith.

60 For these complex and somewhat murky developments, see Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*; "Quel monothéisme en Arabie du Sud ancienne?" in Joëlle Beaucamp, Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet and Christian J. Robin (eds.), *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux* ᴠ*e* *et* ᴠɪ*e* *siècles: regards croisés sur les sources*, Paris: Association des amis du Centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2010, 107–120; Robin, Christian J., "Arabia and Ethiopia," in Scott F. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of late antiquity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 247–332, and "Ḥimyar, Aksūm."

61 Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm" 129.

62 Jamme, Albert, "Le panthéon sud-arabe préislamique d'après les sources épigraphiques," *Le Muséon* 60 (1947), 57–147; Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs* 140–141. The importance of astral deities in north Arabia is a debated question; interestingly, however, Q 53:49 calls God "the Lord of Sirius," which might show an archaic vestige of such beliefs.

63 Hughes, "South Arabian 'Judaism'" 32–33, discusses the evidence suggesting the longevity of forms of polytheism in Yemen and warns against supposing that all South Arabians became monotheists overnight in 380 CE.

have been some suggestions in scholarship that there was a henotheistic development already in the third century, with Almaqah becoming the chief deity above all other gods, but the evidence of this is currently slight.[64]

2.4 *Judaism in Yemen*

Discerning the religious affiliations in late antiquity in Yemen is very difficult. All of our inscriptional evidence (including graffiti) is monotheist, but what sort of monotheists were the Yemenites?[65] The (somewhat scant) evidence that there is points toward Judaism: God is called "God of Israel," for instance.[66] Some inscriptions (surveyed below) mention synagogues. One inscription, which concerns the foundation of a graveyard, explicitly mentions that the graveyard is to be used only to bury Jews (*ʾyhdn*),[67] not gentiles (*ʾrmym*).[68] However, this inscription is a rare example of policing the border between different groups: for the most part, it appears that people with different identities and backgrounds were joined together in their acceptance of Raḥmānān ("the Merciful" or "Loving"), also called Ilān ("God") or Baʿl ("Lord"), as the one God.[69] Perhaps it is the specifically funerary context that should be understood as the background of this text. Be that as it may, I will take the late Sabaic epigraphic corpus as evidence for Judaism in the region, though it has to be remembered that in all likelihood not every writer of these inscriptions, let alone the Yemeni populace at large, identified as Jewish. But some certainly did.

How did the kingdom of Ḥimyar convert to Judaism, if, as seems probable, that is what they did? How did they envision themselves as part of the wider Jewish world? Were there Jews in Yemen before their conversion? We do not know with certainty.[70] However, it has to be remembered that conver-

64 See Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 223, for discussion.

65 For a careful analysis, see Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 13–14, 39–41, 239–247. See also the recent article by Hughes, "South Arabian 'Judaism.'"

66 But see chapter 4 for the possibility that some of the people could be classified as God-fearers.

67 The word "Jews" is indicated with different formulations in the Sabaic inscriptions. One inscription (Ry 515 in CSAI) has *hwd*, while another (CIH 543) has *yhd*.

68 MAFRAY-Ḥaṣī 1, discussed below.

69 In one text God is called *rḥmnn mtrḥm*, which can be compared to the *basmala*'s word pair *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*. See Fa 74 in CSAI. For a comprehensive list of designations used to refer to God in the late antique Sabaic inscriptions, see Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 224–232.

70 For possible scenarios of conversion in the kingdom of Ḥimyar, see the recent study Grasso, Valentina A., "A late antique kingdom's conversion: Jews and sympathisers in South Arabia," in *Journal of Late Antiquity* 13/2 (2020), 352–382.

sion to Judaism was, in antiquity and late antiquity, a relatively simple affair. As mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud (Jevamot 47a–47b), a convert should be taught the basis of the Torah, she or he should be baptized, and (in the case of male proselytes) he should take the circumcision. After this she or he should be considered fully and totally Jewish, just like someone who had been born so. However, there were also rabbinic voices that preferred those born as Jewish to the proselytes in certain contexts.[71]

Interestingly, the Jewish literary sources written outside Yemen do not mention a Jewish community there.[72] Understanding why this is so would require more research. However, the Yemenite Jews did have contacts with the wider Jewish world, as epigraphic finds from Palestine attest.[73] Three inscriptions are important in this regard:[74]

1) One epitaph, probably from Palestine though its exact origin is uncertain, contains three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Sabaic. The Aramaic part notes that this is the grave of Leah, daughter of Yehūda. The Hebrew part contains prayers of Biblical inspiration. The Sabaic part is concise, invoking *Rḥmnn*.
2) An important, though brief, Greek inscription was found at the necropolis of Beth Sheʿarim, a village in Palestine. It reads *homêritôn*, "of/for Ḥimyarites," indicating that Yemeni Jews were buried there. The inscription has been dated to the third or (more likely) fourth century.
3) A fifth-century Hebrew epitaph found in Zoara, Jordan, mentions Ywsh br ʾWfy, "who died in Ẓafār, the land of the Ḥimyarites" and whose body was brought to Zoara to be interred there. This is a significant piece of evidence of Jews travelling to Yemen from the north.

These inscriptions notwithstanding, with the evidence at hand it is impossible to say what sorts of Jews the Arabian ones were. What role did the Talmud and rabbinic learning play in their lives? We do not know.[75] The three inscriptions mentioned above do indicate that the South Arabian Jews had contacts with

71 Fowden, Garth, *Empire to commonwealth: Consequences of monotheism in late antiquity*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993, 68.

72 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 243.

73 Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan* 12–13.

74 They are analyzed in Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 246; Hughes, "South Arabian 'Judaism'" 30–32, on which studies my discussion is based.

75 Hughes, "South Arabian 'Judaism,'" cautions us against treating the South Arabian Jews (and, as an extension, other late antique Jews) as religiously (rabbinically) normative. Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan*, 13, notes that "it remains unkown which form of Judaism the Jews of Ḥimyar practiced."

Palestine, and perhaps rabbinic learning was also transmitted through these contacts, but this is somewhat speculative.[76]

The evidence that I examine in what follows is mostly epigraphic and in Sabaic. The epigraphic corpus contains non-commissioned graffiti, as well as building inscriptions and commemorative inscriptions. I focus here on the Sabaic inscriptions that are dated (either by their writers or, paleographically, by modern scholars) from the fourth to the sixth century CE. Only a few non-Sabaic inscriptions pertaining to late antique Judaism in Yemen have been found. One such inscription is a Greek text found at the port of Qāni' (nowadays known as Bi'r ʿAlī). The text invokes God with the formula *eis Theos*, and then mentions a *hagios topos*, a "sacred place," a phrase that usually designates a synagogue.[77] A Hebrew inscription has been found near Ṣanʿā'. However, due to its fragmentary nature, the exact interpretation of its contents is uncertain.[78] These inscriptions are also important for the fact that they speak to the diversity of languages used in Yemen.

A number of Sabaic private building inscriptions invoke God. One such inscription, commissioned apparently by elite members of the society, reads:

1 [...]md and his wife Mrṯdt
2 and their son ʿfzlm, assistants to the
3 king,[79] constructed, laid the foundations and completed
4 their *gyrt*-construction Tkrb,[80] by the help of 'ln [God],
5 master of heaven, and with the help of their lord
6 Ḏr''mr 'ymn,[81] in the month of ḏ-Ḫrf–
7 n of the year four hundred and
8 sixty-four [354 CE].[82]

76 One "rabbi Jeremiah" was mentioned in an inscription from Dedan, adduced above. Naturally, "rabbi" is a rather general title of honor, so far-reaching conclusions should not be made on the basis of that inscription alone.

77 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 40; Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 188. The inscription has been paleographically dated to the latter half of the fifth century. Sabaic inscriptions attest to synagogues in Yemen already in the fourth century: Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 46.

78 See Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 245–246, for discussion.

79 The king at the time of writing of this inscription was Tha'rān Yuhanʿim (r. 324–375); Fisher, Greg (ed.), *Arabs and empires before Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, xxvii.

80 The edition notes that *gyrt* might refer to a "'construction to produce plaster' (<GYR) or, less likely, 'guest house' (<GWR)." Tkrb refers to the name of the building or its locality.

81 This is a human being, not a reference to God.

82 B 8457 in CSAI.

It is very common in the building inscriptions to note that the construction was carried out with the help of God. The inscription also attests a common way of depicting God as the "master of heaven" (*bʿl-s^{1}myn*). Another reads:

1 ʿbdkllm and his wife ʾbʿly, daughter of ʾlh[…]-
2 … and their sons Hnʾm and Hʿll of the clan of Qwlm [or, Fwlm] built
3 and completed their house Yrs^3 with the help of Rḥmnn [Raḥmānān]. He built it
4 in the month of Ḫrf of the year five hundred and seventy-three [463 CE]. Life![83]

God helps, and in Him one finds solace. Though graffiti are somewhat rare in the late South Arabian corpus, siglum Ha 11 can be adduced as such. The inscription is somewhat awkwardly written, with some mistakes and repetition. The inscription appears to mention two different people, assumedly brothers, Ḥgr bn S^{1}lmt and Mrṯdm bn S^{1}lmt. The graffito begins: "Ḥgr ibn S^{1}lmt; may Rḥmnn listen to his prayer (*l-ys^{1}mʿn Rḥmnn ṣlt-s^1*)." About Mrṯdm, the brother, the text only notes that he "made the pilgrimage (*ḥg*)," which is not a rite commonly mentioned in the inscriptions of the monotheist era.[84]

It was mentioned above that many of the inscriptions in the late Sabaic corpus are generally monotheist, without proclaiming any specific religious affiliation. However, some inscriptions specifically mention "Israel" or other Jewish markers. Should the "generally monotheist" inscriptions also be classified as "Jewish"? Perhaps, though the issue cannot be decided here. Peoples' beliefs and identities in late antique Yemen could have been diverse: though some monotheists considered themselves Jewish, others perhaps did not. Some could have self-identified as God-fearer.[85] In any case, let me present some of the inscriptional evidence that contain explicit Jewish identifications.

The inscription with the siglum Ibrahim al-Hudayd 1 is dated to 580 of the Ḥimyarite era, which corresponds to 470 CE. It is a construction text, stating

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83 CIH 6 in CSAI.

84 Ha 11 in CSAI. As the edition in CSAI notes, the language of this inscription is not standard Sabaic and should perhaps be classified as something else linguistically since it has the suffix pronoun *-s^1* ("his"). I wonder, though, if the word *ḥg* could, in the Jewish context of Yemen, have meant something other than what it did in the pre-monotheist era. Supposing that Mrṯdm was a Jew or a God-fearer, which is naturally anything but certain, the verb *ḥg* might have denoted to him, for example, "to celebrate Passover." See above for the Nabataeo-Arabic inscription which mentions *ḥg ʾl-ptyr*, "the feast of the unleavened bread."

85 See Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 244–245 and chapter 4 of the present work.

that the building was put up with "the help and the power of their Lord ʾln [God], the Master of the heavens and of the earth, and with the help of their tribe [or: people, *s²ʿb-hmw*][86] of Israel." Later in the inscription, God is also called Raḥmānān. A somewhat different picture emerges in CIH 543, which appears to mention Raḥmānān and Israel's God as two *different* divine beings.[87] The text begins: "May bless and be blessed, the name (*s¹m*) of Rḥmnn, who is in heaven, and Israel and their god (*w-Ys³rʾl w-ʾlh-hmw*), the lord of the Jews."[88] However, all other evidence points toward the notion that Raḥmānān is simply the attribute or divine name of God. I think it makes sense to suggest that the inscription does not mention two different divine agents; this only seems so because of the somewhat cumbersome syntax.

An interesting example of an attempt to construct and maintain group boundaries is the important inscription MAFRAY-Ḥaṣī 1, a rather long inscription of 15 lines. The text is not dated, unfortunately. It mentions the setting up of a graveyard "near this rock, down to the border of the arable area, to bury in it the Jews (*ʾyhdn*), with the assurance to avoid burying with them non-Jews (*ʾrmym*), this in order to fulfill their obligations towards the Jews." Toward the end of the text, it doubles down by mentioning "the prohibition and the threat of the Lord of Heaven and Earth to avoid burying a non-Jew on these plots."[89] MAFRAY-Ḥaṣī 1 undergirds the idea that the inhabitants of the Ḥimyarite kingdom were not all seen as Jewish, though even the gentiles had adopted monotheism (or so the surviving evidence suggests). The tendency, in this text, to police borderlines is rare in South Arabian inscriptions and might have to do with the particular burial context here.

The construction of the famous synagogue (*mkrb*) called Bryk in the capital of the kingdom, Ma'rib, is mentioned in a few inscriptions.[90] (The synagogue is not extant and the stones on which the inscriptions were found have been

86 The word *s²ʿb* denotes social groups of varying sizes; see Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 177. Hence, the CSAI translation of Ibrahim al-Hudayd 1 should be modified here.

87 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 232.

88 Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm" 133. I quote the translation in CSAI.

89 MAFRAY-Ḥaṣī 1 in CSAI. For an analysis, see also Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 233–234. As she notes, this inscription is replete with loanwords from Hebrew or Judeo-Aramaic languages. For example, the word *gzr* derives from the Hebrew *gāzar* or Aramaic *gᵊzar*; *hymnt* derives from the Aramaic *hēymanûtâ*.

90 Both the word used for synagogue (*mikrāb*) and its name Bryk, "blessed," are borrowed from Aramaic: Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm" 136. Though note that Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 46, 236–237, remarks that the word *mkrb* does not necessarily always denote a synagogue. It could also refer to other places of worship used by gentile monotheists. As Gajda notes, a number of *mkrb*s are attested in inscriptions.

reused in more modern buildings.) A fifth-century construction text notes that the synagogue was built for God, the Lord of heaven and earth, so that He might “give them the honour of his name [or: reverential fear of his name, *ṣbs*^{1} *s*^{1}*m-hw*], and the safety of their persons, their privileged members, and their vassals in war and peace (*b-ḍrm w-s*^{1}*lmm*). In the month of Ḫrfn of the year five hundred forty-three [= 433 CE]. Peace, peace [*s*^{1}*lwm w-s*^{1}*lwm*], synagogue Bryk.”[91] This and other such inscriptions show the formal organization of Judaism in Yemen. Other words are used for synagogues as well. Another inscription mentions a *kns*^{1}*t*, probably a reference to a synagogue.[92] One inscription mentions *ms*^{1}*gd*, a place of prostration[93] (a word cognate with the Arabic *masjid*, later meaning “mosque”). Above, it was noted that a Greek inscription refers to a synagogue with the phrase *hagios topos*.

In some inscriptions, the belief in (and hope for) the afterlife surfaces. This is not surprising, given that many (most?) Yemenites were Jewish. One inscription, which is unfortunately fragmentary, shows this clearly. The text is either a prayer to Raḥmānān or a building inscription in which the prayer occurred. I quote lines 1–2 and 5–6 of the text:[94]

1 [… …] may He forgive their sins and may He accept their offering [… …]
2 [… …] and in the far and present world and the patron of [… …]
5 [… …]Rḥmnn [Raḥmānān], goodwill of their lords, the kings [… …]
6 [… …] and pestilence, sickness, drought and [… …]

The phrase in line 2, “in the far and present world” (*b-ʿlmn bʿdn w-qrbn*) indicates, in passing, the belief in the hereafter.[95] However, since the text is fragmentary, the exact meaning of this is difficult to decipher.

Another text appears to corroborate the notion of the hereafter in late antique Yemen. It is a building inscription, commemorating the construction of houses by “ʿbdm Brrn and his wife ʾbs^{2}ʿr and their sons and daughters … and their servants.” This, the text says, was achieved with “the grace of Raḥmānān”

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91 Ry 534+MAFY/Rayda 1 in CSAI.

92 Inscription siglum YM 1200, mentioned by Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 71. She notes that the word is probably derived from post-Biblical Hebrew (*kᵉnēset*) or Aramaic (*kᵉnīshtā*), both signifying “synagogue.”

93 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 236, 238. The inscription reads: *ʾmn ʾmn w-ḏn bytn ms*^{1}*gdn*, “Amen, amen, this house is a place of prostration.”

94 CIH 539 in CSAI.

95 Cf. the Arabic *al-ākhira* and *al-dunyā*.

(*b-zkt Rḥ*[*mnn*]).[96] The interesting bit comes in lines 6 and 7, which ask "the Lord of heaven" to "save them from all harm" and that He "grant them a good death" (*mw*[*t ṣdqm*]). Though "a good death" does not necessarily entail the idea of the afterlife, one assumes that it is implied. The text is dated by its writer to year 542 of the Ḥimyarī era, that is, 432 CE.

2.5 *The Wars between Yemen and Ethiopia*

The sixth century witnessed a number of wars between (Jewish) Yemen and (Christian) Ethiopia. According to the epigraphic evidence, both sides saw fighting as religiously sanctioned and invoked the help of God as having procured victory on the battlefield. In 518 or thereabouts, the Ethiopian Negus (king) raided Yemen. This only led to a short Ethiopian occupation at first. However, the Ethiopians appear to have built churches and endeavored to promote Christianity.[97]

The staunchly Jewish Ḥimyarite king Yūsuf As'ar Yath'ar (r. 522–525), known in later Arabic tradition as Dhū Nuwās, "the one with a swinging lock of hair," fought against the Ethiopians and their Christianizing trend. In 523, he even attacked and massacred Christians in Najrān and other places.[98] The massacres of Christians in Najrān are reported in various historiographical works. The eighth-century Syriac Chronicle of pseudo-Dionysius of Tel Mahre narrates the following about them:

> After some time the Himyarite Jews waxed stronger. When the Christian king whom the king of the Ethiopians had established there died, (the Jews) chose a king from among themselves over the people of the Him-

96 ZM 5 + 8+10 in CSAI. One wonders, though, if the word *zkt* should be understood as "alms" (as in Arabic) or "merit" (as in certain Aramaic texts), i.e., the houses are constructed with or as alms dedicated to God. Another building inscription (Gar AY 9d) has the same phrase, *b-zkt Rḥmnn*, while another (Gar Bayt al-Ashwal 1) has *b-zkt mrʾ-hw*, "with the *zkt* of their Lord." These three are the only occurrences of the word *zkt* in the Sabaic texts, as far as I know. The context in all three is commemorating a construction of a building or buildings, so the meaning of "alms" would work very well. If this is correct, the Arabic *zakāt* would have been borrowed through Sabaic and not from a form of Aramaic.

97 Bowersock, *The throne of Adulis* 87–93; Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 79–81.

98 There is a bulky literature on these events. See, e.g., Brock, Sebastian P. and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy women of the Syrian Orient*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1998, 100–121; Beaucamp, Joëlle, Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet and Christian J. Robin (eds.), *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux Ve et VIe siècles: regards croisés sur les sources*, Paris: Association des amis du Centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2010; Beaucamp, Briquel-Chatonnet and Robin, "La persécution des chrétiens de Nagrān et la chronologie ḥimyarite," in *ARAM* 11–12 (1999–2000), 15–83; Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 82–109.

> yarites and in bitter wrath slew and destroyed all the Christian people there, men, women, young people and little children, poor and rich.[99]

While we naturally have to take this with a grain of salt (like all late antique persecution stories), the information about the persecution and massacres are attested well enough to contain some historical truth.[100] It is not only (often much later) literary works that we have to resort to, but, in fact, king Yūsuf’s army commander, called S^{2}rḥʾl Yqbl, commissioned inscriptions celebrating his deeds. The famous inscription Ja 1028 mentions the following (the inscription is fully extant and I quote it in toto):[101]

1 Might, the God, to whom belong the heavens and the earth, bless the king Yusuf ʾs^{1}ʾr Yṯʾr, the king of all the tribes, and might [God] bless the qayls [commanders] …
2 Lḥyʿt Yrḫm, S^{1}myfʿ ʾs^{2}wʿ, S^{2}rḥʾl Yqbl, S^{2}rḫbʾl ʾs^{1}ʿd, the sons of S^{2}rḫbʾl Ykml, of the clan of Yzʾn and Gdnm,
3 the supporters of their lord, the king Yusuf ʾs^{1}ʾr Yṯʾr, when he burnt the church, killed the Abyssinians in Ẓafār, and moved a war against ʾs^{2}ʿrn, Rkbn, Fr–
4 s^{1}n, and Mḫwn, and brought the war (against) the defence of Nagrān. He reinforced the chain of Mandab, they were with him. And he sent them with an army. What the king has managed
5 to get in this expedition as spoils, amounted to twelve thousand deaths, eleven thousand prisoners, two
6 hundred ninety thousand camels, cows and small animals.[102] This inscription was written by the qayl S^{2}rḥʾl Yqbl of Yzʾn, when he was in guard against Nagrān
7 with the tribe of Hamdān, citizens and nomads, and the assault troops of ʾzʾnn and the Arabs [*ʾʿrb*] of Kinda, Murād, Madhḥig, while the qayls, his brothers, with the king, were mounting guard

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99 Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel Mahre, *Chronicle, part III*, trans. Witold Witakowski, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996, 52.

100 See, e.g., the sources discussed in Shahîd, Irfan, *The martyrs of Najrân: New documents*, Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1971.

101 Ja 1028 in CSAI.

102 Another inscription, Ry 508, in CSAI, written in the same year but a different month, gives a somewhat divergent number of deaths and spoils: “The number of all that the armies of the king killed and captured was of thirteen [thousand] deaths and nine thousand five hundred prisoners, two hundred eighty thousand camels, cows and goats.”

8 on the coast against the Abyssinians, while they were reinforcing the chain of Mandab. That is all what they mentioned in this inscription: deaths, boot[y], garrison service and all (what happened) in only one expedition;

9 then they came back to their houses thirteen months later. Might Rḥmnn bless their sons S^{2}rḥbʾl Ykml and Hʿn ʾs^{1}ʾr, the sons of Lḥyʿt

10 and Lḥyʿt Yrḫm, the son of S^{1}myfʿ, and Mrṯdʾln Ymgd, the son of S^{2}rḥʾl, of the clan of Yzʾn. The month of Mḏrʾn of the six hundred

11 thirty-three [523 CE]. For the protection of the heavens and the earth and of the strength of the men was this inscription against those who would harm and degrade. Might Rḥmnn, the Highest,

12 protect it against all those who would degrade. This inscription was placed, written, executed in the name of Rḥmnn. Tmm of Ḥḏyt placed. By the Lord of Jews. By the Highly Praised.

A number of significant details are mentioned in this inscription: it links the massacres of the Christians, and the burning of their church, to the general war against Ethiopia (Abyssinia). The warfare in general is described as having been in defense of God and Judaism. These events led to a new, and much more vigorous, Ethiopian attack on Yemen in 525, in which the army of Yūsuf was defeated, and another campaign in 530.[103] Notably, the Byzantines helped the Ethiopians in the invasion.[104] The campaign of 530 CE is remembered in an important inscription, CIH 621, which I quote:[105]

1 S^{1}myfʿ ʾs^{2}wʿ and his sons fils, S^{2}rḥbʾl Ykml and Mʿdkrb Yʿfr, sons of Lḥyʿt

2 Yrḫm, those of Klʿn, ḏ-Yzʾn, Gdnm, Mṯln, S^{2}rqn, Ḥbm, Yṯʿn,

3 Ys^{2}rm, Yrs^{3}, Mkrbm, ʿqht, Bs^{3}ʾyn, Ylġb, Ġymn, Yṣbr

4 S^{2}bḥm, Gdwyn, Ks^{3}rn, Rḫyt, Grdn, Qbln, S^{2}rgy, banū Mlḥm

5 and their tribes Wḥẓt, ʾlhn, S^{1}lfn, Ḍyftn, Rṯḥm, Rkbn, Mṭlft–

6 n, S^{1}ʾkln, S^{3}krd and the kabirs and the governors of S^{1}ybn ḏ-Nṣf wrote this inscription in the

103 Bowersock, *The throne of Adulis* 96–97. It has recently been suggested on the basis of hydroclimate records that the fall of the Ḥimyarite dynasty was preceded by serious droughts in Yemen, see Fleitmann, Dominik et al., "Droughts and societal change: The environmental context for the emergence of Islam in late antique Arabia," in *Science* 376 (2022), 1317–1321.

104 Sarris, *Empires of faith* 140, 263–264.

105 CIH 621 in CSAI.

7 fortress of Mwyt, when they repaired its walls, its gate, its cisterns and its routes of entry,
8 when they are fortified in it, when they came back from the land of Abyssinia, and the Abyssinians sent the army
9 to the land of Ḥimyar, when they killed the king of Ḥimyar and his ʾqwl, Ḥimyarites and Raḥbanites.
10 The month of Ḥltn of the six hundred forty.

The end of the era of the Ḥimyarite rulers had come. The Ethiopian and Christian presence in Yemen was strengthened and the Ḥimyarite dynasty was supplanted. As will be seen in the next chapter, though Christians were present in Yemen before the Ethiopian occupation, their numbers probably swelled because of it. The Ethiopian influence is also present in other ways too: Ethiopic words (in particular those having to do with religion), one assumes, are borrowed into Arabian languages during this era, many of them eventually appearing in the Qurʾān.[106]

In the 540s–550s, Yemen was ruled by a king of Ethiopian origins called Abraha. He launched many campaigns on parts of Arabia, celebrating his deeds in inscriptions.[107] One expedition was remembered later in Islamic tradition as "the year of the elephant" (*ʿām al-fīl*), even though there is no contemporary evidence that Abraha raided Mecca, as the Arabic literature recounts. The Islamic tradition claims that Muḥammad was born in that year but this does not seem to be anything other than a confluence of two events that were later deemed highly significant.[108] However, one Sabaic inscription commissioned by Abraha, Murayghān 3, notes that he attacked and conquered Yathrib (later, Medina) or at least its hinterlands.[109] Perhaps this is the raid later remembered as "the year of the elephant" and as having included an attack on Mecca as well.

106 See Kropp, Manfred, "Beyond single words: *Māʾida–Shayṭān–jibt* and *ṭāghūt*: Mechanisms of transmission into the Ethiopic (Geʿəz) Bible and the Qurʾānic text," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qurʾān in its historical context*, London: Routledge, 2007, 204–216.

107 Bowersock, *The throne of Adulis* 111–118; Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm," 150–171.

108 Conrad, Lawrence I., "Abraha and Muḥammad: Some observations apropos of chronology and literary *topoi* in the early Arabic historical tradition," in *BSOAS* 50/2 (1987), 225–240.

109 Murayghān 3 in CSAI: "The king ʾbrh [Abraha] *zybmn*, king of Sabaʾ, ḏu-Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt, Ymnt, of their Arabs (*w-ʾʿrb-hmw*) of Ṭwdm and Thmt, wrote this inscription when he came back from the country of Mʿdm [Maʿadd], when he took possession of the Arabs of Mʿdm, from Mḏrn, he drove out ʿmrm, son of Mḏrn, and he took possession of all the Arabs (*w-s¹tqḏw kl ʾʿrb*) of Mʿdm, Hgrm, Ḫṭ, Ṭym, Yṯrb and Gzm." Abraha's title in this inscription, *zybmn*, appears as *zbymn* in others, so *zybmn* could be a slip of the engraver; see Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 120. As Gajda notes, this title should probably be understood as *z-b-ymn*, "who is in Yemen."

Indeed, the Sabaic inscriptions evidence many attempts by the South Arabian kings and commanders to control the Arabic-speaking (and possibly other) groups of the north and use them as auxiliary forces.[110]

Abraha is the last ruler of Yemen mentioned in the pre-Islamic epigraphic record, though his sons might have ruled after him for some time.[111] The political upheavals of the sixth century ultimately led to a situation where other foreign powers also tried to wield influence in Southern Arabia. During Khosrow I (r. 531–579), Sasanid Persia was able to conquer areas in Eastern Arabia, reaching regions in Yemen as well.[112] By 575, the Persians had conquered the whole of Yemen and expelled the Ethiopian troops. Of the Persian era, we unfortunately know very little because the epigraphic evidence, for some reason, becomes silent: we only know the events from later Arabic historiography, with only a few mentions in more contemporary Byzantine historiography.[113] The sixth-century wars were, it seems, taxing to the population of Yemen, leading to impoverishment and a fall in the literary culture that lasted until the early Islamic period, when a new culture and literature, expressed in Arabic, emerges. However, there is nothing to suggest that Jewish or Christian communities would have suffered during the Sasanid rule. Though Ethiopian troops were driven out, the local Christian populations survived. On the eve of Islam, Yemen was possibly majority Jewish, with a sizeable Christian minority.

3 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have argued for well-documented Jewish presence in both the south and the north in late ancient Arabia, though we have a somewhat small amount of information on their more detailed outlook. It is, at the moment, impossible to say, for instance, what rabbinic learning and literature, or the law, exactly meant for them. In any case, the presence of Jews and, by extension, Jewish beliefs and practices are a significant factor when reconstructing the background of Muḥammad's community. Many concepts and ideas present

110 Retsö, *The Arabs in antiquity* 552–562.

111 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 148.

112 Daryaee, Touraj, *Sasanian Persia: The rise and fall of an empire* (International Library of Iranian Studies 8), London: I.B. Tauris, 2009, 31.

113 For nuanced discussions, see Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 149–167; Shoshan, Boaz, "The Sasanian conquest of Ḥimyar reconsidered: In search of a local hero" in Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen et al. (eds.), *The study of Islamic origin: New perspectives and contexts* (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—Tension, transmission, transformation 15), Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021, 259–273.

in the Ḥimyarite inscriptions are later encountered in the Qurʾān, which adopts and echoes them, most significantly the divine name al-Raḥmān. As has been noted, the Ḥimyarite Jewish community had (at least) some connections to the Palestinian Jewish community, so these people, and their ideas, must have travelled through al-Ḥijāz. Moreover, some Arabic-speaking groups of central and northern Arabia were in direct contact with the Ḥimyarites.

As suggested in chapter 6, the "Constitution" of Medina evidences the presence of Arabic-speaking Jews in Medina[114] and categorizes them as part of the community of the believers. Moreover, later evidence from Islamic times, such as the Gaonic responsa, indicate that Jews still lived in Wādī al-Qurā, near Medina, at the beginning of the second millennium CE.[115] Hence, the presence of Jews in and around Medina is rather well attested in different sources. If the Meccan passages of the Qurʾān really stem from Mecca, then Jews were living in that town, too, as chapter 5 will elaborate.

The fall of Ḥimyar in the sixth century, or the mission of Muḥammad in the seventh, did not mean the end of Jews and Judaism in Arabia, though political and power relations naturally changed. While the longevity of Judaism (and Christianity) will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 8, it has to be presently remarked that Jewish communities have continued to exist in Yemen up to the present day.[116]

114 For later Islamic-era texts on the Jews of Medina, see, e.g., Lecker, *Muslims, Jews and pagans*; Mazuz, *The religious and spiritual life*; Munt, Henry, *The holy city of Medina: Sacred space in early Islamic Arabia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 44–46.

115 Mazuz, *The religious and spiritual life* 109–116; Munt, Henry, "'No two religions': Non-Muslims in the early Islamic Ḥijāz," in *BSOAS* 78/2 (2015), 249–269, at 261. For more on this, see chapter 8.

116 In a sad development during the current Yemeni civil war, the Houthis have, according to news articles, apparently expelled the last Yemeni Jews.

CHAPTER 3

Christianity

1 Christianity in Late Antiquity

Many scholars would probably agree that the basic Qurʾānic beliefs (such as monotheism) and regulations (such as avoidance of blood, pork, and carrion) would have been in line with what most late antique Jews would have espoused. However, they often envision a more marked break between the Qurʾānic communication, on the one hand, and Christian beliefs (in particular, Christology) and its supposedly "law-free" orientation, on the other. Hence, it might be supposed that the Qurʾān's views on Jesus and God as well as the emphasis on dietary and purity laws would have made it difficult for Christians to agree with and join Muḥammad's movement. As I argue in this book, this is not necessarily the case. Because of these issues, late antique Christianity receives a more detailed exploration than Judaism did in the previous chapter. However, the world of (and scholarship on) late antique Near Eastern Christians and Christianity is vast, and I will only concentrate here on issues and topics which are of interest as regards the Qurʾānic communication and community: certain features and debates in Christianity more broadly, in particular Christology and the law, and the evidence of Christians in Arabia in late antiquity. The spread of Christianity, and Christians' position vis-à-vis the "pagans," in the Byzantine empire and the Near East, is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

1.1 *The First Generations*

The first Christians were not Christians. They were Jews.[1] This applies to Jesus, Paul, and, in all likelihood, the four evangelists.[2] Jesus lived his life as an eschatological Jewish prophet. That he would have rejected the Torah or declared all foods "clean" is, first and foremost, a Markan fantasy.[3] Jesus preached his kerygma to the Jews; during his time, it appears, there was no gentile mission. The "pagans' apostle," Paul, was a messianic Jew who lived according to the

1 Fredriksen, Paula, *When Christians were Jews: The first generation*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2018.

2 Fredriksen, Paula, *From Jesus to Christ: The origins of the New Testament images of Christ*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, [2]2000.

3 Mark 7:19. Jesus' life in its Jewish context is explored in Sanders, Ed P., *Jesus and Judaism*, London: SCM Press, 1985, and *The historical figure of Jesus*, London: Penguin Press, 1993.

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Torah. Both Jesus and Paul thought and promulgated that the world is going to end in the imminent future. During Paul's time, the message about Jesus as a resurrected messiah spread among the gentiles too and they seemed to have become, already at this stage, the majority in the Jesus movement. However, though the Jews should keep the Torah, Paul suggested that the gentile Christ-believers should not adopt the law, at least not *in toto*.[4] Though the Pauline depiction of the law contains many facets, there are many instances where it is described in positive terms. For example, Paul opines in Romans 3:1–2: "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God." As Paula Fredriksen writes:

> in its founding generation—which was committed to the belief that it was history's *final* generation—members of this movement were traditionally observant Jews, Paul included. (And for that matter, reaching back to the period before his crucifixion, so was Jesus.) These people all studied Jewish scriptures. They honored the god of Israel through offering sacrifices at the temple. They came together on the Sabbath. They imagined final redemption, inclusive of eschatological gentiles, as a natural extension of the history of Israel.[5]

The word "Christians" is first encountered as an in-group name in the early second century Acts of the Apostles (11:26) written by Luke. However, this does not evidence a fully-fledged identity distinct from Judaism.[6] Even the Gospel of John, which contains numerous anti-Jewish passages, shows a mixed picture, with a community that is not yet outside Judaism.[7]

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4 Fredriksen explores this in detail in Fredriksen, Paula, *Paul: The pagan's apostle*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2017. For a critical appraisal of the so-called Paul within Judaism approach (which Fredriksen follows to a degree), see Nikki, Nina, "Challenges in the study of historical Paul," in Raimo Hakola, Outi Lehtipuu and Nina Nikki (eds.), *Common ground and diversity in early Christian thought and study: Essays in memory of Heikki Räisänen* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 495), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022, 185–210, in particular 198–201.

5 Fredriksen, *When Christians were Jews* 185.

6 For an important study on social identities in the Book of Acts, see Baker, Coleman A., *Identity, memory, and narrative in early Christianity: Peter, Paul, and recategorization in the Book of Acts*, Eugene OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011.

7 See Hakola, Raimo, *Identity matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness*, Leiden: Brill, 2005 and *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity* for a thorough discussion of Christian and Jewish affiliations in the Johannine literature. Hakola, *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity* 30, notes that in the context of the early second century eastern Mediterranean, "it is conceivable that the

The discussion on the "parting of the ways" was made famous by J.D.G. Dunn in his classic book on the topic of the formation of a distinct Christian identity and parting from Judaism.[8] Dunn's book was important because it argued with vigor and evidence that we cannot entertain the idea that Jesus, Paul, or other people in the movement could be considered to have been Christians, properly speaking. They did not call themselves that, nor did they recant Judaism. The Jesus group was, simply, one of the sects in late Second Temple Judaism, though they were somewhat distinctive in the fact that they encouraged large numbers of gentiles (non-Jews) to become group members; other Jewish movements accepted proselytes, too, but the emphasis on acquiring them appears to have been peculiar to the Christ group. The most important texts of the New Testament are, it can be argued, Jewish: Paul (definitely) and (possibly but not necessarily all) the evangelists, who wrote their texts in the late first and early second century, were Jews.[9] Scholarship after Dunn has argued with even more emphasis that the historical Jesus did not renounce dietary regulations[10] and the negative Pauline portrayals of the law are mostly written with the gentile audience of his letters in mind. Nowhere does Paul say that Jewish Christ-believers (such as himself) should stop following the law.[11]

Dunn dates "the parting of the ways" between Christianity and Judaism to the era between the first (66–73 CE) and second (132–135 CE) Jewish-Roman

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boundary between those Jews who came to believe in Jesus and other Jews remained open and that it was possible for Jesus' followers to interact with synagogue communities and their members in various ways."

8 Dunn, James D.G. *The partings of the ways between Christianity and Judaism and their significance for the character of Christianity*, London: SCM Press, ^{2}2006.

9 Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ* xvi.

10 Boyarin, Daniel, *The Jewish Gospels: The story of the Jewish Christ*, New York; New Press, 2012.

11 Paul's and other figures' stances toward the law are insightfully explored in Fredriksen, *Paul*, and in her *When Christians were Jews*. It is naturally true that in some passages, such as parts of Philippians, Paul's criticism of the law is comprehensive; see Nikki, *Opponents and identity*; "Challenges in the study of historical Paul." But in my opinion it has to be remembered that all Paul's extant letters are addressed to groups that were majority gentile. Paul's criticism of the law (which is, in any case, present in only some of the letters) can be understood in the context of rhetoric and differing social identifications that he wanted to put forward: as a Jewish Christ-believer writing to gentile Christ-believers, he wanted to make the case that he can be the pagan's apostle. One of the strategies that he adopts for this, in certain passages of his letters, is the criticism of the law. One of his goals was to reject the idea that the gentiles should adopt the law, or at least not in its totality. By this, he wanted to keep the categories of gentiles and Jews separate rather than fusing them into one, though they (or some of them) had the uniting aspect of faithfulness in Jesus.

wars. During the first war, the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, while during the second, the revolt of Bar Kokhba, who was viewed as the Messiah, was crushed. It is also around this time (the second century CE) that the category "Christians" begins to be operative and the New Testament canon starts to emerge. Hence, Dunn suggests that this era witnessed important events in both Judaism[12] and (emerging) Christianity that drove them apart.

All in all, Dunn puts forward the idea of a somewhat slow, and piecemeal, process of the emergence of a distinct Christian identity.[13] However, more recent scholarship, by, for example, Daniel Boyarin, has questioned this as being too early, with the fourth century CE starting to emerge, it appears, as a new consensus for the "parting."[14] It is also this century that witnesses the first concrete examples of Christological formulations, in particular in the first council of Nicaea in 325.[15] This would have put (the majority of) the Christian church, in the plane of ideas, outside of Judaism. It has been suggested by Daniel Boyarin that we should not speak of "Judaism" and "Christianity" as distinct entities before the fourth century CE.[16] Today, most scholars agree that the demarcation between Judaism and Christianity was often not stark in antiquity and late antiquity. Rather, they formed a continuum.[17] Different indi-

12 The development that Dunn emphasizes in Judaism is the beginning of the rise of rabbinic scholarship after the destruction of the Temple.

13 See also Wilson, Stephen G., *Related strangers: Jews and Christians 70–170 C.E.*, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1995.

14 Boyarin, Daniel, *Border lines: The partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, a much-read book, is one of the works to suggest this. The various articles in Becker, Adam H. and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds.), *The ways that never parted: Jews and Christians in late antiquity and the early middle ages*, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2007, treat the issue from different viewpoints, some doubting the whole idea of the "parting," given how intertangled Judaism and Christianity have been to this day.

15 Though it can be claimed that the council of Chalcedon in 451 was more important in laying out Christological dogmata.

16 Boyarin, *Border lines*; "Semantic differences; or 'Judaism'/'Christianity,'" in Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds.), *The ways that never parted: Jews and Christians in late antiquity and the early middle ages*, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2003, 65–85. See also the other studies in Becker and Reed (eds.), *The ways that never parted* and Lieu, Judith, "'The parting of the ways': Theological construct or historical reality?" in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 17/56 (1995), 101–119.

17 Boyarin, Daniel, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the making of Christianity and Judaism*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1999, 8. See also Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 67: "Between Judaism and Christianity in particular there was also an extensive grey area made up of people who, had they been pushed, might have jumped one way or the other, but in the meantime found there a milieu that, they no doubt considered, gave them the best of both worlds."

viduals and groups inhabited, as it were, various places along this continuum. Nor was their abode on this continuum (their affiliation, beliefs, and practices) stable during their lives, but they could adopt different views in different contexts and stages of life.

1.2 *Christians and the Law*

There is a popular notion about Christianity having been, from the start, a "law-free" religion. On the evidence, this does not seem to have been the case. Rather, many Christians saw the law, in some form or another, to be of utmost importance. Consider, for instance Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:17–19:

> Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Rather than erasing the law, Jesus is here depicted as upholding it and, indeed, arguing for a *more* rigorous observance of it (whether or not he actually said something along these lines is not important for my purposes).[18] Since the Gospel of Matthew was in all likelihood written by and for Jews, there is no reason to claim that the text should mean something other than it does at face value.[19] This interpretation of the law and Jesus' teaching was held by many, though not all, Christians throughout late antiquity, despite the church fathers' attempts to negate such a meaning.[20] This was common in Greek and Latin tradition, with interpretations suggesting that, with the coming of Christ, the fulfilment (and rescindment) of the law had already occurred; however, the Syriac tradition understood this passage from Matthew in a law-positive sense.[21]

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18 Zellentin, Holger M., "'One letter *yud* shall not pass away from the Law': Matthew 5:17 to Bavli *Shabbat* 116a–b," in Ilkka Lindstedt, Nina Nikki and Riikka Tuori (eds.), *Religious identities in Antiquity and the early Middle Ages: Walking together & parting ways*, Leiden: Brill, 2021, 204–258, at 208, interprets the passage as meaning: "the Law must be kept strictly, and with moral integrity … Jesus adds to God's Law by emphasizing moral integrity, but he does not add any new laws."

19 Zellentin, "'One letter *yud*'" 205–207.

20 Zellentin, "'One letter *yud*,'" notes that legal observance was considered by some Christians as necessary for *salvation*.

21 Zellentin, "'One letter *yud*'" 214–243. Regardless of this, "the Syriac tradition saw much of

Moreover, it has been noted that the gentile Christ-believers followed the food and purity laws mentioned in the so-called Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:19–21: avoidance of meat sacrificed to idols, carrion, blood, and fornication) for centuries,[22] and those Christ-believers that were of Jewish background in most cases probably followed a fuller set of regulations of the law.[23] This appears to have been the mainstream position up to the fourth century, when the Fathers started to argue for fully symbolic interpretation of the law, though evidence of even later observance of the law, either in its full or limited sense, survives.[24]

In Christian literature, the starting point is the Apostolic decree (Acts 15:19–21, ultimately echoing Leviticus 17),[25] mentioning the requirements for gentiles:

> Therefore I [James] have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.

In late antiquity, there were a number of (gentile) Christian groups who followed a set of dietary regulations (avoidance of meat sacrificed to idols, carrion, blood, and fornication). This was the majority opinion until the fourth century CE, as Holger Zellentin has demonstrated, and even after this, some texts, such as the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and the *Didascalia*, evidence such rules being followed by some Christians. The text of the pseudo-Clementine Homilies was redacted in the fourth or fifth century. The *Didascalia* was originally written in Greek in the third century, though only fragments survive of the original. It dates to the fifth century in its Latin version and the eighth cen-

the Jewish law just as much as abrogated as the majority of the Latin and Greek tradition," as Zellentin, "'One letter *yud*'" 236, notes.

22 Hence, the idea that early Christianity, or gentile Christianity, was "law-free" is problematic and, basically, Protestant. That is to say, it has very little to do with the historical context of early Christianity. For the history of the idea of "law-free Christianity," and a repudiation of it, see Fredriksen, *Paul* 94–130, and the copious notes idem 222–235.

23 Broadhead, *Jewish ways of following Jesus*.

24 Zellentin, Holger M., *The Qurʾān's legal culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a point of departure*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013, and "Judaeo-Christian legal culture."

25 Zellentin, "Judaeo-Christian legal culture" 130: "While the text [of the Acts] does not 'cite' Leviticus in our sense of the word, it can be shown to take knowledge of the laws for granted."

tury in its Syriac one: the translations show the continuing importance, up to the early Middle Ages, of this work in the Near East and elsewhere.[26]

The *Homilies*, in a unique way for a text so late, suggests that the Jews should still observe the Mosaic law, while the gentile Christians should uphold a more limited set of dietary and purity regulations, which include the Ten Commandments and the Apostolic Decree but contain some additional peculiarities.[27] The *Didascalia*, on the other hand, does not differentiate between the Jews and gentiles but rather notes that the law was and is a yoke on both the Jews ("the former people") and the Christian church.[28] Intriguingly, the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and the *Didascalia* also mention avoidance of, or moderation in, drinking wine. Christians skeptical about or eschewing wine might sound unexpected, but there is some evidence that there was similar wariness toward wine among the earliest Jesus group as well, since the wine might have been sacrificed to "false" deities as libations before its serving.[29]

Let us look at the *Didascalia* first, adducing the pertinent passage: "You shall not be lovers of wine, nor drunken, and you shall not be puffed up nor luxurious."[30] Though wine is not totally banned, it (or at least drunkenness) is frowned upon. The *Didascalia* also prohibits divining and magic.[31] Observing these regulations (in the gentile form at least) is underscored in the text: "Therefore keep away from all heretics who follow *not* the Law and the prophets."[32]

The pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* has a long passage on the avoidance of carrion, fornication, and idol sacrifices. In the passage, God is addressing the demons, who are referred to with the pronoun "you"; the pronouns "they" and "he" refer to the humans:

> trouble no one, unless any one of his own accord subject himself to you, worshipping you, and sacrificing and pouring libations, and partaking of your table, or accomplishing aught else that they ought not, or shedding

26 Zellentin, "Judaeo-Christian legal culture" 147. For a thorough study on these texts and their connections with the Qur'ān, see Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's legal culture*.

27 Zellentin, "'One letter *yud*'" 228.

28 Zellentin, "'One letter *yud*'" 239, 242.

29 See Romans 14:20–21; Fredriksen, *Paul* 97–98, 148. The late antique Christian groups that were shunning wine were also worried that it was pagan wine, possibly used in idolatry and sacrificed to deities. See Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's legal culture* 120–122.

30 *The Didascalia*, ch. 8, trans. in Ehrman, Bart D., *After the New Testament: A reader in early Christianity 100–300 CE*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, ^{2}2015, 450.

31 Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's legal culture* 119.

32 Trans. Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's legal culture* 111, emphasis added.

> blood, or tasting dead flesh, or filling themselves with that which is torn of beasts, or that which is cut, or that which is strangled, or aught else that is unclean. But those who betake themselves to my law, you not only shall not touch, but shall also do honour to, and shall flee from, their presence. For whatsoever shall please them, being just, respecting you, that you shall be constrained to suffer. But if any of those who worship me go astray, either committing adultery, or practising magic, or living impurely, or doing any other of the things which are not well-pleasing to me, then they will have to suffer something at your hands or those of others, according to my order. But upon them, when they repent, I, judging of their repentance, whether it be worthy of pardon or not, shall give sentence. These things, therefore, ye ought to remember and to do, well knowing that not even your thoughts shall be able to be concealed from Him.[33]

Before this passage, it is said that it is wine, in particular, that makes a believer yearn for idol meat and forget the law ("my law," that is, God's law).[34] In different chapters, the Homilies underscore the importance of avoiding foodstuffs and libations sacrificed to idols.[35]

Zellentin has argued, with good evidence,[36] that the gentile dietary and purity regulations were upheld in much of early Christianity, and the classification of Christ-believers into those of Jewish and gentile background function "in most forms of Christianity."[37] Hence, it appears that (some? many?) late antique Near Eastern Christians eschewed idol meat, carrion, blood, and (perhaps more rarely) wine. And these dietary regulations (with the addition of pork to the list of illicit foods) is exactly what we find in the Qurʾān.

More evidence of law-observing Christian groups is proffered by late antique heresiographers, who discuss groups such as Ebionites, Nazoreans, Elkesaites,

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33 The pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 8:19; Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *Fathers of the third and fourth centuries: The twelve patriarchs, excerpts and epistles, the Clementina, Apocrypha, Decretals, memoirs of Edessa and Syriac documents, remains of the first ages* (The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325 8), Buffalo, NY: The Christian Literature Company, 1886, 274. See also Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture* 120.

34 The pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 8:3; Roberts and Donaldson, (eds.), *Fathers of the third and fourth centuries* 268.

35 Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture* 121.

36 See the texts cited and analyzed in Zellentin, "Judaeo-Christian legal culture" 132–148.

37 Zellentin, "Judaeo-Christian legal culture" 117. For this question, see also Crone, Patricia, "Jewish Christianity and the Qurʾān (I–II)," in *JNES* 74/2 (2015), 225–253 and 75/1 (2016), 1–21.

and Symmachians, who are often called "Jewish Christian."[38] The dietary and purity rules that these groups followed, according to the heresiographers, were more comprehensive than the gentile regulations discussed above: they appear to have followed most or all features of the Jewish law. First, a note of caution: the heresiographical genre evidences some tendencies. The literature is written by outsiders, who consider themselves "orthodox," portraying others, who they deemed "heterodox." The writers are wont to ascribe absurd views to these "heterodox" groups in order to make them look bad and to refute them.[39] However, enough independent evidence survives to put forward some reconstructions of these diverse groups that flourished until at least ca. 400 CE in the Near East.[40] In addition to low Christological views that are often ascribed to them,[41] the groups are often said to have followed the Jewish law. For instance, Epiphanius (d. 403) noted that the Nazoreans follow the law: "circumcision, the Sabbath and the other things."[42] This more extensive set of purity regulations of Jewish Christianity was not followed by the other Christians who, in certain cases, still observed the gentile purity regulations. Interestingly, sources state that these groups eschewed meat altogether, since Jesus ended sacrifice. Jerome (d. 420) exclaimed that while the Ebionites claim to be Jewish and Christian at the same time, in reality they are neither.[43] Such a category anomaly was clearly repugnant to him. Ambrosiaster (wrote ca. 375) said

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38 See the comprehensive study Broadhead, *Jewish ways of following Jesus*, with lucid source-critical discussion. For critical notes on the category "Jewish Christians," seeing these groups as the creation of the heresiographers, see Zellentin, "'One letter *yud*'" 228–231. It should be noted that in the diverse world of late antique Christianity we should also place the Manichaeans, at least some of whom self-identified as Christian. Mani called himself "the apostle of Jesus Christ" and presented his group as (the true) Christians; Walker, Joel, "From Nisibis to Xi'an: The church of the East in late antique Eurasia," in Scott F. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of late antiquity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 994–1052, at 999. On Manichaeans and Christianity, see, e.g., Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 72–76; Tardieu, Michel, *Manichaeism*, trans. Malcolm B. DeBevoise, Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997. Manichaeans accepted the continuation of prophecy, as did some (other) Christian groups such as the Montanists.

39 Note also the remark by Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East*, 249 on the general state of affairs among early medieval Christians (which would be applicable to other religious groups, in all times, as well): "Rather than being an aberration, 'heresy,' or untuned belief, would be the norm."

40 Broadhead, *Jewish ways of following Jesus* 181, 232. There is no strong evidence of their survival after that period, though it is not impossible.

41 Broadhead, *Jewish ways of following Jesus* 193; and see what follows.

42 Broadhead, *Jewish ways of following Jesus* 176.

43 Broadhead, *Jewish ways of following Jesus* 172 (see also 193).

that the Symmachians observed "the entire Law."[44] Important evidence on the longevity of at least some of these groups is provided by John of Damascus (d. 749 CE), who mentions in chapter 53 of his work *Concerning Heresy* that the Elkesaites are "still now occupying that part of Arabia above the Dead Sea."[45]

Moreover, though the majority of late antique and early medieval Christians did not follow any specific dietary and purity regulations, many Near Eastern Christian communities still perceived Christianity as having a law. As examples, one can adduce the different canon laws or the so-called *Syro-Roman Lawbook*. The latter is a set of laws that are often called "secular," but this is, naturally, a modern characterization and one that is not justified, since the *Lawbook* itself articulates its vision as *Christian* law: indeed, one coming from Christ himself. This compilation was originally composed in Greek in the fifth century, but it survives in translation only. The most important translation for our purposes is the Syriac one, which was made in late antiquity or the early Middle Ages. The *Syro-Roman Lawbook* was a very influential and popular one among the Eastern Churches. Garth Fowden notes that it was widely disseminated and used among both the miaphysite Near Eastern Christians as well as the Church of the East, providing "a body of practical law, and a powerful symbol not only of the Byzantine Commonwealth's shared culture but also of its prestigious relationship to the Byzantine center."[46]

The compilation begins by noting that it presents the laws of the "Christian kings Constantinus, Theodosius and Leo, the kings of the Romans." Among the gifts that Jesus has brought, the text says, is "an excellent law to the church … through the ordinances of the laws of the Christ, they [the Roman kings] rule men according to the law which these kings have received from the church which is a gift for all men."[47] The text does say that Christ undid the Mosaic law (though it is acknowledged that, in its time, it formed a "gift" given to Israel and the nations alike).[48] But this annulling does *not* in fact mean that Chris-

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44 Broadhead, *Jewish ways of following Jesus* 232.

45 Cited in Roncaglia, Martiniano P., "Ebionite and Elkesaite elements in the Koran: Notes and hypotheses," in Ibn Warraq (ed.), Susan Boyd-Bowman (trans.), *Koranic allusions: The Biblical, Qumranian, and pre-Islamic background to the Koran*, Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2013, 345–376, at 349.

46 Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 128.

47 *Syro-Roman lawbook*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Arthur Vööbus, Stockholm: ETSE, 1982–1983, ii, 1.

48 *Syro-Roman lawbook*, trans. Vööbus, ii 2.

tianity is law-free. Rather, now the Roman kings are enacting the law that stems from Jesus: "among all nations the one law of Christ has been given through the Christian kings."[49] Naturally, the *Syro-Roman Lawbook* suggests that it is this law of Christ that it is putting forward.[50]

The *Syro-Roman Lawbook* includes criminal, public, and family law (the bulk of the text deals with inheritance). However, calling the compilation "secular" is misleading, since the text articulates a notion of presenting Christian law and, indeed, deriving from Jesus himself.[51] Rather than "secular law," there is another (though as etic and anachronistic as "secular") characterization that would fit the *Syro-Roman Lawbook* better. It would be "religious law." References to "the law of Christ" (*nāmōsā da-mshīḥa*) appear elsewhere in Syriac literature, as well, such as in the text of the East Syrian synod of 484 CE.[52]

In this section, I have suggested there were a number of late antique Near Eastern Christian groups that followed the law either in its Jewish or gentile form. Law-observance was not merely a question of social organization but was considered necessary for salvation by some. These points should be kept in mind when analyzing Qurʾānic passages that deal with a) the Christians (or the People of the Book) or b) the law. However, there is only scant evidence that the observance of the purity and dietary regulations, even in the limited gentile form, continued after the year 400 or thereabouts[53] or in Arabia among

49 *Syro-Roman lawbook*, trans. Vööbus, ii 2.

50 Zellentin, "'One letter *yud*'" 245. In fact, there are a few examples of characterizing Jesus as a lawgiver (Greek *nomothetēs*) in the late antique Christian literature. For instance, Clement of Alexandria presents Jesus in this way. See Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 131.

51 Or, to put it the other way, if we call the *Syro-Roman lawbook* "secular," then we must call much of the jurisprudence that we find in the Torah or the Qurʾān "secular" as well.

52 Chabot, Jean Baptiste (ed. and trans.), *Synodicon orientale ou recueil de synods nestoriens*, Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1902, 623; Weitz, Lev E., "Polygyny and East Syrian law: Local practices and ecclesiastical tradition," in Robert G. Hoyland (ed.), *The late antique world of early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2015, 157–191, at 162.

53 But note that the *Didascalia* was translated into Syriac in the eighth century. Clearly there were Christians who thought that its contents were still relevant. Of course, it can be argued that the translation was merely because of antiquarian interest, but this is, in my opinion, unlikely. There are examples of late antique and medieval Christian writers censoring other Christians observing Jewish law and practices; see Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East*, 129, 136, 251. While some of this criticism might be purely rhetorical, with imagined opponents, I think it stands to reason that some of the (anonymous) Christian individuals and groups disparaged for Judaizing were real, and, perhaps, following notions of the law related to those detailed in the *Didascalia* and the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*.

Christians. Hence, this point remains somewhat in the realm of speculation. However, the Qurʾānic dietary and purity laws show a striking overlap with the Apostolic Decree, the *Didascalia*, and the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*. Although we cannot pinpoint the exact strands of information flow or cultural influence, it would be unwarranted, I think, to suppose that the overlap is a mere coincidence. Moreover, even many of those Near Eastern Christians deeming purity and dietary regulations unnecessary would not have considered Christianity "law-free," since there were a number of legal compilations, such as the *Syro-Roman Lawbook*, which were conceived of as Christian law, "the one law of Christ," even though consisting of, for example, laws of inheritance rather than laws of food and purity.

1.3 *Late Antique Christological Debates*

There is no triune Godhead in the Bible; even the dogma of the incarnation is scarcely present in the New Testament books.[54] Various forms of Christological dogmata were articulated and argued for by different authorities. In the following centuries, Valentinus (d. 160), Arius (d. 336), and other theologians put forward views on Jesus and God that were later deemed "heretical." Arius deemed that Jesus Christ was created after God and hence lesser than God: he was first and foremost a human being.[55] So-called Gnosticism, Docetism, and other isms that authors that did not identify with them considered beyond the pale,[56] make it impossible to speak of *a* Christian dogma—on any matter—in the early centuries. Instead, there was a multitude of discourses and little consensus (and I am only talking about the ecclesiastical authorities—lay Christians are an altogether different matter). In discussing the variety of late antique Near Eastern Christians, Jack Tannous's concept of "simple believers" is helpful: "The great majority of Christians in the Middle East … belonged to what church leaders referred to as 'the simple.' They were overwhelmingly agrarian, mostly illiterate, and likely had little understanding of the theological complexities that split apart the Christian community in the region."[57] This does not necessarily mean that the priests themselves always had a deep knowledge of the doctrine or the scripture either: there are many pieces of evidence point-

54 For the different views on Jesus and God in the New Testament, see Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*.

55 Maas, Michael, *Readings in late antiquity: A sourcebook*, Abingdon: Routledge, ²2010, 131–132.

56 Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ* 213.

57 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 3.

ing toward some priests having been illiterate and uneducated; in a striking fact, one of the bishops at Chalcedon could not read or write![58]

Arius' Jesus was human, but a somewhat different take on Jesus was apparently present in the Ebionite community, which flourished in the fourth century, though the Christology of both can be called "low." The Ebionites' views and texts are only extant as they are cited and presented by their opponents' writings. Hence, definite statements on their beliefs and practices cannot be given. As put forward by Epiphanius, the Ebionites believed that Jesus was not a human being *nor* divine. Rather, he was a luminous angel: "They [Ebionites] do not allege that he was born from God the Father, but that he was created as one of the archangels, yet was made greater than they, since he rules over the angels and all things made by the Almighty."[59] Other sources, on the other hand, claim that the Ebionites underscored Jesus' human nature, saying that he was the son of Joseph and Mary.[60] Still other heresiographers note that, in fact, a group among the Ebionites accepted the virgin birth;[61] while some Ebionites said that Jesus was the true prophet (but not more?).[62]

The idea of carefully worded Christian creeds, agreed by synods and councils, became popular in the fourth-fifth centuries, in part to counter ideas such as those promulgated by Arius. The most important church councils were perhaps that of Nicaea in 325 and that of Chalcedon in 451. We should not envision these synods and councils as having been loci of unanimous consensus but of debate and controversy. Moreover, after a particular church council, there were many participants that left it disagreeing with the notions that were put forward and agreed by the majority.[63] For instance, the Chalcedonian creed of the two natures (human and divine) of Christ was not accepted by many Eastern Churches who, in its stead, championed what is called the miaphysite dogma. According to this, Jesus' divine and human facets were fused in one nature.[64]

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58 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 26–34.

59 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.16.4–5, translated in Ehrman, *After the New Testament* 153.

60 Broadhead, *Jewish ways of following Jesus* 193.

61 Broadhead, *Jewish ways of following Jesus* 195.

62 Broadhead, *Jewish ways of following Jesus* 205. This view (Jesus as the true prophet) is also attested in the so-called pseudo-Clementine literature (texts that are extant, it should be emphasized). See Broadhead, *Jewish ways of following Jesus*, 267–273.

63 Graumann, Thomas, "The conduct of theology and the 'Fathers' of the church," in Philip Rousseau and Jutta Raithel (eds.), *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, 539–555, at 541–544.

64 Fisher, Greg et al., "Arabs and Christianity," in Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and empires before Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 276–372, at 278–284; Maas, *Readings* 140–141;

Interestingly enough, a view called tritheism emerged out of miaphysite circles in the 560s, though this notion did not receive much backing.[65] As for the Church of the East, it had a Christological formula that set it apart from both the Chalcedonians and the West Syrian miaphysites.[66] Moreover, in the 630s CE, the Byzantine empire was engulfed in debates about monoenergism and monotheletism, in an attempt to heal the divide between the miaphysites and Chalcedonians.[67]

The miaphysites called the Chalcedonians "man-worshipper," because the latter championed the idea that Jesus also had a human nature.[68] An eighth-century miaphysite author, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel Mahre, writes the following about the result of the Council of Chalcedon:[69]

> Immediately after the introduction of the Council of Chalcedon, riot and great tumult at once arose in the capital [Constantinople]. The people were in commotion, congregations were disturbed, male and female monasteries were in commotion and many dissensions appeared among the Christians.

This is hardly a depiction of one Christian church, unified in dogma. Rather, the Christians of the Near East (and elsewhere) were divided into competing churches, who all thought they were "orthodox" and the others "heterodox."

Sarris, *Empires of faith* 163–166. Fisher, Greg, *Between empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in late antiquity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 60, proffers an important point: "Both Chalcedonian and miaphysite positions were characterized by numerous rifts and schisms of varying severity in the sixth century; any picture of two well-defined and opposing religious movements would be misleading."

65 Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 280, 325. Tritheism is the notion underscoring the individual substance and nature for each person of the trinity.

66 Walker, "From Nisibis to Xi'an," 1009–1010: "As refined by Babai the Great (c. 551–628) and other East-Syrian theologians, the official position of the Church of the East was that the incarnate Christ possessed two natures and two *qnōmē* (a Syriac concept similar to, but not identical with, the Greek *hypostasis*), but only one *prosōpon*. This formulation placed the Church of the East at odds not only with Chalcedon but also with the opponents of Chalcedon, the West Syrian or Miaphysite ("One Nature") Church."

67 Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 199–200. Monoenergism is the doctrine that Christ had only one energy. This appears to have been the emperor Heraclius' effort to unite the Chalcedonians and miaphysites. As for monotheletism, it is the doctrine that Christ had only one will, which was a later effort by Heraclius to heal the rift.

68 Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel Mahre, *Chronicle part III* 14.

69 Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel Mahre, *Chronicle part III* 19. Non-Chalcedonians were often persecuted as narrated in idem 22–24.

However, often the lay Christians (and sometimes the clergy as well) did not care about these denominational boundaries: at times, they visited the "wrong" church and took communion there.[70]

Moreover, it also has to be remembered that even if a church or a few churches agreed on a dogma, this does not mean that it was universally held by Christians affiliating with that church. The late antique church councils produced *a semblance* of consensus (at least among the clergy from those churches who acknowledged the council); but that consensus was not hegemonic or overarching even among the clergy. Thomas Jürgasch has pointed out accordingly: "In contrast to the impression one gets from studying the patristic literature of that time, we probably have to conceive of post-Nicaean Christianity—just as of its pre-Nicaean version—as a rather diverse community, or commun*ities*, that were still far away from the ideal of the Church as a 'unified body.' "[71]

In addition to this multitude of Christological statements and beliefs in late antiquity, I would suggest that there were in all likelihood many Christians (in particular lay Christians) who were not interested in the speculative theological discourse on the nature of Christ and God.[72] Take the example of Procopius, a sixth-century Byzantine historian. He was originally from Caesarea, in Pales-

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70 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 108: "What happened when Christian communities were formed on the basis of disagreements about theological speculation that most Christians simply could not understand fully or properly? We have now found part of an answer: many people paid little or only selective heed to the communal borders being set up on the basis of these disagreements. Indeed, we might suggest that a good number of these people may not have even known that such boundaries existed."

71 Jürgasch, Thomas, "Christians and the invention of paganism in the late Roman Empire," in Michele Renee Salzman, Marianne Sáchy, Rita Lizzi Testa (eds.), *Pagans and Christians in late antique Rome*: *Conflict, competition, and coexistence in the fourth century*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 115–138, at 123. Emphasis in the original.

72 I would suggest that such people would have made up a large portion of the (lay) Christians in *all* eras and contexts. For a modern analogue, look at the USA, a relatively religious (Christian) and conservative country. According to a 2020 State of Theology survey, 52% of all respondents agreed with the notion "Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God." Even among the US evangelical respondents 30% agreed with that statement (https://thestateoftheology.com/). That is to say, 30% of American evangelical Christians do not agree with a fundamental, *perhaps the most fundamental*, dogma of their faith. Though Christological dogmata have been and are of utmost importance for the churches, their identities, and their clergy, it cannot necessarily be supposed that lay Christians have always been thoroughly interested in the exact wordings of Christological statements.

tine, but he stayed in various places in the eastern Mediterranean. His works stem from the 540s–550s CE.[73] In his *Gothic Wars*, he writes:[74]

> I will not even record the points of disagreement [between Byzantium and Rome on doctrine], since I think it crazy folly to enquire what the real nature of God is. Humans cannot even understand human things fully, let alone what pertains to the nature of God. So I intend to keep safely quiet about such matters, simply so that existing beliefs shall not be discarded. I can say nothing about God except that He is totally good and has everything within His power. But let each say what he thinks he knows about this, both priest and layman.

Procopius' statement is remarkable both in its acknowledgement of the limits of human reason in matters divine, and hence the secondary importance of theological dogmata, but also as regards his willingness to tolerate the diversity of discourse on such matters both within the clergy and among lay people. In his narratives of, for example, the North Arabian Ghassānids converting to Christianity, he does not mention that they adopted the miaphysite creed, though other Byzantine historians noted this with dismay. He was surely aware of this fact but, true to his belief in the futility of arguing about Christian dogmata, he does not criticize the Ghassānids on this matter, though he otherwise presents their leader al-Ḥārith in a negative light.[75]

In a similar vein, discussing the late antique and early medieval Near East, Jack Tannous has reminded us that the category of Christians "might have included people who held to a wide variety of religious beliefs and it could cover people who engaged in a number of different religious practices." We should not take "the (written) views of Christian elites in the seventh century and assume that they pointed to how most people were actually behaving and what they were believing."[76] For most lay Christians, perhaps priests as well, theological debates and formulations about incarnation and related matters ("speculation about the numbers of natures, hypostases, *prosopa*, wills, and energies in the Incarnate Christ") was unintelligible.[77] It is not only that many Christians probably did not really grasp the doctrine (how many modern Chris-

73 See Cameron, Averil, *Procopius and the sixth century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, 5–15.

74 *Gothic Wars* I.3.6., translated in Cameron, *Procopius*, 119.

75 Cameron, *Procopius* 124–125.

76 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 260.

77 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 24. See also pp. 12–13, 23.

tians do?), they probably did not so much care about it either.[78] This is a point we should keep in mind when, in chapter 6, I discuss the Qurʾānic statements on Jesus, taking issue with the view that they would have made joining the prophet Muḥammad's movement unpalatable to the Christians.

This is not to say that all or the majority of Christians did not care about doctrine. Some obviously did—a great deal. In a different Near Eastern context,

> the ferment of the Christological controversies led to the introduction, at some point in the early sixth century, of the practice of reciting the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed in the liturgy. Once this practice spread, the creed would have been widely memorized in a liturgical context and therefore was not quite as limited in its circulation by the high cost of parchment or by an inability to read.[79]

Some Christians saw doctrinal formulae as central to their identity; debates on them might lead to violence (mostly intra-Christian).[80] Whether these "serious Christians," as Tannous calls them,[81] were the majority or the minority is impossible to know, but, I would suggest, the latter option is the more probable one. There are indeed quite a few pieces of evidence suggesting the commonness of indifference to doctrine among the Christians.[82]

To add to the various Christians' ways of conceptualizing the divine, it should be noted that one of the important developments in Christian epigraphic formulae of the time is the rising emphasis on "one God." In Greek, this is expressed as *eis Theos*.[83] The formula was especially common on tombstones, and appears first in the late third century. The phrase is attested on Greek and

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78 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 61: "What of doctrine? Did it matter? For some of the simple [Christians], it did not. At the end of the Chalcedonian Leontius of Jerusalem's *Testimonies of the Saints*, there is a story about an actor captured by Christian Arabs that can serve to illustrate this. The actor was putatively a Chalcedonian, but this affiliation had no great significance to him. He was, Leontius wrote, 'of our persuasion only in that, when he went to church, he gathered with us, though to tell the truth he did so without realizing there was any difference between Christians.' Some Christians were simply not aware of the differences in confession."

79 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 37.

80 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 43, 111.

81 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 250.

82 See Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 92, 108, 235, 245.

83 See Longworth, Kyle, "Script or scripture? The earliest Arabic tombstones in the light of Jewish and Christian epitaphs," in Fred M. Donner and Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee (eds.), *Scripts and scripture: Writing and religion in Arabia circa 500–700 CE*, Chicago IL: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2022, 185–194.

Coptic tombstones up to the Middle Ages. Hence, despite the probable supposition that many of the commissioners and engravers of these inscriptions (as well as the buried) might have held the dogma of triune Godhead important to them, they still felt it important to underscore that God is one, not three.

The miaphysite Christians underlined their monotheism to a large degree. According to John of Ephesus (d. ca. 588), the miaphysite creedal proclamation was: “the true God is one and there is no other god but he.”[84] In any case, whichever Christology they might subscribe to, there was never much doubt among the Christians that they were monotheists. When considering the Qurʾānic stringent emphasis on monotheism,[85] it has to be borne in mind that this was something that Near Eastern Christians (or Jews for that matter) would have very much agreed with. The Qurʾān, as we will see, invokes shared religious formulae in this regard.

2 The Arabian Context

The following sections deal with late antique Arabian Christians, with an emphasis on inscriptions and Arabic poems, since those are texts written by Christians themselves.[86] Naturally, there are also important pieces of contemporary or semi-contemporary literary evidence, written mainly in Greek and Syriac.

2.1 *Christianity in Yemen before the Ethiopian Occupation*

There is some (literary) evidence that Christianity spread in Yemen already in the fourth century; the epigraphic record evidences the presence of Christians near Najrān in the fifth.[87] According to the Greek (and Anomoean)[88] ecclesiastical historian Philostorgius (d. ca. 439), the emperor Constantius sent a bishop by the name of Theophilus to Yemen to try to convert people to Christianity. According to the narrative, he built three churches, one of them being in Ẓafār, the capital of the kingdom of the Ḥimyar.[89] However, since there is no material

84 Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 116.

85 For example, Q 112:1, *Allāh aḥad*, “God is one.”

86 On this topic, see also Triningham, J. Spencer, *Christianity among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times*, London: Longman, 1979, which is, however, by now somewhat obsolete.

87 The Christian community of Najrān appears to have had a strong connection with the Christian community of al-Ḥīra in the fifth and sixth centuries (and possibly later); Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 79.

88 The Anomoeans, a fourth century group, posited that Christ is not of the same nature, nor of like nature, as God.

89 Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 110.

evidence to corroborate this, it is difficult to say if there is anything to these stories. They are definitely not impossible. Since the Ethiopians began to convert to Christianity in the fourth century and since the commercial and political relations between Yemen and Ethiopia were intimate in late antiquity, it is safe to assume that there were at least *some* Christians residing in Yemen. Moreover, a Greek (and probably Christian) inscription found to the north of Najrān attests to the linguistic diversity of Yemen.[90]

The several Nabataeo-Arabic/Old Arabic Christian graffiti from Ḥimā, from the region of Najrān, are a staggering find. They were discovered by a Saudi-French team in the 2010s. The graffiti, which stem from the fifth-sixth centuries, attest to the strong presence of Christians in the Najrān region even before the Ethiopian era, just like the literary evidence suggests.[91] Many of the graffiti contain crosses, indicating the signaling of Christian identity.[92] They also include some interesting signs of the linguistic situation. One of the graffiti reads:[93]

> ☩ Thawbān [son of] Mālik [wrote this] in the month of *burak* in the year 364.

As is customary in inscriptions of pre-Islamic Arabia,[94] this graffito is dated according to the era of the Roman Province of Arabia, which started in 106. Hence, this inscription was written in 470 CE; the month of *burak* corresponds to February–March. Interestingly, though the graffito is engraved in something resembling the emerging Arabic script, the word "month" is spelled *y-r-ḥ*,[95] while "year" is written *sh-t*. The assimilation of the *nūn* in this word (*sanat*) is not known in Arabic, but occurs in various forms of Aramaic (such as the Syriac *shattō*).[96]

What was the language that the writer, Thawbān son of Mālik, wanted to reproduce in this inscription and others that he left in the vicinity?[97] What

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90 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 249–250. The inscription reads: "Lord, protect me!"

91 Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm," 148, suggests that the Christian community in the region was founded in the mid-fifth century.

92 The inscriptions have been published by Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd, "Inscriptions antiques."

93 Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd, "Inscriptions antiques," 1088.

94 Excluding the Sabaic inscriptions, which follow the Ḥimyarite era.

95 The Nabataean Aramaic *ḥ* can represent Arabic *kh* and *ḥ* (if the writer of this inscription intended to write in Arabic, which is perhaps not likely).

96 Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd, "Inscriptions antiques," 1091–1092.

97 This person is the author of numerous graffiti at the site. See Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd, "Inscriptions antiques," 1094–1107. Other inscriptions only contain his name and, sometimes, a cross.

was his spoken language? It is impossible to say, but the words used for "year" and "month" indicate a form of Aramaic rather than Arabic (or a South Arabian language), regardless of the script that he used and that we can, with hindsight, call "Old Arabic." It is naturally possible, perhaps probable, that his *spoken* language was a dialect of Arabic but since Arabic was rarely written at the time, he resorted to using Aramaic words (which might have worked like logograms). What we can say with certainty is that this Thawbān was a Christian. The crosses in this and other inscriptions written by him indicate this quite clearly.

The area of Ḥimā contains many other inscriptions written in Nabataeo-Arabic or Old Arabic script and that contain Christian identity signaling. One Ilyāʾ bar[98] Marʾ al-Qays engraved his name under one of the graffiti by Thawbān son of Mālik and next to a cross.[99] Likewise, Isḥāq bar ʿĀmir also wrote his name there, coupled with a big cross above his name.[100]

As is usual in Christian Old Arabic inscriptions, the word God appears as *al-ilāh*.[101] Interesting is also the appearance, in one graffito, of the name ʿAbd al-Masīḥ, "the servant of Christ," which is also attested in an Ancient South Arabian inscription from Najrān.[102] Another dated inscription published in this set from Ḥimā has the year 408 of the Roman Province of Arabia, corresponding to 513 CE.[103] Paleographically, too, the Nabataeo-Arabic/Old Arabic inscriptions from Ḥimā belong to roughly the same era, indicating a Christian community living there in the fifth and sixth centuries CE. However, the Christian Ḥimā inscriptions do not yield information about the beliefs and practices of the writers. Still, they are important testimony of the presence of Christians in the region.

2.2 *The Ethiopian Period and the Spread of Christianity in Yemen*

As narrated in the previous chapter, the year 530 inaugurated the Ethiopian era in Yemen. The dynasty of Ḥimyar was replaced by overlords of Ethiopian origin. These events were followed by a stronger Christian presence in Yemen through the Ethiopian troops as well as possible converts (there is, however, no

98 Pre-Islamic Nabataeo-Arabic and Old Arabic regularly use *bar* instead of *bin* to denote "son of."

99 Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd, "Inscriptions antiques," 1096.

100 Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd, "Inscriptions antiques," 1093.

101 "God," *al-ilāh*, appears in two inscriptions from the site: Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd, "Inscriptions antiques," 1100, 1103.

102 Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd, "Inscriptions antiques," 1125. The name ʿAbd al-Masīḥ was also borne by some pre-Islamic Arabic poets; see al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, index, s.v.

103 Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd, "Inscriptions antiques" 1122.

evidence of forced conversions of the Jewish population); churches were also built.[104] An Ethiopic inscription, RIÉ 191, found in Aksum, celebrates that the king Ella Aṣbəḥa sent troops to Yemen and built a church on the coast.[105]

Ethiopian Christians were miaphysites,[106] and it is possible that some Yemenites adopted Christianity in this form.[107] The sixth-century spread of miaphysitism is indeed remarkable, ranging from the Caucasus to Ethiopia, and proffering the miaphysite Christians "a sense of cultural coherence that marked them off from the world of the northern frontier as much as from the other parts of the [Byzantine] empire in which Chalcedon prevailed."[108]

In the Christian inscriptions from Yemen, God is still called Raḥmānān, though he is now often accompanied with Christ and the Holy Spirit. An important South Arabian inscription from the Ethiopian era is the following, which is unfortunately damaged:[109]

1 [… …] Holy Spirit [*mnfs¹ qds¹*]. S¹myfʿ ʾs²wʿ, king of Sabaʾ [… …]
2 [… …] ʾḥṣn and S¹myfʿ ʾs²wʿ, sons of S²rḥbʾl [… …]
3 [… …] their lords, the negus of Axum [*ngs²t ʾks¹mn*] built and laid the foundation [… …]
4 [… …] their royal force and those of the qayls, who concluded [… …]
5 [… …] this king with strength and with their army together with the king [… …]
6 [… …] toward ʾlʾṣbḥh, king of Abyssinia [*mlk Ḥbs²t*] in [… …]
7 [… …] kings for Ḥimyar and governors of the negus [king] of Axum [… …]
8 [… …] submitted themselves to the kings of Axoum and when [… …]
9 [… …] he appointed them for the defense of the sea and the maintenance of order in Ḥimyar [… …]
10 [… …] ḏ-Yzʾn, Ḥs³n and S²rḥbʾl those two of the family Mʿfrn [… …]
11 [… …] ʾs¹wdn and S¹myfʿ ḏ-ʿbdn [… …]
12 [… …] two sons of Ḫll and Zrʿt ḏ-Mrḥbm and Mlkm Ns¹[… …]

104 Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm" 149. However, Robin's statement here that "Jews were systematically slaughtered" seems far off: there is no evidence of this.

105 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 115.

106 Shahîd, Irfan, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the sixth century, i/1-ii/2*, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995–2009, i/2, 743.

107 According to Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 74: "Surviving Miaphysite sources consider the Christian community of Himyar to be Miaphysite; surviving Greek sources, however, regard them as Chalcedonians."

108 Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 102.

109 Ist 7608 bis in CSAI.

13 [… …] and Ḥrṯm and Mrṯdm ʾlht Ṯʿlbn and M[… …]
14 [… …] ʾlʾṣbḥh negus of Axum and when they entrusted and preserved [… …]
15 [… …] the bastard of their father S²rḥbʾl Ykml and [… …]
16 [… …] in name of Rḥmnn and his son Christ, the victorious [*s¹m Rḥmnn w-bn-hw krs³ts³ ġlbn*] [… …]

Of particular interest are the somewhat later Sabaic monumental inscriptions set up at the behest of Abraha, a general and strongman of Ethiopian origin, who ruled from Ṣanʿāʾ.[110] He campaigned in different parts of Arabia in the 540s–550s.[111] He sponsored Christianity: for instance, one inscription, CIH 541, mentions that he dedicated (*qds¹*) a church (*bʿt*) in Maʾrib.[112] Though the following information is only provided by (later) Arabic historiography, it appears that he built a church in Ṣanʿāʾ, the capital during the Ethiopian era. The church is called al-Qalīs in Arabic, ultimately derived from the Greek *ekklēsia*. Though no contemporary inscription has been found that might refer to it, Arabic historical tradition also notes that the church al-Qalīs was in use at least until the 130s/750s.[113] This corroborates the idea that such a church existed. And if it existed, it is likely that it was built during the Ethiopian rule.

Islamic tradition suggests that he tried to capture Mecca too, and that it was in the same year that the prophet was born. However, there are significant chronological problems with this.[114] It is more likely that the Muslim scholars, in creating the social memory about the prophet, connected two events that had nothing to do with each other: the birth of Muḥammad and Abraha's impressive conquests (there is no evidence that he attacked Mecca, however).

Abraha's inscriptions contain some peculiar Christological formulae, as recently noted by Carlos Segovia.[115] In fact, their characterization of Jesus comes close to what the Qurʾān says about him. In the article, Segovia puts forward

110 Piotrovsky, "Late ancient and early mediaeval Yemen" 215.
111 Robin, Christian J., "Abraha et la reconquête de l'Arabie déserte: Un réexamen de l'inscription Ryckmans 506 = Murayghan 1," in *JSAI* 39 (2012), 1–93.
112 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 122.
113 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 125.
114 See Conrad, "Abraha and Muḥammad" for a treatment of the chronological problems. There is no contemporary evidence of Abraha attacking Mecca, so, in my opinion, attempts to harmonize the Sabaic inscriptions and the Muslim tradition are methodologically very problematic (for such attempts, see Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 144; Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm" 151–153). Q 105 does *not* mention Abraha or an attack on Mecca.
115 Segovia, Carlos A., "Abraha's Christological formula *RḤMNN W-MS¹Ḥ-HW* and its relevance for the study of Islam's origins," in *Oriens christianus* 98 (2015), 52–63.

the suggestion that what appears to be the relatively low Christology present in the inscriptions was written to assuage the Jews, who were (one assumes) probably the majority in Yemen at the time. The formulae differ from the usual trinitarian understanding of the Godhead: they do not mention the trinity at all. Moreover, they do not refer to Jesus as God's son but, instead, as His messiah. The pertinent inscriptions are sigla CIH 541 and DAI GDN 2002–2020, dated to 548 CE, and Ry 506, which is somewhat later, being engraved in 552 CE.[116] I will quote the latter, omitting lines 4–8, which discuss specifics of Abraha's raids:

1 By the power of Rḥmnn and his Messiah, the king Abraha who is in Yemen, king of Saba', ḏu-Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt,
2 Ymnt and his nomads of Ṭwdm and Thmt wrote this inscription when he had raided Mʿdm[117]
3 in the fourth raid, in the month ḏ-Ṯbtn, and when all the Bny-ʿmrm had revolted.
9 … by the power of Rḥmnn, in the month of ḏ-ʾln, of (the year) 662 [of the Ḥimyarite era].[118]

The inscription celebrates Abraha's subdual of different groups in Arabia. This, he says, happened by (or through) the power of God (Raḥmānān) and His messiah (*ms¹ḥ-hw*).[119] A similar phrase appears in the earlier DAI GDN 2002–2020, the relevant portion of which reads, "With the power and the help and the support of Rḥmnn, the lord of heaven and of his messiah."[120] CIH 541, which is contemporary with DAI GDN 2002–2020, actually has the different persons of the trinity mentioned. It opens up with the following: "With the power, the aid, and the mercy (*rḥmt*) of Rḥmnn, of his Messiah and of the Holy Spirit."[121]

The inscriptions commissioned by Abraha, though only few in number among the extant Sabaic corpus, show that non-conventional Christological formulae were present and articulated in South Arabia. In addition to the deity name Raḥmānān, the Qurʾān could also echo the South Arabian characterization of Jesus, describing him as the messiah (*al-masīḥ*) but denying that he was

116 I quote the translations as they appear in CSAI.
117 This is a reference to Maʿadd, the chief tribal federation in western Arabia.
118 Ry 506 in CSAI.
119 Ist 7608 bis, adduced above, is the only Sabaic inscription to refer to Christ/Messiah with the word *krs³ts³*.
120 Instead of messiah, the translation in CSAI actually has here "Anointed One" (DAI GDN 2002–2020).
121 CIH 541 in CSAI. Another inscription (Sadd Ma'rib 6 in CSAI) referring to Abraha does not mention the messiah at all, only Rḥmnn.

God's son. Of note is also the topic of religious warfare: Raḥmānān aids, with His power, the king Abraha in his raids.[122] This idea we saw in the last chapter; it is also present in the Medinan strata of the Qurʾān.

2.3 *Christians in Northern Arabia*

Christianity started to spread among Arabic-speaking groups in the north in the fourth century CE, with some sources indicating that many north Arabian groups had already converted in the early fifth century.[123] By the beginning of the mission of the prophet Muḥammad in the early seventh century, most northern Arabian tribes appear to have converted to Christianity. The spread of Christianity can be documented not only from the literary (Arabic and, more contemporaneously with the events, Syriac and Greek) evidence but also from the emergence of crosses in rock graffiti, for example in Kilwa in the north-western Peninsula.[124] Monumental inscriptions, such as the famous Zabad and Harran inscriptions from two martyria, have survived too.[125] Some archaeological evidence is also extant indicating the processes of Christianization.[126] The Ghassānids converted perhaps in the fifth century. The tribe of Taghlib converted in the late sixth century, as evidenced by poetry composed by members of that tribe.[127] The Ṣāliḥids and Tanūkhids also became Christian.[128] According-

122 Note also the contemporaneous Ethiopic inscription RIÉth 191, quoted in Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm" 155, which starts: "God is power and strength, God is power in battles."

123 Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 307; Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs* 147–149. A good overview on the topic is Fisher, *Between empires* 34–71, though it should be noted that Fisher all too easily equates the Arabic-speaking groups with "Arabs" and (graver still) "nomads."

124 Finster, Barbara, "Arabia in late antiquity: An outline of the cultural situation in the Peninsula at the time of Muhammad," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in context: Historical and literary investigations into the Qurʾānic milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 61–114, at 72.

125 Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 347–350. These inscriptions also buttress the idea that northern Arabia (as well as Arabia more generally) was a multi-linguistic zone. The Zabad inscription includes text in Arabic, Greek, and Syriac, while the Harran inscription is in Arabic and Greek.

126 Genequand, Denis, "The archaeological evidence for the Jafnids and the Naṣrids," in Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and empires before Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 172–213. However, the archaeological evidence mainly concerns and informs our understanding of the Ghassānids.

127 See the commentary by Lyall in al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, ii 154–159.

128 See Shahîd, Irfan, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the fifth century*, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1989, 268–269, and *Byzantium and the Arabs in the fourth century* 418–432; however, it must be noted that Shahîd's treatment of the (often late) sources is not critical but, rather, he takes the information at face value. He does not

ing to the surviving evidence, most north Arabian tribes embraced Christianity in its miaphysite form.[129] Adopting Christianity included some, but not always drastic, changes and developments in communal identities and affiliations, the effects spilling over to imperial politics as well.[130]

As Greg Fisher has noted, the conversion stories in Syriac and Greek sources are highly stereotypical, purporting to portray the miraculous conversions of "the barbarian/pagan Saracens": "These highly rhetorical accounts were designed to emphasise the perceived dramatic changes brought about by a new faith in God, and the rejection of a pagan past. Yet they leave little room for manoeuvre and tend to obscure the complex processes that accompanied 'conversion.'"[131] The narratives attribute to the Arabians beliefs that are not commonly attested in inscriptions authored by the Arabians themselves, such as worshipping the morning star, the sun, or other astral deities.[132] This literature should, then, be approached critically, as belles-lettres. For instance, the Syriac *Life of Aḥūdemmeh* tells the (hagiographical) story of the sixth-century miaphysite bishop Aḥūdemmeh, who was from the Mesopotamian town of Balad.[133] According to the work, Aḥūdemmeh was busy performing miracles and converting pagans, in particular *ṭayyāyē*, probably to be understood as a reference to Arabic-speaking groups in the region (and translated as "Arabs" below). The stories of the *ṭayyāyē* are highly literary:

> they lived in tents and were homicidal barbarians. They had many superstitions and were the most ignorant of all peoples of the land until the light of the Messiah shone upon them … he [Aḥūdemmeh] destroyed the

differentiate between contemporary and non-contemporary evidence, so his conclusions have to be taken with a grain of salt.

129 Fisher, *Between empires* 56–60; Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 281, cf. 314; Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the sixth century*, i/2 743. It appears that the Lakhmids followed the Christological dogma of the Church of the East: "From the first half of the fifth century, Nestorian Christianity [the Church of the East] began to spread among the Lakhmid Arabs on the lower Euphrates (though Monophysitism [miaphysitism] too made some headway among them). From the 540s the Ghassanid Arabs of the western areas adopted Monophysitism. Both tendencies marked a kind of independence vis-à-vis Constantinople. In the vast area under Ghassanid control, for example, Monophysites were relatively safe from imperial persecution," Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 120. But the evidence on this is somewhat conflicting; see Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 358, 362–363.

130 Fisher, *Between empires* 36.

131 Fisher, *Between empires* 37. For such narratives, see Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 277–278, 284–285, 289, 303–305.

132 Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 292–293; Grasso, "The gods of the Qurʾān" 303–305.

133 Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 351.

> temples that were used for their sacrifices and burnt the idols they contained. Some Arab camps resisted him and did not let him approach and did not listen to his preaching. He went away from them and prayed to God, and the stones to which they gave the names of gods were broken.[134]

These stories are very similar to the later Islamic-era narratives of conversion from paganism to Islam.[135] Such stories are, then, literary narratives first and foremost, following a set of motifs and topoi which underscore the ultimate triumph of monotheism (whether Christianity or Islam).[136] However, there is no reason to doubt the fact that many north Arabians, even the desert-dwelling ones, had converted to Christianity. For proof, one can for instance adduce a novel Safaitic inscription which, the editors suggest, stems from the fourth century CE:

> By Whbʾl son of Gyz son of ʾʿbs¹ son of Rfʾt son of ʿbṭ son of Ḫl son of Qṭṭ son of Ḏnbn and he grieved for his maternal uncle, the ʾs²ll-ite; O ʿsy [Jesus], help him [Whbʾl] against those who deny you [Jesus] (*h-ʿsy nṣr-h m-kfr-k*)[137]

Two north Arabian tribes, the Ghassānids and Lakhmids formed important polities in late antique north Arabia. The basic outline of the events, and the Christianization of these tribes, is rather well known to the historians of Arabia and Islam; for this reason, I will not dwell on these matters in this chapter. However, some notable aspects need to be summarized here. The Ghassānids and Lakhmids rose to important positions as allies and sort of buffer states of the Byzantine empire and the Sasanian empire toward the end of the third century CE.[138] In the scholarly literature (though not in contemporary

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134 *Life of Aḥūdemmeh*, in F. Nau (ed. and trans.), *Histoires d'Ahoudemmeh et de Marouta, métropolitains jacobites de Tagrit et de l'Orient* (VIe et VIIe siècles)*: Suivies du traité d'Ahoudemmeh sur l'homme* (Patrologia Orientalis 3/1), Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1903, 15–51, at 21, 23, trans. in Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 351–352.

135 On these stories, see the valuable study by Ibrahim, *Conversion to Islam*.

136 As Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 289, note: "for those who read or heard such stories, the drama of conversion was accentuated by ascribing to the converts an uncivilized, 'nomadic' existence away from the cities and the villages of the empire, and this, in turn, heightened the stature of the Christian protagonist of the story."

137 Al-Jallad, Ahmad and Ali al-Manaser, "The pre-Islamic divine name *ʿsy* and the background of the Qurʾānic Jesus," in *JIQSA* 6 (2021), 107–136, at 112.

138 The literature on the two tribes/polities and their involvement in the Roman-Persian wars is rather large. See, e.g., Howard-Johnston, James, "The two great powers in late antiquity: A comparison," in Averil Cameron (ed.), *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East III:*

evidence), they are sometimes called Jafnids and Naṣrids, respectively, according to their ruling houses. The reason for their being employed as vassals of the two great empires is interpreted by Robert Hoyland as follows: "Rome's struggle with a re-energised Iranian Empire led by the Sasanian dynasty (inaugurated in 224 CE) meant that it had an increased need for military manpower and allies. Peripheral people were thus incorporated in the Empire in larger numbers, and consequently they could negotiate with Rome on better terms."[139]

The Ghassānids first appear in two Ancient South Arabian inscriptions dated paleographically to ca. 260 and 360 CE.[140] To these can be added a late Nabataean Aramaic inscription found in al-Qaṭīʿa in the Ḥijāz that Robin (somewhat tentatively) dates to the third-fourth centuries on the basis of paleography. It reads: "Indeed be remembered the relative-in-law of Ḥārithat son of Zaydmanōt, king of Ghassān."[141] This Ḥārithat must be one of the earliest Ghassānid kings.

Thereafter, the Ghassānids appear more often in the epigraphic record and literary evidence, which also indicates their rising importance as a political power. The Jabal Usays inscription, dated to 528–529, was written by a per-

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States, resources and armies (Studies in late antiquity and early Islam), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1995, 157–226; Peters, Francis E. (ed.), *The Arabs and Arabia on the eve of Islam* (FCIW 3), Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999; Ball, Warwick, *Rome in the East: The transformation of an empire*, London: Routledge, 2000; Greatrex, Geoffrey and Samuel N.C. Lieu, *The Roman eastern frontier and the Persian wars: Part II, 363–630 AD*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2002; Shahîd, Irfan, *Rome and the Arabs: A prolegomenon to the study of Byzantium and the Arabs*, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1984; Dignas, Beate and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in late antiquity: Neighbours and rivals*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Toral-Niehoff, Isabel, "Late antique Iran and the Arabs: The case of al-Hira," in *Journal of Persianate Studies* 6 (2013), 115–126; Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra*; Genequand, Denis and Christian J. Robin (eds.), *Les jafnides: Des rois arabes au service de Byzance* (*VIe siècle de l'ère chrétienne*) (Orient & Méditerranée 17), Paris: De Boccard, 2015; Fisher, *Between empires*; Millar, *Religion, language and community*; Genequand, "The archaeological evidence."

139 Hoyland, Robert G., "Arab kings, Arab tribes and the beginnings of Arab historical memory in late Roman epigraphy," in Hannah M. Cotton et al. (eds.), *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and linguistic change in the Roman Near East*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 374–400, at 380. Or, as Garth Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth*, 119, puts it: "Like the Iberians and Armenians, the Arabs were caught up in the terrible tensions of the superpowers; unlike the mountain-dwellers, they enjoyed little natural isolation or protection."

140 Robin, Christian J., "Ghassān en Arabie," in Denis Genequand and Christian J. Robin (eds.), *Les jafnides*, 79–120, at 111–113.

141 Robin, "Ghassān en Arabie," 114; his reading and translation require modification as given here. The text reads, in transliteration, *bl dkyr nšyb ḥrtt br zydmnwtw mlk ʿšn*.

son that the Ghassānid king had sent for some sort of military activity: "I am Ruqaym son of Muʿarrif al-Awsī; the king al-Ḥārith [ibn Jabala] sent me to Usays as a guard [? *mslḥh/mtslḥh*, the interpretation is uncertain] in the year 4×100+20+3 [of the Province of Arabia = 528–529 CE]."[142] Al-Ḥārith's son al-Mundhir (*phylarch* of Byzantium 570–581) is remembered in an inscription from Resafa, reading, in Greek, "the fortune of al-Mundhir is victorious."[143] It is important to note that while both the Ghassānids and Lakhmids were (it appears) Arabic-speaking, they usually resorted to other languages, such as Greek, in writing. Though the two dynasties are often called "Arabs" in the literature, there is, as far as I know, no pre-Islamic evidence whatsoever that they used that ethnic designation themselves or emphasized Arab identity.

The bilingual (Parthian-Middle Persian) Paikuli inscription, dated 293 CE, is the first record of the Lakhmids.[144] In that text, the Lakhmid king ʿAmr (r. ca. 270–300) is mentioned among the vassals of the Sasanians. For the son of ʿAmr, we also have epigraphic evidence: in the Namara funerary inscription of 328 CE, the Lakhmid king Marʾ al-Qays ibn ʿAmr is claimed to have been the "King of all Arabs/Arabia" and to have subdued various Arabian tribes, raiding as far south as Najrān. However, the inscription does not mention the Persians at all; instead, it is said that they (the nobles of the subdued tribes?) became *phylarchs* for the Romans.[145] Hence, it cannot be assumed that the Lakhmids were the submissive clients of the Persians for three centuries but maintained some independence. The Lakhmids, like the Ghassānids, played an important role in the political struggle of sixth-century Arabia. In 524, at a conference near their capital, al-Ḥīra, various political actors tried to get the Lakhmids to intervene on their side in the events that followed the massacre of Chris-

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142 For the reading of this important inscription, see Larcher, Pierre, "In search of a standard: Dialect variation and new Arabic features in the oldest Arabic written documents," in Michael C.A. Macdonald (ed.), *The development of Arabic as a written language: Papers from the special session of the Seminar for Arabian Studies held on 24 July, 2009* (Supplement to the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 40), Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010, 103–112; Macdonald, Michael C.A., "The old Arabic graffito at Jabal Usays: A new reading of line 1," in Michael C.A. Macdonald (ed.), *The development of Arabic as a written language: Papers from the special session of the seminar for Arabian studies held on 24 July, 2009* (Supplement to the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 40), Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010, 141–142.

143 Cameron, Averil, *The Mediterranean world in late antiquity AD 395–700*, London: Routledge, ²2012, 174.

144 Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra*, 30.

145 Bellamy, James A., "A new reading of the Namārah inscription," in *JAOS* 105/1 (1985), 31–48.

tians in al-Najrān, for instance; they mostly sat out the conflict.[146] In the sixth-century conflicts between the Byzantines and the Sasanids, the Ghassānids and Lakhmids were employed as army units, fighting each other. However, their roles as buffer states and polities supported by the Byzantines and the Sasanids became smaller with time. The Lakhmid dynasty came to an end in 602 CE, when their king al-Nuʿmān III was killed by the Persians.[147]

After they had converted, both dynasties sponsored Christianity (in general and in the form that they championed in particular) by building churches, for instance. When their conversion happened is open to some debate. It is possible that already the fourth-century Lakhmid king Marʾ al-Qays ibn ʿAmr had converted to Christianity, though sometimes the Lakhmids' embrace of Christianity is dated to the late sixth century;[148] be that as it may, Arabic and non-Arabic sources suggest that the Lakhmids and the inhabitants of the area they ruled became majority-Christian before Islam, though it is naturally difficult to state this with any certainty.[149]

The Ghassānid ruler al-Ḥārith ibn Jabala (r. ca. 528–569) was personally involved, from the 540s onward, in protecting and supporting Christian—in particular miaphysite—monks, priests, and scholars.[150] The miaphysite monasteries of the area were distributed in a way that suggests that "they tended to be built near the residence of the Ghassanid princes."[151] A famous (then and later) building was the shrine of St Sergius and basilica in al-Ruṣāfa. According to the epigraphic evidence from the site, it was built by the Ghassānid ruler al-Mundhir (r. ca. 569–582).[152] Another site that was sponsored by the Ghassānids is the three-church complex in Nitl, a place ca. 10 kilometers east of Madaba.

146 Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 119–120.

147 Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 121.

148 Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 300–301, 359–361; Fisher, *Between empires* 69; according to this view, it was not until the (last) Lakhmid king al-Nuʿmān (r. ca. 583–602) when the dynasty openly embraced Christianity.

149 See the rich discussion in Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra* 151–211, and "The ʿIbād of al-Ḥīra: An Arab Christian community in late antique Iraq," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in context: Historical and literary investigations into the Qurʾānic milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 323–348.

150 However, note the cautious remarks in Genequand, "The archaeological evidence" 172, who notes that buildings that can be identified with certainty as having been sponsored by the Ghassānids are few in number; moreover, the Lakhmid buildings are only known from literary sources, since almost no archaeological work has been carried out in their domain.

151 Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 130.

152 Fisher, *Between empires* 52–53. The case of al-Ruṣāfa in Islamic times is further discussed in chapter 8.

FIGURE 3 Inscription UJadhGr 10
PHOTOGRAPH BY LAÏLA NEHMÉ, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION

However, identifying the individuals mentioned in the inscriptions from the site with certainty is difficult: in any case; the churches appear to have been built in the sixth century by the Ghassānid elite.[153]

2.4 *Christians in Western Arabia*

2.4.1 Epigraphic Evidence

Eleven new Greek inscriptions were published in 2018 from the localities of al-ʿArniyyāt and Umm Jadhāyidh, in Saudi Arabia, northwest from Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ (ancient Hegra). The localities lie a bit over 500 km via road from Medina.[154] They are undated[155] but, paleographically, can be dated between the second and early fourth centuries.[156] Some of them are clearly Christian: one inscription (UJadhGr 10) is accompanied by a cross,[157] and there are, in other inscriptions, onomastica that are specifically Christian.

153 See the discussion in Genequand, "The archaeological evidence," 179–180, 193–205.

154 This might sound like a long way (and one could exclude them as having nothing to do with the background to Islam), but it has to be remembered that the distance via road from Mecca to Medina is ca. 450 km. These distances are on the basis of Google Maps, following the probable supposition that the distances on the modern roads are somewhat similar to the routes taken by pre-modern travelers.

155 However, one of the texts can actually be understood as the date 175 (of the province = 281 CE), but this is not totally certain; Villeneuve, François, "The Greek inscriptions at al-ʿArniyyāt and Umm Jadhāyidh," in Laïla Nehmé, *The Darb al-Bakrah: A caravan route in North West Arabia discovered by Ali I. al-Ghabban: Catalogue of the inscriptions*, Riyadh: Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, 2018, 285–292, at 289.

156 Villeneuve, "The Greek inscriptions" 292.

157 Villeneuve, "The Greek inscriptions" 291. The word (a name?) following the cross is difficult to decipher, however.

FIGURE 4 Inscription ArGr1
PHOTOGRAPH BY LAÏLA NEHMÉ, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION

Another inscription (ArGr1) reads: “Remember Petros!”, a typical Christian name.[158] Another inscription reads “*theo*” which might be understood as invoking God in an ungrammatical form or might be an unfinished inscription that was meant to read *eis Theos*, “one God,” a very typical Greek inscription.[159]

As far as I know, only one *Arabic* inscription from northwestern Arabia (DaJ144PAr1) that can be classified with certainty as Christian has been published so far in a scholarly format; however, another one (DaJ000NabAr1) is also probably written by a Christian. Both derive from the same region.[160] Because of the scarcity of epigraphic evidence at the moment, Arabic poetry is our main source for Christianity in the region (see the next section). The unique Christian inscription DaJ144PAr1, found near al-Jawf (ancient Dūma), was published in 2017 by Laïla Nehmé. She gives the following translation:[161]

> May be remembered. May God (*al-ilāh*) remember Ḥgʿ{b/n}w son of Salama/Salāma/Salima {in} the m[onth] (gap) year 443 [AD 548/549] ☩

Following the text of the inscription, the writer has engraved a cross, indicating, in all likelihood, Christian identity. What is more, he uses *al-ilāh* to refer to God, which was (on the basis of surviving epigraphic evidence) the usual word employed by Arabic-speaking Christians.

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158 Villeneuve, “The Greek inscriptions” 285. As Villeneuve points out, the name Petros was rarely used by non-Christians.

159 See the discussion of the possibilities in interpreting this in Villeneuve, “The Greek inscriptions” 290.

160 But see the important new inscriptions posted and discussed online at https://alsahra.org/2017/09/. Though they are mostly not dated, they appear to be pre-Islamic according to paleography. Furthermore, one of them, https://i1.wp.com/alsahra.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/16.jpg, uses the standard Christian word *al-ilāh* to refer to God. It might also contain a cross in line 2, though it has been effaced somewhat. Laïla Nehmé is currently preparing a scholarly publication of these novel inscriptions, with the sigla HRahDA 1–12 (personal communication).

161 Nehmé, “New dated inscriptions” 128.

FIGURE 5 Inscription DaJ144PAr1 (on the left)
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE FRENCH-SAUDI-ITALIAN PROJECT IN DÛMAT AL-JANDAL/GUILLAUME CHARLOUX 2016, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION

The other inscription from the same region, DaJoooNabAr1, is undated but belongs paleographically to the fifth-sixth centuries. Since it refers to God as *al-ilāh*, it can be tentatively classified as a Christian inscription. It reads: "May God remember Mālikū son of …"[162]

Though the epigraphic evidence that is currently known to scholars is meager, it in any case suggests the presence of some Christians, at least, in (north)-western Arabia.[163] As mentioned above, Christians are well attested in the north and the south. The relative invisibility of them in the region of al-Ḥijāz is best explained by the fact that to begin with very little evidence (epigraphic or otherwise) has been found from there dating to the critical era of the fifth-sixth century (because it has not really been searched for). However, one key source has not been explored yet: Arabic poetry.

2.5 *Arabic Poetry*

An important source for, among other things, Christians and Christianity in northern, central, eastern, and western Arabia is formed by the so-called *jāhilī*, pre-Islamic Arabic poetry (which will also be a significant source for the discussion of gentile monotheism in the next chapter). The poetry has quite a few references to Christians and Christianity. This chapter has already explicated the strong presence of Christianity in Arabia, so this should not come as a surprise. For instance, the poet al-Aʿshā swears by "the lord of those who prostrate themselves in the evening" (*wa-rabbi l-sājidīna ʿashiyyatan*), referring to Christian prayer rituals.[164] Different poets also put forward phrases such as *bi-ḥamdi llāhi* / *bi-ḥamdi l-ilāhi* / *al-ḥamdu li-llāhi*, "glory to God!", which, in the pre-Islamic context, might point to Christian liturgical language.[165]

As for the poet al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, whose own religious affiliations remain somewhat murky in the tradition but who comes across as some sort

162 For the inscription, see Nehmé, "New dated inscriptions" 131. The stone slab is damaged, but the beginning can be reconstructed as [*dh*]*kr*, as Nehmé suggests.

163 *Pace* Shoemaker, *Creating the Qurʾan* 250. For another monotheist (possibly Christian) Arabic inscription from near Mecca, see al-Jallad, Ahmad and Hythem Sidky, "A Paleo-Arabic inscription on a route north of Ṭāʾif," in *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 2021, https://doi.org/10.1111/aae.12203, with a useful table on the published pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions (in Arabic script).

164 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 51. Compare this with Q 3:113, which notes that some among the People of the Book are upright, reciting God's words (*āyāt*) while prostrating (*wa-hum yasjudūn*). As will be discussed in this study, the Qurʾānic prescription to pray (*ṣallā*), and prostrate while doing it, would not have delineated the believers following Muḥammad from the People of the Book.

165 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 62.

of monotheist,[166] he praises his patrons, the Ghassānids, as pious Christians, and beseeches God (*Allāh*) to grant the Ghassānid king spring rains (*fa-ahdā lahu allāhu al-ghuyūtha l-bawākīrā*).[167] Two lines down, al-Nābigha says that "God has arranged for him [the king] the best creation; He [God] is his [king's] helper over/against the humankind" (*wa-rabba ʿalayhi llāhu aḥsana ṣunʿihi wa-kāna lahu ʿalā l-bariyyati nāṣirā*).[168] Moreover, he wishes that God confer on the Ghassānid king eternal life (*nasʾalu llāha khuldahū*),[169] a reference to the afterlife if we do not take *khuld* here to mean simply "longevity." The latter option is implausible, however. The next verse reads: "We[170] hope for the eternal life, if our lot wins; and we fear the lot of death, if [or: when] it comes overpowering (*naḥnu nurajjī l-khulda in fāza qidḥunā wa-narhabu qidḥa al-mawti in jāʾa qāhirā*)".[171] The word *qidḥ*, meaning "an arrow," specifically those used in the gambling game of *maysir* to draw lots, is here used, interestingly, in a monotheist context and metaphorically to refer to one's lot in the afterlife.[172] In yet another poem, al-Nābigha notes explicitly: "the recompense of men is in God's hands (*wa-ʿinda llāhi tajziyatu l-rijālī*)."[173] The requiting could naturally be this-worldly (as discussed in the next chapter), but in the case of al-Nābigha, one suspects that the hereafter is being evoked in the verse.

Elsewhere in al-Nābigha's corpus, there is also an interesting phrase concerning the Ghassānids: *majallatuhum dhātu l-ilāhi*,[174] which Nicolai Sinai understands as denoting that "the Ghassānids possessed a 'scripture' bestowed by 'the god.' "[175] However, one wonders if this should rather be interpreted as meaning, according to the literal understanding of the word *dhāt*, that their (the Ghassānids') scripture "contained" God (in the sense: it contained God's word, hence God spoke in and through it). It is impossible to say with any certainty what

166 On him, see Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the sixth century*, ii/1 221–232.

167 Ahlwardt, Wilhelm (ed.), *The divans of the six ancient Arabic poets: Ennābiga, ʾAntara, Tharafa, Zuḥair, ʾAlqama and Imruulqais*, London: Trübner, 1870, 12; Sinai, *Rain-giver* 29.

168 Ahlwardt (ed.), *The divans* 12; the second hemistich is mentioned in Sinai, *Rain-giver* 33.

169 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 33.

170 Here, as in the previous verse, the word "we" seems to denote the poet himself, not some larger group of people.

171 Ahlwardt (ed.), *The divans* 11.

172 Cf. "one's scales" (*mawāzīnuhu*) in Q 101:6–7: "the one whose scales [of good deeds] are heavy, will have a pleasing [after]life."

173 Ahlwardt (ed.), *The divans* 21.

174 Ahlwardt (ed.), *The divans* 3. Note the usage of *al-ilāh* for God, which was common among pre-Islamic Arabic-speaking Christians, as attested in the inscriptions. In the previous line of this poem, God is referred to as *Allāh*, however, so clearly these names were interchangeable (at least in the poetry).

175 Ahlwardt (ed.), *The divans* 11; Sinai, *Rain-giver*, 61.

such a book possessed by the Ghassānids might have been, but I would hazard a guess that, since the Ghassānids often used Greek in their official inscriptions and were allied to the Byzantine empire, this could refer to a Greek collection of books, perhaps but not necessarily the New Testament. The verse in question continues: "their law is firm; they can expect to get rewards [from God]" (*wa-dīnuhum qawīmun fa-mā yarjūna ghayra al-ʿawāqibī*).[176] Though God is rewarding (at least to the kings), al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī reminds us elsewhere that no one can hide from Him (literary: "a human being is not able to go behind God," *wa-laysa warāʾa llāhi li-l-marʾi madhabū*), so clearly God has the power to administer doom as well.[177]

Of particular interest for the present book is a verse by the Christian Arabic poet ʿAdī ibn Zayd, who was active in the Lakhmid capital of al-Ḥīra and elsewhere and apparently died some years before the beginning of Muḥammad's mission.[178] This verse refers to Mecca, which is important, since no pre-Islamic epigraphy has been collected from there, so our evidence of Meccan religious life is very patchy indeed.[179] Mecca was a recent town, perhaps founded in the late fifth century CE.[180] No pre-Islamic source refers to it (with the exception to the Arabic verses that will be discussed presently).[181] Later, Islamic-era, Arabic sources on the town contain conflicting and often unconvincing narratives on its role as a religious center in western Arabia. It appears that Mecca was a local pilgrimage center that was viewed as important by some (but not all) Arabians.[182]

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176 Ahlwardt (ed.), *The divans* 3. The ending (*fa-mā yarjūna ghayra al-ʿawāqibī*) is open to different interpretations. Perhaps the intended meaning could be that "they do not wish for anything but [just] outcomes [for their subjects when administering the law]."

177 Ahlwardt (ed.), *The divans* 5.

178 On him, see Dmitriev, who discusses a poem ascribed to ʿAdī about the creation of the cosmos (Dmitriev, Kirill, "An early Christian Arabic account of the creation of the world," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx [eds.], *The Qurʾān in context: Historical and literary investigations into the Qurʾānic milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 349–388). Dmitriev treats it as an authentic poem, though it was reworked somewhat during its transmission by Muslim scholars.

179 For the (possibly) pre-Islamic poems referring to Mecca, see Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the fifth century*, 393–399. For a discussion, see also Grasso, "The gods of the Qurʾān" 313–314.

180 Humphreys, R. Stephen, *Muʿawiya ibn Abi Sufyan: From Arabia to empire*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2006, 23.

181 See the thorough treatment by Morris, Ian D., "Mecca and Macoraba," in *al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 26/1 (2018), https://doi.org/10.7916/alusur.v26i1.6850.

182 Humphreys, *Muʿawiya*, 26, puts it aptly: "even if Mecca was not Jerusalem or Rome, the tradition about the sanctity of the Kaʿba is too strong and pervasive to be swept aside. We can be confident that Mecca was at least a regional pilgrimage center." For the connection

In the verse by ʿAdī ibn Zayd, he swears by "the lord of Mecca and of the cross" (*wa-rabbi makkata wa-l-ṣalībī*).[183] As Nicolai Sinai observes, this identifies God as the protector of Mecca *and* the cross (that is, Christianity).[184] Apparently, it was not an impossible idea for an Arabian Christian to deem Mecca, and possibly its sanctuary, to be protected by her or his God. Did some west Arabian Christians also make the pilgrimage to Mecca? That is possible, though no palpable evidence of this exists at the moment. In this connection, it should be noted that the later, Islamic-era writers identified a number of place names in and around Mecca that suggest that there were Christians living in or visiting Mecca.[185] For instance, al-Azraqī notes that there was a *maqbarat al-naṣārā*, "graveyard of the Christians," in Mecca (without qualifying it further).[186] Establishing the date (pre-Islamic? Islamic-era?) and existence of this graveyard is difficult, but one wonders what motivation the Muslim authors might have had for forging such information. Even more interesting in the context of ʿAdī ibn Zayd's verse is, perhaps, that the (very late) lexicographer al-Zabīdī notes that there was, near al-Muzdalifa, a *wādī*, river bed or valley, called Baṭn Muḥassir, noting: "it is said that it was the halting place of the Christians" (*mawqif al-naṣārā*),[187] which would suggest that some Christians took part in the pilgrimage rites in and around Mecca.

The whole poem of ʿAdī ibn Zayd from which this verse has been extracted is significant for present purposes.[188] It is a famous and lengthy poem, though of somewhat debated authenticity, which was purportedly written in impris-

between Christians and Mecca, see also Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 226–227.

183 ʿAdī ibn Zayd, *Dīwān ʿAdī ibn Zayd al-ʿIbādī*, ed. Muḥammad Jabbār al-Muʿaybid, Baghdad: Dār al-Jumhūriyya, 1385 AH/1965, 38. Al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī also appears to mention Mecca in a verse; see Ahlwardt (ed.), *The divans* 8. So does al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān al-Aʿshā al-kabīr*, ed. Muḥammad M. Ḥusayn, Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, n.d., 123 (no. 15). But these mentions of Mecca in the pre-Islamic Arabic poetical corpus have to be treated with a certain scepticism, as possible later interpolations.

184 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 52. Though note that swearing by *rabbi makkata wa-l-ṣalībī* could be understood somewhat differently: that ʿAdī is swearing "by the lord of Mecca and by the cross." Naturally, even in this instance, God, Mecca, and the cross are interlinked. I thank Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila (personal communication) for this interpretation.

185 These toponyms have been noted by el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 58; Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the fifth century* 390–392.

186 Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka* (*Die Chroniken der Stadt Mekka*), ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, 4 vols., Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1858–1861, 501.

187 Al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿArūs*, ed. ʿAbd al-Sattār A. Farrāj et al., 40 vols., Kuwait: Maṭbabat Ḥukūmat al-Kuwayt, 1975–2001, ix, 15.

188 ʿAdī ibn Zayd, *Dīwān* 37–41.

onment.[189] It contains other references to God as well, for instance, by concluding with the following statement of ʿAdī: "today I have trusted my affairs to the Lord who is near and responsive" (*wa-innī qad wakaltu l-yawma amrī ilā rabbin qarībin mustajībī*).[190] In one poem, ʿAdī underscores his Christian credentials: "By God—do accept my oath—I am [like] a monk, who raises his voice every time he prays (*innanī wa-llāhi fa-qbil ḥalfatī la-abīlun kulla-mā ṣallā jaʾar*)."[191]

Though religious matters are not in the forefront of his oeuvre, in another poem, ʿAdī ibn Zayd proclaims his belief in the afterlife and, specifically, God's judgment during the last days:

> On the day when God will protect you from His attack and He will greatly humiliate and impoverish His enemies, repent and thank God for His blessings—you will find that your God forgives [even] wrongdoing.
>
> *fa-l-yawma idh mā waqāka llāhu ṣurʿatahu wa-zāda aʿdāʾhu dhullan wa-imʿārā*
> *fa-staʿtibū wa-shkurū li-llāhi niʿmatahu tulfū ilāhakumū li-l-ẓulmi ghaffārā*[192]

It should be repeated that there is no scholarly consensus about the authenticity of ʿAdī ibn Zayd's poems. However, if these lines really stem from this sixth-century Christian Arabic poet, they are important evidence of the spread of Christianity, including the belief in the last judgment, among Arabic-speaking people in late antiquity. In these verses, not only is the judgment day men-

189 In his *Dīwān*, there are also other poems that were ostensibly written in prison; see, e.g., ʿAdī ibn Zayd, *Dīwān* 33. This could be a common motif for the transmitters of these poems, probably not all of them authentic, to frame them. On this poem and the formula *rabbi makkata wa-l-ṣalībī*, see also Hainthaler, Theresia, "ʿAdī ibn Zayd al-ʿIbādi, the pre-Islamic Christian poet of al-Hira and his poem nr. 3 written in jail," in *Parole de l'Orient* vol. 30 (2005), 157–172, at 169: "Is this formula authentic or due to a later reworking in Islamic times? If authentic then the formula would be a remarkable testimony of broad-mindedness within Christian circles—not totally impossible as such since it is reported that Christians took part in the pilgrimage to Mekka (though not at the ʿumra). If a revision, then it could make some contribution to the making of a national sanctuary (= Mekka) for the whole Arabian peninsula." She is right: the phrase is remarkable whether it is authentically pre-Islamic or a later addition by a Muslim (?) editor. Why would the latter link Mecca, and God, to Christianity?

190 ʿAdī ibn Zayd, *Dīwān* 41; Sinai, *Rain-giver* 51.

191 ʿAdī ibn Zayd, *Dīwān* 61.

192 ʿAdī ibn Zayd, *Dīwān* 55

tioned, but it is also emphasized that one should repent before (or, at the very least, on) that day. It is also worth noting that ʿAdī ibn Zayd's poem mentions that God is forgiving—even as regards blatant wrongdoing (*al-ẓulm*). This topic surfaces in another poem too, a verse of which reads: "May God be merciful to everyone who weeps because of wrong deeds: every weeper will find that their sins are forgiven" (*raḥima llāhu man bakā li-l-khaṭāyā kullu bākin fa-dhanbuhu maghfūrū*).[193]

In this connection the famous poet al-Aʿshā should also be treated, since he was also possibly of Christian affiliation (though this is not certain).[194] God as a helper in battle has already surfaced in this chapter, in the connection of the Yemeni-Ethiopian wars of the sixth century. In one poem, al-Aʿshā tells his patron that he has surely found God to be powerful against his enemies (*wajadta l-ilāha ʿalayhim qadīrā*).[195] Addressing (purportedly) Qays b. Maʿdīkarīb, the leader of the central Arabian tribe of Kinda, al-Aʿshā notes: "God (*al-ilāh*) has guarded you with it [scil. rule, *al-mulk*, mentioned in the previous verse] when the great things were divided among people."[196] In another poem, panegyrizing (ostensibly) Hawdha b. ʿAlī al-Ḥanafī, the leader of the Banū Ḥanīfa, al-Aʿshā mentions that Hawdha has ransomed a hundred men. He elaborates on this:

> Through them [the ransomed], he [Hawdha] has offered a sacrifice on the Easter day; he is keeping God in mind in what he carries out and does.
>
> He [Hawdha] is not seeking by it [the offering] to do a favor that he will be rewarded for [in this life by mortals]; when he says a word of good, he helps [people] with it.

bi-him taqarraba yawma l-fiṣḥi ḍāḥiyatan yarjū l-ilāha bi-mā saddā wa-mā ṣanaʿā
wa-mā arāda bi-hā nuʿmā yuthābu bi-hā in qāla kalimata maʿrūfin bi-hā nafaʿā[197]

193 ʿAdī ibn Zayd, *Dīwān* 86.

194 On him, see Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the sixth century*, ii/1 272–278. Shahîd makes the interesting point that al-Aʿshā refers to God fifteen times and always as *al-ilāh*.

195 Al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān* 97 (no. 12). Since al-Aʿshā's *Dīwān* is published in editions with different paginations, though the editor is the same (Ḥusayn), I will also include the number of the poem as reference.

196 Al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān* 49 (no. 5).

197 Al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān* 111 (no. 13).

However, as in al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī's case, no clear or explicit self-identification makes al-Aʿshā a Christian.[198] Naturally, as has been the argument in this chapter and throughout this book, we should resist assigning rigid identities to people in history who might have not seen themselves and their affiliations in such a straightforward manner. In any case, pre-Islamic Arabic poetry is overwhelmingly monotheist; this matter will be explored in more detail in the next chapter under the rubric "gentile monotheism."

To sum up this chapter's treatment of Arabic poetry, it contains important evidence of Arabic-speaking individuals' having embraced Christianity—either fully or at least having being influenced by Christian ideas and discourse. It also offers some hints of Mecca as being venerated by local Christians as sacred, though naturally the authenticity of these specific verses is up for debate. In the verses of ʿAdī ibn Zayd, al-Aʿshā, and al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, God is called upon to forgive sins, guard the panegyrized sovereign, and help in battle, for example. The poems also evince, albeit rarely, beliefs about the afterlife.

3 Conclusions

Though quantitative data is impossible to come by, the available evidence suggests, at least tentatively, that Christians were the most numerous religious group in north Arabia on the eve of Islam. In the south, Christian communities existed, though they were perhaps a minority there. This is the Arabia where Muḥammad was born in the second half of the sixth century. As regards material evidence, even al-Ḥijāz is not the "empty" space that it was once deemed to be: in fact, epigraphic texts written by and referring to both Jews and Christians have been found and published, as this and the previous chapter have demonstrated.[199] That no material remains of Judaism or Christianity have been found in or around the immediate vicinity of Mecca and Medina is due to the fact that no systematic epigraphic surveys or archaeological excavations of pre-Islamic (and, more particularly, late antique) material remains have been carried out

198 In fact, one verse, al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān* 21 (no. 2), disparages Christians, mentioning "Christians' circumambulating the temple of the idol (*ṭawf al-naṣārā bi-bayt al-wathan*)". But this could be a later forgery by a Muslim scholar transmitting the poems who wanted to claim that Christians' rites include or are tantamount to idolatry (though the exact reference of "circumambulating the temple of the idol" is opaque).

199 See Montgomery, James E., "The empty Hijaz," in James E. Montgomery (ed.), *Arabic theology, Arabic philosophy: From the many to the one: Essays in celebration of Richard M. Frank* (OLA 152), Leuven: Peeters, 2006, 37–97.

there.[200] Because this is the case, one cannot posit that there were no Christians in these two towns. The argument from silence only works if there is *some* evidence.[201] The Christian inscriptions closest to Medina are from ca. 500 km to the northwest.[202] This might sound like a long way, but the distance is approximately the same as that between Mecca and Medina. What is more, one inscription, probably pre-Islamic and possibly Christian, stems from Rīʿ al-Zallālah on a route north of Ṭāʾif and has recently received a new reading.[203] The distance between Rīʿ al-Zallālah and Mecca is less than 100 km (on road).

If the Qurʾānic material called Meccan and Medinan really derives from the prophet's activities in those towns, the presence of at least some Christians in them is evident. The Arabic poetry also suggests Christians living in or visiting Mecca. Because of these two sets of evidence—the Qurʾān and the poetry—and the fact that epigraphy evidences Christians to the north and to the south of Mecca and Medina, one would be on safer ground supposing the existence of Christian communities or at least individuals residing in the two towns rather than supposing their non-existence. Moreover, it has been noted that later, Islamic-era, literature contains Meccan toponyms ostensibly referring to the presence of Christians, such as the *maqbarat al-naṣārā*, "the graveyard of the Christians."

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200 See King, "Settlement in Western and Central Arabia" 185–192. For rare glimpses of what might be found, if surveys were to be carried out, see the unpublished inscriptions treated preliminarily by al-Jallad in blog posts, "What was spoken at Yathrib"; "A new Paleo-Arabic text."

201 Cf. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 206–207: "Although Christianity had literally encircled the Hijaz by Muhammad's lifetime, there is simply no evidence of a significant Christian community in either Mecca or Medina." As Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 211, himself notes in another connection: "as the dictum goes, absence of evidence … cannot be evidence of absence, *especially when reasons for the absence can be supplied*" (emphasis added). In the case of Mecca and Medina, the reasons for the absence of evidence of Christianity are quite simple since no one has been looking for them on the ground. Similarly to Shoemaker, see Dye, "Mapping the sources of the Qur'anic Jesus" 153, n. 3: "Christianity encircled Western Arabia, but that does not imply it was similarly widespread in Western Arabia: no evidence speaks for that (either materially or in the literary sources), and scanty knowledge of Western Arabia does not allow us to imagine whatever we want." However, as I have argued in this chapter, the presence of Christians in western Arabia is not merely a figment of one's imagination. As this book has time and again noted, all Arabian epigraphic evidence from the fifth and sixth century is monotheist, and this is true as regards western Arabia as well. Inscriptions published by Villeneuve, "The Greek inscriptions," suggest that at least some Christians were present very early on in western Arabia.

202 Villeneuve, "The Greek inscriptions."

203 Al-Jallad and Sidky, "A Paleo-Arabic inscription."

During the Islamic era, Arabian Christians continued to exist and, indeed, thrive. Christianity survived in Yemen at least until the twelfth century CE (and Judaism up to this day).[204] Elsewhere in Arabia too, we have evidence of Christians at least until the ninth century CE (see chapter 8). Unfortunately, we have little evidence that would proffer information about what type of Christians the ones living in Arabia were. One should suppose that a diversity of beliefs and practices existed among them, as Jack Tannous has argued in the case of late antique and early medieval Near Eastern Christians.[205] The evidence that exists suggests that many churches in and around Arabia subscribed to the miaphysite doctrine, but this does not mean that the majority of Christians would have understood the finer subtleties of the trinity and incarnation. The Church of the East, with its non-Chalcedonian, non-miaphysite, Christology, was present in the eastern parts of Arabia (and continued to exist in the Islamic era). As for the Yemenite king Abraha's Sabaic inscriptions, they have been understood as articulating a peculiar, low, Christology, Jesus being relegated to a role secondary to and different from God, as "His Messiah." If this is correct, it points toward a variety of views as regards the dogmata not only among the laity but the powers-to-be as well. One should also suppose much local variety among Arabian Christians, with many visiting and venerating Arabian places (such as the Kaʿba) which were unknown to other Christians outside Arabia. Such local developments are known in many places where Christians (and other religious communities) have been present:[206] why not in Arabia too?

204 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 205.

205 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 7, argues "against adopting a heavily theological understanding of the Christian communities in the post-Chalcedonian Middle East."

206 For more discussion of local, global, shared, and contested sacred spaces in late antiquity, see, e.g., Heyden, Katharina, "Construction, performance, and interpretation of a shared holy place: The case of late antique Mamre (Rāmat al-Khalīl)," in *Entangled Religions* 11/1 (2020), https://doi.org/10.13154/er.11.2020.8557; and the articles in Day et al. (eds.), *Spaces in Late Antiquity*, in particular, Hakola, Raimo, "Galilean Jews and Christians in context: Spaces shared and contested in the eastern Galilee in late antiquity," in Juliette Day et al. (eds.), *Spaces in late antiquity: Cultural, theological and archaeological perspectives*, Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2016, 141–165.

CHAPTER 4

Gentiles

1 Introduction

This chapter deals with a group of people who were not considered, and did not consider themselves, Jews or Christians: the Gentiles. I mentioned above that the delineation into Jews and Christians was often not stark. The same is true as regards Jews and gentiles; and Christians and gentiles (in the sense of people who were not Jews nor Christians).[1] There were numerous ways for gentile individuals and groups to participate in the life, religious life too, of Jews or Christians (and vice versa).[2] To quote Paula Fredriksen on gentile-Jewish interactions in antiquity:

> Just as pagans could be found visiting with Israel's god in his temple's precincts, they also could be found, variously affiliated, in the synagogues of western diaspora cities. There they could listen to biblical traditions sung out in their own vernacular, Greek, becoming acquainted with a powerful god without having to journey to Jerusalem. Synagogue inscriptions gratefully acknowledged the donations of generous pagan benefactors. A priestess of the imperial cult funded the construction of a synagogue building. Alexandrian pagans joined with Jews to feast together annually in celebration of the scriptures' translation into Greek. Gentile

1 This is how the Qurʾān uses words indicating gentile identity (= not Jewish or Christian), so it will be for the most part retained here for analytical purposes. I will use the words "pagan" and "gentile" mostly as synonyms here to denote a person who is not Jewish or Christian, though in some contexts "gentile" refers to non-Jewish specifically. I prefer the word "gentile" over "pagan" since the latter is pejorative while, in the Qurʾān and some other texts, the gentile identity put forward is thoroughly positive. "Gentile" also suggests ethnic identity, which is indeed how the Qurʾān conceptualized gentileness.

2 See the important studies by Kahlos, Maijastina, *Debate and dialogue: Christian and pagan cultures c. 360–430*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, and *Religious dissent in late antiquity, 350–450*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. As Maxwell remarks, the categories of "Christian" and "pagan" are ambivalent (Maxwell, Jaclyn, "Paganism and Christianization," in Scott F. Johnson [ed.], *The Oxford handbook of late antiquity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 849–875, at 864). "Christians" followed ancient "pagan" traditions, regardless of their level of commitment to Christianity. Similarly, "pagans" participated in "Christian" festivals.

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> town councilors involved themselves in synagogue activities and projects. One pagan city [i.e., Apamea] even minted coins bearing an image of Noah's ark.[3]

It has to be borne in mind that the words "pagan" or "gentile" do not refer to social categories that people would usually use for themselves.[4] Rather, they were catchall terms used by outsiders who used them to lump together people who believed or behaved differently than they did. They are an example of a common human cognitive process to categorize the world dichotomously. Thomas Jürgasch, discussing how late antique Latin Christian writers used the term *paganus*, poses an important question: "If, as I claim, pagans are to be considered as a Christian invention, in what sense did they exist?"[5] By dedicating a chapter to "gentiles," I do not mean to say that the people and their ideas that I am going to survey should be understood as forming a single phenomenon. They were nothing if not diverse.

In the context of the Byzantine empire, regarding which there is a large amount of scholarship, it appears that Christianization (meaning: people converting to Christianity; churches, monasteries, and other places of worship and sanctity being built; institutions and rulers supporting Christianity; and so on) was a very slow process. The conventional narrative emphasizes the importance of the emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century, but more recent scholarship has problematized the significance of this singular event.[6]

Granted, the fourth-sixth centuries were crucial in the development where the space for the "pagans" (that is, non-Christians and non-Jews) started to become narrow, though traditional practices and identities survived in some circles for centuries.[7] In any case, Byzantine laws prohibited pagan practices,[8] Christian bigots destroyed ancient temples, and the emperor Justinian (r. 527–

3 Fredriksen, *When Christians were Jews* 140.

4 But see chapter 5 on how the gentile identity was invoked by the prophet as a positive marker.

5 Jürgasch, "Christians and the invention of paganism" 116. See also Maxwell, "Paganism" 852: "The most common term for ancient Mediterranean religions, *paganism*, is problematic, yet difficult to replace. Originally, there was no overarching name for the various forms of traditional religion in the ancient Mediterranean. The concept of paganism was a creation of Christians who aimed to define their religious rivals as a coherent group."

6 E.g., Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 3: "one might ask whether this traditional narrative [regarding the sudden change in the fate of Christianity after the emperor Constantine's conversion] is really compelling."

7 Maxwell, "Paganism" 850.

8 See a list of significant legislative attempts at coercion in Maxwell, "Paganism" 862.

565) championed the forced baptism of the pagans;[9] this coincided with the rise of anti-Jewish polemics.[10] However, as remarked by Jaclyn Maxwell, "we should note that conflicts among Christian sects resulted in more bloodshed than those between Christians and pagans. Likewise, Christian emperors devoted more effort to outlawing heresies than they did to paganism."[11] The Christianization of the Byzantine empire was a slow process; there is certainly not one moment which we can pinpoint and say that, at this instant, the empire became "Christian."

One important facet of the late antique religious map was the rise of gentile monotheism (or at least henotheism)[12] in various forms.[13] One was the cult of Theos Hypsistos, "the highest God," which flourished in the eastern Mediterranean in antiquity and late antiquity.[14] This gentile cult formed in debate and dialogue with Jews and Christians of the region. However, not all references to Theos Hypsistos are gentile, since this is how the Greek-speaking Jews also referred to God.[15] In many instances, scholars struggle to categorize the Hypsistarians in question. As Stephen Mitchell notes: "The difficulty lies in the fact that most 'pagan' or 'Jewish' examples of the term Theos Hypsistos are formally

9 Maxwell, "Paganism" 859.

10 Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 111, notes that, around the Mediterranean, "the legal and social situation of the Jews seriously deteriorated from the end of the fourth century."

11 Maxwell, "Paganism" 861.

12 Henotheism is the belief that, though there may be many divine agents, one of them is more important and more powerful than the rest. Drawing a line between monotheism, henotheism, and polytheism is not easy. As Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 5, notes: "*Polytheism* means belief that the divine realm is populated by a plurality of gods of broadly comparable status, not fully subordinated to or comprehended within a single god of higher status … *Monotheism* means belief in one unique god to the exclusion of all others. It need hardly be added that to use language at all in regard to such matters is to betray the subtlety of human thought and intuition. Monotheism in particular is much more ambiguous as a reality than its definition might lead one to expect. Space has to be allowed for angels, and for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity." Note also Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 34–35: "the traditional distinction of polytheistic versus monotheistic religions is not always particularly useful from a heuristic viewpoint."

13 See the valuable studies in Athanassiadi, Polymnia and Michael Frede (eds.), *Pagan monotheism in late antiquity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.

14 Mitchell, Stephen, "The cult of Theos Hypsistos between pagans, Jews, and Christians," in Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (eds.), *Pagan monotheism in late antiquity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Maxwell, "Paganism" 854: "pagan monotheism should be seen as an example of the diversity within ancient Mediterranean religions and philosophies, and as a reminder that it was not a coherent system. Pagan monotheism did not necessarily lead to a yearning for Jewish or Christian monotheism."

15 Mitchell, "The cult of Theos Hypsistos" 110.

indistinguishable from one another and that the arguments for assigning them to either category are rarely decisive."[16] These classification efforts may, hence, say more about the modern-day scholars' wish to find clear-cut categories than their objects of study.

The Arabian context aligns rather neatly with these general developments in the Byzantine empire and the Near East. Polytheism and cult stones are attested until the fourth century CE; thereafter, monotheist beliefs, in different forms, started to hold sway.

2 Idolatry and Polytheism in Arabia

The Safaitic inscriptions are especially significant evidence for north Arabia because they are voluminous (tens of thousands are published in scholarly works), rather well-understood, and paint a vibrant picture of the religious beliefs of their writers, the inhabitants of the Syro-Jordanian basalt stone desert (*ḥarra*). Although their exact range of dates is unclear, they are conventionally understood to stem from a few centuries before and after CE (some events mentioned in them refer to, for example, the kingdom of Nabataea, which came to an end in 106 CE). Hence, though the Safaitic inscriptions (or some of them) might be contemporary with Jesus, they are not contemporary with Muḥammad.[17] The vast majority of them can be classified as graffiti (non-commissioned inscriptions). As mentioned in chapter 1, the language of these inscriptions is a form of Arabic, though their script is a variety of the Ancient North Arabian script family (in contrast to the Arabic script derived from Nabataean Aramaic).

The Safaitic inscriptions attest religious rituals, such as sacrificing animals (*ḏbḥ*)[18] or dedicating (*qṣy*) an animal in a rock drawing to a deity. More rarely, writers mention going on a pilgrimage (*ḥg*); unfortunately, they rarely say

16 Mitchell, "The cult of Theos Hypsistos" 112. Stroumsa's comment in *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 12, seems odd: "pagan monotheism is a far cry from Abrahamic monotheism, either of the Jewish or of the Christian persuasion." As he acknowledges elsewhere (p. 43) in the same work, there were "dynamic contacts between pagan and monotheistic religions … Such trends [including pagan monotheism] reflect the existence of what we can call a religious *koinē*, a shared religious platform."

17 However, a novel Safaitic inscription, possibly from the fourth century, appears to mention Jesus. See al-Jallad and al-Manaser, "The pre-Islamic divine Name *ʿsy*." If the suggested dating is correct, the end date for the Safaitic corpus might have to be revised and moved somewhat later (at least to the fourth century) than previously supposed.

18 Animal sacrifices are attested in *jāhiliyya* poetry and the archaeological record as well.

where they went.[19] Ababneh and Harahsheh have analyzed Safaitic inscriptions containing the verb *ḏbḥ*, noting that it sometimes appears in connection with a deity when the meaning "to sacrifice/offer as a sacrifice" appears to be intended; at other times, the verb occurs alone, in which case the signification might be simply "to slaughter."[20] To give one example of such an inscription:

> By Tm son of ʾKzm son of Lʿṯmn [is this inscription], and he sacrificed for (*wḏbḥ l-*) Gadḍaif [a tribal deity]. O Lāt (*fhlt*) [grant] peace and protection from misfortune (*wwqyt m bʾs¹*).[21]

Quite a few deities feature in the Safaitic corpus, many of which are identifiable with the ones mentioned in the Qurʾān and later Arabic literature as being among the deities that the pre-Islamic polytheists worshipped: for example, *ʾlh*, *ʾlt*, *ḏs²r(y)/ds²r(y)*, and *rḍw/rḍy*,[22] corresponding to Allāh, Allāt,[23] Dhū al-Sharā, and Ruḍā in Classical Arabic. The inscriptions reveal that the writers sought refuge in the deities when times were tough:

> By S¹ʿd son of S¹wʾt son of Lmʾ [is this inscription] and may Rḍw help him through divine favor, as there is danger here, and may he bless him.[24]

> By {ʾnʿm} [is this inscription] and O {Gdʿwḏ}, O Merciful One (*h rḥm*) and O One who causes death (*h ymyt*), and O Rḍw, may the people be established [in this place].[25]

One of the forms of animal sacrifice was that a camel was killed on the death of its owner; Stetkevych, *The mute immortals* 40; Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs* 163–166, 175.

19 Al-Jallad, *An outline of the grammar* 217; *The religion and rituals of the nomads of pre-Islamic Arabia: A reconstruction based on the Safaitic inscriptions*, Leiden: Brill, 2022.

20 Ababneh, Mohammad I. and Rafe Harahsheh, "Sacrifice in the Safaitic inscription in the light of new evidence," in *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 68/1 (2015), 29–48, at 30; al-Jallad, *The religion and rituals* 17–26.

21 Ababneh and Harahsheh, "Sacrifice" 32.

22 Al-Jallad, *An outline of the grammar* 210.

23 There is an important, though by now somewhat dated, treatment of this deity by Krone, Susanne, *Die altarabische Gottheit al-Lāt*, Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1992.

24 AWS 218 in al-Jallad, *An outline of the grammar* 226. The readings of this and the following Safaitic inscriptions are from Al-Jallad, *An outline of the grammar*. The translations have been modified if deemed necessary.

25 C 4351 in al-Jallad, *An outline of the grammar* 241.

The writers of the Safaitic inscriptions often mention the powers in the region: Nabataeans, Romans, and Persians. In the following example, in addition to "Caesar," erecting (*nṣb*) a sacred stone for, or representing, a deity, Aythaʿ, is mentioned.

> By Nʿmn son of Ḫbyṯ son of Nṣr son of Nʿmn son of Nṣr son of {Grmʾl} son of Kn son of Nʿmn son of Wʿl son of Rbn son of S^{2}ʿr son of Kn son of Ṭḥrt son of Hys^{1}r son of Bʾs^2 son of Ḍf [is this inscription] and he erected (*nṣb*) [a sacred stone of the deity] ʾṯʿ [Aythaʿ] the year Caesar sent reinforcements to the province and restored order to the province and the lineage of ʾs^{1}hm was defeated, for the lineage of Mlk and ʿm the ʿbs^{2}ite and ʾs^1 of the lineage of Frṯ and he/those of the lineage of Yẓr had [all] made war upon them.[26]

Sacred stones, representing deities, are rather widely attested in the archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidence of ancient Arabia.[27] In what follows, we encounter one such example from the late Nabataean inscriptions.

The Safaitic corpus hails from the north, modern-day Jordan and Syria and, it is assumed, the epigraphic habit of writing in Safaitic script does not continue after the fourth century CE (and, in fact, most of the corpus appears to stem from an earlier time than that, being contemporary with the Nabataean kingdom, which lasted until 106 CE). Hence, they cannot be taken as evidence of religious phenomena on the eve of Islam, since they predate Muḥammad by about half a millennium. We are taken closer to the time and geographical location of the prophet with the late Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions found in northwestern Arabia. Though the inscriptions (all graffiti, it should be noted) that I adduce below are all undated, paleographically they appear to stem from the second-fourth centuries.[28] However, I should underscore that even they are centuries earlier than Muḥammad. In any case, they are of utmost importance for their era.

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26 MISSD 1 in al-Jallad, *An outline of the grammar* 273.

27 Al-Jallad, *The religion and rituals* 26–37; Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs* 183–187.

28 See the magisterial studies by Laïla Nehmé: "Epigraphy on the edges"; *The Darb al-Bakrah*; "The religious landscape of Northwest Arabia as reflected in the Nabataean, Nabataeo-Arabic, and pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions," in Fred M. Donner and Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee (eds.), *Scripts and scripture: Writing and religion in Arabia circa 500–700 CE* (Late antique and medieval Islamic Near East 3), Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2022, 43–86. Though the inscriptions are called "late Nabataean," according to their script, they postdate the fall of the Nabataean kingdom.

FIGURE 6 Inscription UJadhNab 237
THE PHOTOGRAPH BY LAÏLA NEHMÉ, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION

Some of the graffiti are quite short, reading, for instance, "May al-ʿUzzā listen (*šmʿt ʾlʿzy*) to ʾA{z/r}m [the writer of the inscription]."[29] Others are more extensive. For instance, the very interesting inscription UJadhNab 237 reads:[30]

1 *dʾ ʾlt dy bnh ʿnmw br*
2 *{d/r}----{r}wp.w bšl{m}*

1 This is Allāt, which was made by Ghanm/Ghānim son of
2 {D/R}---{r}wp. and in salvation (?).

Nehmé notes that the inscription was found near a built structure, which may or may not be related to it (it might naturally be centuries later). The text mentions the goddess Allāt and, furthermore, that the person called Ghanm/Ghānim (probably the same one who engraved the text) "built" or "made" (*bnh*) Allāt. As Nehmé suggests, this would probably mean that the stone and the inscription, in a way, represent Allāt.[31] Above, I adduced a Safaitic inscription that mentioned erecting (*nṣb*) the deity, Aythaʿ. This Nabataean Aramaic

29 UJadhNab 364 in Nehmé, *Darb al-Bakrah* 171. The remark in Nehmé, *The Darb al-Bakrah* 90, is important: "Note that these texts contain the first attestations of the verb *šmʿ* in Nabataean, and because the suffix conjugation does not have an optative force in Aramaic whereas it is constantly used in wishes, prayers and curses with an optative meaning in Arabic, it is possible that these texts are in fact Arabic."
30 Nehmé, *The Darb al-Bakrah* 157.
31 Nehmé, *The Darb al-Bakrah* 157.

inscription appears to evidence a similar belief where deities could inhabit, or be represented by, stones.[32]

Other deities are also mentioned. One writer engraved the following: "Māsikū the Nabataean, may he be safe in the presence of Manātū the goddess (*mntw ʾlhtʾ*)."[33] The self-identification on the part of the writer as a Nabataean in this inscription is interesting, since paleographically the text appears to post-date the end of the Nabataean kingdom (106 CE) by a century or two. Some writers of late Nabataean inscriptions maximize their chances in the eyes of the gods. One text reads: "May Barnaʿarat be safe in the presence of all the gods (*ʾlhyʾ klhm*)."[34]

The Safaitic and late Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions are important evidence for the longevity of beliefs in and worship of many gods, which can be represented by stones, until the fourth century—but not later. As mentioned in chapter 2, the South Arabian (Sabaic) evidence too is entirely monotheist after the fourth century. No Arabian inscription with features of or references to idols or polytheism has been found to date after the fourth century CE. The fifth-sixth century evidence is categorically monotheist, which I would interpret as meaning that Judaism, Christianity, and other forms of monotheism had become the salient religions and affiliations among the majority of the inhabitants of the peninsula. Naturally, there might have been pockets of polytheism and related phenomena: as will be seen in the next chapter, the Qurʾān, at least, does not accept all people in its environment as monotheists or believers.[35]

The evidence about such pockets in the sixth century is very meager, however.[36] The next example does not concern western Arabia properly speaking. It comes from the pen of the anonymous "Piacenza Pilgrim," who wrote his Latin *Itinerarium* sometime in the 570s. He started off from his hometown, Piacenza,

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32 Cult stones were rather widely used in the region, not only in Arabia but also the Negev and Sinai; Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 271.

33 UJadhNab 295 in Nehmé, *The Darb al-Bakrah* 163.

34 UJadhNab 228 in Nehmé, *The Darb al-Bakrah* 156.

35 On a surviving "pagan" pocket in the later, Islamic-era, Near East, see Hämeen-Anttila, Jaakko, "Continuity of pagan religious traditions in tenth-century Iraq," in A. Panaino and G. Pettinato (eds.), *Ideologies as intercultural phenomena: Proceedings of the third annual symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian intellectual heritage project*, Milan: IsIAO, 2002, 89–108.

36 This is also true of the evidence of polytheism in the fifth century. But see Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity," 297, 302. See Retsö, *The Arabs in antiquity*, 518, for Christian stories that suggest that Arabians ate unclean meat and worshipped idols. However, these late antique Christian narratives (like the one by the "Piacenza Pilgrim," adduced here) are highly stylized and stereotyped, as noted in the previous chapter.

and made the pilgrimage to the holy land. The author describes witnessing a sacred stone, and rites related to it, on Mount Sinai:

> And on this mountain, on a part of the mountain, the Saracens have set up their own idol, made of marble white as snow. Here also their priest resides, dressed in a dalmatic and a linen cloak. When the time of their festival arrives with the new moon, before the moon has risen on the day of their feast, the marble begins to change colour; as soon as the moon appears, when they begin to worship, the marble turns black as pitch. When the time of the festival is over, it returns to its original colour. We were totally amazed by this.[37]

Though there is no reason to doubt this witness as such, a few caveats are in order: First, the location is Mount Sinai, not the Arabian Peninsula. Second, though it is probable that the "Saracens" in the text would describe speakers of Arabic, this is not certain. Third, the account contains legendary aspects (the marble changing color).

Some pre-Islamic Arabic poems also attest to belief in many gods (or gods other than Allāh) and sacrifices on cult stones. However, though the Islamic-era Arabic prose literature is keen on highlighting the polytheist and idolatrous nature of the Arabs in the *jāhiliyya* (pre-Islamic era of "ignorance"), the pre-Islamic poetry that has survived is actually *not* rife with such evidence. References to deities other than Allāh or idols are not very common, though they appear sporadically.[38] Rather, as recently highlighted by Nicolai Sinai and as will be surveyed in the next section, the *jāhiliyya* poetry, in general, evinces monotheist or henotheist beliefs.[39] The other gods pale in comparison to the popularity of Allāh.

In the poem of Ṭarafa, a line mentions sacrificial stones (*anṣāb*) and blood that is poured, or flows because animals are sacrificed, on them.[40] It reads: "By your fortune (*jaddika*) and the *anṣāb* among which blood flows/is poured

37 Piacenza Pilgrim, *Travelogue* 38, trans. in Caner, Daniel F., *History and hagiography from the late antique Sinai*, with contributions by Sebastian Brock, Richard M. Price and Kevin van Bladel (Translated Texts for Historians 53), Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010, 258.

38 See the list in Sinai, *Rain-giver* 19, n. 81: Wadd, Allāt, al-ʿUzzā, and the tribal god Yaʿbūb occur, but infrequently or only once in the corpus.

39 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 19, 57–63.

40 This brings to mind Q 6:145, which mentions *dam masfūḥ*, "poured/flowing blood" as one of the illicit foodstuffs. See chapter 6 for the gentile purity and dietary regulations in the Qurʾān.

(*yusfaḥu baynahunna dam*), I have not ridiculed you!"[41] The word *jadd* can be understood as referring to fortune; however, in the Safaitic inscriptions it often refers to a personified god, "the fortune," attached to a tribe or people.[42] It is difficult to say if this could be the intended meaning here; probably not. In any case, even Ṭarafa refers to Allāh when invoking a deity in another poem: "Every friend that I used to associate with—may God not leave them with splendor" (*kullu khalīlin kuntu khālaltuhu lā taraka llāhu lahu wāḍiḥah*).[43] In this short poem, Ṭarafa is talking about his people that have forsaken and deceived him: hence the curse against them.

In any case, this is what we have in the evidence: no sixth-century inscription attests polytheism, cult stones, or idolatry. There are only meager references to these in the literary evidence (which is not as solid proof as epigraphy). All in all, I would conclude that polytheism and idol worship were becoming extinct even before the rise of Islam. As will be seen in the next chapter, the Qurʾān suggests this as well. Judaism and Christianity had expanded considerably. Not only that, but many late antique Near Eastern people who did not affiliate with Judaism or Christianity had begun to disavow the belief in many gods. "The highest God" had won. Gentiles had become monotheists.[44]

3 Gentile Monotheism in Arabia

In late antique Arabia, as elsewhere in the Near East, the rise of gentile (semi-) monotheism is visible in the evidence, though there is some wariness among scholars about connecting this with the cult of Theos Hypsistos.[45] Fuzzy bor-

41 Ṭarafa ibn al-ʿAbd, *Dīwān*, ed. Duriyya al-Khaṭīb and Luṭfī al-Ṣaqqāl, Beirut: al-Muʾassasat al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Dirāsa wa-l-Nashr, 2000, 113. My attention was drawn to this poem by al-Jallad, *The religion and rituals* 28, who discusses it in the context of Safaitic inscriptions. My translation differs from his somewhat.

42 See al-Jallad, *An outline of the grammar* 314, for *gdʿwḏ*, "the Gadd of the lineage of ʿwḏ" and *gdḍf*, "the Gadd of the lineage of Ḍf."

43 Ṭarafa, *Dīwān* 125.

44 Along similar lines, see Grasso, "The gods of the Qurʾān" 309: "the archaeological material points to the abandonment of pagan cults during Late Antiquity. Of course, this lack of material evidence is not to be used as an argumentum ex silentio, as absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Late-dated polytheistic inscriptions may simply not have been found yet. Therefore, at the moment, we can only acknowledge the abrupt epigraphic disappearance of pagan deities and the dismissal of pagan temples after the fourth century."

45 For this question, see Crone, *The Qurʾānic pagans*; Grasso, "The gods of the Qurʾān"; Sinai, *Rain-giver*; Watt, W. Montgomery, "Belief in a 'High God' in pre-Islamic Mecca," in *JSS* 16 (1971), 35–40.

ders between gentiles and others are to be supposed not only as regards beliefs but also practices. For instance, the fifth-century Church historian Sozomen remarks that Arabians of his day followed practices and regulations such as male circumcision and eschewing pork, though he does not seem to suggest that they considered themselves Jewish.[46]

Though the Qurʾānic data is also important in this connection (and will be discussed in the next chapter), in what follows I will concentrate on the evidence provided by the Arabic poetry. God (*Allāh*) occurs many times in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry in a way that suggests monotheist or henotheist tendencies. The expression *li-llāh*, literally "to God (belongs)," followed by someone's name, is used often in praise of that someone.[47] Other common exclamations include *bi-ḥamd Allāh* and *al-ḥamdu li-llāh*, "praise be to God!"[48] God is called *Allāh* (less often: *al-ilāh*), or *al-Rabb*, "the Lord," or *al-Raḥmān*, "the Merciful."[49] Connected to this topic, it should be noted that the name ʿAbdallāh, "the servant of Allāh," is attested in the epigraphic corpus, for instance in an inscription from Ḥimā, written in South Arabian script, though the name is also found in, for example, Safaitic inscriptions, which cannot be called "monotheist."[50]

As Nicolai Sinai has recently shown with much evidence, though the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry portrays God as the, or perhaps a, creator and the master of human destinies, the belief in the hereafter does not surface except rarely (and those rare instances might be post-Islamic additions to the poems).[51] Allāh controls the fate of human beings, but only in this life. This fits nicely with what the Qurʾān suggests about the beliefs of the gentile pagans (see the next chapter). To quote some poetical examples that Sinai adduces for his argument:

46 Hoyland, *Seeing Islam* 129. On Arabic narratives on the early Muslims as a "circumcised nation," see Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 186–194.

47 See, e.g., al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, ii 242, with the editor's note 9 on the same page.

48 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 31.

49 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 20.

50 Robin, "L'Arabie préislamique" 101.

51 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 25, 45. However, note that it is common for the poets to bemoan that all things are fleeting; this does not necessarily signify that the poet did not believe in the afterlife. Even the Christian ʿAdī ibn Zayd notes (if the poem is authentic), in the context of war, that "every creature will perish and pass away (*kullu ḥayyin li-fanāʾin wa-nafad*)" (*Dīwān* 43). This statement does not naturally negate the possibility of the afterlife: indeed, in another poem, *Dīwān* 52, ʿAdī could refer to the hereafter when exclaiming: "Glory to God for saving you from demise! (*fa-l-ḥamdu lillāh idh najjāka min ʿaṭabin*)." In the previous chapter, it was noted that al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī's poems contain references to the eternal life. In any case, the point remains that explicit statements about belief in the hereafter are all but lacking in the corpus of the poems composed by non-Christian poets.

- A poet by the name of Bāʿith ibn Ṣuraym refers to God's role as the creator by swearing by the one "who raised the heaven in its place and the full moon."[52]
- ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward notes that the whole world is God's creation or in His control, urging the reader/hearer to "travel in Allāh's lands (*bilād*) and search for riches."[53]
- Aws ibn Ḥajar mentions in a verse that God "sent a rain cloud." God as the giver of rain is a common literary motif in the poetical corpus, a sign of the arid and semi-arid regions where the poets lived.[54]
- God protects and bestows favors in many different poems.[55] As mentioned in chapters 2 and 3 of the present book, God was often evoked as an ally in the battles of the late antique Near East. This same notion is attested in Arabic poems.[56]
- God is also menacing and vengeful. Salāma ibn Jandal calls God "the bonebreaker" (*al-kāsiru l-ʿaẓma*), capable of gathering and dispersing whatever He wishes.[57] Indeed, the fear (*taqwā* and other words from the same root) of God is mentioned in many poems.[58]
- The notion that God equalizes moral scores surfaces in the verses of various poets. A common refrain is: "may God requite!" (*jazā Allāh*). Dhū l-Iṣbaʿ remarks: "Allāh knows me and Allāh knows you, and Allāh will settle your score with me and settle mine [with you]" (*allāhu yaʿlamunī wa-llāhu yaʿlamukum / wa-llāhu yajzīkumū ʿannī wa-yajzīnī*).[59] However, all or almost all instances of score-settling are this-worldly: the belief in the afterlife is not common.
- God is a supernatural agent of many abilities. He is "seeing and hearing" (*rāʾin wa-sāmiʿū*); He "knows what I do not know."[60]

Mecca (or more particularly the Kaʿba shrine), the poetry suggests, was a local pilgrimage center visited by the polytheists and monotheists alike. In the previous chapter, I noted that the pre-Islamic Christian poet ʿAdī ibn Zayd appears to have mentioned God as the protector of Mecca and the cross. The poetic corpus gives evidence of other monotheist (or quasi-monotheist), in particular gentile, poets mentioning the pilgrimage and the sanctity of the Kaʿba. For

52 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 27.
53 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 30.
54 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 29.
55 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 31–33.
56 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 32.
57 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 34.
58 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 49.
59 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 43.
60 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 48.

instance, one ʿAwf ibn al-Aḥwas gives some interesting information about pre-Islamic pilgrimage customs. Though ʿAwf apparently lived on to see the mission of the prophet Muḥammad, it is probable that the following verses, if authentic, stem from the time before it.[61] The three verses in question read:

> I swear by Him to whose sacred precincts [*maḥārimahū*] Quraish go on pilgrimage [*ḥajjat*], and that which Mount Ḥirā gathers together [of offerings],
>
> And by the holy month of the Sons of Umayyah,[62] and the victims when they are bound [for sacrifice] with the blood soaking into the ground where they stand—
>
> I will never blame thee[63] so long as tears roll down from mine eyes: if I do, then may God [*Allāh*] wipe me out of being![64]

Interesting features are present here: to begin with, the monotheist God (*Allāh*) appears as the rightful owner and protector of the sacred precincts in Mecca. Pilgrimage is connected with animal sacrifice. A visit to, or sacrificing on, Mount Ḥirā is mentioned, though it is not part of the later Islamic practices of pilgrimage and, hence, perhaps an authentic verse (the biographies of the prophet mention, however, that Mount Ḥirā was where he received his first revelation). It is also God who has the power to bring about annihilation. Other poets also mention God as the protector of Mecca as well as the pilgrimage.[65] It seems safe to say that Mecca was a local pilgrimage center and sacred enclave where Allāh, the creator, was worshipped. Perhaps other deities were worshipped there too, though, as I have argued in this book, polytheist beliefs appear to have been a thing of the past everywhere in Arabia in the sixth and seventh centuries CE.

Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry is a noteworthy corpus on the basis of which a number of historical developments can be established. It is an important corpus since much of it stems from western Arabia, from where we have a somewhat limited amount of other evidence for the era under consideration. The

61 Al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, ii 124.

62 Lyall, in al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, ii 126, has a commentary on this peculiar phrase. He suggests that the reference could be not to Umayya ibn ʿAbd Shams, the ancestor of the Umayyad caliphs, but to another Umayya who was apparently in charge of determining the intercalation and, hence, the proper start of the pilgrimage season.

63 The reference is to the poet's beloved, who he mentions at the beginning of the poem.

64 Al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, i 342–343, trans. Lyall, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, ii 125.

65 See the (rather many) examples adduced in Sinai, *Rain-giver* 52–55.

evidence on the religious map of late antique Arabia is the aspect that concerns me here. Some Arabic poets were recognizably Jews or Christians; others, perhaps the majority, did not identify or are not identifiable as such. Nevertheless, even the gentiles proclaim (semi-)monotheist beliefs. The Arabic poetical corpus suggests religious phenomena and trajectories that do not appear out of place in the late antique Near East and Arabia: the spread of Judaism and Christianity but also, importantly, gentile monotheism. As Nicolai Sinai summarizes his findings on the poetry:

> What happened was, of course, a much closer integration of Arabophone communities into the wider late antique world. Christian missionaries had been active among Arabic-speaking tribes from the fourth century onward, but the latter's involvement in the wider political and cultural context of the late antique Near East was decisively precipitated by an escalation of Roman-Sasanian warfare from the beginning of the sixth century onward. In this conflict, both empires subsidized proto-Arab allies such as the Ghassānids and the Lakhmids to engage in proxy warfare with each other and to hold in check tribal groups beyond the imperial frontiers ...
>
> In such a situation of cultural encounter between pagan nomadic tribes and imperial vassals with Christian affiliations, Allāh would have functioned as an expedient currency of conceptual exchange. Pagan and Christian producers and consumers of Arabic poetry patently recognized each other as referring to the same deity when invoking Allāh or *al-ilāh* ... Thus, references to Allāh were intelligible both to Christians, who would have been disposed to equate him with the biblical god, and to pagans, who were able to conceptualize Allāh as the ultimate overlord over a pantheon of inferior deities and to view him as functionally equivalent (or at least intimately linked) with the impersonal notions of attritional time (*dahr*) and insidious doom (*maniyya*) that formed the lynchpin of the heroic ethics of tribal poetry.[66]

3.1 *The God-Fearers*

One important category of gentile (semi-)monotheists or henotheists were the God-fearers, *theosebeis*. They were people who affiliated somewhat with the synagogue, though they did not become formal and full proselytes.[67] Syn-

66 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 61.
67 Mitchell, "The cult of Theos Hypsistos" 117.

agogues were normally open for non-Jews to come and hear the Torah: the "Jewish" versus "gentile" dichotomy did not result in bounded, clear-cut social groups that would have been totally distinct from each other. They rubbed shoulders in the towns and villages where they lived, but also in their places of worship.

The God-fearers were not expected to be monotheists: they simply added the God of Israel to their list of deities, often, but not necessarily always, perceiving Him as the highest of the divine agents.[68] The God-fearers did not adopt the Jewish law either, though some might have espoused some aspects of it. This set the God-fearers apart from full converts to Judaism: the latter were required to reject idolatry and "false" gods, follow the Jewish dietary and purity regulations, including (in the case of male converts) circumcision.[69] However, the God-fearers were not simply passive hang-arounds in the Jewish communities that they affiliated with, but, rather, they donated money and built synagogues for and with them.

Might there have been God-fearers in Arabia? That is probable, given that there is much evidence for (centuries of) Jewish presence in different parts of the peninsula, as chapter 2 has noted. However, extant or explicit evidence of Arabian God-fearers is lacking.[70] Despite this, Patricia Crone has, with some caution, indeed suggested this, seeing the community of the prophet Muḥammad as including them. The Qurʾānic *mushrikūn* certainly share some characteristics with the God-fearers that are known to us from other parts of the Near East: both groups accepted God as the Creator and the highest divine agent, though lesser ones might have still been acknowledged and worshipped.[71] She notes that the Qurʾān appears to attest Jews/Israelites in Mecca (in addition to Medina), though the biographies of the prophet do not place them there; the Qurʾān also once (22:40) refers to synagogues, if this is how the word *ṣalawāt* should be understood.[72] Crone concludes:

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68 Mitchell, "The cult of Theos Hypsistos" 96. Crone, *The Qurʾānic pagans* 324, notes: "There does not seem to have been any procedure for becoming a God-fearer: apparently, one simply declared oneself to be one, or others did so, or no special word was used."

69 Fredriksen, *Paul* 55–60, 74–93.

70 However, Crone, *The Qurʾānic pagans* 328–329, suggests that Sozomen (d. ca. 450) refers to the existence of them in (probably: the Roman province of) Arabia, though he does not actually call them by that name.

71 Crone, *The Qurʾānic pagans* 318–320.

72 Crone, *The Qurʾānic pagans* 321, 331. The verse mentions synagogues (*ṣalawāt*), alongside *ṣawāmiʿ* (monasteries or monks' cloisters), *biyaʿ* (churches), and *masājid* (places of prostration), in a positive sense, as places where God's name is mentioned. The word *masājid* cannot really be translated as "mosques" at this stage. The word *msgd* is found in Sabaic, for instance, denoting "praying-place, oratory," Beeston, Alfred Felix Landon et al., *Sabaic*

> the facts remain that the Qurʾānic pagans were semi-believers who did not apparently have any trouble understanding the Qurʾānic references to the Biblical tradition; that the Messenger himself regarded the earlier recipients of the scripture as authoritative to the point of regarding them as able to sit in judgement on the validity of his own revelations; that he assumed his audience to share this view; and that he was eager to have them, or a particular group (or groups) of them, on his side, even depicting himself as emerging from an Israelite milieu. On this basis it seems reasonable to conclude that both he and the pagans who opposed him had grown up as God-fearers.

The existence of God-fearers (in the sense that anyone would have self-identified as one) is somewhat speculative, though possible, in the case of the northern parts of Arabia. A similar situation of plausible God-fearers obtains in the south, as has been noted by Iwona Gajda. She suggests that many monotheists in Yemen perhaps self-identified more as God-fearers than Jews. However, the South Arabian inscriptions themselves scarcely warrant clear classifications since (as far as I know) no Yemeni writer of the surviving epigraphic texts self-identifies as a God-fearer;[73] however, it is the fact that few of them identify as Jewish either that makes Gajda suggest this.[74] In any case, we should bear in mind the remark of Stephen Mitchell,[75] quoted above, that the act of classification sometimes tells more about us as modern scholars and the pursuit of clear-cut categories than the phenomena that we are studying.

4 The Idea of Abrahamic Descent in Arabia before Islam

Qurʾān 2:127–129 portrays Abraham and Ishmael building the foundations of *al-bayt*, "the sanctuary," probably a reference to the Kaʿba,[76] and praying that God

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dictionary: English, French, Arabic, Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters, 1982, 125. Similarly, Ethiopic *məsgād* means "place of worship, shrine, temple, sanctuary," Leslau, Wolf, *Comparative dictionary of Geʿez* (*classical Ethiopic*), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987, 488.

73 But note the important inscription siglum Ry 534+MAFY/Rayda 1 in CSAI, adduced in chapter 2, which mentions that the synagogue Bryk was built so that God may give people "reverential fear of His name," *ṣbs¹ s¹m-hw*. Could this be a reference to the *theosebeis*, God-fearers? Not necessarily, but it is possible. Late antique God-fearers not only visited synagogues, they sponsored the construction of them too.

74 Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 244–245.

75 Mitchell, "The cult of Theos Hypsistos" 112.

76 However, see Witztum, Joseph, "The foundations of the house (Q 2:127)," in *BSOAS* 72

will make their descendants devoted (*muslimīn*) to God and send a Messenger, probably a reference to Muḥammad, from among them to recite the Scripture.[77] Hence, the idea of Muḥammad and his community belonging to the lineage of Abraham through Ishmael is palpable. Was this idea floated in Arabia in pre-Islamic times as well?[78] This is certainly how Arab identity and the prophet's biography was articulated after the life of Muḥammad. For instance, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* ("The Biography of the Prophet") by Ibn Hishām (d. 833), begins by putting forward a lineage for Muḥammad.[79] It runs through a series of "Arab," mythic, forefathers (Muḍar, Nizār, Maʿadd, and ʿAdnān), until aligning with a Biblical genealogy at Ishmael, through whom the prophet's purported lineage reaches all the way to Adam.[80]

When we look at earlier evidence, the notion of Arabians[81] descending from Ishmael seems to have been present in Arabia already before the prophet's time.[82] The Qurʾān, and other Arabic literature after it, seems to be tapping into an old idea.[83] The Ishmaelite connection surfaces in a few texts, such as Flav-

(2009), 25–40, for an identification of this word with the altar (in Syriac Bible translations, *baytā*) mentioned in Genesis 22:9. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the Qurʾān is, in effect, equating the altar with the sanctuary in Mecca since the Abraham-Mecca connection is present elsewhere in the Qurʾān.

77 This section reproduces some material from Lindstedt, Ilkka, "The seed of Abraham: Gentile ethnicity in early Christian texts and the Quran," in Raimo Hakola, Nina Nikki and Jarkko Vikman (eds.), *Local and global cultures in the Roman East: Multicultural innovations and reinvented identities*, a special issue of *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern research* (forthcoming).

78 For this question, see also Dagorn, René, *La geste d'Ismaël d'après l'onomastique et la tradition arabes*, Genève: Librarie Droz, 1981; Fisher, *Between empires* 162–170; Goudarzi, Mohsen, "The ascent of Ishmael: Genealogy, covenant, and identity in early Islam," in *Arabica* 66 (2019), 415–484; Millar, Fergus, "Hagar, Ishmael and the origins of Islam," in JJS 44 (1993), 23–45, for important, detailed treatments.

79 Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, trans. Alfred Guillaume, 2 vols., Göttingen: Dieterichsche Universitäts-Buchhandlung, 1858–1860, 3, trans. Guillaume, 3. The similarities to the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew, which gives the pedigree of Jesus, are obvious.

80 On this, see Savant, *The new Muslims* 33.

81 I use the English word "Arabians" instead of "Arabs" to draw attention to the fact that the Arab ethnogenesis was still underway, as has been explained in chapter 1 of the present study and argued at length by Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*.

82 Retsö, *The Arabs in antiquity* 383, 487.

83 The fact that the Ishmaelite lineage was portrayed negatively in Genesis 21 and its Pauline interpretation in Galatians 4:21–31 (Penn, *Envisioning Islam* 61) is not, naturally, mentioned in the Qurʾān. The Qurʾān portrays this genealogy in a positive sense, and there is no reason to think that the pre-Islamic Arabians, some of whom adopted the idea of being Ishmael's descendants, would have deemed their assumed lineage to be anything else.

ius Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* and the *Book of Jubilees*. Josephus' work was written in the 90s CE, and contains in passing the idea that Arabians (or more specifically the Nabataeans) descend from Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar.[84] The same idea is present in the *Jubilees*, which is in all likelihood an earlier work than Josephus, written originally possibly in Hebrew perhaps in the second century BCE. However, the original is lost, and the complete work survives only in an Ethiopic (Geʿez) translation (the Ethiopian Orthodox Church considers it a canonical text up to the present), made in late antiquity by Ethiopian Christians.[85] As in the *Antiquities of the Jews*, the Ishmaelite-Arab link is merely a sidenote in the *Jubilees*. It occurs in verses 20:12–13, which read: "Ishmael, his sons, Keturah's [another wife of Abraham] sons, and their sons went together and settled from Paran as far as the entrance of Babylon—in all the land toward the east opposite the desert. They mixed with one another and were called Arabs and Ishmaelites."[86]

The same idea appears in a text from late antiquity, namely the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*. The Syriac version of the text (1.33.3) notes that, from Abraham's sons Ishmael and Eliezer, "the tribes of Arabs and Persians

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84 Van der Lans, Birgit, "Hagar, Ishmael and Abraham's household in Josephus' Antiquitates Judaicae," in Martin Goodman, George H. van Kooten and Jacques T.A.G.M. van Ruiten (eds.), *Abraham, the nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic perspectives on kinship with Abraham*, Leiden: Brill, 2010, 185–199; Cole, *Muhammad* 21–22. A similar idea is found in Paul, Galatians 4:24–25: "One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia." However, Paul develops this into novel interpretations, equating Hagar with Jerusalem, the law ("Mount Sinai"), and the flesh. But behind his argument seems to be the idea that the descendants of Hagar, and probably those of her son Ishmael as well, were located in "Arabia."

85 Fragments of the text survive in other languages as well. For the history of this text and its pre-modern translations, see VanderKam's introduction to *The Book of Jubilees*, v–xxxiv. The Ethiopic text is titled *Maṣḥafa Kufālē*, "the Book of Division." The text was translated, probably from Greek, into Ethiopic apparently quite early in the history of Christian Ethiopia (which starts in the fourth century CE). The manuscript tradition of the text is rather varied; moreover, all surviving manuscripts are rather late. Hence, it is problematic to suppose that the manuscripts of the Ethiopic *Book of Jubilees* would proffer an easy pathway to reconstructing the putative Hebrew original. It is as if we only had the Vulgate translation of the Psalms while both the Septuagint and the Hebrew Bible were lost, except for some fragments. Dost, *An Arabian Qurʾān* 187–188, has, in my opinion convincingly, proposed that *The Book of Jubilees*, alongside some other Ethiopic texts, functioned as an important subtext to the Qurʾān. The influence of Ethiopic Christianity on Arabia can be dated to the sixth century CE, when Arabia was ruled by Ethiopian overlords (see the previous chapters). However, it is still unclear in which shape and form Ethiopic texts and narratives might have circulated in sixth-century Arabia. One supposes that it was partly oral, though the existence, at the time, of books of scripture in Ethiopic is not excluded.

86 *The Book of Jubilees*, trans. VanderKam 119.

descended." The Latin version renders this as follows: "from [Ishmael] the barbarian nations descend, while from [Eliezer] the peoples of the Persians descend."[87] Moreover, Sozomen (d. ca. 450) notes that the "Saracens" descended from Ishmael.[88]

It has recently been convincingly demonstrated by Suleyman Dost that the *Jubilees* was an important subtext to the Qurʾān and known as a written text (in all likelihood in its Ethiopic rendering) or orally in late antique Arabia. For example, the Abraham figure of the Qurʾān shares similarities with that of the *Jubilees*, in particular when it comes to the smashing of idols.[89] If stories and ideas from the *Jubilees*—if not the text itself—circulated in Arabia, would it not then make sense that the Ishmael-Arabia connection was also known to Arabians? The Syriac pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* makes this even more probable. Nicolai Sinai's recent research on Arabic poetry puts forward that pagan monotheism was an emerging phenomenon on the eve of Islam.[90] Might it have included ethnic reasoning and discourse adducing this mythic Ishmaelite connection?

This does not mean that there was a shared notion of ethnic Arab identity or that it would have been very commonly accepted that Arabians descended from Ishmael. Peter Webb has demonstrated the implausibility of both ideas before Islam.[91] Rather, the appellation "Arab" carried a multitude of meanings before Islam. Not only that, but there were many "Arabias," some of them rather far in the north from what we nowadays call the Arabian Peninsula.[92] Epigraphic evidence and pre-Islamic poetry show that the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula self-identified in many ways as regards their tribal and ethnic affiliations, but the word "Arab" is almost completely lacking. What is more, a great number of languages were written and spoken in and around the

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87 Cited in Buell, Denise Kimber, *Why this new race: Ethnic reasoning in early Christianity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, 72. For the text, see Jones, F. Stanley (trans.), *An ancient Jewish Christian source on the history of Christianity: Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions 1.27–71* (Society of Biblical Literature, Texts and translations 37; Christian Apocrypha series 2), Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1995.

88 Crone, *The Qurʾānic pagans* 329.

89 Dost, *An Arabian Qurʾān* 203–210. *The Book of Jubilees* treats Abraham, in a sense, as a convert: he is born into a family and community of idolaters. He lives in it before smashing the idols and choosing monotheism. Abraham as a convert was an important idea which can be seen in the background of Pauline, rabbinic, and Qurʾānic discourses of gentiles and conversion.

90 Sinai, *Rain-giver*.

91 Webb, *Imagining the Arabs* 211–215. As Webb notes on p. 212, the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry does not evidence the idea of the Ishmaelite link.

92 Macdonald, "Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic."

peninsula. Arabic was one of them, but it existed in various dialects with no written standard.[93] The Qurʾān itself refers to the possibility that there were non-Arabic-speaking people among the close circle of Muḥammad: "We [God] know that they say, 'It is a man who teaches him [scil. Muḥammad],' but the language of the one they allude to is foreign (*aʿjamī*), while this [revelation] is in clear Arabic." (Q 16:103). While at first glance this verse reads as defensive and polemical, with not much historical information, on further consideration one can distill an interesting conclusion on the basis of it: There were not only multiple languages spoken in Arabia more generally but also in the immediate context of the prophet Muḥammad's community (*aʿjamī* could denote a form of Aramaic in the West Arabian context, though we cannot rule out other possibilities, such as Greek, Ethiopic, or Sabaic). Not only that, but the prophet himself was in conversation with this person.[94]

It is not until the eighth century CE, when we have more evidence of an ethnos with an endonym "the Arabs" and with a notion of a shared language, Arabic (with a written standard emerging around the year 800). There were some curious developments in this Arab identity articulation when South Arabians, most of whom did not speak Arabic, were categorized as part (and sometimes the primordial source) of the Arab ethnos.[95] And though early Islamic identity contained an emphasis on the settled nature of the people participating in that affiliation, with notable stereotyping of the nomads,[96] the formatted Arab ethnic identity harked back to an imagined nomadic past.

All this would mean that we should not place too much weight on the Ishmaelite connection. There were a number of ethno-linguistic groups in Arabia(s) before Islam, and not all, it would appear, adopted or emphasized the idea of being Ishmaelites. However, it makes sense to assume that the connec-

93 Though it has to be acknowledged that pre-Islamic poetry, if authentic, suggests a poetic standard form of Arabic. However, the linguistic history of Arabic is still rather murky, though the recent epigraphic finds give hope for more thorough reconstructions in the future.

94 Of interest is also the beginning of Qurʾān 41:44: "If We had made it a Qurʾān [or: passage of revelation] in a foreign language (*qurʾānan aʿjamiyyan*), they would say, 'If only its verses [or script: *āyātuhu*] were clear! [Is it both] foreign language and Arabic (*aʿjamiyyun wa-ʿarabiyyun*)?'" This verse seems to suggest that the majority of the audience hearing the prophet's revelations were Arabic-speaking.

95 Webb, *Imagining the Arabs* 215–269. Indeed, interestingly, it was later deemed that the Arabs actually had their origins in Yemen.

96 Athamina, Khalil, "Aʿrāb and Muhājirūn in the environment of Amṣār," in *SI 66* (1987), 5–25; Crone, Patricia, "The first-century concept of 'hiǧra'," in *Arabica* 41 (1994), 352–387; Lindstedt, Ilkka, "*Muhājirūn* as a name for the first/seventh century Muslims," in *JNES* 74 (2015), 67–73.

tion to Abraham and Ishmael is not a Qur'ānic novelty but an idea that was disseminated before Muḥammad's revelations, among some Arabians at least. Even gentiles might have Biblical pedigrees. Indeed, they should have such if they want to be considered a community of believers.

5 An Excursus to Later Arabic Historiography: ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib's Dream

Arabic biographies of the prophet and historiography more generally include many narratives of gentile monotheists and not only in the context of those Arabian seekers who are classified as *ḥanīf*s.[97] In the beginning of chapter 1, I cited Hishām ibn al-Kalbī's depiction of "the Arabs" as vehement idolaters. However, such stories represent only one portion of the ocean of Arabic texts. By way of example, I adduce here the story about the dream of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, the prophet's grandfather.

Ibn Hishām includes two different versions of the story of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib's dream of the digging of the well of Zamzam at the Kaʿba shrine.[98] It is a tale further connecting the Islamic past to the Abrahamic past. Interestingly, it depicts ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib as a monotheist and, furthermore, raises him to the status of a receiver of divine inspiration. This is in line with the narratives in Ibn Hishām's work that characterize the Meccan Quraysh as, in fact, monotheists or quasi-monotheists, though they are gentiles. In other narratives, the Quraysh (and pre-Islamic Arabians) are polytheists and idolaters all and sundry. This tension is at the heart of Muslim depictions of the *jāhiliyya*, the "age of ignorance." I quote here the beginning of the first story in Ibn Hishām:[99]

> While ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib was sleeping in the *ḥijr*,[100] he was ordered in a vision[101] to dig Zamzam. Yazīd b. Abī Ḥabīb al-Miṣrī from Marthad b.

97 The etymology of the word *ḥanīf* and its usage in the Qur'ān is explored in the next chapter. For the narratives of the prophet's connection to Jews and Christians but also gentiles, see Rubin, *The eye of the beholder* 10–11, 76–82.

98 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 91–94, trans. Guillaume 62–64.

99 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 91–92; here, I follow the translation of Guillaume, 62, though I have changed the transliteration to accord with my style in this book and made some other changes that I note in the footnotes.

100 A place at the Kaʿba where Hagar and Ishmael are buried, according to the lore.

101 The Arabic reads *idh utiya wa-umira bi-ḥafr zamzam*. Rather than "a vision," as Guillaume translates, the expression rather suggests to me the coming and presence of an angel or other supernatural being, as Guillaume, in fact, translates what follows.

> ʿAbdallāh al-Yazanī from ʿAbdallāh b. Zurayr al-Ghāfiqī told me that he heard ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib telling the story of Zamzam. He said that ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib said: "I was sleeping in the *ḥijr* when a supernatural visitant came[102] and said, 'Dig Ṭība.'[103] I said 'And what is Ṭība?'; then he left me. I went to my sleeping place[104] again the next day and slept, and he came to me and said 'Dig Barra';[105] when I asked what Barra was he left me. The next day he came and said 'Dig al-Maḍnūna';[106] when I asked what that was he went away again. The next day he came while I was sleeping and said 'Dig Zamzam'. I said, 'What is Zamzam?'; he said:
>
> 'Twill never fail or ever run dry,
> 'Twill water the pilgrim company.
> It lies 'twixt the dung and the flesh bloody,[107]
> By the nest where the white-winged ravens fly,
> By the nest where the ants to and fro ply."

This is a remarkable story in that it portrays ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib as receiving inspiration, or perhaps even revelation, from a supernatural agent. In what follows, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib is depicted as receiving the information of the exact spot where the well of Zamzam is located. He and his son al-Ḥārith[108] dig and when they reach the well, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib cries out loud: *Allāhu akbar*, "God is great!" In this story, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, the prophet's grandfather, is depicted as a monotheist worshipping *Allāh*, God. The Kaʿba shrine is connected with the belief in and worship of the one God in other narratives as well. For instance, Ibn Hishām reports that when the Meccans were rebuilding the Kaʿba (the prophet being 35 years of age at the time, that is to say, before his prophetical call), the Meccans are addressing *Allāh*, God, and asking Him not to be afraid: though they are demolishing a part of the shrine, they are only doing this in

102 The Arabic: *idh atānī ātin*.
103 The word Ṭība denotes something that is good.
104 In Arabic, *maḍjaʿī*. Guillaume translates "bed" here, which is somewhat weird since surely ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib is sleeping on the ground (or at least not in a bed) in this story.
105 The word Barra means "obedience," "piety," and the like.
106 Al-Maḍnūna denotes something that is much valued.
107 Cf. Q. 16:68.
108 The narrator adds: "for he had no other son at that time," Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 92, trans. Guillaume 62. The impetus of this statement is rather clear, explaining why it was not his other son, ʿAbdallāh, the prophet's father, who dug with him.

order to repair the Kaʿba.[109] Rather than being depicted as the vehement idolaters and polytheists that other narratives purport them to be, the Meccans of this story are monotheists.

The point of adducing these narratives was not to buttress my arguments about the presence of gentile monotheists in sixth-century Arabia, since I do not accept such non-contemporary texts as evidence properly speaking. Nor was it to suggest "historical" knowledge on ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, the Kaʿba, or Zamzam. The narrative, like all such narratives of Arabic historiography, belongs to the plane of lore about the mythical past and the origins of Islam. It is, however, interesting in the sense that it offers a memory of a pre-Islamic Arabian figure such as ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib as being a monotheist (or at least henotheist). The point is that the depictions of Arabia on the eve of Islam contained in biographical and historiographical literature are, in fact, varied and do not always suggest an Arabia rife with idolaters and polytheists.

6 Conclusions

Late antique "paganism" meant a number of things as regards beliefs and practices. The label "pagan" was, of course, given by the outsiders: no one self-identified as one. But some Arabians at least had adopted the idea that they were gentiles as regards ethnicity. It is significant to bear in mind the possible difference between the categories "gentile" (a more ethnic term) and "pagan" (a more religious term), either in how (late) ancient people viewed themselves or the others, or how modern scholars talk of the phenomena.

One important development in the Near East was the rise of gentile/pagan monotheism. This development is also evident in Arabia, though it is not certain whether this reflects the wider Near Eastern context. Cult stones and polytheism are attested in the Arabian epigraphic and archaeological record up to the fourth century CE, but not later. The trajectories that can be followed up with inscriptions receive corroboration in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, which indicates that belief in one God (the Creator) was the norm, even among people who did not necessarily identify as Jewish or Christian. However, the Arabian gentile heno- or monotheists did not, it appears, have much faith in the afterlife.[110] For them, God was somewhat distant; and though He might act in the

109 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 124.

110 On the Safaitic corpus (which is centuries earlier than the poetic corpus) and the hereafter, see al-Jallad, *The religion and rituals* 78–83, who notes: "The inscriptions do not provide any explicit details regarding an afterlife and so what can be said about it derives from

world (by bringing rain or luck, for example), His agency ended when one went the way of all flesh. The prophet Muḥammad, who emphasized his gentile origins, came to change that.

If we ignore epigraphy, Arabic poetry, and other evidence with claim to being contemporary, and base our reconstruction on Islamic-era Arabic literature, such as Hishām ibn al-Kalbī's *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, a very different picture arises: an Arabia rife with polytheism and idolatry. However, as discussed in chapter 1, and as argued by Gerald Hawting some 20 years ago, such a depiction appears to have been a tendentious and ideological creation by later Muslim scholars.[111] I would suggest that, during, in particular, the second/eighth century, the Muslim scholars construed such an image of pre-Islamic Arabia not only to draw a line vis-à-vis polytheism but also Judaism and Christianity. I have argued in this book that a sizeable portion, perhaps the majority (though quantitative data is impossible to come by), of Arabians were Jews and Christians—everywhere in the peninsula. Hence, the forefathers and -mothers of many of these Muslim scholars had been Jews or Christians (whether or not they knew it, over 100 years after, is of course an open question). However, in articulating and maintaining a specifically Islamic identity, different from Judaism and Christianity,[112] the Muslim scholars reconstructed another past, one where the change from polytheism to monotheism (specifically, Islam) was sudden, immediate, and, one might say, miraculous. According to this view, the process (or rather, moment) of evolution from the filth of idolatry to the pure service of one God did not owe anything to Judaism, Christianity, or any other religious phenomenon.[113] The erasure of the memory of Judeo-Christian Arabia endeavors to ensure Islam's positive distinctiveness—from Judaism, Christianity, and polytheism—all at the same time.

Basing his treatment (merely) on Islamic-era Arabic historiography, Michael Lecker has claimed:

> there is no indication of the decline of idol worship on the eve of Islam. Quite to the contrary, it appears that the whole life cycle of a Medinan, whether of the Khazraj or the Aws, was associated with idolatry … The evidence adduced above shows that idol worship in Mecca, Medina and

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the interpretation of burial types and mortuary rituals. One may assume some sense of an underworld, a *sheol*, based on a few indirect facts" (p. 78).

111 Hawting, *The idea of idolatry* 110.

112 This process is discussed in more detail in chapter 8.

113 I owe this idea to Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, who suggested this possibility in a private communication.

> among the nomads prospered on the eve of Islam. The evidence for Medina is particularly rich and idols were found on all levels of tribal organization. This must have been the case in all parts of Arabia.[114]

But this is emphatically not true. The epigraphic record—providing an "argument in stone,"[115] in contrast with the late and tendentious narrative sources utilized by Lecker (not "evidence," really)—shows the disappearance of polytheist beliefs and cult stones, and the rise of Judaism and Christianity during the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries everywhere in Arabia where epigraphic surveys have been carried out and yielded inscriptions. The waning of Arabian polytheism has to be understood as a centuries-long process.[116] True, in some parts of Arabia, in particular in and around the vicinity of Mecca and Medina, epigraphic and archaeological research on pre-Islamic remains has been nonexistent. Moreover, the only genre of Arabic literature that has some claim to pre-Islamic authenticity, that is, poetry, suggests that monotheism had become commonplace and idolatry all but invisible. This is not to say that, in the diverse world of Arabian simple believers, some Jews, Christians, other monotheists, henotheists, or polytheists might have sacrificed on cult stones; but idolatry of the sort suggested in Islamic-era Arabic literature is impossible to find in the extant material evidence.[117]

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114 Lecker, *Peoples, tribes and society*, 35–36.

115 I borrow the term from Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 1, who uses it to refer to the archaeological record.

116 *Pace*, e.g., King, "Settlement in Western and Central Arabia" 212, who claims that Muḥammad brought about "the transformation of Arabia in a space of some ten years from polytheistic paganism to a strictly monotheistic society."

117 Because of more and more epigraphic finds that indicate this, I have myself changed my view about this. See my "Pre-Islamic Arabia," where I suggest that there were still some, perhaps many, polytheists around when the prophet was born. Now I would put their number at rather, or very, low.

CHAPTER 5

The Rise of the Gentile Prophet in Mecca

1 Introduction and Methodological Considerations

This chapter uses the Qurʾān as its main source, comparing it with what I have so far established about the Arabian religious map.[1] In the next, on the Medinan community, another source, namely the "Constitution" of Medina, is also adduced and discussed in detail. In these two chapters, I am mainly interested in the question of the social identity of the movement, as reflected in these contemporary sources, that was forming around the prophet Muḥammad. Who did it include and who decided to reject it or were left out? How were the Qurʾānic revelations perceived in the multireligious west Arabian context that included gentiles, Jews, and Christians (and other, probably smaller groups than the three just mentioned, such as the mysterious Ṣābiʾūn, Q 2:62, 5:69, 22:17).

In my discussion, I concentrate on a limited number of Qurʾānic passages and features. The most important figure of the Qurʾān is not Muḥammad or his community, but God, as Gabriel Said Reynolds has recently reminded us.[2] God is not discussed in my treatment except in passing. However, given the multitude of theological views on God among late ancient Jews and Christians, I would suggest that the Qurʾānic God depiction would not have been strange or peculiar to many Jews, Christians, and gentiles in the audience of the prophet Muḥammad. Moreover, the Qurʾānic stories of the prophets (which will not be discussed at length in my treatment) fit very well the late ancient habit of telling and retelling, over and over again, the narratives—the basic plot and central figures of which were well known—of the prophets, patriarchs, and other famous characters, as attested in, for example, the Syriac *memrē* literature, late ancient apocryphal gospels, and rabbinic literature. Once again, I am making the case that the Qurʾān fits perfectly in the Near Eastern world of late antiquity. And, as Suleyman Dost has suggested, it fits perfectly in west Arabia.[3]

1 For detailed treatments of the Meccan Qurʾān, including commentary on dating, see Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition*; *Der Koran* i and *Der Koran* ii/1.
2 Reynolds, *Allah*.
3 Dost, *An Arabian Qurʾān*.

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2 Mecca

2.1 *The Community in Mecca*

When Muḥammad was born, sometime in the latter half of the sixth century CE,[4] most inhabitants of Arabia were Jews or Christians. As far as I know, among the sources that we can date to the sixth century with certainty, hardly any (e.g., the Piacenza Pilgrim) evidence polytheism or idolatry in Arabia or among Arabic-speaking groups (and even this text is actually talking about Mt Sinai). *All other* sixth-century (and fifth-century, for that matter) evidence is monotheist.[5] Though we do not know the exact religious makeup of the populations in Mecca and Medina, epigraphic evidence places Jews and Christians in the wider context of al-Ḥijāz. Moreover, Arabic poetry suggests that Christians and gentile monotheists were present in Mecca. The existence of Jews in Medina can be taken as a fact, given the witness of the "Constitution" of Medina, discussed in the next chapter. However, it is perfectly possible that while most Arabians in general were Jews and Christians, the inhabitants of Mecca in particular were majority gentile—indeed, the Qur'ān suggests as much. According to recent research, Mecca was also a very small settlement.[6]

Another aspect should be mentioned in this connection: According to the earliest non-Arabic sources, and many Arabic sources as well, the prophet worked as a trader, at least for some time, before the beginning of his mission. The sources take it for granted that he traveled in the wider Near East, in particular to Syria.[7] Whether or not these narratives preserve authentic information about the historical prophet is somewhat beside the point; the fact remains that there would not be anything remarkable if Muḥammad had travelled to Syria at some point in his life (moreover, as mentioned in chapter 7, some of the non-Arabic sources are rather early evidence). In any case, even if Mecca might have been majority gentile, this does not, according to the evidence, reflect the general outlook of Arabia on the eve of Islam.

The most common way to refer to the in-group in the Meccan, as well as Medinan, strata of the Qur'ān is "the believers" (masc. *mu'minūn*, fem.

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4 There is no way of knowing when exactly he was born. See Conrad, "Abraha and Muḥammad."

5 Well put by Grasso, "The gods of the Qur'ān" 302: "the idols mentioned in the Qur'ān are the reminiscent memory of an old past, and their presence in the Sūrat *al-Najm* is a direct consequence of the assembly of orally transmitted *logia* during the written composition of the Qur'ān."

6 See the significant article by Majied Robinson, "The population size of Muḥammad's Mecca," 17–18, where it is suggested that the population of Mecca was hundreds rather than thousands during the time of the prophet.

7 Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 59–82.

muʾmināt), or "those who believe" (*alladhīna āmanū*).[8] It is important to underscore that this appellation, as such, would not have created a difference between Muḥammad's followers, on the one hand, and Jews and Christians, on the other.[9] Though the word *muʾmin*(*ūn*) is yet to turn up in Old Arabic inscriptions, cognate words in Ethiopic (*məʾəman*) and Syriac (*mhaymnē*) were designations that Christians used for themselves. The Arabic *muʾmin* appears to have been borrowed from Ethiopic *məʾəman*,[10] probably in the sixth century when Ethiopian overlords reigned in south Arabia and launched raids on the north. It makes sense to assume that Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians called themselves *muʾminūn* before the mission of the prophet Muḥammad. Indeed, the word is attested in the pre-Islamic poetical corpus, such as among the poems of the Christian ʿAdī ibn Zayd.[11] (In the extant Sabaic evidence, it should be noted, the verb *hʾmn* appears only once, meaning to "entrust something to someone for safekeeping"; the noun *ʾmn* appears more often, denoting "safety" and the like; in a different vocalization, *ʾmn* signifies "amen.")[12]

The way we categorize social phenomena, including groups, is of utmost importance in how we construe and understand the world. As noted by the sociologist Gary Alan Fine, "we struggle to find meaning in the world—a psychological process of categorization, grounded on cognitive economy and a perceived correspondence with the world 'out there.'"[13] Social groups are not empirically observable, bounded entities, but they are made and negotiated through language and other types of signaling. When social categorizations are articulated in a specific context by people, they also have a tendency to exaggerate the similarity of the people deemed to belong to that same category, and, at the same time, to overstress the dissimilarity of people in a different category. The mere act of categorization often results in in-group favoritism and seeing a difference between the groups. Moreover, social categories and identities are

8 For the occurrences, see Kassis, Hanna E. and Fazlur Rahman, *A concordance of the Qurʾan*, Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1983, 149–164.

9 And, naturally, one might add Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, etc. as well. But the evidence of these groups in western Arabia is scant.

10 Jeffery, Arthur, *The foreign vocabulary of the Qurʾan*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938, 70; Leslau, *Comparative dictionary* 24.

11 ʿAdī ibn Zayd *Dīwān* 61.

12 Beeston et al., *Sabaic dictionary* 6. In chapter 1 of the present work, the recently found inscription Jabal Ḏabūb 1 was mentioned. It has the word *ʾymn* in the sense of "faith, belief." However, the inscription seems to me to be Islamic-era rather than pre-Islamic, so *ʾymn* appears to present a borrowing from the Arabic *īmān*.

13 Fine, Gary Alan, *Morel tales: The culture of mushrooming*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, 235.

intimately tied to personal or self-identity since human beings have a habit of self-categorizing as part of the social groups available in their contexts. Articulating and being aware of one's group membership affects how we see the world and how we behave.[14]

How should we interpret the fact that Muḥammad chose a label already used by the monotheists of Arabia for his group? It certainly does not signal a clear demarcation from Jews and Christians. However, one could perhaps argue that the shared group name did not, in fact, mean that there were any overlapping identities or fuzzy borders between the groups. Perhaps there were other "believers," but Muḥammad's followers were the true believers. This argument is hard to sustain, and I disagree with it, since, as will become clear in this and the next chapter, the Qurʾān, both in its Meccan and Medinan layers, explicitly and quite a few times states that some Jews and Christians believe or are believers (e.g., Q 3:110, 3:199, 4:46, 5:83, 28:52–55). The Qurʾān adopted a social category, *muʾminūn*, available in its socio-cultural context and adapted and expanded it to mean (also and, in some cases, in particular) those who believed in the prophecy of Muḥammad. This designation is not totally seized from, denied to, or articulated to the exclusion of Jews and Christians, since at least some of them are to be classified as such.

What follows in this chapter discusses different aspects of the Meccan Qurʾānic revelations: the notion of gentile ethnicity and Abrahamic descent; the importance of the law and obedience to it; the judgment and eschatological apocalypticism; and the classification of the People of the Book, the Israelites, the disbelievers, and the associators vis-à-vis the believers. Here as elsewhere in this book, my focus is the social makeup and identity of the community that started to form around Muḥammad. Given this approach, I will mostly gloss over the picture emerging from the Qurʾān about Muḥammad himself. Naturally, the prophet is an important figure in this book. However, I will solely discuss facets that have to do with the social identity of the community around him.

In general terms, it can be noted that references to Muḥammad, only rarely with his name[15] but rather as the messenger (*al-rasūl*), prophet (*al-nabī*), or as an addressee in second person singular communication,[16] increase during the

14 See Haslam, *Psychology in organizations* 17–39, for the social identity theory and self-categorization theory.

15 Only four times in the Qurʾān: Q 3:144, 33:40, 47:2, 48:29.

16 Though see the important remark by Sells, Michael A., "The casting: A close hearing of sūra 20:1–79," in Angelika Neuwirth and Michael A. Sells (eds.), *Qurʾanic studies today*, London: Routledge, 2016, 124–177, at 126: "although the singular 'you' at times applies exclusively to

process of Qur'ānic revelations. It appears that the role of Muḥammad in the Meccan community (supposing we can place the Qur'ānic *sūra*s interpreted as "Meccan" geographically there) was precarious. In Mecca, he was a prophet but not preaching to the choir. He is merely a warner and a human being (e.g., Q 11:12, 18:110). However, there are some legal contents already in the Meccan pericopes (e.g., Q 6:140, 6:145, perhaps 16:115;[17] see also below in this chapter). The late Meccan *sūra*s are replete with pessimistic descriptions of those around the prophet and the possibility of the prophet to get his message across.[18]

In Medina, as the "Constitution" and Medinan Qur'ānic *sūra*s attest, his situation was much more stable and, indeed, he was the leader of the Medinan community. He is in a position of authority and able to judge between people (Q 4:59, 5:49). Belief in his message is, in some verses, even described as requisite for receiving salvation in the afterlife, though the Qur'ānic message on this point is ambiguous (Q 48:13, cf. 2:62 and the next chapter). Legal contents proliferate in the Medinan period (e.g., Q 4:19–25, 24:32–33, 58:1–4, 65:1–7). In the Medinan Qur'ān, there are also some passages that discuss the prophet's wives and family (Q 33:28–52, 66:1–5).

2.2 *Gentile Ethnicity in the Qur'ān*

Religious communities were, in late antiquity, often conceived to form "ethnic" units (i.e., based on descent) in addition to their being groups based on faith.[19] This is natural to perceive in the case of Judaism, where the notion of descent has been important, with converts becoming adopted daughters and sons of the "nation."[20] Christianity, too, was steeped in ethnic discourse. For Paul, it was of utmost importance to present the gentiles, in addition to the Jews, as Abraham's offspring (see in particular Galatians 3 and Romans 4). This "ethnic reasoning" continued in the evolving Christianity, as Denise Kimber Buell has demonstrated in detail.[21] For instance, Justin Martyr wrote the following around 160 CE:

the prophet, in other cases (e.g., 'has the story of Mūsā reached you?'), the 'you' may evoke both the first addressee as well as each member of the implied and actual audience." For a treatment of the different forms present in the Qur'ānic text, see Samji, Karim, *The Qur'ān: A form-critical history*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.

17 Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition* 301, suggests that Q 16:106–128 is a later Medinan addition to the Meccan *sūra*.

18 Saleh, "End of hope."

19 The following reproduces some material from my "The seed of Abraham."

20 Boyarin, *Judaism*.

21 Buell, *Why this new race*.

> we, who have been led to God through this crucified Christ are the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants [or: the nation] (*genos*) of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham who, though uncircumcised, was approved and blessed by God because of his faith and was called the father of many *ethnē* [nations].[22]

Christianity, like Judaism, was not simply a "faith." It was (perceived to be) a "nation," as well. Something similar is going on in the Qurʾān: religious groups are not based only on faith, practices, and dogmata, but also lineage.[23] As was outlined in chapter 1, Arab ethnogenesis, properly speaking, should be understood as a post-Islamic phenomenon. The Qurʾān, then, does not envision an Arab nation, though paying much attention to descent. It describes a gentile ethnos and suggests that most of the believers came from that group.[24] This discourse extends from the Meccan to the Medinan era[25] but because this topic is important for the argument that I am making (the Qurʾān as the revelation of the gentile eschatological prophet), I will deal with the whole topic here.

The central terms that communicate gentile ethnicity are *ummī* (pl. *ummiyyūn*) and *ḥanīf* (pl. *ḥunafāʾ*).[26] In the Qurʾān, both Abraham and Muḥammad are called gentile prophets. For Muḥammad, the word used is *ummī*, while Abraham received the epithet *ḥanīf* (the word is also used once when addressing Muḥammad, Q 10:105).[27] What is more, the followers of Muḥammad (or a subgroup among them) are, in a few instances, referred to with the plu-

22 Justin Martyr, *Iustini Martyris apologiae pro Christianis: Iustini Martyris dialogus cum Tryphone*, ed. Miroslav Marcovich, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997, 11.5, trans. in Buell, *Why this new race* 99.

23 Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 157, 193–195.

24 But not all. As will be argued below, Jews and Christians also joined the believer group. And a few verses such as Q 34:28 clarify that the prophet has been sent to humankind in general (*kāffatan li-l-nās*). However, the point remains that it is the gentile component in the believer group that appears to be dominant and, moreover, the subcategories of the community of the believers into, first and foremost, the gentiles and the People of the Book are retained. Similarly, Paul in, e.g., Galatians 3 and Romans 4 retains the division of people into Jews and non-Jews (gentiles), though they are joined together though their *pistis* (faithfulness) in Christ Jesus.

25 Indeed, it is the Medinan stratum where Abraham, as an exemplary figure, receives even more significance; Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan* 67.

26 The pertinent verses are Q 6:79, 6:161, 10:105, 7:157–158, 16:120, 16:123, 30:30 (Meccan); and Q 2:78, 2:135, 3:20, 3:67, 3:75, 3:95, 4:125, 22:31, 62:2, 98:5 (Medinan). As can be seen from this list, the gentile discourse spans both periods.

27 For a detailed and lucid interpretation of Abraham as the gentile monotheist, see Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical subtext* 71–87.

rals of these words, *ummiyyūn* and *ḥunafāʾ*, which indicates that a part of the prophet's community were regarded (and self-identified) as gentiles.

In the fully-fledged, ninth century CE and later, Islamic exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the Qurʾān, the word *ummī* was understood as meaning "illiterate," while the attribute *ḥanīf*, in particular connected with Abraham, was deemed to mean something like "proto-monotheist; true believer."[28] But modern scholars, operating with the methods of comparative linguistics and Semitic studies, have suggested that the prophet Muḥammad and his contemporaries in all likelihood understood these words differently. The next paragraphs explore the etymologies of the two words.

The word *ummī* is, simply put, derived from the Arabic word *umma*, which means "people, ethnos, community." However, in particular in Qurʾānic Arabic, the word *umma* appears to be similar in usage to the Hebrew *gōy* and *ʿammīm* and Greek *éthnos*, all of which refer not only to "people" but also "gentile people" (in this context, the plurals have more or less the same meaning as the singulars).[29] Moreover, in Syriac the word *ʿammē* signifies "(gentile) nations" (a borrowing from the Hebrew *ʿammīm*).[30] Looking at cognates for the Arabic word *umma* (root *ʾ-m-m*), Hebrew *ummōt* means "the nations; gentiles,"[31] while Syriac has *ūmtho* for "nation, people."[32]

It is unclear whether the Arabic *umma* is, etymologically speaking, a direct borrowing from a form of Aramaic to Arabic or whether, in late antiquity, the Syriac *ʿammē*[33] (or perhaps a cognate in another form of Aramaic) influ-

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28 See Shaddel, Mehdy, "Quranic *Ummī*: Genealogy, ethnicity, and the foundation of a new community," in *JSAI* 43 (2016), 1–60; Olidort, Jacob, "Portraying early Islam as the *milla* of Abraham—A look at the *tafsīr* evidence," in Robert G. Hoyland (ed.), *The late antique world of early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2015, 313–337.

29 Wansbrough, *The sectarian milieu* 122–123.

30 De Blois, François, "*Naṣrānī* (*Ναζωραῖος*) and *ḥanīf* (*ἐθνικός*): Studies on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam," in *BSOAS* 65/1 (2002), 1–30, at 21.

31 The Hebrew word is suggested to be the origin of the Arabic one by Horovitz, Josef, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1926, 51. See also the discussion in Rubin, *The eye of the beholder* 21–30.

32 Payne Smith, Robert, *A compendious Syriac dictionary: Founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903, 6. The meaning "gentiles" is not given by Payne Smith, so it is not clear to me whether the Syriac usage includes this connotation, which I suggest for the Arabic *umma* in Qurʾān 16:120.

33 In Qurʾānic or Classical Arabic, the root *ʿ-m-m* does not produce a word denoting "people," though, astonishingly, a poem by Muraqqish the Elder contains the word *ʿamm* in this meaning. See al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, ii 183, 185. As Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East*, 529, points out, Arabians are sometimes called *ʿammē* in Syriac texts before and after Muḥammad.

enced the usage of the Arabic *umma* to acquire meanings of gentileness. In any case, in the Qurʾān gentiles are mostly referred to with the word *ummī*, plural *ummiyyūn*. *Ummī* refers to one belonging to the *umma*: "one coming from the community, ethnos; a gentile."[34] While the word *ummī*/*ummiyyūn* occurs six times in the Qurʾān, all with the meaning "gentile(s)," the word *umma* appears to denote gentiles with any certainty only in one verse, 16:120.[35] However, since the word is used to designate Muḥammad's community (though not exclusively—other groups are also referred to with this word) and since Muḥammad and many of his followers identified as "gentiles" (as argued in the present study), the meaning "gentile people" might be implicit in other verses as well. One example is Qurʾān 3:110: "You are the best *umma* from among humankind (*ukhkrijat li-l-nās*): you order what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in God. If the People of the Book also believed, it would be better for them. For although some of them do believe, most of them are transgressors." In this verse, the word *umma* might perhaps be translated as "community of gentiles," since they are contrasted with the People of the Book.[36] Or consider Q 16:63, which begins: "By God, We have sent [messengers/revelations] to the [gentile?] nations (*umam*) before you."

The word *ḥanīf* is, quite often in modern scholarship, assumed to derive from the Syriac word *ḥanpā*.[37] While in the Syriac texts it usually refers to gen-

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34 The formulation by Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible* 112, is rather apt. He interprets *ummiyyūn* as meaning "'gentiles' in the sense of those people to whom God has not yet given part of the revelation." But, as I argue in this study, the gentile identity that the Qurʾān articulates is not limited to revelation but is conceived through ethnic reasoning.

35 The word *umma* appears altogether 51 times in the Qurʾān; see Badawi, Elsaid M. and Muhammed Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English dictionary of Qurʾanic usage* (Handbook of Oriental Studies 1, The Near and Middle East 85), Leiden: Brill, 2008, 47. Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible* 429, notes, "The Qurʾān here calls Abraham a 'nation' (Ar. *umma*), a term which expresses the way a people would be descended from him, and thus reflects Genesis 18:[17–18]." Amir-Moezzi and Dye (eds.), *Le Coran des historiens*, ii a 647, notes that the usage of the word *umma* in 16:120 is "*étrange*." However, regarding 16:120, Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical subtext* 85, notes aptly: "In fact this description [Abraham as an *umma*] is meaningful in two ways. First, it reflects the Biblical description of Abraham as a nation (*gōy*; Gn 18.18), itself an epithet that reflects divine promise of blessing. Second, it separates Abraham from the Jews and Christians, making him—like the Qurʾān's own prophet—a prophet of the gentiles."

36 But this sense of *umma* is definitely not in use except in a few occurrences. Moreover, verse 2:213 reminisces about a primordial state of people, when they were all one *umma*.

37 Amir-Moezzi and Dye (eds.), *Le Coran des historiens*, ii a 89; el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 62–66; Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical subtext* 80–87, and *The Qurʾān and the Bible* 430. Some pre-modern Arabic authors also suggested a derivation from Syriac: de Blois, "*Naṣrānī*" 20. Since the word *ḥanīf* (in singular) always appears as

tiles in a negative or neutral sense, in Qurʾānic Arabic the usage is positive—a true believer, albeit of gentile background.[38] The word *ḥanīf* appears 10 times in the Qurʾān, while its plural *ḥunafāʾ* appears twice.[39]

It is unclear why the prophet Muḥammad is associated with the term *ummī* (and not *ḥanīf*, except in verse 10:105), while Abraham is called *ḥanīf* and never *ummī*. However, the prophet's audience and followers (or a part of them) are called both *ummiyyūn* and *ḥunafāʾ* (plurals of the words under discussion). As stated above, it is in particular Abraham that received the attribute *ḥanīf* in the Qurʾān. Verses 3:67–68 state: "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. He was an obedient gentile (*kāna ḥanīfan musliman*), not an associator, and the people who are closest to him are those who follow him: this prophet and those who believe. God is close to the believers." In these verses, Abraham is contrasted with both Jews and Christians as well as the *mushrikūn*, "those who associate other beings with God." Notably, verse 68 links Abraham explicitly with Muḥammad ("this prophet") and his community of believers.

Indeed, verses 3:95–97 note that the present-day believers should emulate Abraham the *ḥanīf*: "[prophet], say, 'God speaks the truth, so follow [plural] the *milla* of Abraham *ḥanīfan*;[40] he was not an associator.' The first sanctuary to be established for people was the one at Bakka;[41] [it was established] as a blessing and guidance for people. There are clear signs in it: the standing place of Abraham; whoever enters it is safe. Pilgrimage to the sanctuary is a duty owed to God by people who are able to make their way there. Those who reject—God has no need of anyone." The Abrahamic prototypicality is not linked simply with the outlook of Muḥammad's community as (for the most part) gentiles but also adduced in connection with the sanctuary at Mecca, where Abraham once stood.[42]

ḥanīfan in the Qurʾān, the final *alif* could actually reflect the final -*ā* of the Syriac *ḥanpā*, as has been suggested in scholarship.

38 For a more detailed treatment of the Syriac usages, see de Blois, "*Naṣrānī*"; Lindstedt, "The seed of Abraham."

39 Badawi and Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English dictionary* 239.

40 Here, the meaning could be understood in two ways: "follow the *milla* of Abraham as gentiles" or "follow the *milla* of Abraham [who was] a gentile." The syntax is difficult, since the imperative "follow" is in the plural, while the word *ḥanīfan* is singular.

41 Usually understood to refer to Mecca, though the word is peculiar.

42 As regards the Abrahamic prototype, Neuwirth, Angelika, "The house of Abraham and the house of Amram: Genealogy, patriarchal authority, and exegetical professionalism," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in context: Historical and literary investigations into the Qurʾānic milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 499–532, at 502, has noted: "At the same time that the biblical Abraham is appropriated as a prototype of the new believers, *al-muslimūn*, (Q 2:135–136), Abraham is installed as the founder of

The Abrahamic lineage of the present-day believers, that is, the followers of Muḥammad, is cemented in these key verses. In addition to the passage just discussed, important is Qurʾān 2:127–129, where Abraham and Ishmael are depicted as laying the foundations of "the sanctuary," which is not identified but is conventionally interpreted to refer to the Kaʿba. At the same time, they address God, praying that the Lord will "make our descendants (*dhurriyyatinā*)[43] into a community (*umma*) devoted to You" and "make a messenger of their own rise up from among them." Although Muḥammad is not named, it seems that the identification is clear.

Qurʾān 98:4–5 polemicizes against the Jews and Christians, saying that they would be better off if they followed God's *dīn* (law) as *ḥunafāʾ*, gentiles: "[Yet] those who were given the Scripture [before] became divided only after they were sent [such] clear evidence though all they are ordered to do is worship God, sincerely devoting the *dīn* to Him as *ḥunafāʾ*, keep up the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, for that is the true *dīn*." This polemical discourse appears to be connected with other Qurʾānic passages, such as Q 2:113 and 3:65, where it is said that Jews and Christians argue with each other about, for example, who owns Abraham rather than being simply obedient to and believing in God. The Qurʾān claims that Jews and Christians are more interested in group affiliations and monikers than being pious and worshipping God. Gentiles, *ḥunafāʾ*, are free of this historical package, according to the Qurʾān.

This contrasting of the Jews and Christians (People of the Book) with the gentiles is apparent in other verses as well. The Medinan verse 3:75 asserts:

> There are People of the Book who, if you [sing.] entrust them with a heap of gold, will return it to you intact, but there are others of them who, if you entrust them with a single coin, will not return it to you unless you keep demanding it, because they say, "We are under no obligation towards the *ummiyyūn*." They knowingly tell lies against God.

Here, the gentileness of (some of) the prophet's followers is communicated with the word *ummiyyūn*. Qurʾān 62:1–2 can be taken as an implicit reference

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the fundamental rites of the Arabian pilgrimage that culminate with the slaughter of a sacrificial animal."

43 The Qurʾānic concept of *dhurriyya*, descendants, is, at the same time, both very concrete and symbolic. Consider Q 3:33–34, according to which Adam, Noah, and the families of Abraham and ʿImrān were *dhurriyya* to each other. This might echo Jesus' lineage(s) in the New Testament, Luke 3:23–38 and Matthew 1:1–17, though this specific genealogical list (Q 3:33–34) is peculiar to the Qurʾān: neither Luke nor Matthew mention Noah or Amram/ʿImrān.

to Muḥammad—his own gentile background and that of many of his followers: "Everything in the heavens and earth praises God, the King, the Holy, the All-mighty, the Wise. It is He who sent a messenger to the *ummiyyūn*, to recite His words (*āyāt*) to them, to make them pure, and teach them the Book and wisdom. Before that, they were clearly astray." In verses 7:155–158 Moses is described as praying to God, who responds (verse 157) by declaring that He will send as a messenger "the *ummī* prophet they find described in the Torah that is with them, and in the Gospel."

The words *ummī* and *ummiyyūn* function, for the most part, in a positive sense. However, in one instance (Q 2:78), the reference is to disbelievers among the gentiles: "Some of them [the disbelievers] are *ummiyyūn*, and know the Book only through wishful thinking. They rely on speculation."[44] Clearly, the Qur'ānic conceptualization of gentile ethnicity is, in itself, not automatically and categorically affirmative. There are believers and disbelievers in different groups, be they Jews, Christians, or gentiles (the main ethnicities in the Qur'ānic communication).

In this section, I have argued that the Qur'ān refers to the prophet Muḥammad's (and many of his followers') ethnic origins as being gentile, though he and they are believers. The Arabic words *ummī* (plural *ummiyyūn*) and *ḥanīf* (plural *ḥunafā'*) can ultimately be traced to another Semitic language, Syriac in the case of *ḥanīf* and probably some form of Aramaic (but not necessarily Syriac) in the case of *ummī*. Since the words do not appear in the North Arabian epigraphic record, the exact time of borrowing cannot be established and could have taken place centuries before the prophet Muḥammad. The fact that the word *ḥanīf* operates with an Arabic broken plural *ḥunafā'* could indicate that at least the word *ḥanīf* was already well known and widely used among Arabic-speaking communities.[45]

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44 Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible* 54, understands this verse differently. According to him, the verse "seems to be accusing certain Jews (the larger context of this Sura involves the Israelites and their sins) of not knowing the word of God and therefore being *ummī*. This polemic is close to that of several New Testament passages (Mat 15:7–9; Mar 7:1–9; Luk 11:39–42)." But this reading is problematic. *Sūra* 2 (the longest one in the whole Qur'ān) includes a myriad of topics, not just the Israelites and their misdeeds. It is perfectly possible to understand Qur'ān 2:72–82 as referring to not (at least only) the Jews but discussing the disbelievers more generally. (It should be noted, though, that the Qur'ān does not categorize all Jews as disbelievers but rather a part of them.)

45 Though, taking an analogue from modern Arabic dialects, this is not necessarily the case. Loan words start to function with a broken plural often very soon after their borrowing. In the pre-Islamic Arabic poetic corpus, the word seems to indicate "gentile," de Blois, "*Naṣrānī*" 19.

2.3 *The Law and Judgment* (dīn) *in the Qurʾān*

The issue of the law and judgment is communicated in the Qurʾān with the word *dīn*, which appears in both the definite and indefinite. The word indicates not only the judgment at the eschaton but also the law that the believers (including the gentile ones) should follow; the latter aspect and connotation rises in importance in the Medinan period. As in Judaism and Christianity, the concept of "the law" trumps how law might be commonly understood today; the pre-modern concept also includes ethics and religious practices.[46] It is important to note that the Qurʾān specifies that the law should be followed gentile-ly, *ḥanīfan*. I would not translate the word *dīn* as "religion" (as is commonly done) in any of its occurrences in the Qurʾān.[47]

To begin with, it should be noted that according to most scholars, the Qurʾānic Arabic *dīn* merges two etymologically different words. According to this view, the Qurʾānic *dīn* fuses both a Semitic word denoting "judgment"[48] and the Middle Persian *dēn*, which is usually but perhaps misleadingly translated as "religion."[49] And, as I argue below, it is the meanings of "judgment" and "law"

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46 The Qurʾānic *dīn* is, in this respect, similar to the Greek *nomos* and the Hebrew *halakha* in the usage of the Jews and Christians. Later, the Arabic words *sharʿ* and *sharīʿa* begin to be used to denote "the law" and the totality of the ethical and practical system. It is perhaps no wonder that the Arabic lexica explain the word *dīn* with *sharīʿa*; see Lane, Edward W. and Stanley Lane-Poole, *Arabic-English lexicon*, 8 vols., London 1863–1893, repr. Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968, s.v. *dīn*. The words were interconfessional: both Jews and Christians called the law, in Greek, *nomos*. The Arabic word *sharīʿa* was used by Jews, Christians, and Muslims; Jews also sometimes translated *Torah* with *dīn* in Arabic; see Boyarin, *Judaism* 61–69.

47 See also the poem ascribed to al-Nābigha, which Sinai, *Rain-giver* 55, translates as "it is not licit for us / to divert ourselves with women, for religion (*dīn*) has become [our] resolve." But surely one could translate *dīn* as "law," instead of "religion." Indeed, it could be the most natural rendering, since the topic discussed is illicit sexual relations with women. The topic will be also discussed in the following chapter. For an insightful, but in my opinion somewhat conventional, interpretation, see Niemi, Matthew D., *Historical & semantic development of dīn and Islām from the seventh century to the present*, (PhD Diss.): Indiana University, Bloomington, 2021. In an interesting and important study, Goudarzi, Mohsen, "Unearthing Abraham's altar: The cultic dimensions of *dīn*, *islām*, and *ḥanīf* in the Qurʾan," *JNES* 82/1 (forthcoming), it is suggested that *dīn* means "(cultic) worship." This might fit well some instances of the word in the Qurʾān, such as Q 109.

48 For example, the Syriac *dīnā* denotes "judgment"; Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible* 894. For a detailed study discussing these issues, see Donner, Fred M., "Dīn, Islām, und Muslim im Koran," in Georges Tamer (ed.), *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019, 129–140.

49 Though, in the case of the Middle Persian *dēn*, the semantic range appears to be somewhat wide, also denoting the Avesta and Zand (the scriptural corpus of Zoroastrianism) as well as the religious community; Nyberg, Henrik S., *A manual of Pahlavi*, 2 vols., i, Wiesbaden:

that are included (primarily, I would suggest) in the Qurʾānic *dīn*. The signification "law/judgment" appears in the pre-Islamic Arabic poetic corpus, and the Qurʾān continues this usage. For instance, the Christian poet ʿAdī ibn Zayd panegyrizes a king by noting: "you guide humankind and fulfil their needs: as regards the law/ judgment (*al-dīn*), justice [i.e., you are just]; as regards benevolence, abundance [i.e., you give abundantly]."[50] In al-Mumazzaq al-ʿAbdī's praise to the king of al-Ḥīra, ʿAmr ibn Hind, we read: "you are the pillar of law: whatever you say is accepted (lit. is said, *wa-anta ʿamūdu l-dīni mahmā taqul yuqal*)."[51] Medieval Arabic lexicographers adduce a further meaning for the word *dīn*: "habit, custom,"[52] which would also function in some of the Qurʾānic (and poetic) contexts.

Further pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabic poems mentioning *dīn* are discussed by Izutsu and Goudarzi in their respective studies.[53] However, their interpretations of these verses differ from mine: Izutsu understands *dīn* as often denoting "service" or "obedience"; Goudarzi agrees with, in particular, the meaning "service," also adding "(cultic) worship" as one of the senses present in both the poetry and the Qurʾān. The poetic evidence they adduce is not necessarily conclusive, in my opinion, and could be read in various ways.

Otto Harrassowitz, 1974, 62. To belong to the *dēn ī māzdesnān*, "the Mazdean/Zoroastrian *dēn*," often also called *weh-dēn*, "the Good *dēn*," is to belong to the community and to follow its law (*dād*); Jaafari-Dehaghi, Mahmoud, "Apostasy in Middle Persian according to *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*," in *Iranian Heritage Studies* 1/2 (1399/2020–2021), 29–34. For studies problematizing the translation of the Middle Persian *dēn* into English as "religion," see also Mokhtarian, Jason, "The boundaries of an infidel in Zoroastrianism: A Middle Persian term of otherness for Jews, Christians, and Muslims," in *Iranian Studies* 48/1 (2015), 99–115; Skjaervø, Prods O., "The Zoroastrian oral tradition as reflected in the texts," in Alberto Cantera (ed.), *The transmission of the Avesta*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012, 3–48, at 20–25; Vevaina, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw, "'Enumerating the Dēn': Textual taxonomies, cosmological deixis, and numerological speculations in Zoroastrianism," in *History of Religions* 50/2 (2010), 111–143.

50 ʿAdī ibn Zayd, *Dīwān* 52. The line runs, in Arabic, as follows: *tahdī l-anāma wa-tuʿṭīhum nawāʾibahum fī l-dīni ʿadlan wa-fī l-iʿṭāʾi ighzārā*. Translating *nawāʾibahum* as "their needs" follows the suggestion of the editor of the *Dīwān* 52, n. 16; however, as the editor notes, this word often means "misfortunes, disasters." In any case, here the crux of the matter is the word *dīn*, which clearly means "law, judgment," here.

51 ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Muʿīnī (ed.), *Shuʿarāʾ ʿAbd al-Qays wa-Shiʿruhum fī al-ʿAṣr al-Jāhilī*, Kuwayt: Muʾassasat Jāʾizat ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Saʿūd al-Bābaṭīn lil-Ibdāʿ al-Shiʿrī, 2002, 336.

52 *Lisān al-ʿarab*, s.v., d-y-n: *wa-l-dīn: al-ʿāda wa-l-shaʾn*. See also Lane and Lane-Poole, *Arabic-English lexicon*, s.v., giving for instance the following meanings in this connection: "custom," "habit," "business," "a way, course, mode, or manner, of acting, or conduct."

53 Izutsu, Toshihiko, *God and man in the Koran: The semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, Petaling Jaya: Islamic Book Trust, 2002, 241–246; Goudarzi, "Unearthing Abraham's altar."

For instance, Goudarzi cites a poem (the authenticity of which is spurious) attributed to Khuzāʿī ibn ʿAbd Nuhm where the poet remarks:

> I went to Nuhm in order to slaughter before it / a sacrificial victim, as I used to do (*dhahabtu ilā Nuhmin li-adhbaḥa ʿindahu / ʿatīrata nuskin ka-lladhī kuntu afʿalu*) …
>
> But I refrained, for my *dīn* today is Muhammad's *dīn* (*abaytu fa-dīnī l-yawma dīnu Muḥammadin*)[54]

Goudarzi understands the word *dīn* here, as elsewhere, to mean "(way of) worship/service," with often cultic connections. In my opinion however, the signification "law" would be clearly warranted in the translation of Khuzāʿī's poem, since (as I argue in this and the next chapter) matters of purity, sacrifice, and worship were understood as part of the Qurʾānic concept of law.

Moreover, some the citations given by Izutsu can also be understood in the context of my interpretation of the word as often denoting "judgment" and "law." In a verse from the *muʿallaqa* of ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm,[55] we read, in Izutsu's translation: "We have inherited the glory of (one of our forefathers) ʿAlqamah; it is he who made lawful to us (i.e. who has conquered for us) many strongholds of glory by force" (*abāḥa lanā ḥuṣūna l-majd dīnan*).[56] In my opinion, the translation "by force" (Izutsu also suggests "the state of absolute obedience and submissiveness" as an alternative) for *dīnan* is somewhat strained. Rather, the word *abāḥa* suggests a legal (and perhaps ironic) comment. I argue that, in this verse, the *tamyīz* accusative *dīnan* would be preferably be translated "in the context of law/judgment" or "as regards law/judgment." What the poet indicates is that the forefather ʿAlqama has declared licit the conquest of famed fortresses.

The foregoing does not mean that the word *dīn* would *always* mean "judgment" or "law" in pre-Islamic poetry. But they are definitely among the meanings attested in that corpus, and could be present, in fact, in cases where other scholars have suggested different significations for *dīn*. With these remarks in mind, let us now survey the word in the Qurʾān.

The word *dīn* appears 92 times in the Qurʾān.[57] Of these, it occurs 13 times in the word pair *yawm al-dīn*, "judgment day."[58] In this expression, the word

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54 Ibn al-Kalbī, *al-Aṣnām* 39–40, trans. in Goudarzi, "Unearthing Abraham's altar."

55 On him, see Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the sixth century*, ii/1, 268–272.

56 Izutsu, *God and man in the Qur'an*, 243.

57 See Kassis and Rahman, *A concordance* 382–383.

58 Verses 1:4, 15:35, 26:82, 37:20, 38:78, 51:12, 56:56, 70:26, 74:46, 82:15, 82:17, 82:18, and 83:11. This

dīn translates effortlessly as "judgment." Translating the phrase as "the day of *religion*" would simply be nonsensical and wrong, since the context is the eschatological events. In some other instances as well, we can see from the context that the meaning is "judgment" rather than "religion." Moreover, verse 51:6 proclaims that "the judgment will come (*inna al-dīn la-wāqiʿ*)." Similarly, in the eschatological context of verse 24:25 the word means "judgment": "on that Day, God will give them their judgment (*dīnahum*) according to [their] due (*al-ḥaqq*)."

These examples serve to illustrate that, in Qurʾānic Arabic, *al-dīn* signifies "judgment." But does the word's semantic field also include what we might translate into English as "law"? Verse 12:76, where the words *dīn al-malik* mean quite clearly "the king's law," evidences that it does (and Medinan verses such as 5:3, discussed in the next chapter, corroborate this). In Q 12:76, the context is that Joseph has hidden a cup in the sack of his youngest brother, Benjamin in the Biblical tradition. This, the verse explains, Joseph did because otherwise he could not have imprisoned his brother *fī dīn al-malik*, "according to the king's law." Here, *dīn* does not signify the "king's judgment" (which would not yet have taken place in the plane of the story) but his "law," namely something that has been laid out in the past and is followed in the present. Also, in Q 42:21, the text addresses the disbelievers as follows: "Or do they have associates (*shurakāʾ*) that have decreed to them of the law (*sharaʿū lahum min al-dīn*) what God has not permitted?" The verb *sharaʿū* and the fact that this *faux dīn* is said to include aspects that God does not allow suggest that the translation "the law" is apt here.

In rest of the cases—75 in total according to my calculation—the word *dīn* is somewhat ambiguous in meaning. It could mean "law; judgment" but perhaps, as is commonly understood, "religion" as well; however, as will be argued in this chapter and the next, I opt for the former. One of the notable aspects is that several verses state that *al-dīn* belongs to God or is God's.[59] Moreover, the disbelievers try to prevent the believers from following this *dīn* by fighting them.[60] Verse 98:5 explains, interestingly addressing the People of the Book, that they should worship God alone, follow the *dīn* as *ḥanīf*s, keep the prayer, and pay the alms. A crucial part of *al-dīn* is submission/obedience to (*al-islām*) it.[61] These two words often go together in the Qurʾānic discourse. Furthermore, the

word pair is taken from the Syriac *yawmā d-dīnā*, "the day of judgment"; el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 189–190.

59 E.g., Q 2:193, 3:19, 3:83.

60 Q 2:193, 2:217.

61 Q 3:19, 3:85, 4:125.

word *ḥanīf* is often used to explain how the correct *dīn* should be pursued.[62] As mentioned above, I agree with the modern scholarly efforts to connect *ḥanīf* etymologically with the Syriac *ḥanpā*, meaning "gentile." What the Qurʾān articulates, then, is a distinct sense of gentile believer-ness and obedience to the law. People like the prophet and his followers, many of them coming from a gentile background, could be believers despite their lowly (in the eyes of the others) ethnicity.

There are quite a few instances where the word *dīn* is usually understood convey the sense of a reified, bounded religious group, but this is unlikely in my opinion. One occurrence of such a use is verse 6:159, which states: "As regards those who have disagreed (*farraqū*) in their *dīn* and broken up into factions (*wa-kānū shiyaʿan*), do not associate with them. Their case rests with God: in time He will tell them about their deeds." I think it might make perfect sense to render the expression "their *dīn*" (*dīnahum*) as "their custom" or "their law"; the reference would be to people who have become divided in their understanding of the law or, perhaps, are portrayed explicitly as law-breakers.

Qurʾān 6:161 connects the word *dīn* with something called *millat ibrāhīm*, "the *milla* of Abraham."[63] The word *milla* is often understood to be synonymous with *dīn* and, accordingly, translated as "religion" in English (or, sometimes, "creed," to avoid repeating the same word). However, this Qurʾānic concept, too, requires some probing.[64] Like *dīn*, the word *milla* never appears in the plural in the Qurʾān, though the plural (*milal*) exists in Classical Arabic. Once again, it seems that we are dealing with an uncountable noun, as it were, in the Qurʾānic communication. The word *milla* appears 15 times in the Qurʾān. In seven of these instances, Abraham, who is said to have pursued it as a *ḥanīf*, as a gentile believer, not a Jew nor Christian, is mentioned in connection with the *milla*. Related to this is Qurʾān 16:120, which states that Abraham was not only *ḥanīf* but also *umma*. Both words probably convey the same meaning of gentile believer-ness.[65] Here, the word *umma* is connected with the word

62 Q 10:105 (*aqim wajhaka li-l-dīn ḥanīfan*), 30:30 (ditto).

63 Interestingly, the Qurʾān never uses the word pair *dīn ibrāhīm*, though it is common in later Arabic literature; Hawting, Gerald R., "The religion of Abraham and Islam," in Martin Goodman, George H. van Kooten and Jacques T.A.G.M. van Ruiten (eds.), *Abraham, the nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic perspectives on kinship with Abraham* (Themes in Biblical Narrative 13), Leiden: Brill, 2010, 475–501, at 480. Note however Q 6:161, which juxtaposes the *dīn* and *millat ibrāhīm*: "Say, 'My Lord has guided me to a straight path, an upright *dīn*, the *milla* of Abraham, as a *ḥanīf*, he was not an associator.' "

64 For an overview of these verses, see also Tottoli, Roberto, *Biblical prophets in the Qurʾān and Muslim literature*, Richmond: Curzon, 2002, 7–11.

65 Though it might also echo Gen 18:18, where it is stated that "Abraham will become a great and powerful nation."

ummī, meaning "gentile," which is one of the attributes of Muḥammad in the Qurʾānic communication.

What does *milla* mean and how should we render it in English? It should be noted that the Arabic exegetes and lexicographers give varying meanings to the word. In addition to understanding it as "religion" (often in the countable sense), they also proffer the meanings "custom" and "way of conduct."[66] Interestingly, Angelika Neuwirth has suggested a more specific meaning for the word *milla*. She argues that the word pair *millat ibrāhīm* can be traced to the Hebrew expression *berit millah*, "covenant of circumcision." The idea of male circumcision would then be included in—indeed central to—the Qurʾānic notion of "the *milla* of Abraham."[67] However, I wonder how this interpretation functions in the context of verse 2:135, where *millat ibrāhīm* is contrasted with Jews (who practiced circumcision) and Christians (who might have).[68] Understanding the Qurʾānic concept *milla* as denoting exclusively or primarily male circumcision seems problematic for this reason. Indeed, a Syriac derivation seems preferable.[69] As for Jeffery, he suggests a derivation from the Syriac *meltā*, lit. "word," which (in some texts) renders the Greek *logos*.[70] In addition, as noted by Milka Levy-Rubin, in the context of war and peace, the Syriac *meltā* translates the Greek *pistis*, the basic meaning of which is "conviction, allegiance, faithfulness," but which also means "a guarantee or promise of security or protection." Sometimes, the Greek *logos* also signifies "promise" in a similar context of treaties.[71] Might we have here the origin of the Qurʾānic *milla* and also clues as regards its signification? I deem it probable. That is to say, the Qurʾānic *milla* is derived from the Syriac *meltā* in the sense of the Greek *logos* or *pistis*. Hence, I would suggest that *millat ibrāhīm* is to be understood either as the "faithful-

66 *Lisān al-ʿarab*, s.v., *m-l-l*: *sunnatuhum wa-ṭarīquhum*.

67 See Neuwirth, "The house of Abraham" 502; and also Carmeli, Yehonatan, "Circumcision in early Islam," in *Der Islam* 99 (2022), 289–311, at 296–300.

68 See Crone, "Jewish Christianity"; Sijpesteijn, Petra M., *Shaping a Muslim state: The world of a mid-eighth-century Egyptian official*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 167, notes that Coptic Christian men observed circumcision.

69 Payne Smith, *A compendious Syriac dictionary*, 274–275, lists, e.g., the following meanings for *meltā*: "a word, saying, sentence, precept, command"; "promise, answer"; "compact"; "the Logos"; "a thing, affair; a cause, reason"; "a discourse, tract; a definition."

70 Jeffery, *The foreign vocabulary*, 268–269. Note that, though Jesus is called God's "word," this is communicated in the Qurʾān with the word *kalima* (Q 3:45, 4:171), not *milla*, although the Syriac Gospel translations use *meltā* to refer to Jesus in, for example, John 1; el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 157–159. Clearly, then, the Qurʾānic *milla* does not refer to John 1 but rather articulates a different concept, "promise" or "faithfulness."

71 Levy-Rubin, Milka, *Non-Muslims in the early Islamic empire: From surrender to coexistence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 24, 31.

ness" or "allegiance" that Abraham showed toward God,[72] or, alternatively, the "word/promise"[73] of that faithfulness.[74] The Qurʾān underlines that this *milla* can be pursued as a *ḥanīf* and, by doing this, the Arabian gentiles too can become part of the Biblical pedigree and community of believers.

The Medinan verses 2:126–132, I suggest, offer a rather clear answer to the question of what the Qurʾānic *milla* means. Let me translate the whole passage:

> [126)]Abraham said: "My Lord! Make this land secure and feed with fruits those among its people who believe in God and the last day." He [God] answered: "And those who disbelieve, I will let them enjoy [life] little more, then I will compel them to the punishment of the fire—an evil destination indeed!" [127)]And Abraham and Ishmael raised the foundations of the shrine (*al-bayt*) [praying]: "Our Lord! Accept [this] from us. You are hearing, knowing. [128)]Our Lord! Make us obedient (*muslimayn*) toward You and make our descendants a community obedient toward You (*umma muslima laka*). Show us our ways (*manāsikanā*)[75] and accept our repentance (*tub ʿalaynā*). You are wont to accept repentance, merciful. [129)]Our Lord! Raise up among them [scil. our descendants/the obedient community] a messenger who recites to them Your revelations and teaches them the Book and wisdom and who will purify them. You are mighty, wise." [130)]Who would forsake Abraham's word of faithfulness (*milla*)? Only those who fool themselves! We chose him in this world; in the hereafter he will

72 Abraham's *pistis*, often and perhaps misleadingly translated as "faith," is a significant motif for Paul. See, e.g., Romans 4:13: "For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of *pistis*."

73 Cf. the English expression "I gave him my word."

74 In addition, in verses where *milla* is not connected to Abraham, the alternate meanings explored in this section appear to work well. In, e.g., Q 18:20, "the people of the cave" are warned about disclosing their identity to the city's inhabitants so that the latter do not stone them or, alternatively, place them under their protection (*millatihim*)—a negative outcome, since the inhabitants of the story are disbelievers. In some later examples of Arabic literature too, the word *milla* appears to be better understood in the meaning of the Syriac *meltā* rather than its later Arabic meaning "religious community." For instance, ʿUrwa's letters contain the following exclamation: "May God preserve us in His *milla* from the day He gives us life until the day He causes us to die and the day He resurrects us from the dead!" The translation is adopted from Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 110, who, however, renders *milla* as "community of faith." But, in this context as in the Qurʾān, perhaps the meaning "a guarantee or promise of security or protection" would fit better.

75 This appears to refer to the routes and stations during the pilgrimage, as suggested by Q 2:200.

> be among the righteous. [131)]When his Lord said to him: "Obey! (*aslim*)," he answered: "I obey the Lord of the world." [132)]Abraham bequeathed it (*waṣṣā bi-hā*, scil. the *milla*) to his sons, as did Jacob, [saying]: "My sons, God has chosen for you the law (*al-dīn*); do not die except as obedient [to God and the law]."[76]

Here we have not only an important passage where the prophet Muḥammad (though not identified by name) is reckoned to be among Abraham's descendants, conceptualized through gentile ethnicity, we also encounter two possibilities of understanding the word *milla* (Q 2:130). It could refer to Abraham and Ishmael's "Lord's prayer" which can be found in verses 2:127–129. But perhaps this is not the most straightforward understanding, since this prayer is uttered by the two of them, while the *milla* is merely *millat ibrāhīm*, "Abraham's *milla*." Perhaps it, rather, refers to verse 2:131 in which Abraham gives his word of allegiance to God. In verse 2:132, *waṣṣā bi-hā* finds its natural referent in the word *milla*, which is the only feminine (or plural) word in the pericope.[77] In that verse, Abraham is cited as further elaborating his *milla* and its contents, by naming the law (*al-dīn*) and obedience to it.

2.4 *Obedience* (islām) *to God and the Law*

"Submitting to" or "obedience to" God and the law (*al-islām*), which also entails submitting to the *dīn*, is a rather significant group belief in the Qurʾānic communication.[78] It is an especially interesting matter to take into consideration here since, as is well known, the word *al-islām* later gives the appellation "Islam" to the religion of the group. Scholars arguing for early Islamic identity development (that is, the supposition that the group demarcation was already in place during the life of the prophet) might use the Qurʾānic concept of *al-islām* to claim that it is one of the aspects that delineates the in-group from Jews and Christians.

Here, however, we encounter the fact that, according the Meccan Qurʾānic communication, the People of the Book take part in *al-islām*, submission to

76 Abdel Haleem's translation renders the ending in a more fluid English: "so make sure you devote yourselves to Him, to your dying moment." (Abdel Haleem, Muhammad A. [trans.], *The Qurʾan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.)

77 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 26 vols., ed. ʿAbd Allāh al-Turkī, Cairo: Hajar, 2001, ii, 582, cites different opinions, but none understands *bi-hā* to refer to the word *milla*. Instead, they interpret *waṣṣā bi-hā* as *waṣṣā bi-dhālika* or *waṣṣā bi-hādhihi al-kalima*, referring to what comes later in the verse. The latter interpretation is, though, somewhat in line with what I suggest, since I take *milla* to mean "promise (of faithfulness)."

78 The concept of *islām* will also be discussed in the next chapter.

God. Verses 28:52–53 refer to the People of the Book, saying that they believe in the prophet's revelation and note that they are already obedient toward God and the law (*muslimīn*). Furthermore, Qur'ān 29:46 says that the People of the Book and the (other) in-group members believe in the same God, confirming that "we [all] submit to Him."

Law-obedience is connected, in particular, with the figure of Abraham, who followed the law as an obedient gentile, *musliman ḥanīfan*. This is key: Abraham proffers an elevated lineage for the gentiles, but he is also proof, the Qur'ān opines, that the law can be followed outside the Jewish and Christian groups, as gentiles. These passages (e.g., Q 3:67, 4:125) emphasize that Abraham, though gentile, was not an associator; nor was he, naturally, Jewish or Christian. Abraham gives not only descent but also a model of following the law.

Faith in God is not, in itself, enough for being a believer, according to the Qur'ān. One must also obey the law. Conversely, law-obedience is not enough if one is not a firm believer. A sort of two-stage process for would-be group members is put forward in Q 49:14:

> The nomads (*al-aʿrāb*) say: "We believe (*āmannā*)!" Say [to them, prophet]: "You do not believe [yet]. Instead, say [nomads]: 'We submit (*āslamnā*)!' Faith has yet to enter your hearts. If you obey (*tuṭīʿū*) God and His messenger, He will not leave your deeds without recompense." God is forgiving, merciful.

In this passage, obeying God and Muḥammad is a first step in the process of becoming a believer.[79]

The contours of the Qur'ānic legislation, in particular as regards food and purity, will be explored in the next chapter. Here it suffices to note that the concept *al-islām* often appears in the Qur'ān in the context of following the dietary and purity regulations. In these passages, *al-islām* should be translated as law-obedience, and not just as the obedience to God. Consider verse 6:125,[80] for instance, which reads:

> Whoever God wills to guide, He opens their breast to *al-islām*. Whoever God wills to lead astray, He constricts and make their breast tight, as if

79 In some late Muslim historiographical and other texts, too, *al-islām* is portrayed as a first step toward *al-īmān*; Ibrahim, *Conversion to Islam* 80–82. Note that Q 49:14 indicates that obeying the prophet and God are interlinked; similar ideas are present elsewhere in the Qur'ān, such as in the Medinan verse 4:80.

80 *Sūra* 6 is Mecca III, according to Nöldeke's dating.

> they were climbing to heaven. This is how God lays the filth upon (*yajʿalu Allāh al-rijs ʿalā*) those who do not believe.[81]

How are we to understand the word *al-islām*, the label of the believers, and, on the other hand, "the filth" mentioned in the context of the disbelievers, who are said to have their chest constricted as if they are taken to heaven? First, let me note that the verses preceding and following 6:125 have to do with the last judgment and afterlife: These themes are explored in 6:127–130 and, moreover, verse 6:124, which ends: "Those who commit crimes, will be overwhelmed with humiliation from God and severe punishment for their scheming." The "crimes" committed by the scheming disbelievers could be naturally a number of things, but looking at the context of this Qurʾānic pericope, in particular since 6:125 mentions "filth," I would suggest the answer is provided by 6:121, which states:

> Do not eat that [probably: meat] over which God's name is not mentioned [when it is slaughtered]. That is transgression (*fisq*). The demons inspire their followers to disagree with you (pl.). If you obey them, you will be associators (*mushrikūn*).[82]

The filth that God lays upon the disbelievers in verse 6:125 is, I put forward, the filth of the illicit foods that they have been eating. What goes around, comes around, the Qurʾān is saying. As mentioned in chapter 3, the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* contain a passage where it is stated that the demons try to entice people to eat unclean foods. The same discourse is probably to be seen in the background of verse 6:121. Reading Qurʾān 6:125 in the wider context of the verses before and after it, it becomes clear that the word *al-islām* is intimately connected with law-obedience. By following the Qurʾānic dietary and purity laws, the community retains its status as obedient believers. Eating unclean foods means obeying the demons and is tantamount to being an associator.[83] This is ultimately linked with the hereafter since, here at least,

81 For the notion of God leading people astray, see Räisänen, Heikki, *The idea of divine hardening*, Helsinki: The Finnish Exegetical Society, 1972. He points out that, in many instances in the Qurʾān, God is said to guide or lead people astray only after they have made good or bad choices. These passages, then, do not necessarily entail the idea of predeterminism. See, along the same lines, Sachedina, Abdulaziz Abdulhussein, *The Islamic roots of democratic pluralism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001, 86.

82 See also 6:119, which begins: "Why do you not eat what is [probably: slaughtered] in God's name?"

83 Indeed, a Medinan passage, 9:28, states that the associators themselves *are* filth. Here, another word, *najas*, is used. It does not occur elsewhere in the Qurʾān.

the Qur'ān appears to be suggesting that the paradisal reward may hinge on law-obedience. I would understand the expression "as if they were climbing to heaven" in this context: the disbelievers are portrayed as though transported to heaven, while in reality their last abode can be found somewhere down below.

2.5 *The Eschatological Imminence*

The Qur'ān is steeped in apocalypticism: texts that portray the imminence of the eschaton, the end. The prophet Muḥammad was, then, an eschatological prophet. This was an interpretation put forward by Paul Casanova in 1911.[84] The eschatological reading of the Qur'ān then lay dormant for much of the 20th century, and only recently has it been reinvigorated, in particular through the studies of Stephen Shoemaker.[85] According to him, the Qur'ānic evidence suggests that Muḥammad and his followers believed the final days to be at hand or already begun.[86] Shoemaker situates this Qur'ānic discourse in the context of sixth-seventh century CE apocalypticism, which was widespread in the Near East among Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and others.[87] Of particular importance were the Roman-Persian wars of the early seventh century (during the life

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84 Casanova, Paul, *Mohammed et la fin du monde: Étude critique sur l'Islam primitive*, Paris: Librarie Paul Geuthner, 1911.

85 Shoemaker, *The death of a prophet*; " 'The reign of God has come': Eschatology and empire in late antiquity and early Islam," in *Arabica* 61 (2014), 514–558, and *The apocalypse of empire*; cf. Cameron, who criticizes Shoemaker's overarching assumptions (Cameron, Averil, "Late antique apocalyptic: A context for the Qur'an?" in Hagit Amirav, Emmanouela Grypeou and Guy G. Stroumsa [eds.], *Visions of the end: Apocalypticism and eschatology in the Abrahamic religions*, 1–19, Leuven: Peeters, 2017). On the Qur'ānic eschatological passages, see also Costa, José, "Early Islam as a messianic movement: A non-issue?" in Carlos A. Segovia (ed.), *Remapping emergent Islam: Texts, social settings, and ideological trajectories*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 45–81; Donner, Fred M., *Muhammad and the believers: At the origins of Islam*, Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010, 14–17; Ghaffar, Zishan, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext: Eschatologie und Apokalyptik in den mittelmekkanischen Suren*, Leiden: Brill, 2019; Sinai, Nicolai, "The eschatological kerygma of the early Qur'an," in Hagit Amirav, Emmanouela Grypeou and Guy G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Apocalypticism and eschatology in late antiquity: Encounters in the Abrahamic religions, 6th–8th centuries*, Leuven: Peeters, 2017, 219–266. El-Badawi, *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 165–205, proffers an interesting comparative study on (Aramaic) Biblical and Qur'ānic eschatological notions.

86 Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 7–8.

87 See the impressive amount of evidence presented in Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 66–89, for the apocalyptic texts and the beliefs and feelings that they can be said to have captured. Note that the geographic range is also wide, apocalyptic eschatology appearing to be present in Ethiopia as well, as evidenced in a few Ethiopic apocalyptic texts of the sixth century.

and the mission of the prophet Muḥammad), events which included the capture of the True Cross from Jerusalem by the Sasanid Persians and its eventual reinstallation there by the Romans.[88] The wars appear to have instilled general fears and hopes of the coming of the eschaton among the peoples of the Near East and serve, to an extent at least, as the backdrop for Qurʾānic apocalypticism as well. Modern social psychologists have noted that social identity and collective imagination about the future are often linked,[89] and the Qurʾānic eschatological communication can be interpreted as one of the means of creating the believer affiliation.

On the matter of the centrality of apocalyptic eschatology in Muḥammad's message, I agree with Shoemaker. However, I part ways with his interpretation of the connection between conquests and apocalypticism in the Qurʾān and among the believers during the lifetime of the prophet. According to him, the key goal of Muḥammad and his community was the liberation of Palestine.[90] In his interpretation, the prophet Muḥammad did not die in 11/632, before the capture of Jerusalem, but some years later, as some non-Arabic texts seem to suggest.[91] It was in fact he who led the believers in the conquest of Palestine.[92] In Shoemaker's exposé, the prophet and his followers endeavored to hasten the beginning of the eschatology through these conquests, the main goal of which was Jerusalem. However, on this point, I disagree. The evidence contemporary with the prophet (the Qurʾān and the "Constitution" of Medina) does not sup-

88 The importance of these events is highlighted in Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 74–79.

89 E.g., Zittoun, Tania and Alex Gillespie, "Imagining the collective future: A sociocultural perspective," in Constance de Saint-Laurent, Sandra Obradović and Kevin R. Carriere (eds.), *Imagining collective futures: Perspectives from social, cultural and political psychology*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 15–37, at 15: "Imagination about the future, we argue, is a central steering mechanism of individual and collective behaviour. Imagination about the future is often political precisely because it can have huge significance for the activities of a group or even a nation." See also the other articles in de Saint-Laurent, Constance, Sandra Obradović and Kevin R. Carriere (eds.), *Imagining collective futures: Perspectives from social, cultural and political psychology*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, which emphasize how narratives about the past and imaginations about the future can shape how the present is viewed.

90 Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 62.

91 See the critical appraisal of Shoemaker's handling of the evidence by Shaddel, Mehdy, "Periodisation and the *futūḥ*: Making sense of Muḥammad's leadership of the conquests in non-Muslim sources," in *Arabica* 69 (2022), 96–145.

92 See the evidence presented in Shoemaker, *The death of a prophet* 18–72. Here, Shoemaker follows an idea that was presented in Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, but which has not received much support among the scholars of early Islam.

port such a reading.[93] Jerusalem is never explicitly mentioned in the Qurʾān, nor are conquests directed toward there or Palestine more generally. (Since Shoemaker suggest that the Qurʾān contains much post- Muḥammadan material, the absence of these themes is all the more damning to his arguments; surely they would be clearly observable in the Qurʾān if that were the case.) Eschatology and warfare appear to be disjointed themes in the Qurʾān, as I will argue. The Qurʾān's discourse of apocalyptic eschatology finds its closest parallels not in the imperial eschatology of the *Tiburtine Sibyl*,[94] for example, but in the teachings of Jesus and Paul.[95] That is to say, in the Qurʾān, apocalyptic communication is not strictly speaking political (or militant) but concentrates on the faith in God, the prophets, the scriptures, the last day, and individual repentance of sins and taking up obedience to God's law.

That is not to say that, after the death of the prophet, many of his followers did not embark on grand conquests and they did not interpret them, including the capture of Jerusalem, through an eschatological lens. The early Muslims also adopted many apocalyptic motifs and topoi from Jews and Christians and made them their own. For instance, they accepted the idea of Jerusalem being the eschatological capital and adopted features of the Christian eschatological king, the so-called last Roman emperor, to the Muslim eschatological figure al-Mahdī.[96] In other words: that some non-Arabic sources (all stemming from the time *after* the death of the prophet—if we accept, as I do, the conventional death date 11/632—and the capture of Jerusalem by their followers) interpreted the mission of Muḥammad to contain the push for Jerusalem is not surprising, given the importance of Jerusalem in Judaism and Christianity (and the Persian-Roman wars contemporary with the prophet). That the early Muslims under the first caliphs also interpreted the conquests from an eschatological point of view is not surprising either. But from these facts it is mistaken to derive the conclusion that the liberation of Jerusalem was indeed Muḥammad's aim, since this is not attested in the Qurʾān. Such a conclusion runs counter to the historical-critical methods that Shoemaker champions.[97]

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93 The examples from the Qurʾān that Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 156–157, adduces in support of his theory are neither numerous nor convincing.

94 On which see Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire*, 38–63.

95 Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire*, 29, discusses the examples of Jesus and Paul but does not apparently consider them useful analogies to the kerygma of Muḥammad.

96 See Lindstedt, Ilkka, "The last Roman emperor, the Mahdī, and Jerusalem," in Antti Laato (ed.), *Understanding the spiritual meaning of Jerusalem in three Abrahamic religions*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, 205–225.

97 Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 1.

Having accepted some and rejected other inferences of Shoemaker's important studies, let me proceed by putting forward my own reading of the Qurʾānic notions of the end. The apocalyptic eschatology is at its most vigorous in the Meccan strata of the Qurʾān, though it is not absent in the Medinan period either.[98] This is, then, how the prophet's mission started: with the strong admonition about the imposing end and judgment day. As I noted in the previous chapter, the poetry and inscriptions written by people who were not Jews or Christians do not evidence an acknowledgment of the last day or the hereafter. It is probably for this reason that hammering home the importance of this belief is central in the Meccan period.

Above, it was argued that the word *al-dīn*, in Qurʾānic Arabic, refers to God's "law" and "judgment" (often in an eschatological sense).[99] Other words are used as well to refer to the eschaton and its coming, such as *al-amr*, "command; reign"[100] and the rather common *al-sāʿa*, "the (final) moment."[101] The eschatological passages in the Meccan Qurʾān are very numerous; only some examples will be adduced in this connection. In particular in the case of the shorter *sūra*s, the whole content deals with the coming of the end and judgment. Take, for instance, *sūra* 101, called "The Blow" (*al-qāriʿa*):

> The blow! What is the blow? What could make you perceive what the blow is? On the day when people will be like scattered moths, and the mountains will be like carded wool, the one whose scales [of good deeds] are heavy, will have a pleasing [after]life; but the one whose scales are light, her/his mother will be bereft.[102] What could make you perceive what that means? Burning fire!

98 For a useful survey of some of the pertinent verses in the Qurʾān, see Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 126–128.

99 E.g., Q 51:6.

100 E.g., Q 16:1, which begins: "The reign of God has [already] come (*atā amr Allāh*), so do not try to hasten it."

101 E.g., Q 19:75.

102 In Arabic, *ummuhu hāwiya*. For this meaning of the verb *hawā*, see de Biberstein-Kazimirski, Albin, *Dictionnaire arabe-francais*, 2 vols., ii, Paris: Maisonneuve, 1860, 1462: "*On dit*: *hawat ummuhu* Sa mère est sans enfants, *et en maudissant*, puisse sa mère être privée de sens enfants!" The attempts of the Qurʾānic commentators, followed by most modern scholars and translators (see, e.g., el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 173), to take the word *umm*, literally "mother," here to mean "abode," are not very convincing in my opinion. Rather, the Qurʾān is suggesting that the person whose scales of good deeds are light and who will for that reason end up in hell will be mourned or as if mourned by her/his mother. For this interpretation, I am indebted to Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, who taught me Qurʾānic Arabic many years ago. Cf. Neuwirth, *Der Koran* i 183.

Such eschatological and highly poetic Meccan *sūra*s are quite common indeed, describing the imminence of the end, the promise of paradise, and the threat of hell (e.g., Q 56, 69, 77, 78, 81–84, 88, 90, 99, 100, 102). The interesting thing about the eschatological passages is that some of them proclaim that the end times have, in some sense, already begun. Verse 27:72 states: "Perhaps some of that[103] which you wish to hasten is [already] behind you (*radifa lakum*)." Verses 36:49–51 proclaim that the eschatological trumpet will be sounded suddenly, ushering in the final judgment before people have time to make their wills or return to their family. Verse 37:179 says that the disbelievers will soon see (*sawfa yubṣirūna*) the beginning of the end. Intriguingly, Q 43:61 appears to remark that Jesus is (holds?) the knowledge of the final moment (thus according to the standard reading: *innahu la-ʿilmun lil-sāʿa*), though it is somewhat unclear what the referent of "he/it" (*innahu*) actually is. But since Mary is mentioned in what precedes and Jesus in what follows, it would be somewhat natural that it refers to Jesus (cf. Q 5:109–120, where Jesus functions in at least a semi-eschatological role). Moreover, there is a variant reading of this passage that states: "he is the sign of the final moment" (*innahu la-ʿalamun lil-sāʿa*). As pointed out by some scholars,[104] this would perhaps make more sense than the reading *ʿilmun* and, if this is the case, connect Jesus more directly to the last events.

Other verses are more agnostic about the exact time of the eschaton. Q 79:42–45 notes: "They ask you [Muḥammad] about the final moment: 'when is it due?' But how could you tell them? Its arrival is up to your Lord. You are simply to warn those who fear it" (see also Q 7:187, 31:34, 41:47). Hence, though the believers should acknowledge the imminent arrival of the final days, they should not pretend that they or the prophet know when they will begin exactly.

The beginning of *sūra* 30 interprets the seventh-century wars between Rome and Persia in eschatological terms (though the latter is not mentioned explicitly). The wars were widely seen in the Near East as the harbinger of the end, and the Qurʾān shares this view:

> The Romans have been overcome in the land nearby. But after their defeat, they will overcome, in a few years' time! The matter [or: reign,

103 The context in the pericope is clearly eschatological: the thing that some people try to hasten is the end.

104 Anthony, Sean W., "Muḥammad, Menaḥem, and the Paraclete: New light on Ibn Ishaq's (d. 150/767) Arabic version of John 15:23–16:1," in *BSOAS* 79/2 (2016), 255–278, at 248, n. 13; Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 161.

> *al-amr*] is God's, before and after. On that day (*yawmaʾidhin*), the believers will rejoice with the help (*naṣr*) of God. He helps who He wills: He is mighty, merciful. [That is] the promise of God; God never breaks His promise, though most people do not understand (Q 30:2–6).

As Tommaso Tesei has noted in an important study, the expression "on that day (*yawmaʾidhin*)" refers, in the Qurʾān, to the eschaton and final judgment.[105] Hence, this passage too should be understood as depicting the events of the end times: believers rejoicing is not simply about their expressing feelings in this world, but rather about their being happy about the start of the eschatological events and the afterlife that ensues.[106]

In this chapter, I have argued that the word (*al-*)*dīn*, in Qurʾānic Arabic, refers exclusively to the "judgment" and (in particular in the Medinan communication) to "law." In an interesting Qurʾānic pericope (Q 110), *dīn* is linked with God's *naṣr* and *al-fatḥ*, "the conquest." Though the latter word is often understood in the context of Mecca, Stephen Shoemaker makes the critical suggestion that, instead, Q 110 should be understood in the context of the beginning of Q 30 just cited: the reference would be the Roman victory that was expected and wished for.[107] *Sūra* 110 consists of only three verses and reads:

> When the help (*naṣr*) of God and the conquest (*al-fatḥ*) come, and you (sing.) see people entering the judgment (*dīn*) of God in multitudes, praise (sing.) the glory of your Lord and ask for His forgiveness. He is wont to accept repentance (*innahu kāna tawwāban*).[108]

This pericope describes humankind as succumbing to God's judgment at the end of days. It is possible that the reference here is indeed to the expected Roman victory in the seventh-century Near Eastern war (which started in the

105 Tesei, Tommaso, "'The Romans will win!' Q 30:2–7 in light of 7th c. political eschatology," in *Der Islam* 95/1 (2018), 1–29, at 24. Note that Tesei understands this passage as a multi-author piece. I am not sure if that is warranted.

106 On this passage, see also Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 152–153.

107 Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 153, points out the connection of Q 110 to Q 30. However, he translates *al-dīn* in Q 110, wrongly I would suggest, as "the religion."

108 I would suggest that though the passage addresses someone in singular, it does not have to be assumed that the addressee meant is necessarily (only) the prophet, though this is the standard interpretation of such passages. Rather, a "general" member of the audience could be understood.

620s).[109] What is of importance in these pericopes is that the believers are not to take part in this Near Eastern war in any way: they are simply to repent.[110]

Indeed, the importance of repentance (*tāba*) and asking for forgiveness (*istaghfara*) are repeated rather often throughout the Qurʾānic strata.[111] These deeds are sometimes directly connected with the coming eschaton. Q 40:7–9 narrates that the angels carrying God's throne intercede on behalf of those who repent (*tābū*), asking God to let them into paradise.[112] Q 39:54 is even more direct: "Turn to your Lord in repentance and submit to Him (*tābū ilā rabbikum wa-aslimū lahu*), before the punishment comes to you and you cannot be helped anymore."

The imminence, even presence, of the eschaton is a key theme in the Meccan layers of the Qurʾān. The goal of the kerygma appears to have been to get the gentiles to believe in the last judgment and the hereafter, which, it seems, they were somewhat reluctant to do. They were to ask for forgiveness and repent before, and at, the coming of *dīn Allāh*, God's judgment on humankind. The People of the Book in the Meccan context would have little hesitancy to accept what the prophet was reciting on this theme and, indeed, some verses explicitly say that Jews and Christians believe in God and the last day. It is to these passages that we now must turn.

2.6 *The People of the Book in the Meccan Period*

A gentile prophet arising in a heavily Judeo-Christian environment and claiming an Abrahamic and Biblical pedigree might do one of two things: chal-

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109 It is, I submit, possible that these passages are indeed Meccan, and hence would actually precede the Roman victory, which was something that the believers were waiting and hoping for. Naturally, it is also possible that they should be understood as *vaticinia ex eventu*, and hence dated later, to the Medinan era.

110 *Pace* Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 153, who interprets these passages as saying: "the victory that comes with God's assistance will be the triumph of God's people, the polity of the Believers, an event that is itself fused to the *eschaton*'s arrival. Through their conquest, the world will be brought into submission to God's divine rule, as throngs of people turn to embrace the faith of Muhammad …" But there is nothing in these Qurʾānic passages or other of the contemporary evidence to suggest this. Moreover, *dīn Allāh* in this pericope certainly does not in any way refer to "the faith of Muhammad" but to the last judgment rendered to humankind by God.

111 For Medinan revelations on this topic, see, e.g., Q 4:17–18, 9:117–120. For repentance in the Qurʾān, see also el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 98–99; Reynolds, *Allah* 105.

112 Courtieu, Gilles, "The Persian keys of the Quranic paradise," in Carlos A. Segovia (ed.), *Remapping emergent Islam: Texts, social settings, and ideological trajectories*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 149–174, argues that the Qurʾānic depiction of the eschaton and paradise were influenced by Persian (and secular) models.

lenge and reject the Jews and Christians around her or him; or accept them as part of her or his potential followers. Muḥammad opted for the latter option. The Meccan Qurʾānic communication is replete with prophetic narratives (of Moses, Noah, Abraham, Mary and Jesus, and others). These narratives were, one assumes, appreciated by the Jews, Christians, and (at least some) gentiles. The Qurʾānic narratives and their subtexts have been the object of intensive scholarly scrutiny in recent years;[113] here I will concentrate on the social categorizations present in the Qurʾān, but it should be noted that the (re)telling of the prophetic stories is part and parcel of the Qurʾānic endeavor to articulate a shared in-group identity.[114] Moreover, the narratives show that the audience of the Qurʾānic revelations knew them beforehand in one version or another, suggesting that the audience was comprised of Jews and Christians but also gentiles who had familiarized themselves with Biblical materials. Commenting on the Qurʾān's David narrative in verses 38:21–26, Bar-Asher notes:

> Anyone unfamiliar with the story of David's sin in taking the spouse of Uriah the Hittite (II Samuel 11:1–27) or with the parable of the poor man's sheep that is applied to David on account of that sin (12:1–25) could understand nothing of this passage from the Qurʾan.[115]

All Meccan references to the People of the Book[116] are laudatory. The reading of the Qurʾān that I put forward in this book entails that a distinct Islamic identity was not articulated and that Jews and Christians joined the community of the believers (though it might have been to a large degree gentile), without

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113 See, e.g., Abboud, Hosn, *Mary in the Qurʾan: A literary reading*, London: Routledge, 2014; el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions*; Hawting, "The religion of Abraham and Islam"; Neuwirth, Angelika, *Scripture, poetry, and the making of a community: Reading the Qurʾan as a literary text*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 and "The house of Abraham"; Räisänen, Heikki, *Das koranische Jesusbild: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Korans*, Helsinki: Finnische Gesellschaft für Missiologie und Ökumenik, 1971; Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical subtext*, and *The Qurʾān and the Bible*; Segovia, *The Quranic Noah*, and *The Quranic Jesus*; Tottoli, *Biblical prophets in the Qurʾān*; Wheeler, Brannon M., *Moses in the Qurʾan and Islamic exegesis*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002.

114 On this theme, see also Lindstedt, "Religious groups in the Quran."

115 Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan*, 77.

116 It is conventionally supposed, and I follow the convention, that the "People of the Book" is an original Qurʾānic grouped term that refers to both Jews and Christians. However, it should be noted that the Qurʾān never explicitly defines who comprise the "People of the Book."

shedding their identities as Jews and Christians.[117] As noted by Patricia Crone: "There are several other Meccan passages in which the recipients of the earlier book are characterized as believers without qualification."[118] This model is particularly well attested in the Meccan strata of the Qurʾān; the Medinan layers continue it, though there is more wariness toward Jews and Christians as groups (individual Jews and Christians can be still considered righteous believers in Medina too).[119]

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117 My interpretation has been inspired by, in particular, Donner, Fred M., "From believers to Muslims: Confessional self-identity in the early Islamic community," in *Al-Abhath* 50–51 (2002–2003), 9–53; "The early Islamic conquests"; *Muhammad and the believers*; "Modern approaches"; "The historian, the believer," and "Talking about Islam's origins," in BSOAS 81 (2018), 1–23. Other works that have influenced, in various ways, my reconstruction of the Qurʾānic communication on religious groups include studies by historians as well as scholars from other fields: Afsaruddin, Asma, "The hermeneutics of inter-faith relations: Retrieving moderation and pluralism as universal principles in Qur'anic exegeses," in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 37/2 (2009), 331–354; Askari, Hasan, "The Qur'anic conception of apostleship," in Dan Cohn-Sherbok (ed.), *Islam in a world of diverse faiths* (Library of philosophy and religion), Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991, 88–103; Cole, Juan, "Infidel or paganus? The polysemy of *kafara* in the Quran," in JAOS 140/3 (2020), 615–636; Crone, Patricia, "The religion of the Qurʾānic pagans: God and the lesser deities," in *Arabica* 57 (2010), 151–200; "Angels versus humans as messengers of God: The view of the Qurʾānic pagans," in Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas (eds.), *Revelation, literature, and community in late antiquity* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 146), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011, 315–336; "The Qurʾānic *mushrikūn* and the resurrection (Parts I–II)," in BSOAS 75/3 (2012), 445–472 and 76/1, 1–20 (2013); "The Book of Watchers in the Qurʾān," in Haggai Ben-Shammai et al. (eds.), *Exchange and transmission across cultural boundaries: Philosophy, mysticism and science in the Mediterranean*, Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2013, 16–51, and "Jewish Christianity"; Esack, Farid, *Qurʾān, liberation & pluralism: An Islamic perspective of interreligious solidarity against oppression*, Oxford: Oneworld, 1997, and "The portrayal of Jews and the possibilities for their salvation in the Qur'an," in Mohammad Hassan Khalil (ed.), *Between heaven and hell: Islam, salvation, and the fate of others*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 207–233; Rahman, Fazlur, *Major themes of the Qur'an*, Minneapolis MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980; Izutsu, Toshihiko, *The structure of the ethical terms in the Koran: A study in semantics*, Tokyo: Keio Institute of Philological Studies, 1959; Lamptey, *Never wholly other*, and *Divine words*; Mortensen, Mette Bjerregaard, *A contribution to Qurʾānic studies: Toward a definition of piety and asceticism in the Qurʾān* (PhD Diss.): Aarhus University, 2018; Sachedina, Abdulaziz Abdulhussein, "The Qurʾān and other religions," in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Cambridge companion to the Qurʾān*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 291–309, and *The Islamic roots*; Shoemaker, *The death of a prophet*; Sirry, Mun'im A., *Scriptural polemics: The Qur'an and other religions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*.

118 Crone, *The Qurʾānic pagans* 334.

119 Sachedina, "The Qurʾān and other religions" 293: "As the youngest of the Abrahamic faiths, Islamic revelation had actually found expression in a world of religious pluralism, a world

Were there Jews and Christians in Mecca, or is it possible that the verses refer to groups that lived outside Mecca? As stated in previous chapters, no epigraphic surveys concentrating on pre-Islamic inscriptions have been carried out in Mecca or its immediate vicinity.[120] Despite the lack of evidence from the Mecca area, the Qur'ānic text suggests that there indeed were Jews and Christians in Mecca, among the audience (and the followers) of the prophet. In Q 10:94, the prophet is even instructed to consult the *ahl al-kitāb* if he doubts what he has received as revelation. Such an instruction only makes sense if there were Jews and Christians in Mecca. Or, alternatively, if there were no or very few Jews and Christians in Mecca, this Qur'ānic verse could not have been revealed there. But I opt for the former solution. As I have argued in previous chapters, Jews and Christians were present (almost) everywhere in western Arabia. It makes considerable sense to assume that there were Jews and Christians residing in Mecca too.

The positive characterization of the People of the Book in the Meccan layer is clear in all the verses where they appear. The most striking aspect in their Qur'ānic portrayal is the insistence that they are not only generally believers but also believers in the revelation given to Muḥammad. To adduce some examples:

> Q 6:114: Would I follow anyone else as judge (*ḥakaman*) than God? He has revealed to you (pl.) the Book elucidated (*mufaṣṣalan*). Those to whom We have given the Book [before] know that it [Muḥammad's revelation] has been sent down from your Lord with truth. Do not be one of the doubters.

> Q 13:36a: Those who have been given the Book rejoice at what has been revealed to you (sing.), though among the factions (*al-aḥzāb*)[121] there are some who deny some of it [Muḥammad's revelation].

which it acknowledged and evaluated critically but never rejected as false. In fact, the spiritual space of the Qur'ān was shared by other monotheistic religions. The major task confronting the early Muslim community was that of securing an identity for its followers within the God-centred worldview on which different groups had claims." I agree that Muḥammad's community articulated an identity, but it was an identity that accepted the sub-groups of Jews, Christians, and gentiles.

120 But note the inscription from a route north of Ṭā'if published by al-Jallad and Sidky, "A Paleo-Arabic inscription."

121 The word *al-aḥzāb* appears eleven times in the Qur'ān, always in the definitive. It appears to refer to the divisions or sects among the Jews and Christians, the existence of which the Qur'ān portrays as something negative, see, e.g., Q 19:37 and 43:65. In some instances, the word refers to military units (of the disbelievers), Q 33:20–22.

> Q 28:52–55: Those to whom We have given the Book before it, believe in it [Muḥammad's revelation]. When it is recited to them, they say: 'We believe in it! It is the truth from our Lord. We have been submitters (*muslimīn*) even before it.' They will receive a double reward, because they have persevered, repaid evil with good, and because they spend [*yunfiqūna*—for the community?] of what We have provided for them (*razaqnāhum*).

What surfaces in these verses of the Qur'ān is that the majority of the People of the Book are portrayed as accepting Muḥammad's role as a recipient of revelations. Only some among them reject—and only a part of the revelatory corpus. Now, it is naturally possible (even probable) that the picture that the Meccan Qur'ān puts forward is, to a degree, idealistic. Perhaps the Meccan Jews and Christians did not accept Muḥammad's prophecy quite as easily and in as large numbers as the Qur'ān suggests in these verses. But the social categorization of the People of the Book as believers is nevertheless important, and it would run counter to all evidence (including Medinan evidence) to claim that no or almost no Jew or Christian accepted Muḥammad as a prophet and affiliated with the burgeoning group.

Related to this question, it must be noted that there is nothing in the Qur'ān to suggest that it was proclaimed to supersede or abrogate other scriptures,[122] despite the fact that later interpretive tradition often viewed it as such.[123] Nor is there any verse that would suggest that its audience viewed it as such. Rather, the Muḥammadan corpus of revelations is portrayed as following the series of the other revelatory scriptures. The revelations of Muḥammad are, in essence, identical to the previous revelations, corroborating and consolidating them. As Q 11:17b proclaims:

> Before it [Muḥammad's revelation], there was the Book of Moses as a guide and mercy. Those [scil. Jews and Christians?] believe in it. And the ones from among the factions (*al-aḥzāb*) who disbelieve in it will have the Fire as their destiny. Do not be in doubt about it: it is the truth from your Lord, though most people do not believe.

Q 46:12 similarly refers to the Book of Moses as the precursor of Muḥammad's revelations, indicating that the latter are "a confirmation [of the Book of Moses

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122 Sachedina, "The Qur'ān and other religions" 297.

123 See Lamptey, *Never wholly other* 18–26, for a discussion of the classical tradition arguing for this.

or earlier scriptures more generally] in the Arabic tongue, to warn those who do wrong and as good tidings to the doers of good." Q 13:37–39 states that messengers have been sent before Muḥammad: every era has its Book (*li-kulli ajalin kitābun*). God may wipe out (*yamḥū*) from the revelations what He wants. The "Mother of the Book" (*umm al-kitāb*) is only with God, not revealed to any prophet, it appears, as such. This heavenly prototype of the Book may be reflected in the revelatory corpora of the prophets, but they seem to have their differences, due to the language of the revelation and specific contexts of the communities.

The Qurʾān mentions a few times that the prophet,[124] or his audience, should recite (*talā* or *qaraʾa*) the Book (*al-kitāb*). For example, verse 35:29 states: "Those who recite the Book of God, hold on to prayer, and spend [for the good of the community] out of what We have provided for them—secretly or openly—may expect a trade that will not fail [i.e., a recompense in the afterlife]." Reciting the Book of God is, in this verse, one of the distinguishing markers of the community of the believers who will receive a reward in the hereafter. How are we to understand this "Book"? Above, it was noted that "the Book" (*al-kitāb*) is oftentimes used in connection with "the People of the Book," understandable as the Jews and Christians: "the Book" is an open-ended concept in the Qurʾānic parlance, appearing to include different scriptures. The prophet's revelations are a confirmation of the earlier "Book(s)." The "Book of God" in Q 35:29 is of course unidentified, but there is nothing to exclude understanding it as a reference to the Bible. Indeed, Q 10:94, mentioned above, mentions that the prophet, if he is in doubt about the revelations that he is receiving, should ask "those who have been reciting the Book before you" (*alladhīna yaqraʾūna al-kitāb qablika*). Clearly, in Q 10:94 at least, "the Book" signifies the Bible (or any text that the communities held sacred). Interpreted in this way, the Qurʾān not only approves of the Bible, it enjoins the believers to read it.[125] It has

124 See Q 18:27, 29:45, 29:48.

125 Cf. Reynolds, *Allah* 37–40, who, on the one hand, notes that the Qurʾān was promulgated in a heavily Jewish and Christian environment but, on the other, suggests that the prophet or those around him could not have "read" the Bible. This, to me, seems contradictory. The Meccan strata make it clear, as do the Medinan ones, that there were Jews and Christians in the immediate vicinity of, and indeed within, the community of the believers. They surely had heard some passages from the Bible translated orally (possibly from an Aramaic text), as had some gentiles too. Moreover, it makes sense to assume that some West Arabian Jews spoke, and perhaps could read as well, Aramaic. In any case, most people could not read or write, so emphasizing the significance of the fact that the Bible was not translated into Arabic before Islam seems to me somewhat beside the point. In fact, in idem 227–228 Reynolds notes: "In certain regions Arabic speakers lived alongside Syr-

to be remembered that the Bible was not translated into Arabic in the seventh century—but some inhabitants of Western Arabia surely knew other languages. In any case, in a world where the vast majority of the people could not read or write (any language), the bulk of the people would have accessed the scripture aurally, whether or not the Bible was available in their language as a written text.

The Qurʾān addresses God with many names.[126] As we have seen in previous chapters, the name *Allāh* was known to West Arabian gentiles (including henotheist ones) and Christians (and, one supposes, Jews as well) before Islam. The specifically late antique Arabic Christian appellation *al-Ilāh* is not attested in the Qurʾān as such. Nevertheless, it is hard to see that the Qurʾān's usage would have created delineation between the different groups in Mecca, since *Allāh* was a common word used for God.

Let me also mention the case of *al-Raḥmān*, "the Merciful," a common Qurʾānic word to refer to God. As can be seen in the Ancient South Arabian epigraphic evidence, both Jews and Christians of Yemen used *Raḥmānān* as the most common divine name. Nicolai Sinai has noted that *al-Raḥmān* is attested in some pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and is used interchangeably with *Allāh* (that is, they refer to the same divine being).[127] Accepting and adopting that name in the Qurʾān can be interpreted as a continuation of existing West Arabian Jewish and Christian trends of talking about and referring to God

iac speakers. Indeed, many Christian Arabs would have been exposed to Syriac. In divine liturgy they likely heard the Bible proclaimed in Syriac and then translated on the spot into Arabic. They also likely heard Arabic versions of hymns and poetic works translated (perhaps spontaneously) from Syriac church fathers such as Ephrem (d. 373)."

126 For a comprehensive survey of the figure of God in the Qurʾān, see Reynolds, *Allah*. The proper discussion of this topic is outside the scope of the present book: here I only mention a couple of facets that are of interest for the social identity of Muḥammad's group.

127 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 59. In this connection, it should be noted that an important recent epigraphic find has been published and discussed by Robin, "L'Arabie préislamique" 106–107. Though the first line of the inscription is somewhat damaged, the text appears to read *bi-sm al-raḥmān al-raḥīm allāhumma ighfir li-yaḥyā bn ʿāṣim*. A later writer, noting that *Allāh* was missing, has supplied it in the middle of the inscription, where there was a blank space. The inscription is undated but Robin suggests it can be paleographically dated to the first/seventh century. Though this is probable, nothing excludes a sixth-century (i.e., pre-Islamic) date. In any case, the inscription appears to indicate that to the writer of this inscription, probably Yaḥyā ibn ʿĀṣim himself, God was principally known as *al-Raḥmān* (if we exclude the possibility that he simply forgot to write *Allāh* after *bi-sm*). Whether the inscription is pre-Islamic or early Islamic, it proffers interesting possibilities for interpretation. However, since it is, as far as I know, at this moment a solitary find of such a formula, far-reaching conclusions should be avoided.

but one that has a specific South Arabian background. As Q 17:110 notes: "Say [prophet]: Call upon *Allāh* or call upon *al-Raḥmān*—whichever you call, the most beautiful names belong to Him." It might be the case, though we lack clear evidence, that the word *al-Raḥmān* was specifically used in West Arabia as elsewhere by Jews and Christians (rather than gentiles). This is suggested by Q 25:60, which appears to be referring to disbelieving gentiles: "When they are told: 'Prostrate before *al-Raḥmān*!', they answer: 'What is *al-Raḥmān*? Are we to prostrate before anything you command?' Thus, their aversion increases." Clearly, the Qurʾān assumes that some in the audience would not know this divine name. Another (possibly) Meccan passage (Q 29:46–47)[128] enjoins the believers to "argue with the People of the Book only in the best [manner] except with those among them that do wrong. Say: 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us and you. Our God and your God is one (*ilāhunā wa-ilāhukum wāḥid*); we submit to Him.' Thus, We have sent you the Book. Those that have received the Book [before] believe in it, and among those [others][129] are those that believe in it. Only the disbelievers reject our words (*āyātinā*)." These verses indicate that the Qurʾān suggests that the People of the Book shared the same conception (and nomenclature) of God with the believers of gentile background.

2.7 *The Israelites*

The Meccan layer of the Qurʾān contains quite a few references to the Israelites (*banū isrāʾīl*). The appellation 'Israelites' is used in particular in connection with Biblical narratives of the sacred past. All characterizations of them, with only a few exceptions, are acclamatory in the Meccan stratum. Indeed, they are depicted as the chosen people.[130] The Israelites are mentioned in particular in the context of the stories about their slavery in, and ultimate flight from, Egypt. In the narrative(s), Moses and the Pharaoh are opponents, the former saving and the latter tormenting the Israelites. This is a story that the Qurʾān is almost obsessed with: it returns to and retells it time and again.[131] Perhaps the reason for this preoccupation was the lesson it offered for the believers: though they might be troubled and distressed at the moment, in the end they

128 Note that Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorâns*, i 155–156 indicates that Q 29:46 might be a later Medinan interpolation. Sinai, "Towards a redactional history" 395, concurs. However, in my opinion the characterization of those given the scripture in Q 29:46 is more in line with other Meccan verses rather than Medinan ones.

129 This might be a reference to the gentiles.

130 Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qur'an* 30.

131 Q 7:105–157, 10:90–93, 17:101–104, 20:9–104, 26:10–66, 44:17–33.

will triumph. There is no question that, in these narratives, the Qurʾān is rooting for the Israelites.[132] In one retelling of them (Q 10:90), the Pharaoh, while drowning, exclaims: "I believe that there is no god but the one that the Israelites believe in; I am [now] one of the submitters (*min al-muslimīn*)!" Here, then, the Qurʾān characterizes God as the God of Israel.

If the Nöldekean division is to be followed, the Meccan Qurʾānic communication does not speak of "Jews" (*yahūd*) or "Christians" (*naṣārā*), in contrast to the Medinan one, but only mentions the Israelites (*banū isrāʾīl*) and "those given the Book."[133] This is rather surprising since the Meccan layer contains narratives of Christian origins, such as the story of Mary (Q 19). One wonders then, if the Christians in Mecca and nearby regions would be included, in the Qurʾānic social categorization, not only in the group People of the Book but also that of the Israelites. This appears to be so, as suggested by previous scholars, for example, Heikki Räisänen and Patricia Crone.[134] This interpretation is based on the fact that the Qurʾān remarks that Jesus was a messenger sent to the Israelites (*banū isrāʾīl*)—naturally, something that reflects something about the self-understanding of the early Jesus movement but that is, nevertheless, somewhat striking in the seventh century CE. This first appears in Q 43:57–64 and resurfaces in Medinan verses (e.g., Q 3:49). Verses 43:57–64 introduce the Qurʾānic understanding of Jesus, which is further elaborated in Medina: he is a messenger from God, bringing wisdom with him, and one whom the people, and Israelites in particular, should obey.[135] Though the passage notes that Jesus was "only a servant" (*huwa illā ʿabd*, Q 43:59), his divinity or sonship are not

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132 Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan* 3, agrees that the *banū isrāʾīl* are, in some of these narratives, depicted as the chosen people that God freed from the Egyptian slavery and led to the promised land. For an important study on these stories, see Sells, "The casting."

133 For the nomenclature, see also Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan* 27–29.

134 Räisänen, Heikki, "The portrait of Jesus in the Quran: Reflections of a Biblical scholar," in *MW* 70 (1980), 122–133, at 125; Crone, "Jewish Christianity (part one)" 231–235. This is one of the pieces of evidence that Crone adduces for her idea that many or most Christians in the Qurʾānic context were Jewish Christians, that is, Christ-believers that followed the Jewish law and had an Israelite/Jewish ethnic self-identity. However, the other possibility must be mentioned as well: the Meccan strata of the Qurʾān categorize both Jews and Christians as "the Israelites" and "the People of the Book," regardless of how they themselves self-identified. This seems obvious as regards the category "the People of the Book," of which, if I am not mistaken, there is no evidence, in any language, as a self-identification. Hence, I wonder if the same could be true of the Qurʾānic construal of "the Israelites" as well.

135 See Saleh, Walid A., "Meccan Gods, Jesus' divinity: An analysis of Q 43 Surat al-Zukhruf," in Holger M. Zellentin (ed.), *The Qurʾan's reformation of Judaism and Christianity*, London: Routledge, 2019, 92–112. I will deal with the Qurʾānic notions on Jesus in the next chapter.

explicitly denied here (though his sonship is denied in Q 19:34–35, 89–92; and divinity in the Medinan stratum). All in all, Q 43:57–64 appears to indicate that the Israelites and Christians are not necessarily different; indeed, the categories "the Israelites" and "the People of the Book" might be more or less synonymous in the Meccan revelations.

It was noted in the previous chapter that there are a number of passages that argue for two interrelated phenomena: 1) the Qurʾānic revelations are a continuation of the series of scriptures; and 2) the People of the Book recognize and believe in the Qurʾānic revelations. The same is said of the Israelites. To begin with, Q 32:23–25 and 40:53–54 note that "the Book of Moses" was given to the Israelites as a guidance and inheritance. Clearly, they possess a sacred scripture. As noted above, Q 11:17 connects the Qurʾānic revelations to the "Book of Moses," which acts as their precursor. Q 26:192–197 notes:

> This is a revelation from the Lord of the world,[136] brought by the trustworthy spirit to your heart, so that you may be a warner, in a lucid Arabic tongue. It is [also found] in the scriptures of the ancients (*zubur al-awwalīn*). Is it not proof for them [the disbelievers] that the scholars of the Israelites recognize it?

The Israelites and their scholars are not only believers in the Qurʾānic revelations; they are the ones who vouch for and substantiate its authenticity. To put it in another way: they are not only in-group affiliates; they are exemplary members of the community of the believers. Similarly, in Q 46:10 it is noted that an Israelite witness (*shāhid*), who believes (*fa-āmana*), will rise to verify the prophet's revelations' authenticity.

All passages considered so far contain highly positive pronouncements on the Israelites. However, there are three Meccan passages (and, as far as I know, three only) where the picture is more mixed. Q 27:75–78 and 45:16–19 note that, though the Israelites have been blessed with wisdom, prophecy, and the Book, and given the status of the chosen people, they disagree with each other (*yakhtalifūna*, *ikhtalafū*). Though the subject matter of the disagreement is not specified, it is plausible to suggest that it relates to the idea that they (Jews and Christians) are divided into factions (see Q 13:36, above). The disagreement might also relate to intergroup debates about who owns the Abrahamic

136 As the reader will remember, the pre-Islamic Jewish Arabian inscriptions (in Aramaic and Sabaic) refer to God as "the Lord of the World," *mry ʿlmʾ*, which is more or less identical with the Arabic *rabb al-ʿālamīn*.

inheritance (as discussed earlier in this chapter). In any case, the statements in Q 27:75–78 and 45:16–19 are hardly categorically damning.

More negative is Q 17:4–8, which begins by noting that God has proclaimed in the Book to the Israelites that they will spread corruption in the land twice and become arrogant.[137] At the first punishment, God would send people of great might against the Israelites. However, after this, God would return the Israelites to power, making them outnumber their enemies. At the second punishment, the enemies of the Israelites would bring utter destruction, ravaging the place of worship (*al-masjid*). However, even the second punishment is not permanent, since Q 17:8 notes: "Perhaps your Lord will have mercy on you. But if you repeat [the sin], We will repeat [the punishment]."

What is Q 17:4–8 about? Though the narrative in the Qurʾān is extremely allusive (as is usual in the Qurʾānic style), it appears that we are dealing with the destruction of the first and second Temple in Jerusalem, called *al-masjid* in Q 17:7. This is portrayed as having happened because of the Israelites' misdeeds: sinning ("spreading corruption in the land") and arrogance. As will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, many of the negative portrayals of the Jews/Israelites in the Qurʾān actually reflect and retell intra-Jewish discourse.[138]

Indeed, the Qurʾān, I would suggest, harks back to the narratives of the destruction of the first Temple in the Hebrew Bible and those of the second Temple in rabbinic literature. The examples are too many to adduce comprehensively, but I will note some of them:[139]

> But because our ancestors had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house [the first Temple] and carried away the people to Babylonia (Ezra 5:12).

137 I am not aware that this reference in Q 17:4 ("We have decreed to the Israelites in the Book: you (pl.) will certainly spread corruption in the land twice and will become extremely arrogant") would be a quotation from any extant Jewish or Christian text.

138 Hence, it seems to me that the remark by Crone, *The Qurʾānic pagans* 335, is off the mark: "the Jews are coldly treated in this sura: their sins, twice punished by God with terrible destruction, are recounted and they are told they may put things right the third time if they will stop sinning; one way in which they might do so was apparently by believing in the Qurʾān and the hereafter (17:4–10)." The word *al-qurʾān* in Q 17:9 definitely does not denote "the Qurʾān" but the pericope in question. In any case, elsewhere the Israelites are, as I have noted, clearly defined as believers in Muḥammad's revelations. Moreover, why they would not be believers in the afterlife eludes me.

139 See also the discussion in Reynolds, *Allah* 166–167, 205–207.

How the Lord in his anger
has humiliated daughter Zion!
He has thrown down from heaven to earth
the splendour of Israel;
he has not remembered his footstool
on the day of his anger.
The Lord has destroyed without mercy
all the dwellings of Jacob;
in his wrath he has broken down
the strongholds of daughter Judah;
he has brought down to the ground in dishonour
the kingdom and its rulers.
He has cut down in fierce anger
all the might of Israel;
he has withdrawn his right hand from them
in the face of the enemy;
he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob,
consuming all around.
He has bent his bow like an enemy,
with his right hand set like a foe;
he has killed all in whom we took pride
in the tent of daughter Zion;
he has poured out his fury like fire.
The Lord has become like an enemy;
he has destroyed Israel.
He has destroyed all its palaces,
laid in ruins its strongholds,
and multiplied in daughter Judah
mourning and lamentation.
He has broken down his booth like a garden,
he has destroyed his tabernacle;
the Lord has abolished in Zion
festival and sabbath,
and in his fierce indignation has spurned
king and priest. (Lamentations 2:1–6).

Apropos of the sins of the High Priests in the Second Temple, the Gemara cites that Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Torta said: Due to what reason was the Tabernacle in Shiloh destroyed in the time of the prophet Samuel? It was destroyed due to the fact that there were two matters that existed

> in the Tabernacle: Forbidden sexual relations and degradation of consecrated items …
>
> Why was the Second Temple destroyed? It was destroyed due to the fact that there was wanton hatred during that period. This comes to teach you that the sin of wanton hatred is equivalent to the three severe transgressions: Idol worship, forbidden sexual relations and bloodshed. (*Bavli*, *Yoma* 9a–b.)[140]

These examples from the Bible and later Jewish literature show clear similarities to Q 17:4–8, though the latter only refers to the events rather than recounting them in detail. First, all sources proffer the interpretation that the destructions of the temples were due to the sins of the Israelites. Second, God himself sends the enemies of the Israelites to destroy the Temples (or, in Lamentations, God Himself *is like an enemy*). When the Jews in the Qurʾānic audience heard *sūra* 17, did they find the pericope harshly attacking them? Though this is hypothetical, I would suggest that not all of them did.[141] What they heard was a reference to familiar stories, told by Jews themselves, of their sacred history. Israel had sinned, twice. Twice it was punished. But—third time is the charm—during the current era, the Qurʾān asserts, they had an opportunity for His enduring mercy.

2.8 *The Others: The Associators (mushrikūn) and Disbelievers* (kuffār)

In the previous chapter, I noted that the sixth-century Arabian evidence (poetry and epigraphy) point toward a reconstruction of Arabia where polytheism and idolatry were receding into the background (or had already receded). No sixth-century CE Arabian inscriptions contain traces of them, though *earlier* ones do (up to the fourth century). This is, to an extent, an argument from silence. However, this hypothesis is buttressed by pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, which also evidences the rise of gentile monotheism. And, as also noted in chapter 4, recent research by Iwona Gajda and Patricia Crone suggests the presence of

140 See also *Bavli*, *Shabbat* 119b, which contains myriad other suggestions for reasons for the destruction of the Temple, such as “when the Jews should have been reciting Shema, they were drinking wine and liquor.”

141 Naturally, it has to be taken into account that, in Christian anti-Jewish imagery, the narratives of the destruction of the Temples because of the sins of the Jews were adduced. See, e.g., Kovelman, Arkady, “Destruction of the Second Temple in Talmudic and Christian literature: The rise of the new morality,” *Journal of beliefs & values* 38/3, (2017).

But taking into account the overtly positive description of and sympathetic stance on the Israelites in the Meccan Qurʾānic communication, it is difficult, I submit, to read Q 17:4–8 as an instance of anti-Jewish polemic.

God-fearers in Arabia: gentiles, who affiliated with Jewish communities and visited the synagogue without embracing the Jewish law or becoming full converts.

Who, then, were the associators (*mushrikūn*) and disbelievers (*kuffār*) of the Qurʾānic communication, given that I have suggested that there were very few actual polytheists and idolaters left? I think the most obvious answer is that they were gentiles (or, more rarely, People of the Book) who were not monotheist enough according to the criteria of the prophet's community or who had not recanted "pagan" habits. They could be called, though the term is awkward, "gentile pagans,"[142] who are contrasted with the "gentile believers" who formed (probably) the mainstay of the prophet's followers. Perhaps the "pagans" had not adopted the gentile purity and dietary regulations that the Qurʾān presents as important. Maybe they were still performing food sacrifices in places and on stones considered sacred.[143] As in earlier Jewish and Christian discourse,[144] idolatry and meat sacrificed in the wrong way are seen, in the Qurʾān, as interlinked.

It has to be underscored that the Qurʾān very rarely ascribes *shirk* (associationism) or *kufr* (disbelief) to Jews or Christians: it is for the most part groups other than these that are signaled with these words.[145] Gerald Hawting was right in a sense: in the background of the Qurʾānic discourse on and criticism of associators (*mushrikūn*), it is for the most part difficult to envision idolaters.[146] However, he was wrong to assume that this would make the Qurʾān a text that does not fit seventh-century Arabia. Moreover, it does not ensue that the Qurʾānic *mushrikūn* were, in fact, Jews and Christians, as Hawting puts forward.

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142 In forming this term, I was inspired by a word pair coined by Fredriksen, *Paul* 30 to describe gentile Jesus-believers: "ex-pagan pagan." This expression could be used to describe the group around Muḥammad too, which was, to a degree at least, gentile.

143 On this question, see also Kister, "'A bag of meat.'"

144 Fredriksen, *When Christians were Jews* 26.

145 As recently argued by Cole, "Infidel or paganus?"

146 Hawting, *The idea of idolatry*. See also Crone, *The Qurʾānic pagans* xiv: "I found paganism much more interesting than Judaism and Christianity and was pained by Hawting's attempt to write it out of the origins of Islam altogether, but I obviously had to check his evidence. This was when I started reading the Qurʾān systematically, with a view to seeing how far it was in line with the traditional account. I was quite shocked. It was obvious that Hawting was right: the so-called *mushrikūn* were not the pagans depicted in the tradition. It was also obvious that I had never really read the book before, not even the parts I thought I had read." However, as the reader will have noticed, my interpretation of the Qurʾān differs in some parts from Crone's, though her influence is naturally undeniable in many of the aspects and readings put forward in the present study.

With these prolegomena in mind, let us survey the Meccan portrayals of the associators (*mushrikūn*) and disbelievers (*kuffār*). Chapter 4 of this book noted that the (ostensibly) pre-Islamic Arabic poetry suggests that gentile Arabians had started to adopt henotheist beliefs: they acknowledged God (*Allāh*), who is the creator, the most powerful supernatural agent, and controller of human fates. However, the gentile Arabians, in contrast to Jewish and Christian ones, did not believe in the afterlife. As noted by (in chronological order) William M. Watt, Patricia Crone, and Nicolai Sinai, the Qurʾānic depiction of its opponents, the associators and disbelievers corroborates this picture.[147] This is an example of the interplay of forms of monotheism and traditional religious beliefs.

A number of Meccan verses could be adduced in support of this thesis;[148] Q 29:61, 63–65 serves as an example here:

> If you ask them who has created the heaven and the earth and controls the sun and the moon, they answer: "God." [Since they acknowledge this,] why are they [scil. the people] then so misled? … If you ask them who sends down the rain from the sky and reinvigorates the dead land, they answer: "God." Say [prophet]: "Praise be to God!" But most of them do not know. This life is mere play and frivolity, but the abode of the hereafter is the true life. Would that they only knew! When they travel on a boat, they call on God, relinquishing the judgment to Him (*mukhliṣīna lahu al-dīn*), but when He delivers them to the land, they associate [other beings with Him].

As detailed here and in similar Qurʾānic passages, the wrong belief of the associators and disbelievers is not that they would not acknowledge the existence of God or his role as the creator; rather, it is that they are not monotheist enough.[149] For instance, verse 16:22 makes the case that belief in one God

147 Crone, *The Qurʾānic pagans*; Sinai, *Rain-giver*; Watt, "Belief in a 'High God.'" However, it should be added that Qurʾānic rhetoric affects the emerging picture: "It must be noted that the Qurʾān ascribes opinions and beliefs, often in a polemic vein, to the enemies of the Believers that they probably did not manifest: it not only describes religious groups and identities but also construes them;" Lindstedt, Ilkka, "Pre-Islamic Arabia and early Islam," in Herbert Berg (ed.), *Routledge handbook on early Islam*, London: Routledge, 2017, 159–176, at 164.

148 See also Q 10:22, 17:49–51, 17:67, 23:81–89, 31:25–32, 39:38, 43:9, 43:87, and 45:24.

149 Grasso, "The gods of the Qurʾān" 302, calls them "sympathizing monotheists." Interestingly, Arjomand, Saïd Amir, "The Constitution of Medina: A sociolegal interpretation of Muhammad's acts of foundation of the *Umma*," in IJMES 41/4 (2009), 555–575, at 567,

and in the afterlife are (should be) intimately connected: without faith in both, one cannot be considered a group member: "Your [pl.] God is one God. Those, who do not believe in the hereafter, are arrogant, and their hearts are in denial."

As an aside, that these passages (such as the block quotation above) often mention seafaring is sometimes brought up by modern commentators as a Qurʾānic conundrum: "It's a bit puzzling that the Qur'an uses seafaring as the example to teach a lesson here, for in the accounts of Islamic traditions, Arabs of Muhammad's time and place travel by camel, not by boat."[150] There is no need to reproduce the old Orientalist stereotype of an intrinsic Arab-camel association, however. Let us glance at the map: Mecca and Medina are not very far from the shore. The connections (by sea) between Arabia and Ethiopia were well established, as has been explained in chapter 2. Furthermore, according to the Arabic biographies of the prophet, the believers made their first *hijra*, emigration, to Ethiopia (on these stories, see below in this chapter); trade relations between the Quraysh and Ethiopia are also taken as granted.[151] The narratives on the first emigration will be discussed later in this chapter, though they do not have to be taken to include factual information. And, in any case, these Qurʾānic passages seem to specifically point out the fact that travel by boat *was* perceived as dangerous.

It is very rarely that other gods than God are mentioned in the Qurʾān. The famous and somewhat cryptic passage 53:19–22 mentions Allāt, al-ʿUzzā, and

argues that the so-called Constitution of Medina (discussed in the next chapter) implies that "the belief in the Last Day and the Day of Resurrection … was commonly shared by the three groups of faithful covenanters." The three groups of the treaty are, in his interpretation, the Muslims, Jews, and pagans.

150 Reynolds, *Allah* 16. The reasoning in Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 122, is tortuous and difficult to accept: "Indeed, the fact that the Qur'an often makes reference to sailing and fishing stands among the primary reasons for questioning its genesis uniquely in the Hijazi context of Mecca and Medina, as the Islamic tradition (and scholarship deferential toward it) would have us believe. Maritime trade is something that is simply not in evidence for Mecca, nor is there any evidence for a culture of fishing and sailing (or agriculture for that matter): to the contrary, these things seem highly improbable in light of its inland desert location." To begin with, the Qurʾān cannot be said to refer to sailing and fishing "often." Moreover, though Mecca is indeed situated inland, it is rather close to the sea. From Mecca to the port town of Jedda, the distance is ca. 100 km by road, a shortish distance even by pre-modern standards.

151 See, e.g., ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr's letters, al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, xi 181, trans. in Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 111: "The land of Abyssinia was a destination for trade where the Quraysh would conduct business and where they had found a lucrative livelihood, safety, and a fair market, so the Messenger of God commanded them to go there."

Manāt, deities that were worshipped in ancient Arabia.[152] Moreover, Q 43:15–19 notes that the opponents associate in particular female deities with God as His daughters.[153] The idea that God should have daughters is brought up—and refuted—in Q 16:57, as well. Verse 71:23 mentions other gods, such as Wadd, an important pre-Islamic deity (though discussed in the context of Noah and his people in this passage!).[154] However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the epigraphic record suggests that the belief in and worship of these (and other) deities had already waned or, in some places, become extinct. There might have been some people who still venerated these gods, but it would appear that they were not the majority. Epigraphy, Arabic poetry, and the Qurʾān agree on this point. Not only the rarity of these deities in the Qurʾān but also the content of these verses should be taken into account: the passages suggest that the persons believing in these deities had relegated them to a secondary role.[155] The mention of these deities in the Qurʾān is, nonetheless, significant, as noted by Suleyman Dost. That is, they are specifically Arabian gods, evinced in ancient Arabian epigraphic texts. Their occurrence in the Qurʾān would make little sense if the Qurʾān was promulgated in Mesopotamia or Syria, for instance, though the Qurʾān could be adducing them as a sort of archaism.[156]

All in all, based on Arabic poetry and the Qurʾān, one can state with some confidence that the opponents of the prophet, the disbelievers and associators, were not atheists in any sense of the word. Nor were they really polytheists, since their pantheon appears not to have included a multitude of gods; or, if it did, the creator God (*Allāh*) was unmistakably the most important one.[157] Instead of polytheists, they should be called henotheists or semi-monotheists.

The fact that the opponents associate other beings with God is important, from the point of the view of the Qurʾān, but so is the fact that they do not display enough obedience (*al-islām*) toward God and the law/judgment (*al-dīn*). They did not adopt the purity regulations that the Qurʾān required,[158] but fol-

152 For an important treatment of this passage, see Grasso, "The gods of the Qurʾān" 302–306. For the deities mentioned in the Safaitic corpus, see al-Jallad, *The religion and rituals*, 56–77.

153 Interestingly, two Safaitic inscriptions indicate that Allāt was considered the daughter of Ruḍaw; see al-Jallad, *The religion and rituals* 56.

154 Grasso, "The gods of the Qurʾān" 306–309.

155 This is elaborated in great detail in Crone, *The Qurʾānic pagans*.

156 Dost, *An Arabian Qurʾān* 52–58.

157 Though some verses, such as Q 17:42, appear to treat the different deities on an equal basis.

158 These regulations will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

lowed their own ideas as regards what is permissible and what is not. It should be emphasized that the Meccan Qurʾānic passages never, as far as I am aware, scold the People of the Book or the Israelites as being non-obedient toward the law. This changes somewhat in the Medinan strata, though even late *sūra*s accept that some Jews and Christians are law-obedient and share purity and dietary practices with the community of the believers.[159]

As regards the disbelievers, the Qurʾān asserts that they are not following the proper law but something else. *Sūra* 109 is famous in noting that the *kāfirūn* worship other beings in addition or to the exclusion of God, with verse 5 concluding: "You have your *dīn* and I have mine." This *sūra* does not, in fact, explicitly condemn the disbelievers, and it has been variously interpreted, with, for example, Abdulaziz Sachedina suggesting that Q 109 is not exclusivist but, rather, pluralist.[160] However, another Meccan passage, 39:39–41 is more derogatory:

> Say [prophet]: "O my people! Act according to your manner; I do too. Then, we will know who will receive a punishment that disgraces—an enduring punishment that descends." We [God] have revealed you [the prophet] the Book with the justice (*bi-l-ḥaqq*) for people. Whoever follows the guidance, does it for their own good, and whoever strays away, does it to their peril. You are not their keeper.

The change in dietary and purity regulations (including rejecting sacrificing to idols or cult stones) is underlined in a few Arabic conversion poems from the first generation of believers recently translated by Peter Webb.[161] For instance, one ʿAbd ʿAmr b. Jabala al-Kalbī is cited as having composed the following lines:

> The Messenger of God came with right guidance; I complied:
> And after praising God I have become abstemious.
> Farewell to pleasures of the cup!
> All my life I inclined toward play, an addict;
> Now I believe in God, illustrious on high,
> And I shall reject idols evermore.[162]

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159 E.g., Q 5:5, 5:47–48.
160 Sachedina, *The Islamic roots* 36.
161 Webb, Peter, "The spread of Islam in Arabia: Expressing conversion in poetry," in Nimrod Hurvitz et al. (eds.), *Conversion to Islam in the premodern age: A sourcebook*, Oakland CA: University of California Press, 2020, 63–68.
162 Webb, "The spread of Islam" 65.

The authenticity issue of these early Islamic-era Arabic poems is perhaps even more vexing than those stemming (supposedly) from pre-Islamic times, since the former are part of the Islamic salvation history narrative. In any case, the poems appear to substantiate the notion that one of the aspects of the disbelievers' *shirk* (associationism) is that they do not follow the religious law nor do they recant food sacrifices on cult stones. The *mushrikūn*, "associators," were "simple believers,"[163] who, the Qur'ān asserts, were not monotheist enough, did not embrace the proper understanding of the afterlife, and sacrificed to deities that they might have considered lesser supernatural beings. Naturally, no one called themselves *mushrikūn*. In this sense, they were rather an ideological and rhetorical construct than a social reality, a group that would have had any members. The *mushrikūn* is a catch-all category of practices of (in a sense, imagined) people that the Qur'ān considers beyond the pale.

3 Excursus: Arabic Historiography on the Meccan Period

The identity claims in the biographical (*sīra*) literature are manifold and, sometimes, surprising. Rather than presenting a simplistic picture of Arabia before and during the life of the prophet, the texts in fact contain frictions and varying portrayals. As in the contemporary sources, in the *sīra* literature too, we encounter gentile monotheists before Islam. In the pages of the biographies of the prophet, Jews and Christians are depicted as the allies of the nascent Muslim group, sometimes becoming group members without rejecting their previous allegiances. In the Arabic historiographical narratives, Mecca is connected in particular with (some) Christians living there, while Medina is said to have had a (more substantial) Jewish population. In addition to the prophet's wife's cousin, the famous Waraqa ibn al-Nawfal, who is depicted as a Christian, it is said, for example, that a Coptic carpenter lived in Mecca. Moreover, this Copt helped build the roof of the Kaʿba shrine.[164]

In the first *hijra*, emigration, to Ethiopia, which happened before the emigration to Medina, I suggest that we have clear instances of the memory of fuzzy religious boundaries. Naturally, conflict and strife between religious communities (in particular, the Jews and the Muslims) are present as well in the literature. I suggest that reading these second-century AH/eighth-century CE narratives in tandem with and in the light of contemporary, first/seventh-

163 To use the term of Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East*.
164 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 121–124.

century, sources, such as the Qurʾān, Arabic documents, and non-Arabic literature, would yield important insights into the question of what the earliest Arabic *akhbārī*, collectors of historical lore, were doing and why.[165]

Narratives on the *hijra* to Ethiopia can be found in Arabic literature, in particular in historiography.[166] As far as I know, the most copious and detailed early account can be found in al-Balādhurī's (d. 279/892) *Ansāb al-ashrāf*.[167] Al-Balādhurī notes that some of the prosopographical lists and narratives on who went to Ethiopia and when are contradictory, so he posits that there were actually two different *hijra*s there, with more people travelling to Ethiopia on the second trip than the first.[168] Reconstructing what might have really happened and the exact sequence of events does not need to concern us here. It is possible that we are dealing with completely made-up history: perhaps no Meccan believer went to Ethiopia.[169] Only epigraphic, archaeological, or other tangible evidence can prove their presence there. Be that as it may, these narratives are important testimonies to the notion that, in the early community, the distinctly Islamic identity was still emerging and communal borders were not fixed.[170] The narratives also attest to the fact that, in the collective memory of early Muslims, the link to Ethiopia and Ethiopian Christianity was deemed significant.

In nutshell, though there is variation in the details, the story of the trip to Ethiopia goes as follows: The community of the believers in Mecca are experiencing considerable coercion and persecution on the part of the Meccan aristocracy, who are, so the tradition would have us believe, polytheists and idolaters clear and simple. Because of this, the prophet Muḥammad orders some of his followers to go to Ethiopia and ask the Negus, that is to say the king, for protection.[171] The believers cross the sea to go to Ethiopia and find

165 Anthony's suggestion, in *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 17, of taking "the historical and philological insights gained from reading the Qurʾān to reinterpret the *sīrah-maghāzī* literature" makes considerable sense.

166 See, e.g., Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 217–224; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, Michail Jan de Goeje et al. (eds.), *Annales*, 3 vols. in 15, Leiden: Brill, 1879–1901, i, 1180–1184.

167 al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf*, ed. A.A. al-Dūrī et al., 7 vols., Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 1978, i/1, 446–533.

168 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, i/1, 532. On p. 445 of the same work, al-Balādhurī notes that the (first?) *hijra* to Ethiopia occurred in the fifth year of the prophet's mission.

169 Though it must be acknowledged that a short account on the emigration to Ethiopia was already present in ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr's corpus; Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 111.

170 A process which, I suggest, continued until 700 CE if not later; see chapter 8.

171 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, i/1, 450, says that the name of the king at the time was Aṣḥama. Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia" 299–300, notes that some undated coins give the name *ʾrmḥ*

refuge there. As Ibn Hishām tells us, "They were safely ensconced there and were grateful for the protection of the Negus; could serve God without fear; and the Negus had shown them every hospitality."[172] The Meccan aristocracy then sends messengers to the Negus, asking that he hand over the members of Muḥammad's community to them; the embassy includes a famous figure who later sided with Muḥammad and, after the prophet's death, became a victorious army commander, ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ. Muḥammad's believers recite a passage of *sūra* 19 of the Qurʾān, the *sūra* of Mary, to the Negus, who acknowledges it as real revelation. He rejects the request of the Meccan polytheists to send the believers back. However, though he would like to, he cannot overtly convert to Islam and risk his position among his people.

Even the basic form of this narrative is interesting as regards the depiction of communal boundaries. That the Arabian believers travel to Christian Ethiopia shows how, in the historical memory about the early community, Christianity is depicted as something akin to Muḥammad's message and movement. The *sūra* of Mary is, one could say, the most "Christian" of the Qurʾānic contents, depicting the youth and pregnancy of Mary and the birth of Jesus. However, the biographical sketches included in al-Balādhurī's *Ansāb al-ashrāf* proffer even more interesting glimpses of border crossings.

First, it should be noted that the emigrants to Ethiopia consist of not only the commoners of the believers' movement (as described in the Arabic historiographical and biographical literature), but also, so we are told, luminaries such as Jaʿfar ibn Abī Ṭālib, ʿAlī's brother; and the later third caliph, ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, who went to Ethiopia with his wife Ruqayya, the prophet's daughter.[173] Umm Salama, later married to Muḥammad, also travelled to Ethiopia.

The fuzzy borders between the religious communities emerge in a few narratives about the members of the Meccan community of the believers. For instance, one ʿUbaydallāh ibn Jaḥsh, an ally (*ḥalīf*) of the Umayyad clan, is said to have gone to Ethiopia on the second *hijra*. One assumes that, on the plane of the narrative, he is depicted as a Muslim, though this is not explicitly stated. In fact, he is sometimes classified as a *ḥanīf* in the sources. However, when in Ethiopia, the text tells us, he became a Christian (*tanaṣṣara*) and he died professing Christianity. Though the narrative describes the border crossing matter-of-factly, the moral lesson soon ensues: al-Balādhurī remarks that he

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for an Ethiopian king, but it is impossible to say with the evidence available at the moment when *ʾrmḥ* ruled and whether or not Aṣḥama might be a corruption of *ʾrmḥ*.

172 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 215, trans. Guillaume 148.

173 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, i/1 446–447.

drowned in the sea while drunk; or, possibly, he drowned in wine! Christianity is connected here with wine drinking, with perilous consequences. However, al-Balādhurī notes, ʿUbaydallāh's wife Ramla bint Abī Sufyān remained a firm Muslim (*aqāmat ʿalā al-islām*); she later became one of the wives of the prophet.[174] The threat of conversion to Christianity is real in the historical imagination of Ethiopia, though the prophet and his household are kept clear of such threats. If someone is mentioned as having died in Ethiopia, al-Balādhurī sometimes underscores that he or she died as a Muslim, as for instance in the case of ʿAmr ibn Umayya.[175] Clearly, this is done in order to ensure that the reader would not think that the person in question died a Christian.

The famous companion of the prophet, al-Zubayr ibn al-ʿAwwām (later killed during the first *fitna*) also went to Ethiopia, we are told—in fact, al-Balādhurī insists that he went there two times, on both *hijra*s.[176] He becomes close with the Negus, fighting alongside him against an anonymous enemy. (Ibn Hishām specifies that this was a rebel that arose to usurp the Negus.)[177] The Negus gives him a spear (*ʿanaza*), though we are not told whether this means that the spear was given to him before the fight or as a gift after it. In any case, later, al-Zubayr gives the spear to the prophet. Al-Zubayr, it would appear, not only made the Ethiopian *hijra* two times but, al-Balādhurī emphasizes, he also made the *hijra* from Mecca to Medina.[178] Al-Zubayr is, then, depicted as having done three *hijra*s. Though the religious affiliation of al-Zubayr is not dealt with, fighting alongside the king is a fascinating facet in the narratives of Ethiopia. In fact, Ibn Hishām says all Arabian emigrants in Ethiopia "prayed to God to give the Negus victory over his enemy and to establish him in his own country."[179]

The story of al-Nuḍayr ibn al-Ḥārith ibn ʿAlqama shows that the danger of apostasy from Islam could be brought back to Arabia. In a very terse account, it is said that he went to Ethiopia; his religious identity is not mentioned but, again, one assumes that the implicit affiliation is Muslim. However, after returning from Ethiopia to Mecca, he deconverted (*irtadda*).[180] It is not said to what he converted or why; but one assumes that the lure of Christianity lurks

174 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, i/1 450.
175 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, i/1 457.
176 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, i/1 455.
177 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 221.
178 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, i/1 456.
179 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 221, trans. Guillaume, 153.
180 For stories of insincere conversion to Islam and, after that, deconversion from Islam in Muslim historiography, see Ibrahim, *Conversion to Islam* 155–167.

in the background. He apparently stays in Mecca, since, on the day of the conquest of Mecca, the prophet pardons al-Nuḍayr, who becomes Muslim anew after the battle of Ḥunayn. His Islamic faith is said to have been firm afterwards; he died at the battle of al-Yarmūk.[181]

Another interesting narrative item is the one connecting the return from Ethiopia, in the case of some of the emigrants there, to the so-called satanic verse stories, according to which Satan was able to cast a false revelation after Q 53:19–20, which would have acknowledged the existence of the deities Allāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt.[182] Hearing this, the Meccan polytheists rejoice and stop persecuting Muḥammad's believers. The emigrants in Ethiopia think that the Meccan aristocracy tolerates them now, so they return. However, upon returning, they learn that the satanic verse has been annulled and they are, once again, in jeopardy. They have to live in Mecca covertly or under the protection of a powerful community member.[183]

The narratives on the two *hijra*s to Ethiopia depict, like no other Arabic historiographical narrative cycle known to me, porous borders, and perilous crossings of them, in the community of the believers during the life of Muḥammad. On the one hand, Christian Ethiopia and its Christian king, the Negus, are characterized in exceedingly positive terms: they are believers like the Arabian believers, to whom they give protection. Indeed, it is said that when the Negus died, the prophet prayed for him, asking God to forgive his sins.[184] On the other hand, Christianity represents a lurking and enticing menace. What is noteworthy is that all the conversions and deconversions in these narratives are described as if they would have been very ordinary and common, though sudden, occurrences. One word (*aslama*, *tanaṣṣara*, or *irtadda*) is enough to recount the change in affiliation. Conversion, in these narratives, is a moment, not a process. Moreover, the satanic verse cycle connects the emigration to Ethiopia, or more particularly the return from there, to a momentary concession to polytheism or henotheism. As I have argued in this and the previous chapter, it makes sense to assume that some Meccans were Jews and Christians, while even the gentiles were monotheists or henotheists of a sort. The narratives of fierce polytheist persecution and enmity towards the prophet's group could be nothing but mythical memory constructions in which the difference between the communities is over-emphasized. Indeed, behind the narratives of

181 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, i/1 461–462.

182 On these stories, see Ahmed, Shahab, *Before orthodoxy: The Satanic verses in early Islam*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017; Rubin, *The eye of the beholder* 156–166.

183 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 241–243; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, i 1189–1196.

184 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 224.

the emigration to Ethiopia and return to Mecca might be a memory of the fact that some believers were actually Christians (consider the case of ʿUbaydallāh ibn Jaḥsh), and, on the other hand, the rift between Arabian gentile monotheists (represented by the prophet's community) and henotheists (other gentiles) was not so gaping.

4 Conclusions on the Meccan Period

The Meccan believers were, on the basis of the Qurʾān, an eschatological community led by a gentile prophet who received revelations from a supernatural being. The eschatological imminence (even presence) is palpable in the Meccan *sūra*s. That the eschaton has, in some sense, already started is proclaimed in, for example, Q 7:185: "Do they not ponder the kingdom (*malakūt*) of heaven and earth and all that God has created and [the fact] that perhaps their appointed time has drawn close? What story could they believe after it?" Q 62:2 and other verses explicate that Muḥammad is sent by God to the gentiles in particular to recite them God's words and His scripture.

The notion of eschatology, so central in the mission of Muḥammad, is connected with sin and its removal through repentance, which is first and foremost the responsibility of the individual believers. Gentile law-obedience is an emerging theme that is further developed in the Medinan strata of the Qurʾān. The Qurʾānic notions of the last events and final judgment are, I would argue, similar to those of Jesus and Paul: the aspects of imperial hegemony and warfare are absent in them. The end was at hand, and the Qurʾānic revelation and joining the group headed by the prophet Muḥammad expanded the possibility for salvation to gentiles too.[185] (The point about the eschaton is not the end of this world but the coming of a better one in the form of the hereafter and the paradisal reward.) Significantly, all Meccan-era characterizations of the People of the Book, and the vast majority of the narratives on the Israelites, are positive, with explicit statements indicating that they believed in God and the scriptures, in general, and in Muḥammad's revelations, in particular. He was an apostle sent from among and to the gentiles, but also some non-gentiles embraced him. The Muḥammad-believing People of the Book were included in the community of believers.

185 However, Qurʾān 56:10–14 suggests that the earlier communities will form the majority (*thulla*) of the people that will be granted paradise. Later generations (which, one supposes, include also the followers of Muḥammad) are only a few (*qalīl*) as compared to them.

Late Meccan Qurʾānic material attests to a burgeoning but still small community, which was, in fact, in distress.[186] Though the promise of the eschaton brought comfort, the situation of the this-worldly believers was dire. More people rejected than accepted Muḥammad's message. It appears that it was in particular the gentiles that gave him a hard time since the People of the Book are almost always characterized in a positive vein. At this time, the oasis town of Medina, with a significant Jewish population, beckoned. It is there that Muḥammad and his followers, comprising gentile and other believers, went.

186 As insightfully captured by Saleh, "End of hope."

CHAPTER 6

The Founding and Consolidating of the Community in Medina

1 The "Constitution" of Medina

I will start this chapter with the "Constitution" of Medina, since this text appears to stem from the earliest years of the community in Medina. Hence, it is probably older than much (but not all) of the Qurʾānic material classified as Medinan. I subscribe to the view that the document is early Medinan, that is, drafted soon after the *hijra* (1/622).[1] The text is important evidence for the Medinan community, which included, in the main, gentile and Jewish believers. All depictions of the Jews in the document are positive (or neutral): they are full and equal members of the Medinan coalition. Interestingly, the treaty does not mention Christians at all.

The word "Constitution" is a modern and misleading name, but since it is conveniently used to refer to the document, I will also use the term, though in quotation marks.[2] A better word to characterize the text would be "treaty,"

1 Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-amwāl*, ed. Shākir Dhiʾb Fayyāḍ, 3 vols., Riadh: Markaz al-Malik Fayṣal li-l-Buḥūth wa-l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya, 1986, ii, 466 and 472–473, remarks that the document was drafted immediately when the prophet Muḥammad came to Medina. We do not have to take Abū ʿUbayd at his word, though this is a plausible suggestion. See also Lecker, Michael, *The "Constitution of Medina": Muhammad's first legal document*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2004, 182, for the date of the text and Lindstedt, "'One community'" for a comparison of the discourse of the treaty with different Qurʾānic strata. This section reproduces some passages from the latter study.

2 The document has generated quite a bit of modern scholarship. See, e.g., Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* 221–226; Serjeant, Robert B., "The Constitution of Medina," in *Islamic Quarterly* 8 (1964), 3–16, and "The *Sunnah Jâmiʿah* pacts with the Yathrib Jews, and the *Taḥrîm* of Yathrib: Analysis and translation of the documents comprised in the so-called 'Constitution of Medina'," in *BSOAS* 41 (1978), 1–42; Gil, Moshe, "The Constitution of Medina: A reconsideration," in *IOS* 4 (1974), 44–65; Denny, Frederick Mathewson, "*Ummah* in the Constitution of Medina," in *JNES* 36 (1977), 39–47; Rubin, Uri, "The 'Constitution of Medina': Some notes," in *SI* 62 (1985), 5–23; Humphreys, *Islamic history* 91–99; Arjomand, "The Constitution of Medina"; Munt, *The holy city* 54–64; Lindstedt, "'One community.'" The most important study on the text in recent years is undoubtedly Lecker, *The "Constitution of Medina*." However, as will be seen here, my interpretations differ markedly from his. Lecker reads the whole document in a supposed context of legislation on homicide and bloodwite. This misrepresents the text, which is much more diverse in themes. For a critical take on the interpretations of the "ori-

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which I will also use (without quotation marks) to denote the text. The text itself uses the words *al-kitāb* and *al-ṣaḥīfa* to refer to itself. Both *al-kitāb* and *al-ṣaḥīfa* can be translated as "document."

Though the text does not survive on parchment or papyri, but only as cited in later Arabic historiography, there are good grounds to suppose that the text is authentic and goes back to the time of the prophet. To begin with, the style and vocabulary of the document is archaic and often difficult to interpret; in accordance with the Qurʾān, the text refers to the in-group as "believers"; and, moreover, Jews are included in the community of the believers described in the text. For these reason, most modern scholars have accepted the text as authentic and early.[3] To quote Watt:

> No later falsifier writing under the Umayyads or ʿAbbāsids would have included non-Muslims in the *ummah*, would have retained the articles against Quraysh, and would have given Muhammad so insignificant a place. Moreover the style is archaic, and certain points, such as the use of "believers" instead of "Muslims" in most articles, belong to the earlier Medinan period.[4]

In the same breath, it must be acknowledged that the document survives in two versions that somewhat, or in some passages considerably, differ from each other. First, it is cited in Ibn Isḥāq's *Maghāzī* in the recension of Ibn Hishām: this is the longer version of the text.[5] Second, it is also preserved in Abū ʿUbayd's *Kitāb al-Amwāl*.[6] This version is shorter, omitting, it appears, a few passages. However, in some parts, Abū ʿUbayd gives arguably better and more original readings than Ibn Hishām. There are also some references to the treaty in other works, though the complete text is adduced in only these two. The text of the two versions has been critically evaluated and discussed by Michael Lecker.[7] It is not known exactly how the text was preserved, in how many copies, or how it

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entalists" on this text, see al-Faruqi, Maysam J., "*Umma*: The Orientalists and the Qurʾānic concept of identity," in *JIS* 16 (2005), 1–34.

3 E.g., Crone, *Slaves on horses* 7: "The Constitution of Medina is preserved in Ibn Isḥāq's *Sīra*, in which it sticks out like a piece of solid rock in an accumulation of rubble."

4 Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* 225 (though note that, as I argue in this chapter, the appellation "believers" is the primary one throughout the Qurʾān, up to the very latest strata, such as *sūra* 5).

5 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 341–344.

6 Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 466–470, with an interpretative commentary by Abū ʿUbayd in ii 471–473.

7 Lecker, *The "Constitution of Medina."*

reached Ibn Isḥāq and Abū ʿUbayd, but the little information there is suggests that it was preserved as an heirloom of the caliph ʿUmar I and his progeny.[8] In fact, as Sean Anthony notes, Ibn Isḥāq was criticized for including documents such as the "Constitution" in his work. This ran counter to the norms of Muslim scholarship, which emphasized the importance of hearing (*samāʿ*) texts in lectures and study circles rather than consulting written works and documents.[9]

The treaty mentions and articulates different social categories. As an in-group term, the *muʾminūn*, "believers," are mentioned. This word is, I suggest, used on two different levels: first, it refers in particular to the gentile believers of the community. Second, as will be seen, in some parts of the text, a more general meaning is entailed in the word. The more general usage of the word categorizes also the Jews (*yahūd*) of different Medinan tribes as part of the community of the believers. The treaty also mentions a number of tribes that are singled out as taking part in it. The text also mentions, among others, associators (in the singular, *mushrik*) and disbelievers (*kāfir*). Moreover, "the emigrants from Quraysh" (*al-muhājirūn min quraysh*) are referred to.[10]

The text begins by invoking the authority of the prophet.[11] Immediately after, it describes the community around him, mentioning that the treaty is "between the *muʾminūn* and the *muslimūn* of Quraysh and Yathrib [i.e., Medina] and those who follow them, join them, and fight/struggle alongside them (*jāhada maʿahum*): they are one community to the exclusion of other people (*umma wāḥida min dūn al-nās*)."[12] The superordinate identity of "one community," delineated from all other people, is articulated at the outset.

The phrase "the *muʾminūn* and the *muslimūn* of Quraysh and Yathrib" has generated some discussion, and perhaps also confusion, in the scholarship. The *muʾminūn* and the *muslimūn* are often taken to be two distinct groups, the one perhaps coming from Mecca (Quraysh), the other from Medina (Yathrib).[13]

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8 Lecker, *The "Constitution of Medina"* 7. This is how, it appears, many early Arabic documents survived; see Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 106.

9 Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 168.

10 On the different social categorizations and meanings attached to them in the text, see, in more detail, Lindstedt, "'One community.'"

11 Called *al-nabī*, "the prophet," in Ibn Hishām's version (*Sīra*, i, 341), and *al-nabī rasūl allāh*, "the prophet, the messenger of God," in Abū ʿUbayd's (*Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 466).

12 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 341. Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 466, has *ahl yathrib*, "the people of Yathrib," as opposed to simply *yathrib*; his version also adds "(those who) reside with them" (*fa-ḥalla maʿahum*) after "(those who) join them."

13 For discussion, see, e.g., Denny, "*Ummah* in the Constitution" 43–44; Serjeant, "The *Sunnah Jâmiʿah* pacts" 12–13; Lecker, *The "Constitution of Medina"* 40–45.

This appears somewhat unlikely to me. Two solutions are possible: 1) The construction is, as it were, a hendiadys: the word *muʾminūn* refers to the partakers characterized as believers, while *muslimūn* emphasizes another facet, their obedience to God and the law. 2) It is also possible that the word *muslimūn* was added later to the text by a copyist working in the second/eighth century when that word was the primary one used to refer to the group (see chapter 8 for this development in the labels of the category). As mentioned above, the text is not preserved in its original form but adduced over a century later by Arabic writers. That said, *muslimūn* appears in both versions: Ibn Hishām's *Sīra* and Abū ʿUbayd's *Kitāb al-Amwāl*.

Next, the text moves to discuss the tribes partaking in the treaty. It underscores that the tribes, though they participate in a new superordinate identity, keep their old tribal organizations (*ribʿatihim*) and are responsible for the previous bloodwites (*maʿāqilahum al-ūlā*).[14] I would suggest that the point of this is to underline that the treaty does not endanger the existing tribal system, finances, or customs of retribution. Members of the tribe do not lose their tribal identities.

Having articulated common ground between the participating tribes, the text then discusses some regulations that the individuals and groups in this community of the believers should accept:[15] This is a theme that the text returns to toward the end. Various rules are mentioned. The text now refers to the group as "the God-fearing/revering believers (*al-muʾminīn al-muttaqīn*),"[16] noting that they are to be against sinners and criminals among them (*ʿalā man baghā minhum aw ibtaghā dasīʿat ẓulm aw ithm aw ʿudwān aw fasād*), even if the sinner is someone's child (*wa-law kāna walad aḥadihim*). However, the text does not mention what is to be done with the sinner and criminals. After this, the "disbelievers" (sing. *kāfir*) are mentioned: probably, the reference is to people outside Medina and, hence too, this treaty. The text notes: "a believer shall not kill [another] believer in retaliation for a disbeliever, nor help a disbeliever against a believer." The treaty articulates a somewhat strict delineation between the believers and the others, the disbelievers. The lives of the former are more valuable than the lives of the latter. Indeed, the text notes soon after: "the believers are allies (*mawālī*) to each other to the exclusion of other peo-

14 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, I 341; Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 466–467. The point about bloodwites might also be understood as denoting that the tribes should pay the bloodwites that are currently owed to the other tribes of the Medinan coalition.

15 What ensues is from Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 342; Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 468.

16 Thus in Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 342. Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 468, adds the word "and" between the two words: *al-muʾminīn wa-l-muttaqīn*.

ple," which should be compared with Q 3:28: "The believers should not take the disbelievers as allies (*awliyāʾ*) to the exclusion of the believers." The text also mentions that the "peace" (*silm*) between the believers is unwavering. In this context, the treaty also mentions that "who knowingly kills a believer—there being evidence of this—will be killed in retaliation for him if the relative of the killed is not content with bloodwite."[17] Related to this, the text later notes that the interior (*jawf*) of Medina (Ibn Hishām: *Yathrib*; Abū ʿUbayd: *al-Madīna*) is an inviolable and sanctified area (*ḥaram*) for the participants of this treaty (*li-ahl hādhihi al-ṣaḥīfa*).[18] The believers are not to shed each other's blood: Medina is a safe space, at least for those who take part in the coalition.

The Jews are mentioned for the first time in this part of the document. The text stipulates: "Those Jews who follow us shall have succor (*al-naṣr*) and help (*al-iswa*); they shall not be wronged nor [shall their enemies be] helped against [them]."[19] The word "us" denotes either the gentile believers or, alternatively, the prophet, with a plural of majesty employed in reference to him. The Jewish members of the Medinan community are mentioned later in the document as well. Here as elsewhere, they are treated as respected members of the community. This part of the document ends by defining the partakers as those who "believe in God and the last day" (*āmana bi-llāh wa-al-yawm al-ākhir*).[20] Moreover, if the believers should disagree on something, they should "refer it to God and Muḥammad," who are the ultimate arbiters of judgment.

The next section deals mostly with the Jewish subsets of the tribes belonging to the treaty.[21] Interestingly, the text makes clear that most tribes mentioned in the early part of the treaty as partaking in it had Jewish members. The Jews were a sizable religious group in Medina. Not only that, but they were regular members of the tribes of Medina: according to this document, at least, they did not form a group of their own, their own tribe or tribes. As mentioned in chapter 2, the Jews of Western Arabia appear to have been mostly Arabic-speaking. The "Constitution" mentions numerous partaking tribes, such as al-Aws, one of the

17 The last word, *bi-l-ʿaql*, "bloodwite," is only present in Abū ʿUbayd's version (*Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 468), but the context requires it so I suggest that it was part of the original wording of the document.

18 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 343; Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 469.

19 Thus in Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 342. Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 468, has, instead of *al-naṣr*, *al-maʿrūf*, which could be translated as "amicability" or "fairness."

20 This is a common Qurʾānic refrain and definition of the minimal requirements for being a believer (e.g., Q 2:126 and 2:232).

21 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 342–343; Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 469.

leading tribes of Medina, as having Jewish members.[22] Whether or not these tribes were majority Jewish cannot be known with certainty, but it is possible.

The treaty specifies that the Jews shall "spend money" (*yunfiqūna*) with and for the believers as long as the Medinan coalition is at war.[23] Then, the different tribes and their Jewish subgroups are mentioned. Here, the versions of Ibn Hishām and Abū ʿUbayd differ in the preposition that they use characterizing the Jews:

– Ibn Hishām: "The Jews of the tribe X are a group (*umma*)[24] alongside with (*maʿa*) the believers."
– Abū ʿUbayd: "The Jews of the tribe X are a group (*umma*) from among (*min*) the believers."

There are good reasons to accept Abū ʿUbayd's reading as the original one.[25] It places the Jews explicitly as part of the believers' community: it is difficult to see why Abū ʿUbayd or a copyist before him would have made the change from *maʿa* to *min*.[26] It is much easier to see reasons for the modification of *min* to *maʿa*, which makes a delineation (somewhat) between the Jews and the believers. In Ibn Hishām's version, Jews are merely "alongside with" the believers. They are not, strictly speaking, equated with them. Abū ʿUbayd's reading also makes more sense in the light of the rest of the text, which characterizes

22 Viz.: *yahūd banī al-najjār*, *yahūd banī al-ḥārith*, *yahūd banī sāʿida*, *yahūd banī jusham*, *yahūd banī al-aws*, *yahūd banī thaʿlaba*, and *biṭānat yahūd* (Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 342–343; Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 469).

23 Later, the document returns to the question of expenses, probably in the context of warfare: *ʿalā al-yahūd nafaqatuhum wa-ʿalā al-muslimīn nafaqatuhum*, "the Jews have [at their responsibility] their expenses, and the *muslimūn* have [at their responsibility] their expenses" (Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 343, Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 469).

24 Despite the fact that the word *umma* later comes to denote the Muslim community in a broad sense, in the "Constitution" and the Qurʾān *umma* signifies groups of varying sizes. See, e.g., Q 3:104, where the word is used to denote a group among the community of the believers.

25 Rubin, "The Constitution of Medina" 20. On the other hand, Lecker, *The "Constitution of Medina"* 139–147, claims that we should replace the word *umma* with *amana* and translate: "The Jews of the Banū ʿAwf are secure from (*amana min*) the Muʾminūn." But this is based on extremely poor textual evidence and, frankly, special pleading. Lecker's contention in his study is that the Jews and believers were distinct groups and, moreover, that the Jews were not really part of the "one community." As far as I know, Lecker is the only scholar to have put forward this; the suggestion does not seem to have been accepted by other scholars.

26 Though Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila has noted to me in a personal communication that one could hypothesize that a copyist, used to seeing (in the Qurʾān and elsewhere in Arabic literature) a very common phrase *min al-muʾminīn*, might have accidentally changed *maʿa al-muʾminīn* to *min al-muʾminīn*.

Jews as full members of the Medinan coalition: the Jews are helped by the other believers, and vice versa. Uri Rubin goes further and suggest that the preposition *min* is used here *li-l-bayān/tabyīn*, to make clear or elucidate the preceding indefinite word *umma*. In his understanding, the Jewish groups are called an "*umma* of believers," and not only "from among the believers."[27] However, the difference in the two translations is not enormous.

Ibn Hishām's version also presents an inferior reading in what ensues. Abū ʿUbayd's text continues: *li-l-yahūd d-y-n-hum wa-li-l-muʾminīn d-y-n-hum*, while Ibn Hishām, on the other hand, has *muslimīn* instead of *muʾminīn*.[28] As mentioned above, there might have been a tendency to place the word "Muslims" in the text during the second/eighth century, when it became the primary designation of the group. Be that as it may, how is the phrase *li-l-yahūd d-y-n-hum wa-li-l-muʾminīn d-y-n-hum* to be understood? The first option would be to read *daynuhum*, and translate: "The loans owed to the Jews [are to be upheld], and the loans owed to the [gentile] believers [are to be upheld]." This is not necessarily wrong, but perhaps the other option, *dīnuhum*, is preferable. If so, the passage reads: "The Jews have their law, and the [gentile] believers theirs." As mentioned later in this chapter, the Qurʾān (e.g., 5:48) notes that, though the different subgroups in the community of the believers should agree on basic principles, they can follow their own legal systems in some respects. Interestingly, here the word *muʾminīn* is used to denote only the gentile believers. The text notes that this right is not extended to those members of the community who sin or commit wrong deeds. However, this is further qualified that such criminals only bring calamity to themselves and their family (*fa-innahu lā yūtighu illā nafsahu wa-ahla baytihi*). A Jew doing wrong would not incriminate the wider category of Jews.

I have so far only mentioned in passing an important topic in the treaty: that of warfare. This topic is key in the "Constitution." I have noted that one of the goals of this treaty text was to found a community of believers in Medina, which included gentiles and Jews.[29] They are to help each other; shedding the blood of or harming another believer is strictly forbidden. However, this is not a pacifist document. The community is menaced by an enemy without. The text notes that, should Medina be the target of a sudden attack (the verb *dahama* is used), the members of the community should help each other. The group members should not be laggards; rather, every fighting unit (*kull ghāziya*) among the community shall follow at the heels of another (*yaʿqubu baʿḍuhā*

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27 Rubin, "The Constitution of Medina" 14.

28 Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 469; Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 342.

29 See also Donner, "From believers to Muslims" 31–33.

baʿḍan) in battle.[30] They should contribute to the community's financial means by paying the *nafaqa*.[31] Moreover, the believers shall avenge the blood of those community members who were killed in the path of God (*inna al-muʾminīn yubīʾu baʿḍuhum ʿan baʿḍ bi-mā nāla dimāʾahum fī sabīl Allāh*).[32] This is, indeed, a community at war.

Toward the end of the text, some closing formulae are put forward. The phrase *inna al-birr dūn al-ithm*, "devotion is better than sin," occurs here, but it had already appeared earlier in the text, functioning as a sort of refrain. The individual responsibility of the believers is then underlined: every person is responsible for her or his deeds and their repercussions (*lā yaksibu kāsib illā ʿalā nafsihi*), adding that God is the most trusted fulfiller of this treaty. The treaty, it is noted, does not help a wrongdoer or sinner (*wa-innahu lā yaḥūlu hādhā al-kitāb dūna ẓālim aw āthim*). Remarkably, the next statement notes that people are free to leave Medina (and, I would suggest, the treaty). Participating in it is not mandatory: "Who leaves (*man kharaja*) is safe, and who remains (*man qaʿada*) is safe in Medina, except whoever does wrong and sins." Then comes the very last statement of the document: "God is the protector (*jār*) of those who are pious and revere [God] (*li-man barra wa-ittaqā*), and Muḥammad is the messenger of God."[33]

In my interpretation, what the treaty endeavored to do (with some success, it would seem on the basis of the Qurʾān) is to formulate a common in-group identity[34] as God-fearing believers. The Medinan coalition included people from different tribes and religious affiliation. Both the Jewish and the gentile believers are included in this big-tent community that has a positive and distinctive identity as "one community to the exclusion of other people." Importantly, former identities (tribal affiliations, religious identities) of the Medinan coalition of the believers are not effaced or rejected but understood

30 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 342; Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 468.

31 Serjeant, "The *Sunnah Jâmiʿah* pacts" 26, astutely notes that the document presents the Jews and other believers as equals payers of the *nafaqa*.

32 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 342. This clause is missing in Abū ʿUbayd, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*.

33 This appears only in Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i 344, but it makes sense as a closing statement. Abū ʿUbayd's version (*Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 470) ends differently: "the best partaker of this document is the pious doer of good" (*inna awlāhum bi-hādhihi al-ṣaḥīfa al-barr al-muḥsin*). In both Ibn Hishām's (*Sīra*, i 341) and Abū ʿUbayd's (*Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ii 466) versions the document began by mentioning its source and authority as the prophet. It would make sense to expect the "Constitution" to end with a mention of Muḥammad as well.

34 For the common in-group identity model, see Gaertner, Samuel L. and John F. Dovidio, *Reducing intergroup bias: The common ingroup identity model*, Philadelphia PA: Psychology Press, 2000.

as sub-categories.[35] In the work of modern social psychologists, such a common in-group identity has been demonstrated to facilitate a sense of belonging together and aid to the members of the novel identity (though they might have been, in the past, viewed as enemies).[36] The topic of mutual succor is one that the treaty comes back to time and again. Moreover, the role that the leaders (and aspiring leaders) play in this articulation of common in-group identity has been noted in various studies. In fact, "it is by becoming emblematic of a new sense of 'us' that leaders acquire their transformational power."[37] In drafting and negotiating the treaty agreement, the prophet Muḥammad united the gentile and Jewish believers of Medina as one community set apart from other people and placed himself as its leader. The "Constitution" is a remarkable early witness to the processes that made him the head of a city state.

One of the significant features that arises on reading the "Constitution" is the fact that the presence (indeed, heavy presence) of Jewish individuals and groups among the tribes mentioned in the text is taken for granted and matter-of-factly. In chapter 2, I mustered the epigraphic evidence on Jews around Medina, which fits nicely with the picture presented by the "Constitution." Why Christians are not mentioned in the treaty is somewhat of a mystery. The Qurʾān indicates that they were readily present in the environment. Perhaps, in Medina, Christians existed mostly as sole individuals, without forming tribes that would have been majority Christian. Perhaps another treaty, now lost, was forged with the tribes with sizeable Christian sections. Or perhaps they were so embedded among Muḥammad's followers, the believers, that they did not have to be mentioned.[38] With the evidence at hand presently, one simply does not know.

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35 Gaertner and Dovidio, *Reducing intergroup bias* 86–87, 97, 146–148, 163–168, note that the common in-group mode works best if the previous identities are not rejected but rather treated as legitimate sub-identities.

36 Gaertner and Dovidio, *Reducing intergroup bias* 7.

37 Haslam, Reicher and Platow, *The new psychology of leadership* 89. Siegel and Badaan note with regard to modern sectarian speech online: "We find that elite-endorsed messages that prime common religious identity are the most consistently effective in reducing the spread of sectarian hate speech. Our results provide suggestive evidence that religious elites may play an important role as social referents—alerting individuals to social norms of acceptable behavior." (Siegel, Alexandra A. and Vivienne Badaan, "#No2Sectarianism: Experimental approaches to reducing sectarian hate speech online," in *American Political Science Review* 114/3 (2020), 837–855, at 837.)

38 If this is the case, then my proposal that, in this text, the word *muʾminūn* denotes in particular the gentile component in the community of the believers will have to be revised.

2 The Believers in the Medinan Qurʾān

2.1 *Core Beliefs and Rituals*

It is a feature of the Medinan strata of the Qurʾān[39] that the key beliefs and rituals of the believers are articulated in more detail than in Mecca. It is in particular such Medinan verses that I will discuss in this section, though some Meccan ones are incorporated as well (I will mark them where they appear). The point of this section is to dig deeper into the social categorizations put forward in the Qurʾān. I have noted so far that the Meccan Qurʾānic communication appears to categorize most Jews and Christians as believers; the "Constitution," a Medinan-era document, continues this discourse, though it only deals with the gentile and Jewish believers. If explicit statements do not place Jews and Christians beyond the pale, perhaps the Qurʾān mentions beliefs and rituals that would part ways with them? However, as will become clear, such is not the case.[40]

According to the Qurʾān and the "Constitution," merely believing is not enough for group membership: one must also carry out the duties and practices of the community. As the Meccan verse 29:2 mocks: "Do people think that

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39 In contrast to the Meccan layer of the Qurʾān, the Medinan one consists of, by and large, longer *sūra*s, some of which are compilations of diverse materials stemming from various years of the prophet's life; see Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext"; Sinai, "Processes of literary growth." *Pace* Shoemaker, *Creating the Qurʾan*, I opine that the bulk of the material goes back to Muḥammad's proclamation. As for Reda, Nevin, *The al-Baqara crescendo: Understanding the Qurʾan's style, narrative structure, and running themes*, Montreal, 2017, and "The poetics of Sūrat Āl ʿImrān's narrative structure (Q 3)," in Marianna Klar (ed.), *Structural dividers in the Qurʾan*, London: Routledge, 2021, 27–53, she suggests that even longer *sūra*s such as Q 2 and Q 3 can be interpreted as single units with meticulous organization. Reda's idea is not necessarily incompatible with Neuwirth, Sinai, and other scholars' view that the longer *sūra*s consists of distinct, non-contemporaneous pericopes: it can be suggested that whoever edited the passages into single *sūra*s (in my opinion probably a post-prophetic process) paid attention to the format and organization of these units. For an excellent introduction to the Medinan Qurʾān, see Sinai, Nicolai, "The unknown known: Some groundwork for interpreting the Medinan Qurʾan," in *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 66 (2015–2016), 47–96; however, as will be seen, my interpretation of the religious groups and social categorizations in the Medinan layers of the Qurʾān differs substantially from Sinai's reading.

40 The theoretical background that I put forward in this section is that identities can be understood to be "signaled" through, for example, clothing, practices, or discourse, as articulated by Ehala, Martin, *Signs of identity: The anatomy of belonging*, London: Routledge, 2018. On this, see also Lindstedt, "Signs of identity in the Quran." Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan* 91–101, compares Qurʾān and Jewish notions of prayer and fasting, though his conclusions diverge from mine.

they are left alone and not tested if they simply say: 'We believe'?" Another Meccan passage, Q 49:15 defines the believers: "The believers are those who believe in God and his messenger without doubting and who strive in God's path with their wealth and lives. They are the truthful." Being a group member, then, entails both espousing the core beliefs but also performing the core rituals and practices. The latter include fighting for the community (implicitly in Q 49:15 too), which is elucidated in the next section.

Selecting the core beliefs and practices as articulated in the Qur'ān is, naturally, a somewhat subjective matter.[41] Some of the aspects, such as obedience to God and the law, have been dealt with elsewhere in this book. Here, I will note the following core beliefs and practices, which, I suggest, arise somewhat naturally from the Qur'ān, given their numerous occurrences in the text:

– Belief in God and the last day
– Belief in the prophets and scriptures, including Muḥammad and his revelations
– Doing good deeds and being pious
– Praying and giving alms
– Fasting and performing the pilgrimage

Notably, in a few verses of the Qur'ān, the core dogmata and praxes are also ascribed to Jews and Christians, at least a minority among them. The importance, in the Qur'ānic discourse, of belief in God and the last day is clear in all strata of the text. For example, Q 2:4 notes that the believers are those who are sure of the afterlife (*bi-l-ākhira hum yūqinūn*). In the previous chapter, I noted that Meccan passages quite often classify the People of the Book as believers, not only as believers in God and the last day but also in the authenticity of Muḥammad's revelations (e.g., Q 13:36, 28:52–55). This discourse is continued in some Medinan passages, for instance in Q 3:199:[42]

> Among the People of the Book are those who believe in God and what has been revealed to you [pl.] and what has been revealed to them. They are humble before God. They do not trade God's signs/revelations (*āyāt*) for a small gain. They will receive their reward with their Lord. God is swift in reckoning.

41 See, e.g., Fazlur Rahman, *Major themes*, who emphasizes *taqwā*, piety or God-consciousness, over other aspects of the Qur'ān.

42 For a treatment of the narrative structure of Q 3 (an important *sūra* regarding the social identity of the Medinan community), see Reda, "The poetics of Sūrat Āl 'Imrān."

Some verses, such as Q 5:82–86, differentiate between the Jews and the Christians: while the latter are classified as believers in this passage, the Jews are not. The discourse is varied, then, but it must be acknowledged that, throughout the Qurʾānic strata, there are verses that state that some Jews and Christians believe, though, in the Medinan period, the overall picture is more critical toward them.

Doing good and pious deeds (indicated with Arabic words from the roots *ḥ-s-n*, *kh-y-r*, and *ṣ-l-ḥ*) is mentioned in the Qurʾān as a requirement for entry to paradise (e.g., 3:133–134, 10:26). Such benevolent actions are an important part of the cementing of the in-group solidarity in the Qurʾānic message. They are attributed to Jews and Christians too. Q 3:114 notes that some People of the Book are quick to do good deeds (*yusāriʿūna fī al-khayrāt*) and are to be classified among the pious (*al-ṣāliḥīn*).

As for praying and giving alms, it should be noted that the Qurʾān does not communicate in detail how they should be carried out, though prostration (*sajada*, e.g., 7:206) and kneeling down (*rakaʿa*, e.g., 3:43) are mentioned as part of prayer.[43] It appears obvious that Jews and Christians in Arabia, as elsewhere, prayed and gave alms. Indeed, the words in the Qurʾān indicating prayer (*ṣalāt*, written *ṣ-l-w-t*) and alms (*zakāt*, but written *z-k-w-t*) were borrowed from some form of Aramaic.[44] In themselves, prayer and alms-giving cannot be taken to delineate groups. As for alms, there are no explicit Qurʾānic statements saying whether the People of the Book are carrying out their duties or not concerning alms, they are simply commanded to do this (e.g., 2:43, 98:5). However, Q 4:162 notes that some among the Jews are upholding the prayer and paying alms.

The important question regarding prayer is, are there Qurʾānic passages that would note that Jews or Christians prayed differently than the believers or that the prayer of the People of the Book is invalid? In fact, the following Meccan passage notes that the People of the Book pray similarly to the general Qurʾānic portrayal of prayer:

> Q 17:107–109 (Meccan): Say [prophet]: 'Believe (pl.) in it or do not.'[45] When it [the revelation] is recited to those who have been given knowledge

43 On this, see also Rubin, Uri, "Morning and evening prayers in early Islam," in *JSAI* 10 (1987), 40–64, who also treats later Arabic literature on this question.

44 Jeffery, *The foreign vocabulary* 153, 198–199.

45 This appears to be addressing the gentiles, who consist of both believers and disbelievers and who are contrasted with the believing Jews and Christians ("those who have been given knowledge before").

> before, they fall on their faces in prostration (*sujjadan*) and say: 'Glory to our Lord! The promise of our Lord has been realized.' They fall on their faces weeping—it increases their humility.

Moreover, the Medinan Q 3:113 notes that some among the People of the Book are upright, reciting God's words (*āyāt*) while prostrating (*wa-hum yasjudūn*). Prostration—that is, the bodily and physical aspect of prayer—does not appear to delineate the believers, Jews, and Christians. Prostration in prayer is attested in the poetic corpus as well since, in a poem, al-Aʿshā swears by "the Lord of those who prostrate themselves in the evening" (*wa-rabbi l-sājidīna ʿashiyy-atan*), referring to Christians praying.[46]

As is well known, in the medieval era and nowadays Muslims consider it a religious duty to pray five times a day; the Shīʿīs often combine the prayers, performing the prayer three times a day, though carrying out all five prayer cycles.[47] However, the Qurʾānic text appears to suggest two or three daily prayers, instead.[48] If the early community prayed three times a day, this could be another instance of shared practices between the religious communities. Indeed, thrice a day is the usual Jewish practice of praying.[49] Though, as far as I know, there is no evidence that late antique Christians upheld an idea of the number of daily prayers, an earlier Greek text, probably from the first century CE, *The Didache*, notes that Christ-believers should pray three times a day.[50]

Regarding the prayer direction, *qibla* in Arabic, *sūra* 2[51] contains verses discussing it and its possible signification. Verses 2:142–144 note that the prayer direction of Muḥammad's group changed at some point, and verse 145 adds that the People of the Book pray toward a different direction. However, the importance of prayer direction as a boundary marker is qualified by 2:115 and 2:177. To quote the former: "To God belongs the east and the west. Wherever you turn, the face of God is there. God is all-encompassing, knowing." Verse 2:114 mentions "God's places of worship" (*masājid Allāh*), so it makes sense to assume that

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46 Sinai, *Rain-giver* 51.

47 This is, naturally, prescriptive. It is safe to say that there have been, in the past as well as today, a large number of Muslims (perhaps the majority) who do not pray five times a day.

48 See Q 2:238, 6:52, 7:204–206, 11:114, 17:78–79, 18:28, 20:130, 24:58, 25:64, 50:39, 52:48–49, 76:26.

49 Jaffee, *Early Judaism*, 196; Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 161.

50 Ehrman, *After the New Testament* 460.

51 For an important reading of the style and structure of *sūra* 2, see Reda, *The al-Baqara crescendo*.

2:115 is indeed dealing with the direction(s) of prayer. As chapters 7–8 will note, there is (post-prophet) archaeological evidence from two places in the Near East, the Kathisma church and the open-air place of worship in Beʾer Ora, suggesting that Christians and Arabian believers prayed in the same building, each community facing toward its prayer direction. Moreover, there is literary evidence proposing that Jews and Arabian believers prayed together in the place of worship built on the Temple Mount before the Dome of the Rock (though prayer direction is not discussed in these reports).

Though prayer habits appear not to have created any kind of firm boundary between the believers and the People of the Book, the issue of the pilgrimage and fasting present more complex cases. The pilgrimage (*ḥajj*), probably to the Kaʿba, and the fast (*ṣawm*) in Ramaḍān are discussed in some detail in the Qurʾān (see 2:158, 183–185, 196–200, 5:97, 22:26–29). A few things should be noted, however. First, the Qurʾān decrees fasting in many different contexts, not only during Ramaḍān (see e.g., Q 4:92: as a means of repenting after killing another believer; 5:95: after hunting during the pilgrimage; 5:89: after breaking an oath). Fasting is, in the Qurʾānic message, a broad concept; that the fast of Ramaḍān later emerges as one of the so-called pillars of Islam blurs this message. Moreover, it is not entirely clear what role the Qurʾān assigns to the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*). Note, for instance, that Q 2:158 says that performing the *ḥajj* is not blameworthy for the one doing it (*lā junāḥ ʿalayhi*)—hardly a wholehearted espousal.

As for the pilgrimage and fasting, the Qurʾān never ascribes these practices to the People of the Book. On the other hand, it should be noted that the Qurʾān never states that Jews and Christians are *not* participating in them. Indeed Q 2:183 suggests that the fasting practices of the believers are similar to those of the previous communities.[52] It was noted in chapter 3 that the poetic corpus suggests that the pilgrimage to the Kaʿba was an established (though local) practice in the pre-Islamic era and, moreover, some Christian Arabic poets, too, appear to have celebrated Mecca.[53] Further research on pilgrimage and fasting practices in late antique Arabia is a desideratum, but until new epigraphic, archaeological, or other material evidence comes to light, the topic remains somewhat in the realm of speculation.

52 On verses Q 2:183–186, see also Sinai, "Towards a redactional history," 368–371. He suggests that Q 2:183–184 and Q 2:185–186 form two distinct utterances. He notes that Q 2:183–184 embrace and endorse a type of fasting that was in line with existing Jewish custom, though Q 2:185–186 (a later insertion) offered "a more autonomous practice," according to Sinai. It is true that Q 2:185 proclaims the month of Ramaḍān as the (a?) month of fasting. However, the Qurʾān does not articulate this in contrast to Jews or Christians.

53 Miller, *Tribal poetics* 104; Sinai, *Rain-giver* 52.

All in all, when looking at the core beliefs and practices that the Qurʾān enjoins the believers to follow, interesting conclusions emerge: In fact, most of the dogmata and deeds are also ascribed to Jews and Christians as well. The Qurʾān explicitly acknowledges that (at least some) Jews and Christians carry out the core practices and espouse the core beliefs. Moreover, as a matter of fact, one should note the difference between the two discourses: generally speaking, whereas the Qurʾānic instructions to the believers are *prescriptive* (indicating what the believers should be doing and believing, though at the present they might not), the Qurʾānic communication about the People of the Book is oftentimes *descriptive* (indicating what the Jews and Christians are actually doing).

2.2 *The Persecuted Emigrants* (*muhājirūn and* **muhājirāt**)*, Fighting for the Community*

The Medinan passages of the Qurʾān (e.g., Q 60:10) portray the community as including persecuted emigrants (*muhājirūn* and *muhājirāt*). The concept of being an emigrant is connected with the notion of the community being at risk and under attack, and for the defense of which the emigrants (and Medinan believers) should fight. The Qurʾānic category of the *muhājirūn* is, in later Islamic interpretive tradition, understood to signify those Muslims who emigrated (performed the *hijra*) from Mecca to Medina, but as Mette Mortensen has shown, the original Qurʾānic notion is also connected with spiritual secession, ascetism, and physical fighting.[54] She describes the Qurʾānic *muhājirūn* as follows:

> Going out, however, is not without cost or sacrifice, which leads to what I would argue is an essential concept in the definition of the Qurʾānic *muhājirūn*: asceticism. Emigrating in the way of God is encouraged in the Qurʾān, but this emigration entails deprivation and sacrifice in terms of loss of wealth, property, and possibly even the lives of the emigrants, a fact which the Qurʾān acknowledges (Q8:72; Q9:20). However, the understanding of the concept of asceticism that I would like to make use of here is not primarily centered on deprivation, but on the original Greek meaning of the word (*áskēsis*): "exercise" or "training."[55]

The Medinan community, on the basis of the Qurʾānic text and the "Constitution," was a community which was menaced by outsider forces. The Qurʾān

54 Mortensen, *A contribution* 159–171.
55 Mortensen, *A contribution* 171.

notes that some of the believers had been expelled from their homes (Q 3:175, 59:8). It was a community that had to be prepared to fight. Being a *muhājir*, emigrant, entailed that one had to be ready for fighting, *qitāl*, and striving, *jihād*.

Warfare in the name of and defense of religion was a rather popular concept in the Near East of late antiquity, as chapters 2 and 3 have mentioned. The pre-Islamic South Arabian inscriptions evidence that God was adduced as providing victory on the battlefield by both the Jews and Christians. It is also attested in the early sixth-century Ethiopic inscription that begins, "God is power and strength, God is power in battles."[56] Contemporary with the life of the prophet, the emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641) invoked the idea of holy war against Sasanid Persia. It appears that Heraclius proclaimed that those who fall while fighting are to be regarded as martyrs. Tommaso Tesei has recently suggested that Heraclius' war propaganda might undergird the Qur'ānic discourse on war, which shows similar features.[57] The idea that God not only condones but also helps in warfare appears to have been commonly accepted in late antiquity.

Fighting, *qitāl*, and striving, *jihād*, are rather important costly signals that the Medinese community of believers is encouraged to carry out in the Qur'ān (and also in the "Constitution," as noted above).[58] Fighting is often directly connected with the *hijra*, emigration or flight to Medina. Qur'ān 2:218 states: "Those who believe and those who emigrate (*hājarū*)[59] and strive (*jāhadū*) in God's path, aspire for the mercy of God." On evidence, it appears that much of the community that was forming in Medina was fleeing for its life. The community was fighting to defend itself—though occasionally also to expand. The activities of *qitāl* and *jihād* are often said to be done *fī sabīl allāh*, "in God's path" (e.g., Q 8:74), or even *fī allāh*, "in God" (Q 22:78 cf. Q 29:69). They are depicted as arduous tasks but nevertheless as something commendable—there is no Qur'ānic passage that states generally that fighting or striving are deeds that should be avoided (that is, if carried out by the believers, not the enemy). *Jihād*, which sometime later becomes the most common designation for religious (or

56 RIÉth 191, quoted in Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm" 155. There is a cross engraved before "in battles."

57 Tesei, Tommaso, "Heraclius' war propaganda and the Qur'ān's promise of reward for dying in battle," in *SI* 114/2 (2019), 219–247. See also Sarris, *Empires of faith* 266–267.

58 The literature on religious warfare and Islam is immense. For orientation, see Cook, David, *Martyrdom in Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Demichelis, Marco, *Violence in early Islam: Religious narratives, the Arab conquests and the canonization of jihad*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2021; Firestone, Reuven, *Jihad: The origin of holy war in Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

59 For the words *hijra* and *muhājirūn* and their probable connection with fighting (in later evidence at least), see Crone, "The first-century concept" and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam* 548.

sacred or just) warfare, is not necessarily always synonymous with *qitāl* in the Qurʾān; it can also refer to other forms of exertion. But in many verses the synonymity can be supposed. The expression *fī sabīl allāh*, moreover, is perhaps not automatically related to fighting in the Qurʾān, even if this later becomes the primary context for it, as can also be seen in the epigraphic evidence of this study. Let me next give an exposition of the Qurʾānic verses. The discussion is thematic: it is very difficult to come up with a chronology of the ethics of war.

I will start with *qitāl* and *qātala*. Verse 2:216 states that "fighting (*al-qitāl*) has been decreed to you (pl.), although it may be loathsome to you" (see also Q 4:77, 47:20). In a much-discussed verse (Q 9:29), it is commanded: "Fight those who do not believe in God and the last day, who do not deem illicit what God and His messenger have proclaimed to be such, and who do not follow the law of justice (*dīn al-ḥaqq*) from those who have been given the Book, until they humbly pay the *jizya ʿan yad*."[60] It should be noted that "those who have been given the Book" (that is, the People of the Book) are not mentioned as an enemy category all and sundry. Rather, only those among them who do not believe in God or who are not law-observant should be fought. As I have endeavored to argue, the Qurʾān does not categorically suggest that Jews or Christians are not believers or law-observing.

Fighting is sometimes connected with "spending money" (*anfaqa*) in God's path (Q 57:10). The enemy is mentioned as an active partner in fighting too, although usually left anonymous: "fight (pl.) in God's path against those that fight against you" (Q 2:190; see also 3:13). The Qurʾānic discourse on war, in general, includes the notion that warfare should be continued (only) as long as the enemy does too. The Qurʾān mentions different preconditions for fighting: the believers should not fight at the sacred precinct (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*) if they are not attacked first. If that happens, they can kill the enemy since "such is the recompense of the unbelievers" (Q 2:191; see also 2:217). Furthermore, hypocrites (*al-munāfiqūn*) and unbelievers should be fought only as long as they fight against the believers. If the former leave the latter at peace, God has not allowed fighting (Q 4:90; cf. 9:7–13).

However, not all present in the Qurʾānic milieu are willing to fight: the hypocrites (*alladhīna nāfaqū*) are said to have rejected the command, pretending not to know how to fight (Q 3:167). Those who take part in fighting are also con-

60 The interpretations of the phrase *al-jizya ʿan yad* vary. The word *al-jizya* refers to tax or tribute, but *ʿan yad* is somewhat mysterious. It could mean "willingly," "readily," "in kind," "for each person," "out of their own property," or something else. For interpretations, see Bravmann, *The spiritual background* 199–212; Rubin, Uri, "Qurʾān and poetry: More data concerning the Qurʾānic *jizya* verse (*ʿan yadin*)," in *JSAI* 31 (2006), 139–146.

trasted with those who stay behind (*qaʿadū*, e.g., Q 3:168, 9:81). In one verse, the Qurʾān (4:75) asks the audience why they are not fighting in God's path and for the weak men, women, and children. Citing Firestone, the copious verses that display opposition to God's commands to fight suggest "that the Muslim community was far from unified in its view on warring on behalf of religion and the religious community."[61] In some instances (e.g., Q 48:16), those unwilling to fight are described as "nomads" (*aʿrāb*). In the Qurʾān, "hypocrites" (*munāfiqūn*) and "those who stay behind" are particularly clear examples of free-riders that were not willing to perform costly deeds, such as fighting, for the in-group. Their existence is seen in the Qurʾān as a problem for intragroup cohesion and solidarity.[62] Often, Islamic exegesis and modern scholarship treat the *munāfiqūn* as a group wavering in *faith*[63] but it is perhaps better to interpret them as purported free-riders that waver in *deeds*.

This aversion toward fighting is said to have been usual in earlier communities as well: after the life of Moses, the Israelites are commanded to fight but most of them turn away (*tawallaw*, Q 2:246). However, the prophet Muḥammad is somewhat more successful in conveying the command to fight, leading the believers to their battle stations and victory at Badr (Q 3:121–127). Elsewhere the Qurʾān (8:65) enjoins him to encourage the believers to fight, and many people are indeed said to have fought steadfastly on the side of the prophets (in plural, Q 3:146).

As stated above, *jihād*, "striving," in the Qurʾān did not necessarily always signify physical fighting to the original audience of its message. However, later it became the standard appellation for holy war. Since both *qitāl* and *jihād* are often said to be done *fī sabīl allāh*, clearly the Qurʾān is somehow locating the two concepts in the same context, and in some cases it is rather clear that the Qurʾān is in fact portraying *jihād* as physical struggle (Q 8:70–75, 9:14–20). This is connected with otherworldly rewards: *jihād* is connected with the entrance to paradise in Q 3:140–143. Above it was stated that those who fight

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61 Firestone, *Jihad* 77. However, in contrast to Firestone, I do not think that the in-group described in the Qurʾān can be called "the Muslim community."

62 For more on the "free-rider problem" in religious groups, see Stark, Rodney, *The rise of Christianity: How the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world in a few centuries*, San Francisco CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, 174–176.

63 For orientation, see the valuable survey by Adang, Camilla, "Hypocrites and hypocrisy," in *EQ*, ii (2002), 468–472. The Arabic *munāfiq* derives from the Ethiopic *manāfeq*, which has meanings related to hypocrisy, doubt, dividing the community, and causing schisms. See Dost, *An Arabian Qurʾān*, 227–229. Once again, the connection to Southern Arabia and its religious map and vocabulary is palpable.

are contrasted with those who stay behind, and the same is the case for those who strive (*al-mujāhidūn*) as well (Q 4:95, 9:81, 9:86). In Q 9:73 and 66:9, the prophet himself is addressed: "O prophet, strive against the unbelievers and hypocrites (*jāhid al-kuffār wa-l-munāfiqīn*) and be tough against them. Their refuge is Hell." In some verses (e.g., Q 49:15), striving with willingness to spend one's money and even life is mentioned as one of the conditions for being a believer, alongside believing in God and His prophet. As for the enemies of the believers, they strive too, but only to try to convince the believers that they should associate other beings with God (Q 29:8, 31:15).

Killing (*qatala*) is in itself negative in the Qur'ān: to give some examples, historical communities such as the people of Moses are described as having killed prophets (Q 2:61)[64] as well as other individuals (Q 2:72). In a recurring Qur'ānic reproach, humanity is admonished because every time God has sent messengers bringing something that people do not like, they either disbelieve them or kill them (e.g., Q 2:82).[65] One of Adam's sons killed the other, which was a calamity (Q 5:27–30). People are instructed not to kill each other (Q 4:29), or their children (Q 6:140 and 151), and a believer should not kill another believer, lest he face Hell (Q 4:92–93). Pharaoh is portrayed in a negative vein as killing and ravaging (Q 7:127, 7:141, 40:26); what is more, Joseph's brothers scheme to kill him (Q 12:9). There are some instances, however, where killing (*qatala*), not just fighting (*qātala*), is required. In Q 2:190–191, believers are commanded to kill those who fight against them, since "discord is worse than killing" (*al-fitna ashadd min al-qatl*; this phrase also occurs in Q 2:217). Hypocrites (*al-munāfiqūn*) too should be captured or killed (Q 4:88–89) as well as associators (*al-mushrikīn*), if they do not repent (Q 9:5). The text of Q 8:17 describes a battle between the believers and unbelievers and states "it was not you (pl.) who

64 Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qur'an* 51, asserts: "The Bible does not attest to either [Q 2:61 and Q 5:70] of these accusations from the Qur'an, nor to any instance of the specific charges they inspired; namely, that the Jews killed some particular prophet or another." However, the reader is confused since Bar-Asher then goes to list Biblical passages that *do* mention the killing of the prophets (1 Kings 19:19 and Jeremiah 2:30, and, from the New Testament, Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34, Romans 11:3, 1 Thessalonians 2:14–15, to which one should add Luke 11:48 and Matthew 23:29–31). It would seem to me, then, that the idea that some Jewish individuals or groups had at some point killed some (anonymous) prophets was current among the Jews themselves. For the idea that the New Testament books can be read as evidence for *Jewish* (rather than Christian) notions and narratives, see Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels*.

65 This harks back to Luke 11:49, where Jesus says: "Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute'"; el-Badawi, *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 121–125.

killed them, but rather God killed them." Elsewhere too, God is shown as taking an active part in the fight between believers and unbelievers (Q 8:36–39, 9:14).

Whereas the Qurʾānic attitude towards killing is context-specific, being killed (*qutila*) for God is usually portrayed as commendable: "Do not say to/about those killed in God's path (*li-man yuqtalu fī sabīl allāh*) that they are dead. Rather, they are alive" (Q 2:154; see also 3:169). It is furthermore stated that falling in God's path is a better bargain than amassing fortunes in this world (Q 3:157–158). Indeed, mercantile terminology is usual in these passages describing one's willingness to sacrifice oneself for God's cause: "Let those of you who are willing to trade the life of this world for the life to come fight in God's path. To anyone who fights in God's path, whether killed or victorious, We shall give a great reward" (Q 4:74). "God has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties in exchange for [the promise] that they will have Paradise. They fight in God's path, so they kill and are killed" (Q 9:111; see also 61:10–12). Paradise is, then, the explicit Qurʾānic reward for those who fall while fighting as it is for other groups who do good (Q 3:195): their deeds will not come to naught (Q 47:4). This promise naturally only applies to the believers and not their enemies: the latter will be killed or expelled and then face painful punishment, except for those who repent (Q 5:33). In the Qurʾān, words of the root *sh-h-d* seem to relate to witnessing rather than martyrdom. Over 150 occurrences of such words appear in the Qurʾān but perhaps only Q 3:140 and 4:69 could have anything to do martyrs.[66]

This book has argued that Muḥammad's community was an eschatological one: he and his followers believed that, since the end was nigh, people should repent and (if they had not already done so) acknowledge God as the only divine being, recanting associationism (*shirk*) and any traces of idolatry (e.g., *al-maysir*). In my opinion, what is remarkable in the Qurʾānic discourse on warfare is that it has *nothing* to do with this eschatological belief: though the discourse is a rather important theme in the Medinan strata, I am not aware of any passage that would state that warfare, fighting, or conquests would initiate the end times. The Qurʾān, I would suggest, is the reaction to the specific context of the Medinan community, which was obliged to fight the enemies. It is true that a paradisal reward is promised to those who fall on the battlefield. But this promise is *individual* and not connected with the eschaton that was upon all.

It needs to be emphasized that there are no Qurʾānic passages that suggest that Muḥammad's believers were engaged, first and foremost, or categorically,

66 See also el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 87–88.

in war with Jews and Christians; even in the case of Q 9:29, the People of the Book are mentioned only in passing, as a sidenote. In addition to Q 9:29, there are two other passages that need to be discussed in this connection. The first is Q 3:111, which notes that "if they [the sinners among the People of the Book mentioned in Q 3:110] meet you in battle (*wa-in yuqātilukum*), they will flee and have no helpers." Here, as in Q 9:29, the statement hardly appears to include categorically all Jews and Christians but rather a transgressing segment among them. Moreover, the expression "*if* they meet you in battle" (*wa-in yuqātilukum*) appears to signify a possible event rather than a certain or recurring one. Another important passage is Q 33:25–27, which depicts a battle between the believers and the disbelievers which ends in the triumph of the former. Q 33:26 explicitly mentions "those from among the People of the Book who aided them [scil. the disbelievers]" (*alladhīna ẓāharūhum min ahl al-kitāb*). According to this pericope, in one clash at least, some People of the Book were supporting the disbelievers—but this, again, explicitly concerns only a portion of them and, more importantly still, Q 33:25–27 makes a clear difference between the disbelievers and the People of the Book, which are mentioned as distinct social categories. All in all, the battle lines are, hence, not "Muslims" versus Jews and Christians in the Qurʾān, but believers versus disbelievers; what is more, the latter should be fought only as long as they themselves are belligerent. As will become clear in what follows, the Medinan Qurʾānic strata accept some Jews and Christians as part of the believer community: one supposes that this would mean that they also took part in the fighting for the in-group. The "Constitution," as mentioned above, quite clearly supposes, or at least demands, that the Jews are fighting against the enemy alongside the other believers.

3 The People of the Book in the Medinan Period

Though scholars might acknowledge that the Meccan Qurʾānic discourse represents a stage when the People of the Book could be considered group members, it is still common in scholarship to suggest that a reified, distinct Islam must have been present in Medina, at least in the last years of the prophet.[67] However, as will be argued in what follows, the Meccan kerygma of gentile believers co-existing with Jewish and Christian believers is continued in the Medinan

67 Sinai, *The Qur'an* 125, for instance, argues that verses such as 5:12–19, 41–86, and 116–118 "betray an explicit demarcation of the Qur'anic community from Judaism and Christianity and harshly criticise Jewish and Christian beliefs."

layers, notwithstanding the criticism that is directed toward some Jews and Christians and some Jewish and Christian dogmata.[68]

It is true that certain Medinan Qurʾānic passages appear to equate, categorically or in part, the People of the Book with the disbelievers and the associators. For instance, Q 2:105 notes that "the disbelievers among the People of the Book" and "the associators" do not want good for the believers. Q 3:186 is similar in content, mentioning that the associators and the People of the Book will say hurtful words about the believers. Verses 4:51–52 note that some People of the Book still worship idols (*al-jibt wa-l-ṭāghūt*) and, because of this, have been cursed by God. Like the *mushrikūn*, associators, they are not, then, monotheist enough, though the exact reason for the claim of Q 4:51–52 is unclear. The passage Q 3:98–99 enjoins the prophet to ask the People of the Book why they deny God's signs or revelations (*āyāt*) and, furthermore, divert the believers from God's way. Moreover, a group among the People of the Book endeavors to revert the believers to disbelief (Q 3:100; similarly, Q 2:109). Verses 3:187–188 and 5:12–14 represent passages of supersession: earlier in history, God made his covenant (*mīthāq*) with the People of the Book, but, as a group, they have lost the covenant, which now belongs to the believers.

Sūra 5 consists of many polemics about the People of the Book.[69] Verse 5:65 notes that "if only (*law*) the People of the Book believed, We would absolve them of their bad deeds and make them enter the gardens of bliss." The word *law*, introducing the conditional sentence, suggests that most of them do not believe. The verse does not describe, however, a completely hypothetical or impossible situation, since Q 5:66 notes that some of the People of the Book are upright (for a similar *law* sentence, which is then modified, see Q 3:110). Q 5:51 goes as far as noting that the believers should not take Jews or Christians as *awliyāʾ*, friends or allies.[70] This appears to be qualified by Q 5:57–58, which notes that the believers should not take as *awliyāʾ* those among the People of the Book who mocked the believers' law (*dīn*) and call to prayer.

There are various Qurʾānic passages that bewail the fact, or at least the imagined notion, that the Jews and the Christians are vehemently arguing with each

68 See also Sachedina, *The Islamic roots* 26: "the Koran's theology of religious tolerance cannot be ascribed [merely] to the earlier Mekkan period of the revelation when Muslims lived as a minority in the midst of a hostile majority of the unbelievers, as some modern Muslim apologists have tried to argue."

69 For its structure, see Sinai, "Towards a redactional history," who views both Q 4 and Q 5 as having been subject to quite a lot of redaction, though he does not argue that these instances of redaction are necessarily post-Muḥammadan.

70 On this verse, its exegesis, and late antique Christian parallels, see also Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 411–415.

other. In Q 2:113, the two groups claim that the other does not have anything to stand on. In Q 2:111, furthermore, they are portrayed as claiming that only their own group will get to paradise, a notion that the Qurʾān rejects.[71] Q 5:18 has them argue over which group is "the children of God and His loved ones."[72] Q 3:65 shows them debating who owns the patriarch Abraham. According to my reading, these passages do not say that the Jews or Christians will not get to paradise or that they have no claim to the Abrahamic pedigree; rather, the Qurʾān asserts that the Jews and Christians are not the only ones to do so. The gentile believers also have a potential to accomplish these things.

Sūra 98 proffers an interesting case, first adopting a censuring and then apparently a more confident stance vis-à-vis the People of the Book.[73] It starts by noting that a disbelieving group among them (*alladhīna kafarū min ahl al-kitāb*) and the associators were unhinged until clear evidence came to them: a messenger of God, reciting pure scrolls, in which there are upright writings (*kutub qayyima*) (Q 98:1–3). The wording of these verses might suggest that they accepted this evidence and messenger, but the opposite is true, the Qurʾān asserts: they actually became more divided (Q 98:4). The fate of the associators and the disbelievers among the People of the Book is certain: the eternal fire of hell (Q 98:6). However, those who believe (of the People of the Book?) are "the best of creatures" (Q 98:7): they will enjoy the eternal grace of God in paradise as a reward for their reverence for God (Q 98:8). The critical pronouncements surveyed in this section are, indeed, highly remarkable and there is no need to try to hide the fact that they exist in the Qurʾān. As will become clear in what follows, however, they are far from being the sole message or tone among the Medinan Qurʾānic passages.

It is worth underscoring that the Medinan Qurʾānic communication also includes very positive statements about the People of the Book. The idea that the description of Jews and Christians becomes increasingly sour, with a final and decisive "parting of the ways" occurring toward the end of the prophet's life, and with the word *al-islām* being understood as reified Islam, is not tenable, in my opinion, and will be discussed in more detail below in this chapter.

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71 This appears to be because verses such as 2:62 and 5:69 articulate a more universalistic understanding of paradise. For more on the social groups in the Qurʾānic conceptualization of the afterlife, see below in this chapter.

72 According to both Jewish and Christian texts, the late antique Jews and Christians *did* quarrel with each other about who the people and sons of God are; el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 95–96; Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 222. This Qurʾānic argument should be understood in this context.

73 On it, see also Sinai, *The Qurʾan* 130–132.

For instance, Q 5:66 notes that among the People of the Book there is an *umma muqtaṣida*, "moderate community," though most of them are evil-doers. The concept of *umma muqtaṣida* can be connected with another concept, *umma wasaṭ*, "middle community," which in Q 2:143 is an appellation used for the in-group. Furthermore, Q 3:113 notes that among the People of the Book is an *umma qāʾima*, "upright community." Verse Q 3:75 notes that some of the People of the Book are indeed trustworthy. The importance of the passage Q 3:110–115 should be emphasized. It is clear proof that, in the Qurʾān, the development is not simply one of growing hostility toward the People of the Book. Rather, in this case, Q 3:110–112 paint a very bleak picture of those that have been given the Book before: though some of them are believers (*minhum al-muʾminūn*), most of them are sinners (*aktharuhum al-fāsiqūn*, Q 3:110). Not only that, Q 3:111 describes them as enemies (though cowards) in battle, and Q 3:112 says that they have invited the wrath of God because they have disbelieved His verses and killed prophets, being disobeying and transgressing. The tone changes drastically in Q 3:113, which, I would suggest, marks a later interpolation suffixed to Q 3:110–112. Verse 3:113 proclaims that some of the People of the Book recite God's verses and prostrate throughout the night. Q 3:114 notes that they believe in God and the last day, race to do good things, and are righteous. For this, they will receive the reward—in all likelihood to be understood as the heavenly reward (Q 3:115).

A similar pronouncement in tone, and possibly a similar a process of Qurʾānic development, can be found in Q 2:120–121. Verse 2:120 begins very critically by noting that the Jews and Christians will not be satisfied with "you" (the prophet) until the prophet follows their *milla*, probably to be understood here as "their discourse/understanding of faithfulness (toward God)." The verse draws a line between the Jews, Christians, and the prophet's community. Verse 2:121, which could be a later interpolation because of the drastic change in tone, suggests a very different situation: "Those who We have given the Book [before] recite it as it should be recited. They believe in it. As for those who disbelieve in it, it is they who are losers." Here, the People of the Book are true believers in and readers of the scripture. It is some other people, apparently outside the category of the People of the Book, who reject the revelation(s).

The Medinan discourse is open for the Jews and Christians to join the group (as Jews and Christians) or, at the very least, act as allies to the prophet's community:

> Q 3:64: Say: "People of the Book, come to a common word (*kalima sawāʾ*) between us and you—that we worship none except God, do not associate anything/-one with Him, and do not take one another as lords instead of

> God." But if they [the People of the Book] turn away, say: "Bear witness that we are obedient (*muslimūn*)."

As the Meccan Qurʾān noted, the People of the Book can be and indeed are obedient (*muslimūn*, Q 28:53, 29:46). In the Medinan Q 3:64, the point is not that the People of the Book are automatically not *muslimūn*, or that the *muslimūn* form a different social category, it is that if they do not agree on the basic premises of monotheism, they also lose their status as law- and God-obeying people.[74] Similarly, Q 2:139 notes that God is the Lord of all—there is no need to debate this.

One of the interesting aspects of the Qurʾānic representation of the People of the Book is that some verses claim that at least some of them have rejected (*kafara*), hid (*katama* or *akhfā*), or misconstrued (*ḥarrafa*) parts of the scripture. As has been seen in connection with other features of the Qurʾānic communication, this discourse also has its earlier precursors in Christian literature. Claims and accusations about the corruption of the scriptures or their interpretation were rather widespread in late antiquity. For instance, Tertullian writes the following about his opponents (the "heretics") around 200 CE:[75]

> We ["the orthodox"] are of them [scil. the scriptures], before there was any change, before you mutilated them. Mutilation must always be later than the original. It springs from hostility, which is neither earlier than, nor at home with, what it opposes. Consequently, no person of sense can believe that it is we who introduced the textual corruptions into Scripture, we who have existed from the beginning and are the first, any more than he can help believing that it is they, who are later and hostile, who were the culprits. One man perverts Scripture with his hand, another with his exegesis. If Valentinus seems to have used the whole Bible, he laid violent hands on the truth with just as much cunning as Marcion. Marcion openly and nakedly used the knife, not the pen, massacring Scripture to suit his own material.

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74 On this verse and its context, see also Günther, Sebastian, "O people of the scripture! Come to a word common to you and us (Q. 3:64): The ten commandments and the Qur'an," in *JQS* 9/1 (2007), 28–58, who reads the verse as referring to the allusions of the Decalogue in Q 17:23–39 and Q 6:151–153.

75 Tertullian, *Prescription of the Heretics* 38, trans. in Ehrman, *After the New Testament* 247–248.

Moreover, the pseudo-Clementine works articulate the idea that Satan has slipped some pericopes into the scripture.[76] Such intra-Christian accusations of "mutilating" and "massacring" the scripture were often, I suggest, more heated and intense than what the Qurʾānic accusation of *taḥrīf*, "misconstrual of the scriptures," contained. It should also be noted that some late antique Christians had argued that the Jews' scripture was, in effect, falsified, since the original one had been destroyed during the Babylonian captivity.[77]

As regards this point, as many others, the Qurʾānic portrayals of the People of the Book, earlier scriptures, and current revelation received by the prophet disagree with each other. The previous chapter noted that Qurʾānic verses explicate that the People of the Book actually believed in Muḥammad's message and accepted his mission. Moreover, Medinan passages such as Q 4:163 note that his revelation is identical, or similar, to earlier revelations: "Indeed, We reveal to you [the prophet] similarly as (*ka-mā*) We have revealed to Noah and the prophets after him; and We have revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, and Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon; and to David We gave Psalms (*zabūran*)."[78] In this, the prophet Muḥammad is pictured as akin to other prophets of the sacred history (given in the verse in no chronological order). Indeed, in some passages of the Qurʾān (e.g., Q 5:48, 5:68), the People of the Book are enjoined to believe in their scriptures and the revelation of Muḥammad, the latter being a confirmation of the earlier books.

These are rather positive passages on the prophetical books and, by extension, the People of the Book. However, Q 5:15 paints a different picture, noting that the prophet Muḥammad has come to explain matters the People of the Book have hidden from the scripture. This verse, as well as Q 5:19, emphasizes that the prophet has come specifically to the People of the Book after a long hiatus without a messenger or a warner. Hence, though the prophet underscored his gentile (*ummī*) credentials, as explored in chapter 5, his message is also for the People of the Book to adopt. Verse 2:75 notes that "a group of them [scil. the People of the Book]" misconstrues God's word (*yuḥarrifūnahu*) after hearing and understanding it; Q 2:79 even notes that some people "write the scripture with their own hands, claiming it is from God" (*yaktubūna al-kitāb bi-aydīhim*

76 Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions*, 153. As Zellentin, "'One letter *yud*'" 222, notes: "according to Mani's teaching, even the true Scriptures are interspersed with falsehoods, a teaching that was widespread among Marcionites and Manicheans alike, and will find another iteration in the so-called Clementine Homilies."

77 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 414.

78 Similarly, see Q 2:275. On the chain of prophets, see el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 78–113; Sachedina, *The Islamic roots* 37.

thumma yaqūluna hādhā min ʿinda allāh). Verse 2:85 notes that they believe in part of the scripture, while rejecting (*takfurūna*) the rest. Verse 2:101 continues this theme by noting that a group among the People of the Book have "cast … the Book of God behind their backs." Though this misrepresentation of or the refusal to believe in the whole of the Book is usually ascribed to an anonymous group among the People of the Book, Q 4:46 notes that it is specifically the Jews who "misconstrue the words out of their proper places" (*yuḥarrifūna al-kalima ʿan mawāḍiʿihi*).

In any case, the Qurʾānic accusation that the People of the Book have rejected or misapprehended part of the scripture can be characterized as rather mild.[79] There is no talk of them having "massacred" the scripture, as Tertullian remarked concerning his opponents. Nor is there any talk that the Torah, the Evangelion, or other books would be corrupt as such. What is important to note here is that there is no scriptural supersessionism in the Qurʾān: it does not claim that the previous holy books have become undone or that they themselves are fraudulent.[80] Indeed, Q 5:68 propounds that the faith of the People of the Book is not based on anything if they do not follow the Torah and the Evangelion. Rather, the Qurʾān claims, it is merely that some People of the Book have misconstrued some interpretations concerning the scriptures. What these errors in interpretation might be is left unexplained by the Qurʾān, but one suspects that what is meant is the reluctance by some People of the Book to accept Muḥammad's revelation as being of divine origin, claiming that their own scripture is full and complete and cannot be added to. Verse 2:146 could hint at this: it notes that though the People of the Book should and indeed do recognize the current revelation as true, they hide the truth.

79 For a different interpretation, see Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qur'an* 48–50.

80 Shoemaker's formulation is apt, "A new Arabic apocryphon" 34–35: "we certainly may not presume that the Qurʾān was understood from the beginning as a new revelation intended to supersede and displace these previous dispensations. When and how the Qurʾān attained this status among those who followed Muḥammad is still not entirely clear. Accordingly, we should remain open to the possibility that until later in the seventh century, the Qurʾān may have been understood as having a more supplementary, rather than supplanting, relation to the biblical traditions." However, I would perhaps place the point in time even after that, perhaps in the early eighth century. As I will elucidate in chapter 8, a distinctive Islamic identity is not well attested before the early eighth century. Scriptural supersessionism was definitely one of the important means through which such an identity and positive distinctiveness was articulated. As far as I know, no seventh-century source suggests that the Qurʾān was interpreted as having supplanted other scriptures: certainly, the Qurʾān, the "Constitution," or surviving early Arabic inscriptions or papyri do not. The seventh-century non-Arabic sources do not ascribe this view to the Arabian believers either.

To finish this section, I should ask (and try to answer) how we are to account for the Qurʾān's conflicting portrayals of the People of the Book. I have already argued that there is no simple development from the positive toward the negative description since passages such as Q 2:120–121 and 3:110–115 suggest that, in some cases, more positive material was interpolated into a more negative, and earlier, one. Moreover, the very late *sūra*s, such as Q 5, also include positive portrayals of Jews and Christians (for instance, Q 5:62, 5:66).

It could be claimed that the Qurʾān's positive descriptions of the People of the Book are wishful thinking—as if the Qurʾān was keeping the door open for the People of the Book to join the group though they never did—and the more negative ones describe the situation on the ground more accurately. I am arguing for the exact opposite: it makes more sense to suppose that the Qurʾān's positive and neutral portrayals of the Jews and Christians describe the inter- and intra-group situations[81] more truly, whereas the pejorative passages are due to the rhetorical polemical style and the common phenomenon of categorizing social groups simplistically, with a tendency to minimize (real and empirically observable) inter-group similarities and to emphasize (supposed and construed) inter-group differences.

My line of thought as regards this issue is informed by similar readings of the early and late antique Christian literature,[82] as well as the social identity theory, which posits that, in their discourse, people strive for clear-cut categories, though the social world is made up of a much more diverse reality.[83] The scholars of early and late antique Christianity have noted in their respective studies that the tendency of many early Christian texts to polemicize against, e.g., the Jews is not always because the Christian-Jewish identities were clear and separate, nor that the inter-group relationships were categorically fraught but because the authors of these Christian texts endeavored to create distinct social categories and paint the Christians in positive colors. The texts are proof that the elites have started to articulate the difference by polemics, not that such differences were widely accepted by the believers. Such a reasoning is rarely considered in the context of the Qurʾān's polemical passages.[84] Otherwise put: though some Qurʾānic passages polemi-

81 With the word "intra-group," I draw attention to the fact that, according to my reading of the Qurʾān, some of the People of the Book are accepted as in-group members.

82 E.g., Boyarin, *Border lines*; *The Jewish Gospels*; Fredriksen, *Paul*; *When Christians were Jews*; Hakola, *Identity matters*; *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity*; Wilson, *Related strangers*.

83 See Tajfel, Henri, *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, and *Differentiation between social groups*.

84 Though see el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions*, 114–143.

cize against the Jews and Christians and appear to draw a distinction from them, this might mean the (very early) *beginning* of the process of differentiation rather than its completion. However, even this budding process did not proceed on a clear trajectory, since later Qurʾānic passages are sometimes milder in tone and qualify earlier, more polemical ones. Few scholars of early Christianity nowadays see Christian identity as "ready" or distinct from Judaism when, for example, the Gospel of Matthew was written (approximately 80–100 CE, decades after the life of Jesus), *though* it contains some anti-Jewish, in particular anti-Pharisaic, polemics. Rather, the Gospel of Matthew was written for and by Jews. In contrast, many scholars of early Islam see Islamic identity "ready" and distinct from the People of the Book already during the life of the prophet, *since* the Qurʾān contains some anti-Jewish and anti-Christian passages.

This section has surveyed the Qurʾānic passages on the combined group "the People of the Book," with some references to those mentioning "Jews" or "Christians" in particular. Though the mentions of Jews and Christians often go hand in hand in the Qurʾānic discourse, there are some differences in how they are portrayed. In the next sections, I will discuss these specifics.

4 The Jews in the Qurʾān

In the Medinan Qurʾānic communication, descriptions of the Jews and Israelites[85] are more negative than the those of the Christians. For instance, Q 5:82, which will be discussed in more detail below, juxtaposes Jews and associators, while depicting the Christians as the allies of the believers and the prophet. Verse 5:64 notes, in a somewhat obscure way, that the Jews claim that "the hand of God is chained," a statement which is, naturally, rejected by the Qurʾān.

Verses 9:30–31 notes that Jews say that ʿUzayr is the son of God, while the Christians say the same of Jesus (*al-masīḥ*). Both groups are denigrated for these views. The identity of this ʿUzayr has perplexed commentators: he is often understood to be Ezra, but others have suggested that he might be interpreted as Azazel, one of the "children of God," that is, angels, or in this case, a fallen angel.[86] However, such a derivation appears etymologically problematic, if it

85 As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Qurʾānic category "the Israelites" is somewhat ambiguous and is sometimes used in reference to Christians as well.

86 See Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan* 44–48; Wasserstrom, Steven M., *Between Muslim and Jew: The problem of symbiosis in early Islam*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995, 183.

is not supposed that the last *r* of ʿUzayr should actually be read as a *z* and the name be vocalized differently.

However, not all descriptions of the Jews are censorious. Verse 5:44 notes that the Torah has been sent as a guidance and light to the people; with the Torah, the obedient prophets have judged among people. The Jewish rabbis and scholars (*al-rabbāniyyūn wa-l-aḥbār*) safeguard and confirm the Torah, according to which they should judge. This is, then, an affirmative depiction of the Jewish religious authorities.[87] Verse 2:122 enjoins the Israelites to remember the favors of God to them, while Q 2:39–47 contain a longer exposition on the covenant and God's favors to Israel. The undertone is indeed very positive. Verses 2:83–85, however, contain a much more negative narrative on the covenant that Israel has lost. This is connected with other Qurʾānic verses of supersessionism, mentioned above, according to which Jews and Christians, as groups, have lost the covenant with God: they no longer automatically belong to the righteous in-group, but they might as individuals.[88]

In the previous section, it was noted that 3:110–115 contain what I suggested to be an earlier, polemical passage on the People of the Book (Q 3:110–112) and a later interpolation, the tone of which is more positive (Q 3:113–115). The same appears to be the case of Q 4:160–162, which begins negatively but then, suddenly, the message becomes very benevolent toward the Jews, or at least a faction among them:[89]

> 160 Because the Jews did wrong and hindered many [people] from God's path, We forbade them some good foods (*ṭayyibāt*) that had been permitted to them [before].[90] 161 [This was also because they] took interest though this had been prohibited and unjustly consumed people's property. We have prepared a painful punishment for the disbelievers among

87 See also Zellentin, Holger M., "*Aḥbār* and *Ruhbān*: Religious leaders in the Qurʾān in dialogue with Christian and Rabbinic literature," in Angelika Neuwirth and Michael A. Sells (eds.), *Qurʾanic studies today*, London: Routledge, 2016, 258–289.

88 Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qur'an* 31, claims that "in contrast to the Mosaic text and the book of the prophets, which constantly reiterate that the various divine punishments visited upon Israel do not call into question God's unconditional fidelity to it, in the Qur'an the people's conduct justifies that they be stripped of election." However, this is a rather optimistic interpretation of the prophetical books of the Hebrew Bible. The idea that Israel has, at some point of its history, broken the covenant and lived without it and the election can also be found in the Hebrew Bible. See Jeremiah 11, Ezekiel 44:7, and Isaiah 24:5.

89 See also Sinai, "Towards a redactional history" 387, who notes that Q 4:153–154 might have originally formed a unit with Q 4:160–162. Verses 4:155–159 would then be a later addition.

90 El-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 115, suggests that a similar verse, Q 3:93, signifies that the Jews "have lost their scripture" and that "their dietary prohibi-

> them. 162 But those among them who are well-versed in knowledge and believers[91] believe in what has been revealed to you [scil. the prophet] and what has been revealed before you—and those who keep the prayer and pay the alms and believe in God and the last day: to them We shall give a great reward.

Verse 4:162 depicts some Jews as believers in God, the last day, and all the revelations—including Muḥammad's. They also signal the important group rituals of praying and giving alms. Not for nothing are they explicitly identified as "believers" (*al-muʾminūn*) in this verse.

In a similar vein, verse 4:46 notes that few (*qalīl*) Jews are believers. At first blush, this is a negative characterization. But it must be emphasized that the verse notes that some Jews are indeed believers, that is to say, group members. Similarly, Q 2:83 notes that the Israelites have "turned away" from God's covenant, "except for a few" (*illā qalīlan*). Rather than categorical denunciation of the Jews, these verses can be read as an explicit avowal that there was a continuous presence of *some* Jews in Muḥammad's group, beginning with Mecca, through the early years of Medina—as the "Constitution" makes abundantly clear—to the later period there. In fact, as chapter 8 will elucidate, Jews belonging to the community of the Arabian believers are attested in texts written after the death of Muḥammad as well.

An interesting, recurring narrative in the Qurʾān is the one which states that some people have been turned into apes because they broke the Sabbath. In the later Islamic interpretive traditions, and in particular today, this narrative has become a trope in anti-Semitic hate speech.[92] But, I would argue, this is more due to spiteful interpretation of the text of the Qurʾān than what it actually says and how it was understood by the first audience. Let us look at these passages:

> Q 2:63–66: Then We made a covenant with you [pl.] and raised the mountain above you: "Hold tight to the strength that We have given you, remember it [scil. the covenant], so that you might revere [God]." After this, you

tions are a fabrication," but this appears to me to be a tortuous interpretation which does not take into account that the Qurʾān never categorically censures the Torah or the Jewish conceptualization or observance of the law.

91 In this verse, "believers" refers to the Jewish lay believers in my interpretation. They are contrasted to the Jewish scholars, those "well-versed in knowledge."

92 On the passages and later Muslim interpretive traditions, see Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan* 53–55; Esack, "The portrayal of Jews"; Reynolds, *Allah* 168–171; Rubin, Uri, "Apes, pigs, and the Islamic identity," in *IOS* 17 (1997), 89–105.

> turned away and you would have ended up as losers were it not for the grace and mercy of God. You surely know those of you who broke the Sabbath! We said to them: "Become disgraceful apes!" We made them an example to the present and later generations and a lesson to those who revere.
>
> Q 7:163–166 (I omit verses 164–165): Ask [sing.] them about the town that was by the sea and whose inhabitants broke the Sabbath, when the fish would surface only on the day of the Sabbath, but on other days they would not surface. Thus, We tested them, because they had transgressed … When they exceeded the bounds of what was forbidden to them, We said to them: "Become disgraceful apes!"

Uri Rubin has argued that these narratives in the Qurʾān, and in particular Q 7:163–166, appear to reflect the Jewish interpretive traditions concerning Numbers 11, a narrative about the Israelites complaining to Moses in the desert about, among other things, the lack of meat;[93] the story ends with God sending quails from the sea, which the people eat, angering God, who strikes the people with a plague.[94] In later Jewish Bible exegesis, this punishment is developed to include all sorts of physical ailments. Rubin concludes: "The people who became apes (*qirada*) seem to represent the lustful quail eaters who, in Jewish Midrash (*Leviticus Rabbah*), are said to have been punished with various kinds of nasty bodily inflictions. In the Quran they are transformed into apes, a species that represents the loss of human dignity due to over-indulgence in food and drink."[95] This appears to me to be a very good interpretation of the background of the Qurʾānic passages in question.

A few additional comments are in order from the point of view of social groups. Q 2:63–66 and 7:163–166 do not mention that turning people into apes was because they belonged to the categories of the Israelites or the People of the Book. It was a punishment because they broke their requirement to observe the Sabbath, which is, then, portrayed as something positive and commendable. The "people of the Sabbath" (*aṣḥāb al-sabt*), mentioned in Q 4:47 as having been cursed by God, appears to refer specifically to those who broke the Sab-

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93 In Q 2:61, the Israelites are complaining about eating the same food over and over again: however, instead of meat, they ask for vegetables, cucumbers, garlic, lentils, and onions.

94 Rubin, Uri, "'Become you apes, repelled!' (Quran 7:166): The transformation of the Israelites into apes and its Biblical and Midrashic background," in *BSOAS*, 78 (2015), 25–40.

95 Rubin, "'Become you apes, repelled!'" 39.

bath rather than observe(d) it. Moreover, the passages explicitly note that the punishment only targeted "some of you" (as in Q 2:63–66) or one town (Q 7:163–166). In their original context, it is difficult to understand these verses as being anti-Jewish or anti-People of the Book.

To sum up, the Qurʾān contains many references to Jews (*yahūd* or *man hādū*), some of which (but not all) are negative.[96] This is in contrast to the "Constitution" of Medina, which does not contain anything except positive statement on Jews. Today, we read the Qurʾān as the scripture of a religion, Islam, and a group, Muslims. The anti-Jewish passages in the Qurʾān (as in the New Testament) read as repugnant and, at times, incendiary. However, it has to be remembered that a different social context obtained in the 620s–630s. Contemporary evidence, including Qurʾānic passages, suggests that there were some (perhaps many) Jews in the prophet Muḥammad's movement, which was not called Islam back then. How can this be reconciled with the fact that the Qurʾān contains anti-Jewish passages? How were they heard and understood by the Jewish sub-group in the community of the believers?

The following point, though important (I think) and referred to in the previous chapter, I make with some hesitation:[97] there was, among Jews, a centuries-old tradition of self-criticism of Israel. This was propounded in the Bible and the post-Biblical literature. This is, of course, nothing novel in itself—these passages are well known. But the existence of these passages is somewhat rarely, as far as I know, noted in Qurʾānic studies. Consider, for instance the following verses from Isaiah, a book heavy in censure of Israel, in which God is cited as saying:

> Israel does not know,
> my people do not understand.
>
> Ah, sinful nation,
> people laden with iniquity,
> offspring who do evil,
> children who deal corruptly,

96 El-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 115, claims that in the Qurʾān *al-yahūd* "is never used in a positive light." But surely this is oversimplifying matters: Q 2:62 and 5:69 promise a heavenly reward to them (on this, see what follows in this chapter) and Q 4:46 and Q 4:162 note that some Jews, though a minority of them, are to be counted as believers.

97 Hesitation, since I understand that this line of thought could be used to buttress anti-Semitic hate speech.

> who have forsaken the Lord,
> who have despised the Holy One of Israel,
> who are utterly estranged!
>
> Why do you seek further beatings?
> Why do you continue to rebel?
> The whole head is sick,
> and the whole heart faint (Isaiah 1:3b–5).

This is just to quote a few verses from that book; almost *any* prophetical book of the Hebrew Bible could be opened and similar scathing remarks, ascribed to God, about Israel could be found: they are legion. Israel has sinned, lapsed in law-observance, and committed crimes such as killing prophets, these verses state. Now, it must repent.

The same point has been made about anti-Jewish statements in the New Testament, for instance those found in Matthew. As Paula Fredriksen notes:

> Matthew could appeal to a popular *Jewish* tradition that Israel had always rejected and persecuted God's prophets. Complaints frequently appear in scripture, and particularly in the classical prophets, that Israel obdurately resists the divine call issued through these prophets do to tshuvah—to turn from sin and return to Torah. Jews of the late Second Temple period inferred from such passages that their unrepentant people had resisted to the point of actually murdering God's messengers.[98]

Hence, the Qurʾānic narratives and statements that are critical of Israel and Jews were, perhaps, not interpreted as attacking Jews categorically, since they were repeating ideas that were also current among Jews themselves. I make this point with some caution, however, since it is impossible to reconstruct in detail how the Jewish component in Muḥammad's audience understood his revelations and since these Qurʾānic passages were and are customarily invoked in medieval and modern Islamic anti-Semitic discourse.

Earlier in this book, I cited the four "basic markers" of Jewish social identity in antiquity and late antiquity, as construed by Martin S. Jaffee. These were: 1) belief in one God; 2) dietary and purity restrictions; 3) circumcision of male Jews; 4) observing the Sabbath.[99] Does the Qurʾān rebuff these four aspects or rather espouse them? On evidence, the latter is more likely to be the case.

98 Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ* 188, emphasis in the original.
99 Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 132–133.

The first one (monotheism) is *the* central message of the Qurʾān. As for the second (food and purity), this will be discussed in more detail below, but it can already be noted that the Qurʾān shares many of the same ideas as present in Jewish tradition, though the former gives the dietary and purity restrictions a certain gentile twist (itself a Jewish notion). As for the third (male circumcision), the Qurʾān does not explicitly mention it at all.[100] But, as is well known, later Muslims practiced male circumcision. As for the fourth (the Sabbath), the Qurʾānic portrayal is multivocal: On the one hand, the Sabbath is said to have been "imposed on those who argue about him [scil. Abraham]"[101] (Q 16:124), a somewhat pejorative statement; on the other, those who broke the Sabbath are cursed (e.g., Q 2:65, 4:47), which would indicate that the Sabbath should be observed, by Jews at least. Indeed, Q 4:154 notes that the Sabbath is one of the signs of the covenant that God made with Moses and Israel on Mount Sinai. All in all, the Qurʾānic depiction of the Sabbath leans toward positive; in any case, there is no verse in the Qurʾān which would say that observing the Sabbath is wrong or should be rejected.

As the "Constitution" makes clear Jews (*qua* Jews) were an important part of Muḥammad's community. They did not have to "convert" to a new religion or recant Judaism. Nor is such a requirement present in the Qurʾān. Moreover, the practices and beliefs present in the Qurʾān do not, by and large, differ from those of Judaism but rather overlap with them. The basic markers of antique and late antique Judaism are not rejected but either passed over in silence or approved of. Though the Qurʾān appears to be less welcoming to Jews than it is to Christians, it has to be remembered that the Qurʾānic discourse is, in fact, rehashing many features and motifs of *intra*-Jewish criticism of Israel (and some Christian ones as well). This qualification is important to be borne in mind when contextualizing the Qurʾānic communication and community. The Qurʾānic notions that the Jews/Israel had sinned and transgressed were, perhaps, not as distasteful to the Medinan Jews as they sound today.

100 However, cf. Carmeli, "Circumcision in Early Islam," who sees Q 2:124–130 as referring to the habit.

101 The word "him" would refer here to Abraham, who is the subject of the verses before Q 16:124. However, it is also possible to render this as "the Sabbath imposed on those who argue about it [scil. the Sabbath]," but this does not seem to me to be the preferable interpretation.

5 The Christians in the Qurʾān

So far in this chapter, I have endeavored to argue that the Medinan characterizations of the People of the Book are more negative than the Meccan ones, though even the very late layers of the Qurʾān accept some People of the Book as in-group members. As for the category Jews, most Medinan descriptions are pejorative, though the situation is not categorical. The case of the Christians (*naṣārā*) in the Qurʾān is interesting: they are depicted in a rather positive sense, though the Qurʾān attacks Christological doctrines that were prevalent, one supposes, among the Christians of the Near East.

The Qurʾān's tone toward Christianity has been described in various ways in scholarly literature. Some have argued that since it vehemently and directly attacks *the* Christian dogmata of the incarnation and triune Godhead,[102] it must be understood as attacking Christianity and the Christians categorically.[103] However, a variety of views on God and Jesus existed among late antique Christians, and this is probably true as regards seventh-century CE Arabian Christians.[104] Christians with low Christological beliefs (or little care for Christology to begin with) would have had few problems joining the group around the prophet Muḥammad, should they wish to do that. Moreover, the Qurʾān, in fact, explicitly mentions some Christians as being believers, that is to say, members of the community of the believers. The characterization of the Christians is more positive than that of the Jews. As in the case of the Jews, nowhere does the Qurʾān mention that, to be considered believers, Christians should recant Christianity as a religion or identity.

Since the verses discussing Christians almost always occur in connection with matters concerning the Jews, some of the relevant passages have already been adduced. However, one should still note verses 5:82–85, which contain a very positive description of the Christians and their religious authorities, that is, priests and monks (*qissīsīn wa-ruhbān*):[105]

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102 Though it never mentions trinitarianism as articulated in Nicaea and later church councils as consisting of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

103 See, e.g., Reynolds, *Allah* 12–14, for a discussion. For the later interpretive traditions, see McAuliffe, Jean Dammen, *Qurʾānic Christians: An analysis of classical and modern exegesis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

104 See chapter 3 for this.

105 As noted by Sahner, the Qurʾānic discourse on monks is somewhat ambivalent (Sahner, Christian C., "Islamic legends about the birth of monasticism: A case study on the late antique milieu of the Qurʾān and Tafsīr," in Robert G. Hoyland (ed.), *The late antique world of early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2015, 393–435). In this passage, however, the depiction is very positive.

> You [prophet] will certainly find that the worst in enmity toward those who believe are the Jews and those who associate. And you will certainly find that the closest in affection toward those who believe are those who call themselves Christians. This is because there are priests and monks (*qissīsīn wa-ruhbān*) among them; they are not arrogant. When they hear what has been revealed to the messenger, you can see their eyes flowing with tears, because they recognize the truth in it. They say: "Our Lord, we believe! Count us among the witnesses. Why would we not believe in God and what has come to us of the truth. We hope that God will make us enter [Paradise] with the righteous people." God will recompence them for their belief with gardens beneath which flow rivers, where they abide forever. That is the reward of the doers of good.

Moreover, Q 5:47 says that the "People of the Evangelion" should judge by the Evangelion. Their revelation (as the Qurʾān conceptualizes it) is valuable and the Christians should follow it in matters of law and praxis.

Since the Qurʾānic depiction of Jesus is often understood to have signified a clear parting from Christianity,[106] I will discuss and problematize this notion in some detail.[107] I will concentrate on the question of what the Qurʾānic Jesus might have meant for the audience of the revelations and its social makeup, not how the narratives of Mary and Jesus are construed and what earlier texts they might echo—topics of utmost scholarly importance but somewhat irrelevant for my present purposes since I discuss the social identity of the burgeoning movement.

As is well known, according to the Qurʾān, Jesus was a prophet and messenger who received revelation (Q 2:87, 19:30), but he was no God incarnate (Q 5:72).[108] Moreover, the idea of God having a son or offspring is denied (Q 19:34–40, Q 112).[109] However, in a sense, the Qurʾānic Jesus is more than simply a prophet: he is, in fact, called the Christ/Messiah (*al-masīḥ*, Q 3:45, 4:157, 4:171–172, 5:17, 5:72, 5:75, 9:30–31)[110] and, in contrast to most prophets of the Qurʾān, he was a miracle-worker (Q 3:48–52, 5:110). Indeed, he is the prime performer of miracles in the Qurʾān.[111] One of his miracles, it can be interpreted, is

106 E.g., Reynolds, *Allah* 12–13; Sinai, *The Qurʾan* 200–202.
107 In this connection, see also Donner, "From believers to Muslims" 25–27.
108 Most recently on Jesus in the Qurʾān, see Costa, "Early Islam as a messianic movement"; Dye, "Mapping the sources of the Qurʾanic Jesus."
109 El-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 105–107.
110 For a discussion of the term *al-masīḥ* in the Qurʾān, see Costa, "Early Islam as a messianic movement" 48–75.
111 Reynolds, *Allah* 55.

his prediction that a new prophet, whose name is *aḥmad*, "most venerated," a clear nod at Muḥammad, will emerge (Q 61:6).[112] Jesus is also called God's word (*kalima*, Q 3:45, 4:171)[113] and was of virgin birth (Q 3:42–47, 19:16–34).[114] Moreover, he represents a new Adam (Q 3:59).[115] Interestingly, he does not render the Torah redundant but rather comes to confirm (*muṣaddiq*) it (Q 5:46, 61:6). He is taken up to God (Q 3:55, 4:157–159),[116] apparently to return during the eschatological era. Though this is not elucidated in detail in the Qurʾān, passages such as Q 43:57–64 suggest that he has an important part to play in the last events.[117] It would be, then, completely wrong to call the Qurʾānic Jesus merely a prophet. He is a prophet, but also the Messiah and the most significant miracle worker of the Qurʾān. To give in full some of the important passages concerning Jesus:

> Q 5:72–75: They have disbelieved who say: "God is the Messiah, son of Mary." The Messiah himself has said: "Israelites, worship God, your Lord and my Lord!" God has denied Paradise to those who associate, and their abode will be the hell-fire. The wrongdoers do not have a helper. They have disbelieved who say: "God is the third of the three."[118] There is no god but one God. If the disbelievers among them do not cease to talk of

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112 It is, then, not only Abraham that foresees Muḥammad in the Qurʾān (see the previous chapter), Jesus does too. Note the New Testament parallels of these predictions: in John 8:56, Jesus is quoted as telling the Jews that Abraham has foreseen him. Paul, in Galatians 3:16, claimed that Jesus is the seed (in singular) of Abraham.

113 El-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 157–159; this translates the Greek *logos* of John 1, though it is reinterpreted in the Qurʾān, which disagrees with the ending of John 1:1, "the Word was God."

114 Note the important study Anthony, Sean W., "The virgin annunciate in the Meccan Qurʾan: Q. Maryam 19:19 in context," in *JNES* 81 (2022), 363–385, which discusses the interesting wording in Q 19:19. In the verse, the angel says: "I am the Messenger of your Lord, I have come to give you (*li-ahaba laki*) a pure son." Here the Qurʾān does not differ from some Christian late antique interpretations of the conception: Gabriel was seen as an agent of sorts in this, having perfumed Mary or having entered her womb via her mouth.

115 This idea is also present in Paul, see el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 79.

116 The question of whether the Qurʾān suggests that Jesus was crucified or not is beyond the theme of the present inquiry. On this question, see Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic* 37–38, 88–89. Recently, Juan Cole has emphasized that the Qurʾān Q 4:157 exonerates the Jews of blame for having killed Jesus (Cole, Juan, "'It was made to appear to them so': The crucifixion, Jews and Sasanian war propaganda in the Qurʾān," in *Religion* 51/3 [2021], 404–422).

117 For the eschatological Jesus, see Reynolds, *Allah* 70–71.

118 On this expression, see Griffith, Sidney H., "Syriacisms in the 'Arabic Qurʾān': Who were those who said 'Allāh is third of three' according to al-Māʾida 73?" in Meir Bar-Asher et al. (eds.), *A word fitly spoken: Studies in mediaeval exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qurʾān presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai*, Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi, 2007, 83–110.

> such things, they will face a painful punishment. Why do they not turn to God, repenting, and ask for His forgiveness? God is merciful, compassionate. The Messiah, son of Mary, was merely a messenger; before him there have been other messengers. His mother was virtuous, and they both ate food.
>
> Q 4:171: People of the Book, do not transgress your law (*lā taghlū fī dīnikum*)! Do not say anything but the truth about God! The Messiah, son of Mary, was the messenger of God, and His word that He gave to Mary, and a spirit from Him. Believe in God and His messengers and do not say: "Three!" Desist; it is better for you. God is one God; He is above having a son. To Him belongs what is in the heavens and earth. He is the best trustee.

Note that neither of these passages claims that Christians hold such beliefs. Indeed, Q 5:73 talks of "disbelievers among them," suggesting that certainly not all Christians are beyond the pale. As far as I am aware, only one Qurʾānic verse, 9:30 (discussed in the previous section), actually attributes to the Christians Christological beliefs that the Qurʾān censures (in the case of Q 9:30, Jesus' sonship). The possible reasons for this should be probed in some detail.

Let me start by looking at verses 5:110–120, which mention a narrative about Jesus, his disciples, and the table (*māʾida*).[119] It is this narrative that gives the surah its name. It might be mentioned here that, in verses 5:116–118, Nicolai Sinai sees one of the examples in the Qurʾānic communication of drawing a clear boundary with Christianity and of harsh criticism of Christian dogmata.[120]

Since food and dietary regulations are an important topic of surah 5, it is perhaps no coincidence that the surah ends with a narrative where Jesus' disciples ask God to send[121] them a table (*māʾida*)[122] from heaven. Verse 110 ascribes to Jesus many superhuman characteristics: he was helped by the Holy Spirit, he resurrected the dead, and gave life to a clay bird; he healed the blind and the lepers; and God taught him multiple scriptures: the Torah and Evangelion, but

119 For these verses, see the important comments in Azaiez et al. (eds.), *The Qurʾan seminar commentary: A collaborative study of 50 Qurʾanic passages*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016, 111–117.

120 Sinai, *The Qurʾan* 125.

121 The verb used is *anzala*, which is often used in the Qurʾān in the context of God giving the prophets revelation or scripture.

122 This word appears to be a loanword from Geʿez, where its cognate is related to the Eucharist; see Jeffery, *The foreign vocabulary* 255–256.

also "the Book" and "the Wisdom." What is more, Qurʾān 5:111 adds that the disciples of Jesus were also given inspiration[123] by God, and that they were obedient (*muslimūn*, perhaps to be understood as law-observant).

The table narrative is recounted in verses 5:112–114, where the disciples first ask Jesus to ask God to send them "a table," and Jesus does this, specifying that the table would provide for a "feast" (*ʿīdan*) for "the first and last of us." At this point, God makes the miraculous table descend from heaven. This Qurʾānic passage appears to echo the Christian last supper narratives[124] and, as verse 5:109[125] connects the passage to eschatology, the expectation of the eschatological second coming of Jesus might be implied at the end of surah 5. The phrase "the first and last of us" might also be understood in an eschatological context.

After the table narrative, the Qurʾān once again comments on Jesus' nature. In verses 5:116–117, God interrogates Jesus, asking if he is to be blamed for the idea that Jesus and Mary[126] are considered gods in addition to God. Jesus denies this idea. Since such a trinitarian (or perhaps better, tritheist) dogma of God, Mary, and Jesus as the three persons of the Godhead was not a common one among late antique Christians, it is difficult to see these verses as generally denouncing Christianity or Christians.

Was the Qurʾānic locution on Jesus—as a messenger-cum-prophet, as a man, though the Messiah—completely outside the late antique Christian discourse? Not really. After all, he is called a prophet, for instance, in some New Testa-

123 The verb used in this verse is *awḥā*. This is rather remarkable: the disciples/apostles were God-inspired. It shows how far the Qurʾān sometimes goes to embrace the Christians.

124 Azaiez et al. (eds.), *The Qur'an seminar commentary* 113–117, discuss different possible subtexts for this Qurʾānic narrative that appears to echo the narratives of the last supper: Matthew 14:13–21 and 15:32–39; Acts 10; John 6:22–71 and 10. However, Reynolds rejects this association and rather connects the passage with the story of Moses and the Israelites in the desert and the Ethiopic translation of Psalm 78:19 (Reynolds, Gabriel, "On the Qurʾān's Māʾida passage and the wanderings of the Israelites," in Carlos A. Segovia and Basil Lourié (eds.), *The coming of the comforter: When, where, and to whom? Studies on the rise of Islam and various other topics in memory of John Wansbrough*, Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012, 91–108).

125 "On the Day when God assembles all the messengers and asks, 'What response did you receive?' they will say, 'We do not have that knowledge: You alone know things that cannot be seen.'"

126 This is not, naturally, the "orthodox" understanding of the Trinity or of Mary, as has been pointed out by modern scholars. For these Qurʾānic statements and their context, see the lucid study by Sirry, Mun'im A., "Reinterpreting the Qurʾānic criticism of other religions," in Angelika Neuwirth and Michael Sells (eds.), *Qur'anic studies today*, London: Routledge, 2016, 294–309.

ment texts (Matthew 21:11, Acts 3:22).[127] Naturally, high Christology is (though very rarely) present in the New Testament as well, such as in the pre-existing Christ/Logos, equated with God, of John 1. Paul is often adduced as an early example of high Christological thinking (in the sense: Jesus = God), but this appears to resort to special pleading.[128] It is only with the later church councils (discussed in chapter 3 of the present study) that we encounter the canonization of such high Christological beliefs; before them, a variety of opinions and beliefs about Jesus existed on equal footing. A variety of Christological beliefs also existed naturally after Nicaea (in 325 CE), but low Christological ideas were now the butt of attack and, one supposes, became minority opinions. In the pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, we also encounter Jesus the prophet. Clemens is quoted as saying:

> Then, however, a priest or a prophet, being anointed with the compounded ointment, putting fire to the altar of God, was held illustrious in all the world. But after Aaron, who was a priest, another is taken out of the waters. I do not speak of Moses, but of Him who, in the waters of baptism, was called by God His Son. For it is Jesus who has put out, by the grace of baptism, that fire which the priest kindled for sins; for, from the time when He appeared, the chrism has ceased, by which the priesthood or the prophetic or the kingly office was conferred.[129]

Earlier in the work, the figure of the true prophet is introduced. This appears to be a recurring figure, manifesting himself in many individuals, including but not limited to Jesus. The pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, then, appear to include the notion of the chain of the prophets:

> He, therefore, whose aid is needed for the house filled with the darkness of ignorance and the smoke of vices, is He, we say, who is called the true Prophet, who alone can enlighten the souls of men, so that with their eyes they may plainly see the way of safety. For otherwise it is impossible to get knowledge of divine and eternal things, unless one learns of that true Prophet; because, as you yourself stated a little ago, the belief of things, and the opinions of causes, are estimated in proportion to the talents of their advocates: hence, also, one and the same cause is now thought just,

127 See also el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 78–83.

128 As argued by Fredriksen, *Paul* 131–145, who deconstructs conventional interpretations of Romans 1:3–4 and Philippians 2:6–11.

129 Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* 1:48.

> now unjust; and what now seemed true, anon becomes false on the assertion of another. For this reason, the credit of religion and piety demanded the presence of the true Prophet, that He Himself might tell us respecting each particular, how the truth stands, and might teach us how we are to believe concerning each.[130]

Because of such prooftexts, it is not entirely true that Jesus as a/the prophet would have been anathema to all Christians in antiquity and late antiquity.

Heikki Räisänen approached the question of the Qurʾānic Jesus in 1971 with a novel interpretation, comparing the Jesus of the Qurʾān with the Jesus of the synoptic gospels.[131] To mention a few details that Räisänen brings up, let me note the following: Like the Qurʾān, Matthew and Luke espouse the idea of Jesus' virginal birth without attributing the idea of divine incarnation to him. In Luke-Acts, Jesus is God's Christ and servant; his miracles are due to God's power, not his own. The Qurʾān echoes such language. The Jesus depictions of the synoptics are, naturally, internally varied, but one can still note these affinities to some of their aspects in the Qurʾānic discourse.[132] Though not in any way identical, "the Qurʾanic portrait of Jesus is not *so* remote from the NT [New Testament] as might seem to be the case at first glance."[133] As Räisänen notes, the differences between the Muslim and Christian Jesus understandings are not so much due to the Qurʾān and the Bible as to their different interpretive traditions.[134] The majority of Christian communities started, post-Nicaea, to espouse a high Christological doctrine. Early Islamic exegesis of the Qurʾān, on the other hand, belittled the role of Jesus, insisting, for example, that his title in the Qurʾān, *al-masīḥ*, is more or less empty of specific signification. However, it is difficult to accept that the earliest audience of the Qurʾānic revelations, which included Jews and Christians, would have thought that the figure of "the Messiah" was meaningless.

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130 Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* 1:16.

131 Räisänen, *Das koranische Jesusbild*. He continued to write on the topic sporadically until his death in 2015: see Räisänen, "The portrait of Jesus" and the articles collected in his *The Bible among scriptures and other essays*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017.

132 Räisänen, "The portrait of Jesus" 126–128.

133 Räisänen, "The portrait of Jesus" 129, emphasis in the original.

134 Sarris, *Empires of faith*, 266, makes an important point: "The respect in the Qur'an for the Virgin Mary, but its denial of Jesus' divinity and crucifixion, chime closely with shades of contemporary Christianity, both 'orthodox' and 'heterodox' … What Muhammad's austere monotheism cut through were the complexities and controversies of Christian Trinitarian and Christological doctrine. In that sense it was itself a fulsome response to contemporary Christian debate."

As regards what follows, let me start with two premises arising from the Qurʾān, the first being generally agreed upon, the second being something that I have argued for at some length in this book: 1) The Qurʾānic "Christology" is of a relatively low type. 2) Some Christians accepted the Qurʾānic revelations as authentic and joined Muḥammad's movement. If both are true, how do we account for this? I think two answers are possible. In fact, they might both be true, reflecting the different circumstances in the lives and contexts of different Christians:

i) The first solution to the dilemma would be that the Qurʾānic notions of Jesus were, in fact, similar or identical to what some Christian groups or individuals already endorsed in Mecca, Medina, and neighboring areas. This can be understood in two ways: a) in the context of group variation (what we might call "the Jewish Christian thesis"), or b) individual variation (Tannous's "simple believers thesis").

i a) The Jewish Christian thesis has been advocated by a number of writers[135] and, it appears to me, is rather popular among scholars. However, it has had its critics too.[136] I myself would be willing to accept the Jewish Christian presence as *one* of the factors in the background of the Qurʾān, although, since tangible evidence is lacking, this is somewhat speculative. There are some indications that such groups might have indeed been present in the seventh-century Near East (John of Damascus, d. 749 CE, notes that the Elkesaites are "still now occupying that part of Arabia above the Dead Sea"),[137] though there is no such evidence from Arabia; but given our lack of knowledge of varieties of Christian belief in Arabia more generally this is not surprising. Furthermore, the patri-

135 E.g., Crone, "Jewish Christianity"; Pines, Shlomo, "Notes on Islam and on Arabic Christianity and Judaeo-Christianity," *JSAI* 4 (1984), 135–152; Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 5, 139–158; Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew* 37–41. For more on this, including critical viewpoints, see the articles collected in Francisco del Río Sánchez, (ed.), *Jewish Christianity and the origins of Islam: Papers presented at the colloquium held in Washington DC, October 29–31, 2015* (*8th ASMEA Conference*) (Judaïsme ancien et origines du christianisme 13), Turnhout: Brepols, 2018.

136 E.g., Dye, "Mapping the sources of the Qurʾanic Jesus" 158–162; Shoemaker, Stephen, "Jewish Christianity, non-trinitarianism, and the beginnings of Islam," in Francisco del Río Sánchez (ed.), *Jewish Christianity and the origins of Islam: Papers presented at the colloquium held in Washington DC, October 29–31, 2015* (*8th ASMEA Conference*) (Judaïsme ancien et origines du christianisme 13), Turnhout: Brepols, 2018, 105–116; Stern, Samuel M., "ʿAbd al-Jabbār's account of how Christ's religion was falsified by the adoption of Roman customs," *Journal of theological studies*, N.S. 19/1 (1968), 128–185; Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 247–249.

137 Cited in Roncaglia, "Ebionite and Elkesaite elements" 349. For other evidence, see Crone, "Jewish Christianity (part two)" 1–3.

arch of the Church of the East, Mar Aba (d. 552), reportedly met a student of Christian theology who emphasized that he was both Jewish and Christian, a possible indication of the longevity of such groups in the Near East.[138] Patricia Crone has argued that the Qurʾān proves the existence of such a group or groups in the Qurʾānic milieu: "All in all, a full seven doctrines,[139] several of them central to the Qurʾān, point to the presence of Jewish Christians in the Messenger's locality."[140] For example, the Qurʾān notes that Jesus does not annul the Torah but rather confirms it (Q 5:46, 61:6), which could point to the possibility that the Christians around the prophet considered Torah-obedience important.

There were, as noted above, late antique Christians whose view on Jesus was similar to the Qurʾānic one. Whether or not they existed in sixth-seventh century CE Arabia is up for debate (since no palpable evidence is available). It should be remembered that non-trinitarian Christian groups, such as Bogomils and Catharists, popped up in medieval Europe. After Nicaea and Chalcedon, trinitarian and incarnationist Christianity was the mainstream;[141] but perhaps other options existed in the Near East and, more specifically, Arabia too. As mentioned in chapter 2, the inscriptions commissioned by Abraha, the Ethiopian king of Yemen in the mid-sixth century, have been interpreted by Carlos Segovia as putting forward low Christological formulae.[142] Two of Abraha's surviving inscriptions[143] do not mention the trinity, nor do they mention Jesus' sonship but refer to him, instead, as God's messiah (*ms*^{1}*ḥ-hw*). Segovia suggests that Abraha came with these formulae to appease his subject people, who were majority Jewish.

I think it would be hasty to dismiss the group variation thesis altogether. The fact of diversity, then as now, signifies diversity as regards individuals but also groups that the individuals form. We do not necessarily have to call these hypothetical low Christology groups "Jewish Christians," or give them a genealogy to

138 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 245.

139 These are identified by Crone as: a) Jesus is a prophet sent to the Israelites; b) Christians are Israelites too; c) Jesus is second to Moses and confirms the Torah/law rather than supplants it; d) Jesus was a human being, not God incarnate; e) Muḥammad's opponents held that both Mary and Jesus are divine; f) docetic crucifixion, though Jesus' death is otherwise accepted; g) virgin birth of Jesus. Some of the points are not as strong as others, but it must be acknowledged that a-d closely resemble the beliefs that we know different Jewish Christian groups were espousing.

140 Crone, "Jewish Christianity (part one)" 229.

141 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 77, notes that, post-Chalcedon, "all of the major competing and rival churches" agreed upon the trinity and incarnation.

142 Segovia, "Abraha's Christological formula."

143 Sigla DAI GDN 2002–2020, dated to 548 CE, and Ry 506, dated to 552 CE.

such a group from earlier centuries, such as Ebionites. However, the Qurʾān's relationship (discussed at more length below) with the *Didascalia* and the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, which manifest, in some passages, low Christology (Jesus as a prophet) and emphasize purity regulations, is too unmistakable to pass over.[144] The obvious conclusion is that there were a group or groups of Arabian Christians who espoused and transmitted (perhaps orally) teachings that resembled the contents of these texts. Otherwise, it is difficult to account for the aspects of the gentile law in the Qurʾān, which show striking similarities with the *Didascalia* and the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*.

i b) Though scholars of late antiquity sometimes forget that diversity of beliefs (even as regards the central dogmata) and practices permeated the vernacular religion of the Christians and other communities,[145] this has recently been emphasized by Jack Tannous in his "simple believers thesis." According to him, we are misled if we only take into account the views of the bishops and other elites. It is naturally true that, by the seventh century CE (and, actually, even some two centuries earlier), all Christian churches that we have any evidence of held trinitarian and incarnationist beliefs (which the Qurʾān refutes)—in fact, they advocated them *as the very essence* of the Christian faith. But does this signify that all Christians actually considered them central to how they lived, acted, and worshipped as Christians? I think not. Tannous has argued for this comprehensively in his well-documented book. As he notes: "just as one can believe in gravity without understanding the finer points of Einstein's Theory of General Relativity, or indeed, without ever having

144 See also Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 97, 154. The pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 16.7.9, has, moreover, an interesting formulation on God: "God is one, and there is no God but Him." This is very similar to those found in the Qurʾān.

145 Religious studies scholars working with modern "lived" or "vernacular" religion take diversity and variation in, as well as indifference toward, doctrine and practice as natural and given. There is nothing to suggest that such a situation did not obtain in the pre-modern era as well. In chapter 3, I noted that according to the 2020 State of Theology survey (https://thestateoftheology.com/), 30% of US evangelical Christians agreed with the (low Christological) notion "Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God." A study on Finnish religious identities and beliefs noted that, in 2019, 60% of the surveyed Finns identified as Christian and 51% as Lutheran. Despite this, only 25% of Finns said they believed in "the God of Christianity." Interestingly, however, 33% affirmed the belief that Jesus was resurrected and 38% that Jesus is the Son of God; Ketola, Kimmo, "Uskonnolliset identiteetit ja uskomusmaailma moninaistuivat," in Hanna Salomäki et al. (eds.), *Uskonto arjessa ja juhlassa: Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko vuosina* 2016–2019 (Kirkon Tutkimuskeskuksen julkaisuja 134), Helsinki: Kirkon Tutkimuskeskus, 2019, at 70, 74, 79. Apparently one can believe in the "Son of God" without believing in "the God of Christianity"; such notions are among the interesting paradoxes of vernacular religious beliefs. One should expect to find as many, if not more, such contradictions in the pre-modern world as regards beliefs.

heard of Einstein; so, too, one could believe in Jesus without having a coherent view of the Incarnation or a strong opinion on Chalcedon (or any view at all on these matters)."[146] There is, in fact, much evidence that there was variation among all the denominations of the late antique and early medieval Near East, in particular among the laity but sometimes clergy as well. The variation among Christians included, for instance, divergent Christological views, interest in divination, or acceptance of polygyny.[147] Tannous notes that, to understand Qurʾānic Christological statements, there is no need to refer to hypothetical Jewish Christian groups, since diversity of beliefs was a fact even within the churches that deemed themselves orthodox: there is no need to speculate about this or that fringe group that might have survived on the fringes of the Roman empire.[148] He notes:

> when the Qurʾān seems to suggest that Christians understood Mary to be part of the Trinity (5:116), we can, as scholars have done, invoke the possible existence of an exotic heretical group like the Collyridians in western Arabia to explain such a curious claim. But in this instance, and in other places where the Qurʾān speaks of Christianity in unfamiliar ways, rather than looking for fourth—or fifth—century groups which held low Christologies, exalted views of Mary, or some other view not typical of the Christian communities most familiar to us now, or seeking to find individual passages in Syriac texts written by theological elites in northern Mesopotamia or Greek writers somewhere in the Mediterranean world which seem to bear resemblance to this or that idea put forth in the Qurʾān, a more fruitful way of understanding the image of Christianity presented therein is to see it as a reflection of and reaction to Christianity as it existed on the ground in the seventh-century Ḥijāz—or wherever it is that one wants to argue is the Qurʾān's original context.[149]

However, one wonders why the group aspect should be recanted altogether. Individuals have a habit and aptitude to affiliate with those whom they view as likeminded. It is certainly true that there was much individual variation within, say, the (Miaphysite) Syriac Orthodox church as regards doctrinal matters and praxes.[150] But did they only exist as individuals or did some members of the

146 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 235.
147 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 226–229, 256.
148 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 247–249.
149 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 252.
150 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 78, 251–252, gives the example of Jacob

church meet with others that agreed with their views and practices, perhaps forming prayer or study circles or other social groups where they interacted? The latter is likely. This, then, takes us into the sphere of group variation: subgroups, as it were, inside a larger collective. Were there, moreover, smaller or larger Christian groups that operated outside the hegemonic churches of the Near East? Also likely. Moreover, though I very much sympathize with Tannous's argument, it has to be pointed out that, like the group variation thesis, a limited amount of evidence exists as regards the individual variation thesis. They are, then, both hypotheses, though credible ones at that.

ii) The second solution to the dilemma would be to state that though the Qurʾānic "Christology" was (perhaps much) lower than what the west Arabian Christians upheld, they joined the believers' movement nonetheless, perhaps lowering their Christ beliefs, perhaps simply ignoring the discrepancy with the Qurʾānic communication on Jesus and what they earlier believed in (or at least had heard in sermons). This is not impossible. Many Christians might have changed their view on Christ, while others might have simply overlooked what the Qurʾān said on him. Naturally, one should also question the extent to which all the Qurʾānic pericopes were known among the believers around Muḥammad since the revelatory corpus was still being produced and not yet collected in a book.[151]

Modern religious-studies theory on conversion includes the idea that change in religious beliefs and practices happens throughout one's life, regardless of whether one thinks of this in connection with the concept "conversion" or not.[152] Some of these developments are sudden, some more gradual: there is much individual variation in how people experience and undergo religious change or conversion.[153] This solution is in line with Tannous's "simple believers thesis," noted above. The religious views and praxes of Christian and other believers were (and are) in a constant state of flux, though they might self-identify in the same way throughout their lives. One could have learned by

of Edessa (d. 708) as disapproving of some members of his churches who were following the Jewish law (however they understood it); and the East Syrian patriarch Timothy I (d. 823) discussed the question of whether a "heretic" joining the Church of the East can be rebaptized. Among the categories of heretics that he mentions are those who believed that Jesus was a human and rejected his divinity. This points toward the possibility that there were, before and after Islam, Christians who held low Christological beliefs.

151 See Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 307–308, for narratives, in Arabic literature written by Muslims, of Muslims who did not know a single verse of the Qurʾān.

152 See, in particular, Rambo, Lewis R., *Understanding religious conversion*, New Haven CT: Yale University, 1993.

153 Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion* 170–171.

heart and believe in the standard Christological formulae of one's church and community before coming into contact with a new religious movement (in this instance, Muḥammad's) that one joins. In reaction, one could start to emphasize (or not) new facets in the realm of religious dogmata and beliefs.

A thought experiment now arises regarding those Christians who held *high* Christological beliefs (the majority, one assumes, in the Near East on the eve of Islam, and probably in Arabia too), accepting the incarnation and triune Godhead:[154] would these Christians, if they joined the prophet Muḥammad's movement, have felt that they *converted* from Christianity to another religion? Would they have felt that the Qurʾānic discourse on Jesus would be so *opposed* to what they knew from their scripture, the interpretive tradition, and general Christian discourse that they did *not* consider themselves Christians anymore, but something else? Though the Qurʾānic evidence can be read in divergent ways, I would suggest that the answer is no. If my reading of the Qurʾānic social categorizations is correct and the Christians of Muḥammad's movement did not have to recant their earlier identity, then it follows that they considered themselves no less Christians than, say, Ebionites did.[155] There is simply no Qurʾānic evidence to suggest that conversion—in the sense of recanting one's previous religious affiliation in lieu of a new one—was required for or expected from the Jews or Christians joining the believer group. These people would have, then, identified as both Muḥammad's followers and Jews/Christians. For some, this might have meant that they saw themselves as having a dual or hybrid identity in this regard.[156] Other Muḥammad-believing Jews or Muḥammad-believing Christians did not necessarily think of themselves as being doubly-affiliated: they self-identified simply as Jews or Christians. Both options are possible and might indeed have been operative in the mind and discourse of a single individual, with a variation and fluctuation throughout her life.[157]

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154 There was naturally a diversity of opinion on the miaphysite-dyaphysite continuum among the clergy and, one assumes, even more so among the laity (if they cared about such matters to begin with). In any case, many churches around Arabia were non-Chalcedonian in their orientation (miaphysite or East Syrian).

155 Or no less Jewish than Jesus or Paul.

156 Such dual identifications have been noticed among modern-day believers by scholars. According to one poll, 6% of Americans state that they belong to more than one religion (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/26/few-americans-identify-with-more-than-one-religion/). As regards late antiquity, above it was noted that the Mar Aba (d. 552) reportedly met a theology student who identified as both Jewish and Christian; Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 245. Such examples could be multiplied. Though this type of phenomenon is and, in all likelihood, has been somewhat rare among the people of the world, these examples suggest that it is not non-existent.

157 See also Lindstedt, "One community," where it is suggested that the believer affiliation rep-

I am naturally not suggesting that all or the majority of the west Arabian Christians accepted the Qur'ānic revelations and joined Muḥammad's movement. But the Qur'ānic evidence certainly suggests that some did, regardless of the Christological polemics present in the Qur'ān's message. One could even suggest that it was more difficult for the Jews to accept the Qur'ānic Jesus than for the Christians. But join the movement the Jews did, as the Qur'ānic evidence and the "Constitution" suggest.[158] It must be remembered that Jesus is more rarely mentioned than, for instance, Moses or other patriarchs. Hence, it appears that the relatively few occurrences of Jesus the Messiah in the Qur'ānic revelations did not deter some Jews from joining the community of the believers.[159]

A further question suggests itself: was the idea that prophecy continued and was present in Muḥammad so problematic that Christians would have been repelled from following him? For many, perhaps.[160] For some, probably not. After John and Jesus, a number of Christians actually claimed the mantle of prophecy and, in some cases, were successful in attracting followers.[161] Most famous were Montanus, Prisca, and Maximilla (of the late second century Montanist movement), and Mani (d. 270s). The latter actually never called himself a "prophet"; rather, he was "the apostle of Jesus." However, his elite followers, the *electii*, were known as prophets.[162] The Montanist movement appealed not only to the laity but also some of the clergy: the famous church father, Tertullian, joined it.[163] The group was apparently still alive in the eighth century CE Byzantine empire.[164]

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resented a superordinate identity which accepted sub-identities as Jewish, Christian, or gentile. A similar phenomenon has been suggested for early Christianity; see, e.g., studies by Esler, *Galatians*, and *Conflict and identity*, in which it is suggested that Paul envisioned the early Jesus group as comprising Jewish Christ-believers and gentile Christ-believers; Christ-believerness was a superordinate identity in which the Jews and others did not have to forsake their Jewishness or other ethnic identity.

158 See also the texts written by Jews and Christians discussed in the next two chapters.

159 Dye, "Mapping the sources of the Qur'anic Jesus" 154–156, has rightly called the portrayal of Jesus paradoxical.

160 See, e.g., Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 214. In Luke 16:16, Jesus is depicted as saying: "The law and the prophets were in effect until John came," which was quoted in late antique Christian discourse to suggest that prophecy does not continue.

161 See Crone, Patricia, *The nativist prophets of early Islamic Iran: Rural revolt and local Zoroastrianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 281–301; Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 59–71, 87–99.

162 Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 96–97.

163 Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 164.

164 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 478–479.

It is true that, after these figures, no Christian prophet who gained a significant group of followers is attested in the late antique Near East, though one supposes that minor Christian prophets popped up sporadically (as they do nowadays). The Christian prophets could always refer to Biblical prooftexts. In Matthew 23:34, Jesus is cited as saying that he is "sending you prophets and sages and teachers"; clearly prophecy is not something that has come to an end with Jesus. Moreover, Paul exalts ecstatic worship and prophecy, in which every believer can take part, in 1 Cor 14:26–31:

> What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged.

In their scripture and lived tradition, Christians had earlier examples of prophecy continuing after Jesus. One should also note that, as discussed here and in the previous chapter, there is considerable Qurʾānic evidence stating that Christians (and Jews) gladly acknowledged and accepted Muḥammad's revelations. This runs counter to the notion that unending prophecy was, in itself, distasteful to Arabian Christians.

Related to this discussion, I should note that modern scholars sometimes make much of the fact that the Qurʾān speaks of *al-Injīl*, "Evangelion" or "Gospel," in the singular.[165] Hence, so the argument goes, the Qurʾānic *al-Injīl* cannot be taken as a reference to the Gospel*s* (in plural) that the Christians considered sacred. Moreover, the argument sometimes continues, the Qurʾānic embrace of the earlier scripture is mostly but lip service and cannot have meant much to the Jews and Christians in the context of the audience of the Qurʾān. But is this so? I very much doubt it. As regards *al-Injīl*, it is and has been naturally common for Christians to speak of "the Gospel" in the singular when referring to the good news about Jesus, or the narrative(s) about him, or the Christian teaching more generally.[166] What is more, late antique Christians produced a

165 See, e.g., Reynolds, *Allah* 36–40.

166 For instance, the *Didascalia* refers to Jesus' message as well as the narratives about him as "the Gospel" (*ʾwnglywn*), in the singular; Zellentin, "'One letter *yud*'" 241.

number of gospel harmonies, which rendered the story presented in the four Gospels (and their interpretive tradition) into one book. The most important of these was Tatian's *Diatessaron* (ca. 160–175), which was written in Syriac or Greek and which Tatian himself apparently called, simply, "the Gospel."[167] Many manuscripts of the Syriac text as well as translations of it into other languages are extant which are testimony to the popularity of this "Gospel" in late antiquity.[168] Though we do not naturally have to understand that *al-Injīl*, in the Qurʾān, refers to the *Diatessaron*—things are not so simple—the case of Tatian's work serves as an example that there would in all likelihood be nothing surprising or distasteful to Christians to hear the Qurʾān talk about the Gospel in the singular. I suggest that it is highly unlikely that an Arabian Christian, upon hearing the Qurʾānic revelations referred to *al-Injīl* (always in a positive sense, it should be underscored), would have been put off by the singular noun. Rather, she would in all likelihood have felt her scripture honored and validated. An average late antique Christian would not, in any case, have *ever* read the Bible himself:[169] Did he know or care how many Gospels there were within or without the canon (a concept that warrants problematization in itself)? It is doubtful.

The "Constitution" of Medina can be used as extra-Qurʾānic evidence for the position and categorization of the Medinan Jews in the believers' movement, but there is no similar text depicting the Medinan Christians. Nevertheless, in this connection it is warranted to mention a poem attributed to al-Aʿshā, who was possibly Christian, as discussed in chapter 3. The poem is written in

167 Crawford, Matthew R., "Diatessaron, a misnomer? The evidence from Ephrem's commentary," in *Early Christianity* 4 (2013), 362–385.

168 Wood, Philip, "Syriac and the 'Syrians,'" in Scott F. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of late antiquity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 170–194, at 174. Note, though, that the work was banned by some bishops; Wood, "Syriac" 182.

169 This is emphasized in Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 3, 26–34, noting that there are a number of instances in literary texts that bewail the fact that even the priests could not read or did not know the contents of the Bible. As Tannous notes on p. 21: "Even if we were to assume that there were well-trained, highly literate and informed clergy in urban and rural areas alike throughout the Middle East, we would nevertheless have to consider the question of whether people actually went to church and what, if anything, they got out of their attendance. But levels of church attendance in our period are impossible to gauge. And, if we suppose they were high, frequent complaints about congregants' misbehavior—doing everything from making business transactions, to talking during the service, to gawking at women, to shoving and kicking as they lined up to take the Eucharist—should give us pause before assuming any kind of correlation between church attendance and levels of Christian knowledge or seriousness of engagement with Christianity."

the praise of the prophet Muḥammad and mentions the city of Yathrib (Medina).[170] In the poem, Muḥammad is called "the prophet of God (*al-ilāh*)" and is characterized, among other things, as having "given advice and called [people] to witness" (*awṣā wa-ashhada*).[171] The poem does not contain any indication that al-Aʿshā would have considered Muḥammad as having proclaimed a new religion called Islam. It hence squares with my analysis of the Qurʾānic evidence presented in this book, according to which some Jews and Christians joined the group without a need for conversion.

However, further research is needed on this particular poem and its possible authenticity as well as al-Aʿshā's corpus more generally. According to Shahîd, the last six verses of the poem are spurious, because they in Shahîd's opinion mention Islamic dogmata and praxes in a suspicious way, but otherwise the poem should be treated as an authentic composition of al-Aʿshā: for example, the toponyms (Ṣarkhad, Yathrib rather than al-Madīna) mentioned in the poem appear to ascertain its genuine nature.[172] If so, and if al-Aʿshā was in fact Christian, then we would have an extra-Qurʾānic piece of evidence for Christian praise of Muḥammad as a prophet.

In fact, I would be willing to go so far as to accept, at least tentatively, the last six lines of the poem as authentic too. Shahîd is correct in stating that they contain Islamic notions, but they are actually markedly *Qurʾānic*: there are no post-Qurʾānic anachronisms in the poem as far as I can see. Similar arguments have been used to ascribe authenticity to the "Constitution," and they should be given full weight in this case, too.

I give in what follows my translation of the last six lines of the poem and then discuss their meaning and importance. In this part, al-Aʿshā addresses the hearer of the poem as if he[173] were a potential or actual believer group member:

> Be careful not to eat carrion (*al-maytāt*),
> and not to use an iron arrow to slit a vein [of an animal and drink its blood or sacrifice the blood on a cult stone] (*li-tafṣada*);
>
> and not to devote yourself to the [deity] of the erected cult stone (*dhā al-nuṣub al-manṣūb*),
> and not to worship the idols (*al-awthān*)—rather, worship God!

170 Al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān* 135–137 (no. 17). This poem should be compared with al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān* 329–331 (no. 66), which also contains monotheist beliefs.

171 Al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān* 137.

172 Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the sixth century*, ii/1 275–277.

173 The implied reader/hearer is clearly male in the verses.

> Pray during the evening time and the morning (*ḥīn al-ʿashiyyāt wa-l-ḍuḥā*),
> do not praise Satan—rather, praise God!
>
> Do not turn away a poor beggar
> on his heels nor a shackled prisoner.
>
> Do not scoff at a harm that brings a loss (*ba's dhī ḍarāra*),
> do not think that man has an ever-lasting day (*yawman mukhalladan*).
>
> Do not approach a female neighbor (*jāra*); indeed, her secret (*sirrahā*)
> is forbidden to you. Either marry or become celibate![174]

In this part (or other parts) of the poem, there is no mention of a reified Islam or Muḥammad as having formed a distinct, or new, religion. It aligns well with my reading of the social categories in the Qurʾānic evidence and the "Constitution" of Medina. Moreover, *pace* Shahîd, the last six verses could well be authentic, since they adduce rather the nascent Qurʾānic legislation than the later Islamic and much more detailed regulations and decrees. The dietary and purity notions present in the poem (no carrion, no blood, no cult stones), is similar to Q 5:3, for example, considered in the next section. Interestingly, too, the poem appears to refer to two daily prayers (*ḥīn al-ʿashiyyāt wa-l-ḍuḥā*). This matches some Qurʾānic evidence (Q 6:52, 11:114, 18:28, 24:58), which indicates that the community of the believers prayed, at some point of its history, two times a day, in addition to being recommended to observe nocturnal vigils. Taking all this into consideration, the poem reads in my opinion as a possible contemporary witness to a Christian poet's ideas about Muḥammad and the message he was proclaiming.

6 *Inna al-dīn ʿinda Allāh al-islām*

Verses 3:19, 3:85, and 5:3 are often cited as evidence for the idea that, in the Medinan period, the Qurʾān already names the religion of the in-group as "Islam" and, furthermore, this religion is characterized as the best and perhaps the only one.[175] However, such an understanding simply reflects conventional Islamic readings of them. These verses become, in classical Islamic exegesis, significant

174 Al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān* 137.

175 E.g., Friedmann, Yohanan, *Tolerance and coercion in Islam: Interfaith relations in the Mus-*

prooftexts for the notion of Islamic superiority and hegemony, as insightfully discussed by Mun'im Sirry.[176] One of them, Q 5:3, is even known in later tradition as the "verse of the perfection of religion" (*āyat ikmāl al-dīn*) and, according to the majority of interpretations, as being revealed during the farewell pilgrimage of the prophet.

I suggest another reading, however, translating, as in the Meccan kerygma, *al-islām* consistently as "obedience" (to God, the prophet, and the law).[177] In the previous chapter, it was noted that the word (*al-*)*dīn* often refers to "judgment" (in particular, "the last judgment") but, sometimes too, to "law," as in Q 12:76, where *dīn al-malik* signifies "the king's law." It is the meaning "law" (broadly understood) that, according to my interpretation, becomes common in the Medinan stratum. However, the signification "(the last) judgment" is still operative. This is the case, for instance, in Q 3:24, where the context indicates this to be the intended meaning. In this verse, the disbelievers claim: " 'the (hell-)fire will only touch us for a certain number of days.' Their concoctions have misled them regarding their judgment! (*wa-gharrahum fī dīnihim mā kānū yaftarūn*)." Here, the Qur'ān notes that the judgment that the disbelievers will receive (*dīnihim*) on the last day is different—namely, eternal—than what they falsely think. Relatedly, Q 4:146 mentions the repentant among the *munāfiqūn*, "hypocrites," namely those who hold fast to God and "relinquish the [matter of] their judgment to God" (*akhlaṣū dīnahum lillāh*).

When considering the Medinan occurrences of *dīn* in the sense of "law," let us begin with verse 5:3. The wider context of the beginning of Q 5 is dietary and purity regulations (which are also addressed in verse 5:3). Here is my rendering of the verse, which is very long indeed (I leave the key words untranslated):

> You are forbidden to consume carrion, blood, pork, anything dedicated to other than God, any [animal] strangled, hit or fallen fatally, gored, eaten by wild animals—unless you have slaughtered it [properly]—or anything sacrificed on idol stones (*al-nuṣub*). [Moreover, you are forbidden] to draw divining arrows (*al-azlām*)—that is transgression. Today, those who

lim tradition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 33–34. For a different view, see, e.g., Donner, "From believers to Muslims" 14–16.

176 Sirry, *Scriptural polemics* 65–99. As Sirry notes, in modern Muslim exegesis the hegemonic understanding of these verses has been questioned. See also Lamptey, *Never wholly other* 26–35.

177 Somewhat similarly, see Esack, *Qur'ān, liberation & pluralism* 126–134; Sachedina, *The Islamic roots* 38–39. El-Badawi, *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic gospel traditions*, 59–60, 66–74, on the other hand, derives the Arabic *al-islām* from Syriac *mashlmānūtā*, "tradition," here to be understood as "prophetic tradition."

> reject (*kafarū min*) your *dīn* have lost hope. Do not fear them, fear Me. Today I have perfected (*akmaltu*) your *dīn* for you, completed (*atmamtu*) My blessing upon you, and favored (*raḍītu*) *al-islām dīnan* for you.[178] But if anyone is forced [to eat illicit food] because of hunger, not intending to sin, God is forgiving and merciful.

This verse and other similar ones have been in the forefront in Islamic exegesis and theology as prooftexts for the conventional exclusivist interpretation of other religions.[179] However, it is hard to see *al-islām* signifying a reified and distinct religion, Islam, in Qurʾānic Arabic, here or elsewhere. The word, after all, simply means "submission" or "obedience" to God and the law, as has been surveyed in the previous chapter.[180] Nor should we translate *dīn* as "religion" here,[181] but go with the usual Qurʾānic meaning of "law" or "judgment."[182] Indeed, the rest of verse 5:3, as well as the neighboring verses, have

178 All "you" pronouns are plural here.

179 Sirry, *Scriptural polemics* 65–99.

180 This is indeed how some classical exegetes understand this as well: see, e.g., the view of al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, viii 84, who explains that in verse 5:3 the phrase *al-islām dīnan* means "submission to My [God's] command, holding onto My obedience, according to what I have decreed of limits and ordinances." He then doubles down and paraphrases *dīnan* as *ṭāʿatan minkum lī*, "in your obedience toward Me." Clearly, al-Ṭabarī's understanding of *dīn* relates the word to the law, and *al-islām* does not refer to the name of a religion, but to obedience toward God and the law. Compare my treatment of the word *al-islām* with Baneth, David H., "What did Muḥammad mean when he called his religion 'Islam'? The original meaning of *aslama* and its derivatives," in *IOS* 1 (1971), 183–190; Cole, Juan, "Paradosis and monotheism: A late antique approach to the meaning of *islām* in the Quran," in *BSOAS* 82/3 (2019), 405–425. Bravmann, *The spiritual background* 8, basing the interpretation on Arabic poetry, suggests that the original meaning of *al-islām* was "defiance of death, self-sacrifice (for the sake of God and his prophet)." But the examples from poetry are of dubious authenticity (stemming, for example, from the work of Ibn Hishām). Moreover, the interpretation of *aslama* (elliptically for *aslama nafsahu*) as "defy death" or "give up one's life" might fit some poems but, in my opinion, does not really fit the Qurʾānic prooftexts; Bravmann, *The spiritual background* 7–26.

181 Classical exegesis often supplies the plural to the reading of the text; see, e.g., al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-taʾwīl*, 2 vols., i, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 2008, 255, who suggests that Qurʾān 5:3 means that God has chosen Islam as *the* religion "over all other faiths" (*ʿalā al-adyān kullihā*). The goal of these pre-modern exegetes was to solidify the hegemonic understanding of Islam as the best (indeed, the only authentic) religion.

182 For a detailed treatment of these words, see Donner, "*Dīn*." My understanding of Q 3:19, 3:85, and 5:3 differs from his, however. According to Donner, these verses evidence the name of the religion, Islam, in the reified sense, and hence could and should be considered later interpolations. In my interpretation, *al-islām* signified "obedience" throughout in the Qurʾān.

to do with dietary and other regulations.[183] On the basis of the context, translating *dīn* here with anything other than "law," and *al-islām* as "submission" or "obedience" would be strained. Thus, I suggest that the most straightforward translation for this passage would be: "Today I have perfected your law for you, completed My blessing upon you, and favored for you obedience in/as regards law." In fact, as the next section will elucidate, the law mentioned in 5:3 is the gentile purity law—a concept familiar to Jews and Christians of the late ancient Near East.[184]

It should be noted that, in Qurʾānic and later Arabic, the expression "submit to something" is *aslama li-*, that is to say, it requires the preposition *li-* (e.g., Q: 3:83). However, in Q 5:3, as in Q 3:85, considered next, I would suggest that the accusative *dīnan* is a *tamyīz* accusative, which determines and limits the predicate. In such Arabic expressions, the accusative noun should be translated into English as "in/with/as regards (noun)." On this usage, Wright, for example, adduces the following sentences in his grammar, which are very similar in structure to the expression found in Q 5:3, *raḍītu lakum al-islāma dīnan* (I give the full vocalization in what follows):

> *rafaʿtu l-shaykha qadran*, "I raised the chief in dignity" (or, as one could also translate, "as regards dignity")
> *gharastu l-arḍa shajaran*, "I planted the land with trees"
> *allāhu ʿaẓīmun qudratan*, "God is great in might" (or: "as regards might")
> *huwa ḥātimun jūdan*, "he is [like] a Ḥātim in generosity" (or: "as regards generosity")[185]

Note that, in these sentences, the *tamyīz* noun is a *maṣdar* (verbal noun) or non-participle noun—just like *dīnan*. What I am arguing here is that, as in the examples cited above, in Q 5:3 *dīnan* functions as a determination or specification for the object of the clause, *al-islām*, "obedience," answering the question, "as regards what, or in what, is obedience being favored for you (*raḍītu*

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183 For an attempt to understand the redaction history of Q 5:3–5, see Sinai, "Processes of literary growth" 87–88. For another discussion of Q 5:3, see Donner, "*Dīn*" 133–134, who argues that the passage "Today I have perfected (*akmaltu*) your *dīn* for you, completed (*atmamtu*) My blessing upon you, and favored (*raḍītu*) *al-islām dīnan* for you" is out of place. But Donner understands the phrase *al-islām dīnan* in the conventional fashion ("favored for you Islam as religion"), which I do not think is warranted.

184 See Zellentin, Holger M., *Law beyond Israel: From the Bible to the Qurʾan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, 35–128.

185 Wright, William, *A grammar of the Arabic language*, 2 vols., ii, Cambridge: The University Press, [3]1896–1898 (rev. ed.), 122.

lakum)?"[186] Hence, the expression *raḍītu lakum al-islām dīnan* can be rendered into English as "I have favored for you obedience in/as regards law." This grammatical interpretation also explains why *dīnan* is indefinite, since *tamyīz* accusatives are, according to the general rule, indefinite.

Similar *tamyīz* accusatives can be found elsewhere in the Qurʾān. For example, *ʿadlu dhālika ṣiyāman*, "the same equivalent in fasting" (Q 5:95); *ishtaʿala l-raʾsu shayban*, "the head has become glowing with grey hair" (Q 19:4); or *fajjarnā l-arḍa ʿuyūnan*, "We have caused the earth to burst with springs" (Q 54:12). As for verse 11:7, it states that God has created the universe "to test which one of you is best as regards deeds" (*li-yabluwakum ayyukum aḥsanu ʿamalan*). In these expressions, the nouns *ṣiyāman*, *shayban*, *ʿuyūnan*, and *ʿamalan* modify the predicate and, naturally, are in the accusative because of their role as *tamyīz* nouns, not because they serve as an object of the verb or verbal noun. I would suggest that is the case with the phrase *raḍītu lakum al-islām dīnan* of Q 5:3, too.

In this connection, it is pertinent to remark that Nicolai Sinai has put forward the interpretation that verse 5:3 consists of two distinct utterances.[187] According to him, the middle of the verse is a later addition. Understood this way, we would originally have had the locution a), which was then glossed with b):

a) You are forbidden to consume carrion, blood, pork, anything dedicated to other than God. But if anyone is forced [to eat illicit food] because of hunger, not intending to sin, God is forgiving and merciful.

b) [Forbidden is] any [animal] strangled, hit or fallen fatally, gored, eaten by wild animals—unless you have slaughtered it [properly]—or anything sacrificed on idol stones (*al-nuṣub*). [Moreover, you are forbidden] to draw divining arrows (*al-azlām*)—that is transgression. Today, those who reject (*kafarū min*) your *dīn* have lost hope. Do not fear them, fear Me. Today I have perfected (*akmaltu*) your *dīn* for you, completed (*atmamtu*) My blessing upon you, and favored (*raḍītu*) *al-islām dīnan* for you.

Sinai's suggestion is based on the fact that a) corresponds to Q 2:173. The middle part of the verse, that is b), would have been a later interpolation glossing and commenting on a). However, in contrast to my interpretation, Sinai translates the phrase under consideration as "today I have perfected your religion for you,"[188] which he suggests could be a post-Muḥammadan insertion because of

186 Though I might be stating the obvious, the preposition + suffix *lakum* is connected with the verb *raḍītu* and not, for example, *al-islām*.

187 Sinai, "Processes of literary growth" 79–84.

188 Sinai, "Processes of literary growth" 80.

its meaning. However, as I argue in this section, this is unlikely to have been the significance as understood by the earliest audience of the Qurʾān. In any case, Sinai's suggestion of the redacted nature of Q 5:3 is interesting and worth pondering. It should be noted in this connection that the famous Qurʾānic manuscript of *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, Arabe 328(a), actually breaks down Q 5:3 in to two verses, with an "additional" verse-ending marked after the word *al-azlām*,[189] which is notable but does not (and naturally need not) correspond with the division suggested by Sinai.

In line with my interpretation of the meaning of Q 5:3, I would translate 3:85 (*wa-man yanbaghi ghayra l-islām dīnan fa-lan yuqbala minhu wa-huwa fī l-ākhira mina l-khāsirīn*) as: "Whoever desires non-obedience (*ghayra l-islām*) in law (*dīnan*)—it will not be accepted from them, and they will be among the losers in the hereafter."[190] In this verse, as in 5:3, the word *dīnan* in *yanbaghi ghayra l-islām dīnan* functions as a *tamyīz* noun that specifies the predicate. It indicates with respect to what in particular one is pursuing *ghayra l-islām*, non-obedience. Note that here the concept of *dīn*, law, and submission to it, is directly connected to the idea of paradisal reward (or more precisely the lack of it). Q 3:85 should be read in conjunction with verse 3:83, which states: "Do they pursue anything other than the law of God (*dīn Allāh*)? Everyone in heaven and earth submits to Him (*aslama lahu*), willingly or not; they will all be returned to Him." Verses 3:83 and 3:85 are not talking about "a religion" called "Islam," but rather about submission to God and the law. Verse 2:132, mentioned in the previous chapter, notes that Abraham, as well as Jacob, advised their children to follow the *millat ibrāhīm*, Abraham's promise of faithfulness toward God, adding: "God has chosen for you the law (*al-dīn*); do not die except as obedient [to God and the law] (*muslimūn*)."

The expression *inna al-dīn ʿinda allāh al-islām* in (the equally famous) verse 3:19 should be considered in this connection. This is usually understood to mean "the religion of God is Islam," but, as I have argued in this study, it does not appear warranted to understand the Qurʾānic expression *al-islām* as meaning Islam, with a capital letter; nor does *al-dīn* refer to "religion" as much as "judgment/law."[191] First, we must consider which noun the expression *ʿinda allāh*,

189 See https://corpuscoranicum.de/de/verse-navigator/sura/5/verse/3/manuscripts/13/page/21r; Déroche, *The one and the many* 203.

190 See also Amir-Moezzi and Dye (eds.), *Le Coran des historiens*, ii a 154: "Les termes *islām* et *dīn* au v. [3:]85 ne doivent pas être interprétés comme une référence à une 'religion' spécifique, puisque *dīn* peut aussi signifier 'jugement' (voir par exemple Q 1:4) et *islām* 'conformité' à, et donc 'acceptation de', la volonté divine."

191 The way out of this would be, perhaps, to note that while *al-dīn* cannot be rendered as

"with/in the presence/sight of God," specifies: is it *al-dīn* or *al-islām*? If the latter, *inna al-dīn ʿinda allāh al-islām* could be understood to mean: "the judgment/law is submission in the presence of God." However, this is not preferable, since, elsewhere in the Qurʾān, *ʿinda allāh* follows, rather than precedes, the noun that it specifies (e.g., Q 2:89, 2:94, 2:103, 6:109). Hence, as is indeed usually understood, *ʿinda allāh* is connected to *al-dīn*, with *al-islām* being the predicative of the clause: "*al-dīn ʿinda allāh* is *al-islām*." But things are not so simple. As in the example adduced above regarding *tamyīz*, that is, *huwa ḥātimun jūdan*, "he is [like] a Ḥātim in generosity," it is possible that, in an Arabic nominal sentence, the meaning should be understood as "is like," "is tantamount to," or "signifies," rather than simply "is."[192] This, I suggest, would fit the expression *inna al-dīn ʿinda allāh al-islām* in Q 3:19. The predicative *al-islām* explains what the "judgment/law with/in the presence/sight of God (*al-dīn ʿinda allāh*)" is, is like, or signifies. It is "submission," in the sense that it ("judgment/law") must be submitted to.

Another example of the word *al-islām*, in the definite form and from the Medinan period, occurs in Q 61:7, which reads: "Who is more wrong (*aẓlam*) than those who invent lies about God while being summoned to obedience (*yudʿā ʿalā al-islām*)? God does not guide the wrongdoers (*al-ẓālimīn*)." The meaning of "obedience" seems rather straightforward in the context of this *sūra*, which, incidentally, attacks (some?) believers for saying one thing while doing another (Q 61:2–3). When considering the Qurʾānic polemics on the People of the Book, it should be remembered that the Qurʾān is sometimes critical of the category "the believers" too.

It is significant, I should add here, that the plural of the word *dīn* never appears in the Qurʾān, though it exists in later stages of Arabic (*adyān*).[193] This, too, points to the Qurʾānic *dīn* being something other than *a* religion, at least in the countable sense. In this connection, verse 22:78, mentioning the key words *al-dīn*, *milla*, and *al-muslimīn*, is also of importance. I would render it as follows:

"religion" in the modern (and possibly Protestant Christian) sense of the word, it could be understood as "law and religion," combined. In German, for instance, the combination *Rechtsreligion* is sometimes used, though, I should note, the term and usage are pejorative (which I do not intend when translating the Qurʾānic *al-dīn* as "the law").

192 For a somewhat similar verse, where one must understand the nominal sentence as meaning "is like" or "is tantamount to," see Q 9:28, which states literally that "the associators are filth" (*innamā al-mushrikūn najas*).

193 As Sirry, *Scriptural polemics* 98, notes: "Even the word '*al-dīn*' is never used in the Qurʾān in its plural form, *adyān*, which indicates that religious life at the time was not yet fully reified." This has also been noted by Esack, *Qurʾān, liberation & pluralism* 145. However, both authors understand *al-dīn* primarily as "religion."

> Strive in God's way as He deserves. He has chosen you [pl.] and has not made the law (*al-dīn*) burdensome to you [pl.], because of the *milla*[194] of your [pl.] father Abraham. He has called you obedient (*al-muslimīn*) before and in this [pericope]. May the messenger be a witness over you [pl.] and may you [pl.] be witnesses over [all] the people. Uphold the prayer, give alms, and hold fast to God. He is your guardian—what an excellent guardian and helper!

Here, as in the verses treated above, it is natural to translate *al-dīn* as "the law," and *al-muslimīn*, the obedient, refers to the community of the believers who obey God, the messenger, and the law. Later in the verse, the key precepts of the law are mentioned—prayer, alms, and piety. Once again, Abraham is adduced as a prototypical figure who also supplies a lofty pedigree to the believers, whatever their background. What does the word "before" in "He has called you obedient (*al-muslimīn*) before and in this [pericope]" refer to? I would suggest that it harks back to verse 2:128 (supposing that it is earlier than Q 22:78), where Abraham and Ishmael pray God to make them obedient (*muslimayn*) to God, and, furthermore, to raise from their offspring (*dhurriyyatinā*) an "obedient nation" (*umma muslima*). This could be the earlier pericope mentioned in Q 22:78 where the current community of the believers is characterized as "the obedient." Moreover, this might be the "promise" (*milla*) given to Abraham: that a new, righteous, obedient nation following a gentile prophet will emerge. Through Abraham's promise and the new revelation given to Muḥammad, the gentiles will reach purity and, through purity, salvation.

7 Gentile Purity and Dietary Regulations

If the arguments of this book are accepted—that the Qurʾānic word *dīn* should be translated as "law," while *milla* might be rendered "faithfulness" or "promise"—what does it mean for those verses in the Qurʾān that state that the *dīn* and *milla* are to be followed *ḥanīfan*, gentile-ly?[195] More specifically:

194 Here, I understand the accusative *millata* as the "*motive and object* of the agent in doing the act, the *cause or reason* of his doing it," Wright, *A grammar*, ii 121. As elsewhere in the Qurʾān, I argue that the word *milla* should be understood as Abraham's word/promise of faithfulness and obedience toward God.

195 See, e.g., the following (Meccan) verses: Q 10:105: "Direct yourself toward the law (*dīn*) as a gentile (*ḥanīfan*)"; Q 16:123: "We revealed to you, 'Follow the *milla* of Abraham as a *ḥanīf*. He was not an associator' "; Q 30:30: "Direct yourself toward the law (*dīn*) as a gentile (*ḥanīfan*) according to the disposition (*fiṭrat*) of God that He has created."

what is the *gentile way of following the law*? Though this might sound surprising, even bizarre, at first blush, it is exactly this detail that provides clinching evidence for my case.

Holger Zellentin has studied the issue of the Qurʾān's legal discourse and its connections with Jewish and Christian literature comprehensively; the issue was surveyed in chapter 3 of this book.[196] He points out that the Qurʾānic dietary and purity regulations resemble what some Jewish and Christian texts of antiquity and late antiquity put forward as regards the gentiles. In Christian literature, we should start with the so-called Apostolic decree in Acts, which forbids i) food offered to idols (and perhaps idolatry more generally); ii) sexual "depravity"; iii) meat coming from animals that are not properly slaughtered ("whatever has been strangled"); and iv) blood. It is important to note that the category of "strangled" was understood more broadly to mean meat that was improperly slaughtered.[197] "Things strangled" signified, to many Christians, all sorts of carrion.

The Qurʾān, then, follows what the Christians and Jews[198] of the early era and late antiquity viewed as the gentile purity and dietary regulations. Important passages in the Qurʾānic communication on dietary regulation are 2:173, 5:1–5, 6:145–146, and 16:115.[199] The Qurʾān forbids carrion, pork, blood, and idol meat, and is skeptical of wine.[200] The injunction to avoid pork, in particular when compared with Qurʾān 5:5 ("the food of the People of the Book is lawful for you as your food is lawful for them"), suggests to me that, in addition to Jews, some Arabian Christians eschewed pork.[201] Importantly for the arguments of

196 Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*; "Judaeo-Christian legal culture", and *Law beyond Israel*. See also Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan* 88–107, for a comparison of the Qurʾānic law and Jewish law. He notes (p. 101): "Apart from the fact that Islam and Judaism share dietary prohibitions regarding certain animals, their resemblance in this area is minimal. The dietary laws of Islam—at least in the stratum reflected in the Qurʾan—are simple and few in number." However, Bar-Asher does not notice that the Qurʾānic dietary law follows the Jewish (and early Christian) conceptions of the food and purity regulations that the *gentiles* are expected to follow.

197 Zellentin, "Judaeo-Christian legal culture" 131, 136–137.

198 Zellentin, "Judaeo-Christian legal culture" 155, suggests that the Qurʾān is more in dialogue with Leviticus than with late antique Christian literature.

199 These passages are dealt with in Zellentin, "Judaeo-Christian legal culture" 149–158.

200 Though blanket prohibition of wine (and more generally alcohol) is nowadays associated with Islam, this does not represent the diversity of opinions and practices among medieval Muslims (or modern ones, for that matter); Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 278–287.

201 Cf. Sinai, "Processes of literary growth" 85–89, who suggests that Q 5:5 could be understood as abrogating the pork taboo of Q 5:3. However, Sinai does not address the fact that

this book, it also suggests that the believers did not distinguish them from the People of the Book on the basis of dietary praxes (an important and common way of drawing a group boundary in late antiquity).[202]

Though the Qurʾānic communication, I argue, suggests that there were actually many shared notions and norms between the gentiles and the People of the Book, it should be noted that, even in the case of disagreements, the Qurʾān does not necessarily see them as an insurmountable problem. Q 5:43–50 advises, in a somewhat winding prose, that Jews and Christians should follow their own laws. Of importance is, in particular, Q 5:48, which notes: "We have assigned a law (*shirʿatan*) and a path (*minhājan*) to each of you [pl.]." Above in this chapter, it was noted, moreover, that the "Constitution" proclaims: "The Jews have their law (*dīnuhum*), and the [gentile] believers theirs."

One interesting fact in the Qurʾānic purity regulations is the juxtaposition of a) food sacrificed to idols and b) divining arrows (*al-azlām*). As mentioned in, for example, Q 5:3, cited above, prohibited is "anything sacrificed on idol stones (*al-nuṣub*). [Moreover, you are forbidden] to draw divining arrows (*al-azlām*)—that is transgression." Moreover, these are connected to wine (*al-khamr*) and *al-maysir*, often translated as "gambling," for instance, in Q 2:219 and 5:90–91.[203] In chapter 3, it was pointed out that two late antique Christian texts, the *Didascalia* and the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, censure wine because it might have been used in libations to idols or false deities or because drinking wine and becoming intoxicated might lead to participating in eating idol meat or general depravity. The pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 8:19 connected this to the demons who lead humankind astray (or, more specifically, those people who already have decided to obey the demons). This devilish connection is also present in Q 5:90, which notes: "You who believe: Wine, *al-maysir*, idol stones (*al-anṣāb*), and divining arrows (*al-azlām*) are filth, Satan's doing (*rijsun min ʿamali l-shayṭān*)! Eschew them so that you might prosper."[204] Neither the *Homilies* nor the Qurʾān forbid wine outright but note that it can lead it to impure actions.

(the majority of) the Jews would not have eaten pork, so his reasoning is difficult to follow here, supposing that these verses were revealed in Medina; Medina had a sizeable Jewish population; and that the Qurʾānic references to the People of the Book (such as in Q 5:5) also included the Jews.

202 See also Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 351, for later Muslim views that Jewish and Christian meat was fine, whereas Zoroastrian meat was not.

203 Sinai, "Towards a redactional history," 383, understands Q 5:90–93 as supplementing and commenting on Q 5:3.

204 Note also the avoidance of wine in a supposedly pre-Islamic poem by a certain ʿĀmir al-Khaṣafī from the tribe of Muḥārib; he and his tribe appear to have been Christian. In the

In any case, the Qurʾānic injunction to avoid *al-maysir*, if understood generally as "gambling," appears original in this respect. But perhaps "gambling" gives a wrong sense. It must be noted that later Arabic lexicographers and Qurʾānic commentators had different explanations for the word *al-maysir*: clearly, they struggled with it, having lost the original context and the exact meaning of the word. Let me cite the entry of al-Fīrūzābādī:

> *Al-maysir*: a game with arrows (*al-qidāḥ*). [The verb used is] *yasara yaysiru*. Or it denotes the animal fit for slaughter (*al-jazūr*), which they [the people taking part in the *maysir*] would gamble (*yataqāmarūna*) on. If they wanted to play *maysir*, they would buy [together] one animal fit for slaughter (*al-jazūr*) on credit. They would slaughter it before they would play *maysir* and divide it into 28 pieces or 10 pieces. Then they would draw, one at a time [the arrows/lots used in this game], which [i.e., the arrows/lots] would have the names of each man, indicating victory of the allotted share to the one whose lot would be drawn. The one whose arrow/lot would be empty (*al-ghufl*), would have to pay [for the slaughtered animal that was bought on credit]. Or *al-maysir* denotes backgammon (*al-nard*) or any game of gambling.[205]

The pre-Islamic Arabic poetry suggests that the game of *maysir* was usually played with a camel being the sacrificed animal.[206] The famous poet ʿAlqama boasts, however, that he would participate even if the stake was a horse:

> And oft-times have I played *Maisir* when hunger burdened the gaming-arrow of *nab*ʿ-wood bound round with a sinew, marked with a notch by the teeth;

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poem, the poet addresses his tribe's enemy, saying that they had wrongfully waged war. Moreover: "And we were not with you at your debauch, when ye drank down (*khamrakum idh sharibtum*), bereft of reason—by God!—an ill-omened draught"; al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, i 625, trans. ii 258. Have we here an example of a pre-Islamic Arabic-speaking Christian person who eschewed wine (or at least pagan wine)?

205 al-Fīrūzābādī, *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, 4 vols., ii, Cairo: Muʾassasat al-Ḥalabī, n.d. 163.

206 See the explanation given by the editor, Lyall, in al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, ii 28, who notes that the game was "played with arrows by seven players for portions of a slaughtered camel (or camels, for the rules of the game frequently involved the slaughter and cutting-up of successive victims). The arrows, ten in number, of which only seven carried shares in the stakes and three were blanks, bore different names, and were marked with notches denoting their value. They were shuffled in a leathern quiver, and the shuffler and dealer (*mufīḍ al-qidāḥ*), having it in his power to influence the throw."

> If they played the game with horses (instead of camels) as the stake, I would play it for the same stake: and whatsoever people stake is bound to be paid.[207]

While the exact rules and context of *al-maysir* are somewhat lost, it appears that, in the context of the late antique and Qurʾānic gentile regulations, it makes sense to assume that the thing that the Qurʾān wanted to prohibit was not gambling in general but that *al-maysir* should also be understood as a form of idol meat.[208] That *al-maysir* is connected with slaughtering an animal and then gambling on it was, then, connected with sacrificing rites on cult stones, as Q 5:3 clearly suggests.

Connected with this, I would suggest that verse 2:256, regardless of its later uses and readings, should probably be understood in this context: "There is no compulsion in the law (*lā ikrāh fī al-dīn*).[209] Guidance and error have been distinguished from each other: Who rejects idols (*yakfur bi-l-ṭāghūt*)[210] and believes in God has grasped the firmest handhold, which will not break. God is hearing, knowing." In Q 2:256, as elsewhere, the law, *al-dīn*, is specifically connected with the rejection of idols and, by extension, idol meat and drink.

The Qurʾānic concern for purity extends to other things as well. Ablutions (attaining purity) before praying are mentioned in verse 5:6. Much as we could with hindsight detect a distinctly "Islamic" set of requirements for ritual purity (washing oneself before prayer) here, things were probably not so simple in the seventh century when the first followers of Muḥammad (and probably others in the audience as well) would have heard him recite his revelations. The late antique Christian texts mentioned above, the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and the *Didascalia*, contain references to Christian groups that practiced washing themselves before praying and after having sex. Similar injunctions are

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207 Al-Mufaḍḍal, *Mufaḍḍalīyāt*, ii 337 (trans. Lyall).

208 In this connection, it should be noted that the late antique Christian sources are also fixated on the idea that the Arabians ate unclean meat and worshipped idols, though this appears to have been a literary motif first and foremost; Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 297, 302.

209 Hence, not "There is no compulsion in *religion*," as is commonly translated (and indeed understood in medieval interpretative tradition, see Crone, Patricia, *God's rule: Government and Islam*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 373–382).

210 The Qurʾānic word *ṭāghūt* appears to be derived from the (Western Palestinian) Aramaic *ṭāʿūthā* or Ethiopic *ṭāʿot*, both meaning "idol;" see Kropp, "Beyond single words" 209. Once again, as in many other religious concepts that the Qurʾān uses, the connection with the surrounding Christian cultures is clear, though the exact process and manner of derivation is not known.

also attested in rabbinic texts.[211] In the case of verse 5:6 too, it is unclear if the Qurʾānic message actually puts forward norms and rules that would have set its community apart from Jews and Christians. Rather, the opposite could be the case: the Qurʾān accepts and acknowledges dietary and purity regulations that were perhaps widely followed in its context.[212]

The goal of this subsection was not to claim that Qurʾānic legal discourse and reasoning lacks originality or is fully borrowed from Jewish understanding of the gentile Noahide laws or the Christian Apostolic decree. There are varied legal ordinances and arguments in the Qurʾān that cannot be traced back to a Jewish or Christian exemplar. And, in any case, the Qurʾān presents a unique combination of injunctions. However, the point remains that the Qurʾānic prohibitions and instigations come close to Jewish and Christian understandings of those laws that the *gentiles* should follow. The Qurʾān prompts, for example, "Say, 'My Lord has guided me to a straight path, an upright *dīn*, the *milla* of Abraham, as a *ḥanīf*, he was not an associator'" (6:161). That the law should be followed *both* Abrahamic-ly *and* gentile-ly is not, in fact, incongruous. It is the very point. Once again, the eschatological context of the Qurʾānic kerygma has to be remembered (see also what follows). The gentiles of the Qurʾān are "eschatological gentiles"[213] who need to adopt dietary, purity, and other regulations and to recant idolatry, totally and completely, to be saved, since the end is near. The Jews and Christians have already accepted the law, though their law includes superfluous aspects and their beliefs sometimes include views that are incompatible with the Qurʾānic portrayal of stringent monotheism. In fact, Q 98:5 suggests that Jews as well as Christians would be better off if they followed the law in its gentile form. However, other passages, such as Q 5:43–48, note that Jews and Christians are free to (and indeed should) follow their own legal systems.

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211 See the detailed discussion in Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture* 86–105, with references to rabbinic literature as well.

212 Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture* 81, notes: "the entirety of the enhanced Judaeo-Christian lawcode that we find in the Qurʾān—including the prohibition of pork, and the injunction to wash after intercourse and before prayer, as well as abstinence during the menses—was equally endorsed by Judaeo-Christians within the Didascalia's community, as well as by the gentile followers of Jesus in the Clementine Homilies." See also Zellentin, *Law beyond Israel*, 118, n. 191: "I do not share the assumption of many previous scholars that all Christians must surely have eaten pork, which seems to be the major point of contention when trying to contextualize this verse [5:5]. Such an assumption does not square with the patristic records about Arabian practices, which, in the aforementioned case of Sozomen, discuss the conversion of Arabians to Christianity without mentioning any changes in their custom of avoiding pork."

213 I adopt the expression from Fredriksen, *Paul* 73.

It is, moreover, possible that the gentiles in the audience also had already adopted many of the norms and practices advocated by the Qurʾān: comparisons to late antique Christian rhetoric suggest that the claim that there are pagans who consume impure food and drink was a common, and exaggerated, literary motif.[214] In the Qurʾānic context, there was, in fact, a very small difference between the pagan way of slaughtering an animal and the Qurʾānic-ly sanctioned one, in which God's name would have to be mentioned and the slaughtering could not be made on cult stones of any sort (in any case, the evidence suggests that such stones were no longer widely used in the sixth and seventh centuries).[215]

It is, I suggest, in the context of dietary and purity regulations that the Qurʾānic portrayal of the community of the believers as "pure" should be understood. For instance, Q 35:18 notes that the prophet is sent to warn those who fear God, pray, and follow the purity regulations (*man tazakkā*). In verse 2:129, Abraham and Ishmael pray to God that He will send a later messenger (probably a reference to Muḥammad) to, among other things, "purify them." Q 9:108 speaks of a prayer place (*masjid*) that has been founded on *al-taqwā*, piety, remarking that "in it are men[216] who love to be pure (*yataṭahharū*); and God loves the pure."[217]

8 The Eschaton Postponed?

The Meccan strata of the Qurʾān are replete with apocalyptic eschatology. The point appears to have been to get the gentiles, who were already monotheists of sorts or at least henotheists, to accept the imminence of the end and the reality of the hereafter. This was to make salvation accessible to gentiles too.

214 Maxwell, "Paganism" 854–856; Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 23–41. Safaitic inscriptions, written by ancient (for the most part "pagan" and nomadic) people living in Jordan and Syria, already contain references to ritual cleansing and purity; see al-Jallad, *The religion and rituals* 44–46.

215 Compare this with the situation in the late antique Byzantine empire where, as Maxwell, "Paganism" 856, notes, there was a small difference between a "pagan" meat-centered feast and a "Christian" one.

216 In Arabic, this is *rijāl*, which is indeed gendered. This is related to the more general Qurʾānic androcentric style, see Hidayatullah, *Feminist edges*, 119–121, though, in fact, the Qurʾān often uses gender neutral words such as *al-nās* to refer to humankind (notwithstanding the fact that some translators of the Qurʾān render these words in a gendered way).

217 Q 35 is Mecca III, while Q 9 is Medinan, according to Nöldeke's scheme. For repentance in the Qurʾān, see also el-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic gospel traditions* 99–100.

Since this appears to have been achieved by the Medinan period—there is, after all, a much clearer sense of a community of believers in Medina—there was no longer so much need for this discourse. What is more, the Medinan environment had, it appears on the basis of the Qurʾān, a much stronger Jewish and Christian presence than Mecca; these People of the Book did not have any doubts about the eschaton and the afterlife, so other Qurʾānic themes could be pursued. Naturally, the Meccan pericopes of the Qurʾān did not disappear anywhere; they were memorized (probably also written down to an extent) and recited among the community.

However, though not numerous, there are some Medinan verses that proclaim the end times. Consider, for instance, Q 22:55: "Those who disbelieve, will be in doubt until the (last) moment comes suddenly upon them; or (*aw*)[218] the punishment of a barren day comes to them." The verse communicates a very pressing sense of the end and judgment that are coming, as does Q 3:9, which notes that "God will not break His promise" concerning the coming of the final judgment. More, but not completely, ambivalent is another Medinan verse, Q 33:63: "People ask you (sing.) about the (last) moment. Say: 'Knowledge of it is with God.' What could make you (sing.) know [it]? Perhaps (*la-ʿalla*) the (last) moment is near (*qarīban*)!" In Qurʾānic discourse, the expression *la-ʿalla* often denotes a wish (not just potentiality) that something may come true, so here too, the expectation of the impending end is present.

It seems to me that rather than supposing that the eschatological belief was watered down in the Medinan community, it lived on.[219] Establishing a community and expecting the eschaton are not incongruous, as the historian of early Christianity Paula Fredriksen has pointed out: "It is harder to wait and do nothing than it is to wait and do something";[220] a similar situation may have existed in the Medinan community in 1–11/622–632. Though a (or, *the*) community of believers was founded, with a more developed sense of regulations and requirements, and though it was waging a war against an earthly enemy, this does not exclude the likelihood that they were avidly waiting for the end times to begin. That Muḥammad did not, it appears, appoint a successor suggests that he and his community were expecting the end to come any minute.[221]

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218 The conjunction "or" is peculiar here, since one would expect these two things (the eschaton and the punishment) to be interrelated events. But *aw* rather than *wa* appears in all early manuscripts available at https://corpuscoranicum.de/handschriften/index/sure/22/vers/55.

219 Also, Costa, "Early Islam as a messianic movement" 47.

220 Fredriksen, *When Christians were Jews* 131.

221 Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 131.

To be a believer, according to the Qurʾānic social categorization, one had to accept the leadership and prophetical role of Muḥammad (at least to some degree). But is the hereafter more pluralistic? Could one attain paradise without accepting Muḥammad? It would seem so, though the Qurʾānic communication on this point is somewhat ambivalent.[222]

Much of the Medinan society (perhaps in contrast to that of Mecca)[223] were believers in God *and* the last day, whatever their background. Rather than propounding depictions of the approaching end, the Medinan Qurʾānic teaching puts forward discourses on the corporeal resurrection, the promise of paradise, and the threat of hell—talking points that would have been utterly acceptable to, not to say acknowledged by, Jews and Christians. Significantly, while the Medinan pericopes (contra the Meccan ones) often suggest that the majority of the Jews and Christians were unfit to be considered true believers and members of the prophet's community, late Qurʾānic verses (e.g., 2:62, 2:277, 3:199, 5:69) still promise a paradisal reward[224] to all and sundry among them provided that they fulfill the minimal requirements of believing in God and the eschaton and performing good deeds. In these verses, faith in the prophet Muḥammad's message and revelation is not even mentioned as a requirement for the paradisal rewards.[225] There are some verses which indicate the opposite—for instance, Q 9:80 says that God will not forgive those who do not believe in Muḥammad. Hence, the picture emerging from the Qurʾān is not completely clear, but it still seems to me that the eschatological promise of 2:62, 3:199, and 5:69 is meant to incorporate a larger group than simply those who believe in Muḥammad. In fact, looking at verse 9:79, it appears to contextualize 9:80 more, mentioning those who actively scorn and ridicule the believers. An important verse in this

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222 On this question and the later interpretive tradition, see the rich discussion in Reynolds, *Allah* 66–88, 135–154.

223 As I have pointed out in this book, the gentile monotheists and henotheists of western Arabia appear to have been skeptical of the final judgment and afterlife.

224 That the "reward" (*ajr*) mentioned in these verses is of the paradisal sort is clear from other Qurʾānic passages, such as 18:30–31, which explicitly elaborate that the reward signifies paradise. See also Donner, "From believers to Muslims" 19.

225 See Sachedina, "The Qurʾān and other religions," 297–305, for later developments in the Islamic interpretive tradition toward supersession and exclusive understandings of the afterlife. Note in particular p. 301: "in the sectarian milieu of seventh-century Arabia early Muslims encountered competing claims to authentic religiosity as posed by other monotheists like the Christians and Jews. This encounter, which produced extended interreligious polemics, led to the notion of the independent status of Islam as a unique and perfect version of the original Abrahamic monotheism." This is to the point, although I would add that this exclusivist discourse should perhaps be better placed in the eighth than the seventh century CE.

connection is Q 74:31, which appears to be a later (probably Medinan) addition to a Mecca I *sūra*.[226] In the verse, the People of the Book are depicted as alongside the believers and in contrast to the disbelievers:

> We have appointed angels as guardians of the fire. Their number is a test for those who disbelieve so that those who have received the Book may be certain and those who believe might increase in faith; and so that those who have received the Book and the believers would not have any doubts; and so that those who have sickness in their hearts and the disbelievers would say: "What does God mean by this simile?" Thus, God leads astray who He wills and guides who He wills. None knows the hosts of your Lord except He. And it [the fire] is a reminder to humankind.

According to this verse, on one side are the People of the Book and the believers: the coming judgment does not perplex them but only lessens their doubts. On the other side, there are the disbelievers and "those who have sickness in their hearts." This verse is one of the clear examples in the Qurʾān that the People of the Book are not categorized as disbelievers; rather, they are with the believers (and, as other verses propound, some of them are actually to be included in the social group of the believers).

A (somewhat) inclusivist afterlife would fit rather well some of the ancient and late ancient semi-universalist discourses of the last judgment, according to which salvation was not merely constrained to the in-group.[227] The gentiles who fear God will earn a portion of heaven, opined the rabbis (e.g., Sanhedrin 105a). An earlier Jew, the apostle Paul, develops a prolonged argument of Israel's sin, redemption, and their place vis-à-vis the gentiles in Romans 9–11, contending that "all Israel" will be saved and "the full number of" gentiles will come to Zion to experience and profit from the eschaton (Romans 11:25–26), though it is unclear whether or not Paul thought that belief in Christ Jesus is required. Origen (d. 254) also argued for an inclusivist afterlife, even letting, in

226 The verse is significantly longer and different in content than the verses before and after it; Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorâns* i 88.

227 Jewish and Christian scholars of the ancient and late ancient world sometimes opined that the people of the other faiths will receive at least a portion of the eschatological reward. Some of these scholars were of the opinion that the "others" would convert (whatever that might mean in context); others remarked that a full conversion would not be required. For examples in Second Temple Judaism (including the Jesus group), see Fredriksen, *Paul* 5–7, 26–31, 73–77, 160–164.

the end, Satan there—a doctrine condemned as heretical by the Second Council of Constantinople (553 CE).[228] The Qurʾānic promise of salvation being a multi-group enterprise is remarkable, but it is not, then, completely novel. This difference of present and future characterizations (critical comments toward the "others" in the context of this life but optimistic notions about their salvation at the eschaton) is attested in Jewish and Christian literature and theology as well.

9 Excursus: Arabic Historiography and the Medinan Era

The blurred boundaries are not entirely absent from the biographies of the prophet even as regards the Medinan era. It was indeed Ibn Hishām who decided to include the "Constitution" of Medina in his work. Moreover, there are some narratives mentioning Jews *qua* Jews as members of the in-group, though it is more frequent to see Medinan Jews portrayed as a clearly distinct group from Muḥammad's believers.[229] There are also numerous interesting contacts between the communities, though they are often hostile. Both Muḥammad and Abū Bakr are portrayed as having gone to a (Medinan?) *bet midrash* to argue with the rabbinic scholars there.[230] More benevolent contacts can be seen in the fact that Arabic literature notes that some of Muḥammad's wives were Jewish (Ṣafiyya bint Ḥuyayy ibn Akhṭab and Rayḥāna bint Shamʿūn ibn Zayd) and, at least one, Christian (the concubine Mary the Copt).[231] If this is based on real recollections of events and figures, it signifies that not only were the prophet's followers composed of Jews, Christians, and gentiles, his family was too. Though the later literature notes that Ṣafiyya and Rayḥāna converted to Islam, there are reasons to doubt these conversion stories.[232] Significant in this connection is also the case of the famous Ubayy ibn Kaʿb, who is, in the Arabic sources, described as a *ḥibr* (Jewish rabbi, though a Christian religious

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228 Reynolds, *Allah* 149. That the Second Council of Constantinople had to take issue with this stance shows that it was debated and, in all likelihood, embraced by some Christians.

229 See, e.g., Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 334: though a Medinan Jew is first to spot Muḥammad when he is doing his emigration from Mecca to Medina, the former is quoted as having made a distinction between the Jews and those who expect Muḥammad (the Khazraj and Aws). For an insightful study on the narratives on Jewish-Muslim (often hostile) interactions in the Medinan era, see Roohi, "The murder of the Jewish chieftain," who argues that many of the stories belong to the stuff of fantasy.

230 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 383–384, 388–389; Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qurʾan* 16.

231 See Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 438–439.

232 Ibrahim, *Conversion to Islam* 70–71.

scholar could also be so denoted) before his conversion; later, he was one of the companions who collected a (pre-ʿUthmānic) version of the Qurʾān.[233]

Another interesting anecdote takes place at the battle of Uḥud, where a certain learned Jew, called Mukhayrīq, fights on the side of Muḥammad's community and dies. Only a few sources assume that he converted before his death: most sources present him as a Jew, though Ibn Hishām makes the implausible claim that he rejected the Sabbath.[234] Toward the end of the narrative, Muḥammad is quoted as saying: "Mukhayrīq is the best of the Jews." According to the story, Mukhayrīq, the rabbi-cum-fighter, bequeathed his wealth to Muḥammad and his community.[235] Mukhayrīq is a reversed God-fearer, so to speak, in the story: a Jew who associates with the gentile monotheists. Though not becoming a full member of the Muslim group (a category that the biographical literature retrojects to the time of the prophet), he fights for it and bequeaths his earthly belongings to it.

The double-affiliated Mukhayrīq is cited as a positive example. Usually, however, such group bending or crossing figures represent a threat or a negative model in the *sīra* narratives. No one exemplifies this better than the leader of the Khazraj tribe, ʿAbdallāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl. Though he is notionally a Muslim, on the side of Muḥammad and his followers, he sometimes schemes with their opponents—according to the *sīra* reports, that is—the Jews.[236] He is a paradigmatic *munāfiq*, a hypocrite who only feigns loyalty and belief. In the famous *ḥadīth al-ifk*, the account of the lie, that is, the narrative about the events that led some people wrongly to accuse ʿĀʾisha, the prophet's wife, of infidelity, ʿAbdallāh ibn Ubayy is described as one of the most vehement spreaders of these false rumors.[237] Despite all this, he dies a Muslim, with the prophet praying over his grave. The tales of his life form a narrated cluster of overlapping, hybrid identities that exist in tension. ʿAbdallāh ibn Ubayy is a liminal Muslim, now affiliating with Muḥammad, other times with the Jews.

Narratives on Ethiopia and the Negus extend to the Medinan period. ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, who went, so we are told, to Ethiopia as an envoy of the Quraysh during the 610s CE to ask the Negus to relinquish Muḥammad's believers to them,

233 The case of Ubayy ibn Kaʿb is discussed in Ibrahim, *Conversion to Islam* 136–137.

234 Implausible, that is, if Mukhayrīq represents an actual historical figure. On Mukhayrīq and his religious identity, see also Roohi, "The murder of the Jewish chieftain" 10–12.

235 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 578, trans. Guillaume 384; the story is also in al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* 262–263, trans. Faizer Rizvi (ed.), *The life of Muḥammad: Al-Wāqidī's Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, trans. Rizvi Faizer, Amal Ismail and Abdulkader Tayob, London: Routledge, 2013, 128.

236 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 653.

237 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 734.

goes to Ethiopia again. In the narrative, he is still a polytheist and opponent of the prophet, siding with the Meccan Quraysh, though he is later known as an important general of the Muslim armies. After the battle of the trench (*al-khandaq*), he opines that it is better to go to Ethiopia and stay there and sit the war between Muḥammad and the Quraysh out. While in Ethiopia, ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ spots ʿAmr ibn Umayya, the prophet Muḥammad's envoy there. ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ asks the Negus for permission to kill his namesake, but the Negus vehemently denies this, noting that Muḥammad is a true prophet who has received the same great law (*al-nāmūs*) that has come to Moses. Hearing this, ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ undergoes a moment of fundamental change, and decides to convert to Islam: "I asked him [the Negus] if he would accept my allegiance to Muhammad in Islam, and he stretched out his hand and I gave my allegiance."[238] Not only is the Ethiopian king a Christian-cum-Muslim, he can act on Muḥammad's behalf and apparently accept conversions to Islam. Moreover, the connections with Muḥammad's believers and the Negus continue to exist long after the emigrations, during the Meccan period, there. Though it strains credibility, from a historical point of view, that the Ethiopian king would have given his time or energy to hear about an Arabian prophet, much less to acknowledge him, it is certainly possible that some of Muḥammad's believers went to Ethiopia. Once there, they would have had long-lasting and intimate contacts with the Ethiopian Christians.

In fact, the same report notes that the prophet had sent ʿAmr ibn Umayya to Ethiopia specifically "concerning Jaʿfar and his companions."[239] That is to say that ʿAlī's brother Jaʿfar and a group of other Arabian believers are still lingering in Christian Ethiopia, even after the battle of the trench, when Muḥammad's community was well established in Medina. Since no details of their stay are given in the literary evidence, how are we to imagine their stay in Ethiopia over all these years (either in historical or literary terms)? If, as the narratives tell us, Jaʿfar and the others went there in the fifth year of Muḥammad's mission in Mecca (ca. 615 CE), and if they were still there after the *khandaq* battle (ca. 5/626–627), this would mean that a community of Arabian believers stayed in Ethiopia over ten years. What did they do all that time? Where did they live? Where did they pray? Which scripture did they read (or hear)? I have suggested in this book that some believers in Muḥammad's community self-identified, in fact, as Christians. The narratives about the Ethiopian exile might be a memory about these blurred lines in the early period. If there is any authentic informa-

238 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 717, trans. Guillaume 484.
239 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 716 trans. Guillaume 484.

tion in the stories of Jaʿfar and his companions in Ethiopia, one would suppose that they prayed in churches alongside the Ethiopian Christians.

It was noted in the previous chapter that the Arabic narratives on the Meccan period, in particular the trip to Ethiopia and back, display the affinity, but also the threat, of Christianity with Muḥammad's believers. This is not entirely absent in the stories dealing with the Medinan period either, though they usually concentrate on discussing and drawing a boundary vis-à-vis the Jews (culminating in the violent massacre of the Jewish tribe of Banū Qurayẓa). The Christian aspect is present in, for example, the story about the history of the call to prayer.[240] First, Muḥammad entertains the idea that, according to the Jewish custom, a trumpet should be blown when it was prayer time. This is carried out for some time, until Muḥammad rejects the idea. Then, he orders the use of clappers (*nawāqīs*), as was the wont of Near Eastern Christians. After this, one ʿAbdallāh ibn Zayd ibn Thaʿlaba has a dream in which the proper call to prayer is told to him. The prophet hears about this dream, acknowledges it as an authentic vision from God, and orders his community to call to prayer by using the human voice only. This is a remarkable story, which portrays Muḥammad's believers trying out the practices of both Jews and Christians. The true vision indicating how the call to prayer should be given is not even received by Muḥammad but, as far as we know, a minor member of the community, ʿAbdallāh ibn Zayd ibn Thaʿlaba.

The delegation of the Christians of al-Najrān should also be mentioned here.[241] Though the narrative as presented by Ibn Hishām endeavors to draw a firm line between the Christians and the Muslims, and, moreover, Ibn Hishām appends a long passage where he adduces arguments and Qurʾānic passages ostensibly proving the falsity of Christianity,[242] what sticks out amid all this is the fact that, in the narrative, the Christians of al-Najrān insist that they are *muslimūn*, submitters to God.[243] Moreover, their deputation is depicted in glowing terms: they are, for example, knowledgeable about religion. Not only that, but they prayed in the prophet's mosque in Medina, the prophet ordering that they should be free to do so.[244] Though the narrative ends in a Christological dispute between Muḥammad and the Christians, the story fails to portray Christians and Muslims as wholly other.

240 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 347.

241 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 401–403. On this, see also Ibrahim, *Conversion to Islam* 152–153.

242 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 403–410.

243 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 403.

244 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 402. As we will see in chapters 7 and 8, there is extensive evidence of Jews, Christians, and Arabian gentile believers sharing a place of prayer.

10 Conclusions on the Medinan Era

In this book I have tried to argue that the community and message of Muḥammad fits seamlessly into the late antique world of Arabia. Rather than supposing that early Islam was *sui generis*, from a historical perspective it makes more sense to assume that new phenomena and social groups arise in contexts where the group beliefs and practices are in relationship with those present in the time and place already.[245] The "Constitution" and the Qur'ān's willingness to accommodate and include Jews and Christians in the believer group only makes sense if a) there were Jews and Christians around; b) they themselves (or some of them) were willing to join the group, not seeing it as totally alien.

Much as the early Jesus movement comprised, in the first century CE, both Jewish and gentile members, the community of believers around Muḥammad consisted of gentiles, Jews, and Christians.[246] This somewhat inclusive situation did not really change in Medina, according to the Qur'ānic evidence and the "Constitution,"[247] though there is more criticism of the People of the Book in the Medinan strata. Yet, there is no sign of a specific or formal conversion rite that people should undergo to join the group, nor is there a demand to forsake earlier ethno-religious identities.[248] Granted, Medinan Qur'ānic communication is, at times, suspicious of the "Jews" and "Christians" as broader social categories,[249] but the suspicion is not total. Even the very latest strata of the Qur'ān, such as *sūra* 5, does not indicate that Muḥammad's community would have "parted" from the Jews and Christians. Naturally, since we do not really have identifiable texts produced by these Jews and Christians at the time of the prophet Muḥammad, with the possible exception of the poem by al-Aʿshā,[250]

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245 Stark, Rodney, "Why religious movements succeed or fail: A revised general model," in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 11 (1996), 133–146, at 136, has noted that new religious movements are more likely to succeed if they "*retain cultural continuity with conventional faith*(*s*) *of the societies in which they seek converts*" (emphasis in the original).

246 Rather surprisingly, Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 394–396, disagrees with this idea, though the evidence mustered in his book seems to me to support it rather than disprove it. The disagreement appears to be the result of the insistence, on the part of Tannous, on treating social categories such as "Christian" and "Muslim" as clear and stable, though the categories might themselves include a variety of different people, with their manifold beliefs, praxes, and ideas. However, I have argued in this book that the social categories should also be analyzed and problematized.

247 *Pace*, for example, Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qur'an* who suggests that Islam and Judaism parted ways during the Medinan period.

248 Donner, "From believers to Muslims" 49.

249 Lindstedt, "'One community'" 367–368.

250 After his life, we have some texts that seem to be produced by such members of the community of the believers, as I discuss in the following chapters.

it is difficult to say how they themselves understood their affiliation with the believer movement: perhaps some of them only considered themselves allies or auxiliary members. But the Qurʾān and the "Constitution" appear to suggest more than that: these Muḥammad-believing Jews and Christians were indeed part of the community.[251]

The eschatological urgency, indeed the already-arrived presence of the eschaton, of the Meccan Qurʾānic revelations is toned down somewhat in the Medinan strata, though it is still present and operative. The belief in the last day is one of the core principles of the community in the Qurʾān and the "Constitution" of Medina. The threat of hell and the promise of paradise are at the center of the Qurʾānic proclamation, and late key verses (Q 2:62, 5:69) reiterate that the believers, whatever their background—gentile, Jewish, Christian, or Sabian—are eligible for paradise. In the Medinan pericopes, the significance of the law (*al-dīn*) and its observance (*al-islām*)—which is synonymous with obeying God and the prophet—is underscored. The Jews and Christians, within (and without?) Muḥammad's community of believers, ought to follow their own dietary and purity regulations, while the gentile believers should take up the law *ḥanīfan*, gentile-ly (in any case, Q 5:5 notes that the gentile conception of licit and illicit foods are more or less the same as those of the People of the Book). The community of the believers fights against a common enemy: this enemy, however, cannot be simply equated with the People of the Book. Moreover, fighting or conquests do not seem to be related to any eschatological or imperial drama in the Qurʾān[252] (though this idea might be prevalent in the later, but still emerging, Islamic community after the death of the prophet). However, the eschaton was still deemed to be at hand, though the urgency of it in the Qurʾānic portrayal is not so pronounced as in Meccan pericopes. The fact that there were early and rancorous disputes about the *khalīfa*, heir or follower, of the prophet after his death seems to denote that he did not pick one, which I take to mean that he thought that the world was going to end before his demise.[253]

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251 This is also suggested by texts written by Jews and Christians themselves after the life of Muḥammad; see chapters 7 and 8.

252 *Pace* Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire*. The only possible references I can see to such a notion in the Qurʾān are verses 30:2–5, but this does not suffice as evidence for the more general "conquest eschatological" outlook of the community.

253 Following Shoemaker, *The death of a prophet* 178–188, 195–198. It should be noted that the eschatological outlook of the early community did not die out with the first generation but continued strong throughout the first/seventh century and (in a more muted form) later. See, e.g., Cook, David, *Studies in Muslim apocalyptic*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2002; Lindstedt, "The last Roman emperor."

When the prophet Muḥammad breathed his last, what he left behind was a community of gentile, Jewish, and Christian believers. People from different ethno-linguistic and religious backgrounds had joined the movement. Soon after his death, the Arabian believers conquered much of the Near East, North Africa, and Central Asia. But the social categorizations were still in a state of flux. The next two chapters look at two different but interlinked topics: first, how people who did not become part of the community of the believers viewed it and its prophet; and, second, how the community itself began, in the second/eighth century, to articulate and understand its distinctive identity as "Muslims." Through this, somewhat slow, process, a new social category was born.

CHAPTER 7

Near-Contemporary Non-Arabic Views on the Prophet and His Community

1 Near-Contemporary Non-Arabic Views on the Prophet's Community

In this chapter, I survey three non-Arabic witnesses on Muḥammad that buttress the arguments presented in previous chapters about the content and context of his mission. Two of them were written by Christians; one is Jewish. They are presented in a rough chronological order. The texts were written a few decades after the death of the prophet. This chapter concentrates on texts that mention and discuss Muḥammad and his earliest followers; in the next, I will also adduce non-Arabic texts that discuss the early Islamic conquests and other events in the first century AH.[1] While all of the texts are rather well known to scholars, they are worth citing and discussing here in the context of the arguments I have presented in this book.

1.1 Armenian Chronicle of 661

The *Armenian Chronicle of 661*, ascribed to one Sebeos, was written in Armenian in the 660s.[2] It is the earliest non-Arabic source giving us substantial information on Muḥammad and his movement. The *Armenian Chronicle of 661* is, then, a very significant source for early Islamic history, not least because it mentions that its information is based on eyewitnesses who were taken as captives by the Arabians during the early conquests.[3] That is to say, not only was the whole of the *Armenian Chronicle of 661* composed soon after the death of Muḥammad, it reproduces an even earlier report, written down perhaps in the 640s. The *Chronicle* has been highly praised as a source of authentic and valuable information by scholars.[4]

1 For Christian sources on early Islam, see Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 364–385. The classic treatment, of utmost importance, is Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*.

2 Sebeos, *The Armenian history attributed to Sebeos*, trans. Robert W. Thomson, commentary by James Howard-Johnston, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000.

3 Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 63.

4 Sarris, *Empires of faith* 261; Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 62–63.

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The passage describes the conquest of Jerusalem by the army of the Roman emperor Heraclius in the late 620s and the expelling of the Jews living there. It then goes on to mention the prophet Muḥammad:

> At that time a man appeared from among these same sons of Ishmael, whose name was Muhammad, a merchant, who appeared to them as if by God's command as preacher, as the way of truth. He taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, because he was especially learned and well informed in the history of Moses. Now because the command was from on high, through a single command they all came together in unity of religion, and abandoning vain cults, they returned to the living God who had appeared to their father Abraham. Then Muhammad established laws for them: not to eat carrion, and not to drink wine, and not to speak falsely, and not to engage in fornication. And he said, "With an oath God promised this land to Abraham and his descendants after him forever. And he brought it about as he said in the time when he loved Israel. Truly, you are now the sons of Abraham, and God is fulfilling the promise to Abraham and his descendants on your behalf. Now love the God of Abraham with a single mind, and go and seize your land, which God gave to your father Abraham, and no one will be able to stand against you in battle, because God is with you" … And when all the remnants of the people of the children of Israel assembled, they joined together, and they became a large army.[5]

A number of aspects should be highlighted in this passage. It is an important example of the many rather positive depictions of the prophet and the believers' movement: Muḥammad received his revelations and mission "as if by God's command as preacher, as the way of truth." The text furthermore accepts that "the command was from on high." It buttresses the idea that I have been putting forward in the previous chapters: that Muḥammad and his followers saw themselves as a (mostly) gentile movement, though with an Abrahamic lineage. Sebeos correctly identifies the gentile dietary and purity regulation adopted and proclaimed in the Qur'ān: rejection of idols, fornication, carrion, and wine. However, this is not a text contemporary with the prophet. That it cites Muḥammad as enjoining the believers to conquer Palestine should, I would suggest, probably be understood as reflecting the date of the author of the text. By time of the writing of this text (and its source), Jerusalem, and Palestine more gener-

5 I quote the translation from Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 64–65, which can also be found in his *The apocalypse of empire* 155.

ally, had been conquered by the believers, so it would have made sense for the author to suppose that this aligned with Muḥammad's mission and kerygma.

The fact that the text suggests that some Jews joined Muḥammad's believers in the movement and, indeed, the conquest, could at first blush be dismissed as Christian anti-Jewish polemic. However, it aligns with what other sources have to say. The "Constitution" of Medina, as noted above, categorizes the Jews of the partaking tribes as full and equal members of the community alongside the gentile believers. The text also underlines the importance of the participation of all the group members, including the Jews, in fighting for the community. The *Armenian Chronicle of 661* is probably mistaken to suggest that only Jews joined the gentile believers around Muḥammad (and the caliphs after him); in all likelihood, many Christians did too. Indeed, John bar Penkaye, who wrote his work *Ktābā d-rēsh mellē*, "the Book of Main Points," around the 680s, indicates this, noting the presence of the Christians in the conquering armies too.[6] Taken together, John bar Penkaye's *Ktābā d-rēsh mellē* and the *Armenian Chronicle of 661* suggests that there were Jewish and Christian members in the community of the believers and their fighting units. Nothing suggests that they had to recant their former ethno-religious identities. This naturally continues the social categorizations that were operative during the life of the prophet Muḥammad and of which the Qurʾān and the "Constitution" are evidence.

1.2 *The* Doctrina Iacobi Nuper Baptizati

The *Doctrina Iacobi Nuper Baptizati* ("Teaching of Jacob, the Recently Baptized") is a Christian apologetic text that mentions Muḥammad and his community in passing. In previous scholarship, this Greek text was dated to the 630s–640s, but Sean Anthony has argued, in my opinion credibly, that we should rather date the text somewhat later, to the 670s or thereabouts.[7] Mehdy Shaddel has furthermore pointed out that the exposé of the prophet in the *Doctrina Iacobi* should not be taken as an eyewitness account.[8]

6 Penn, Michael P., *When Christians first met Muslims: A sourcebook of the earliest Syriac writings on Islam*, Oakland CA: University of California Press, 2015, 92; Donner, Fred M., "Living together: Social perceptions and changing interactions of Arabian believers and other religious communities during the Umayyad period," in Andrew Marsham (ed.), *The Umayyad world*, London: Routledge, 2021, 23–38, at 27. This passage will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

7 Anthony, Sean W., "Muḥammad, the keys to Paradise, and the *Doctrina Iacobi*: A late antique puzzle," in *Der Islam* 91 (2014), 243–265; *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 41–58.

8 Shaddel, Mehdy, "*Doctrina Iacobi*, the rise of Islam, and the forced baptism of the Jews (forthcoming)." See also Sarris, *Empires of faith* 260–261 and Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 37–39, who emphasize the importance of this text.

The text narrates the story of a Jew called Jacob who has been forcibly baptized to Christianity. Though compelled to convert, upon reading the Christian scripture Jacob finds much to like about his new religion.[9] The passage that concerns early Islam "quotes" another figure, a Jew called Abraham, who writes in a letter (I quote the recent translation by Stephen Shoemaker):

> Abraham wrote to me that a false prophet has appeared. Abraham writes: "When [Sergius] the *candidatus* was killed by the Saracens, I was in Caesarea, and I went by ship to Sykamina. And they were saying, 'The *candidatus* has been killed,' and we Jews were overjoyed. And they were saying, 'A prophet has appeared, coming with the Saracens, and he is preaching the arrival of the anointed one who is to come, the Messiah.' And when I arrived in Sykamina, I visited an old man who was learned in Scriptures, and I said to him, 'What can you tell me about the prophet who has appeared with the Saracens?' And he said to me, groaning loudly, 'He is false, for prophets do not come with a sword and a war-chariot. Truly, the things set in motion today are deeds of anarchy, and I fear that somehow the first Christ that came, whom the Christians worship, was the one sent by God, and instead of him we will receive the Antichrist. Truly, Isaiah said that we Jews will have a deceived and hardened heart until the entire earth is destroyed. But go, master Abraham, and find out about this prophet who has appeared.' And when I, Abraham, investigated thoroughly, I heard from those who had met him that one will find no truth in the so-called prophet, only the shedding of human blood. In fact, he says that he has the keys of paradise, which is impossible." These things my brother Abraham has written from the East.[10]

Though we are in the context of literature, the text still contains an early testimony to how the prophet Muḥammad was viewed by Near Eastern Christians. The *Doctrina* connects his career with the shedding of blood, conquests, and deception, perhaps even painting him as the Antichrist or his harbinger. However, this is not all there is to the text. Interesting features are the clear eschatological tenor of the message ascribed to Muḥammad, including the preaching of the Messiah as well as the description of Muḥammad as having the keys to paradise.[11]

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9 Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 41–42.

10 Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 39–40.

11 Costa, "Early Islam as a messianic movement" 49–50; Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 41.

Sean Anthony has probed the image of the prophet Muḥammad as a/the bearer of the keys of paradise in detail and connected it with late antique Christian eschatological discourse. For instance, the Syriac Ephrem (d. 373 CE) mentions the "keys of paradise" in an eschatological vein. Anthony writes: "Hence, the *Doctrina*, by casting the Saracen prophet as making claims to the keys of Paradise, attributes to him mutatis mutandis not so much claims to apostolic authority over the Kingdom of Heaven as, rather, a promise to his followers of eschatological salvation."[12]

To summarize, the *Doctrina Iacobi Nuper Baptizati* is a rather early, though not contemporary, text corroborating some characteristics in my reconstruction of the message and community of the prophet Muḥammad. His mission and community (also after his life) subscribed to eschatological beliefs. If we take the *Doctrina* to reflect more its time of composition, possibly the 670s, than the events it purports to portray, then we could posit that the eschatological stance of the believer group was still alive decades after the death of Muḥammad. Interestingly, too, the text suggests that Jesus was to play a role in this eschatological drama.[13]

1.3 *The* Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn ben Yōḥay

The next text to be surveyed, *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn ben Yōḥay*, is an apocalyptic Jewish text written in Hebrew. The dating of this text is notoriously difficult: it appears to contain an early (seventh-century CE?) layer, which was later updated to take into account the ʿAbbāsid revolution of 129–132/747–750.[14] The

12 Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 48.

13 Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 43.

14 On the text and its context, see Hughes, "South Arabian 'Judaism'" 36–37; Lewis, Bernard, "An apocalyptic vision of Islamic history," in *BSOAS*, 2/13 (1950), 308–338; Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 98–99; *A prophet has appeared* 138–143; Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 78–85. Though we have no exact information who wrote it, the geographical place of origin for the beginning of the text is probably Palestine, while the rest of the text might have been authored in Iraq or Syria, as Lewis, "An apocalyptic vision" 328–330, notes. Recently, Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 58, n. 120, has questioned this early date of the text: "The text speaks vividly of historical events from the beginning of the Islamic conquests to the Abbasid revolution in 132/750, so I do not regard this early date as defensible. In all likelihood, the Jewish apocalypse dates to the period after the Abbasid ascendancy. In my view, the text must be read in light of the Jewish millenarians and messianic movements of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid period." While this is possible, it has to be remembered that apocalypses are often layered texts, with later material appended to an earlier stratum. Though the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn ben Yōḥay* definitely received its final form in the early Abbasid period, it does not mean that the beginning of the text could not be very early. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 138, dates the text to ca. 660 CE.

text is interesting in many ways: for instance, it mentions “the second king” of the “Ishmaelites” (probably the caliph ʿUmar) as a lover of Israel and as the one who restores the temple by building a place of worship on the Temple Mount, “over the Foundation Stone.”[15] This piece of information seems to give some evidence for the idea that at least some prayer places established by the believers were inclusive spaces; this appears to have been the case with the Dome of the Rock, which is later built on the same place as the first prayer place built by ʿUmar or another early caliph. The narrative in the early layer of the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn ben Yōḥay*, discussed here, is so upbeat as regards the Arabian believers that it might even be suggested that it was produced by a Jew that affiliated with the movement.[16]

As the background to this text, it must be noted that the early Islamic era brought about a significant change in the status of Palestinian Jews—for the better, it seems. This is because the Byzantines did not allow Jews to reside in Jerusalem. Jerusalem had started to become a Christian domain in the fourth and fifth centuries CE: “Apart from a possible small Samaritan community, Jerusalem was transformed into a monolithic Christian city by the sixth century. Its population consisted of a mixture of native inhabitants and Christians from abroad who, following their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, settled temporarily or permanently in the Holy City.”[17] This all changed with the coming of the Arabian believers, who did not impose such restrictions on Jews.

The passage that concerns us presently is the one mentioning the prophet Muḥammad, though not naming him explicitly. The text presents itself as a vision of the Rabbi Shimʿōn (the pronoun “he” in the passage below refers to him). The vision is about two kingdoms: Rome, which is called “Edom” and “Esau,” and the early Muslim polity, which is called “Ishmael.” I quote the translation by Stephen Shoemaker:[18]

> These are the secrets that were revealed to Rabbai Shimʿōn b. Yōḥai while he was hiding in a cave on account of Caesar king of Edom [Rome]. And he stood in prayer for forty days and forty nights and he began thus: “Lord God, how long will you spurn the prayer of your servant?” Immediately the secrets and hidden things of the eschaton were revealed to him …

15 Lewis, “An apocalyptic vision” 324–325; Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 140.

16 For Jews affiliating with the Arabian believers’ movement, see, in particular, the “Constitution” of Medina discussed in the previous chapter and the passages from the *Armenian Chronicle of 661* and Maximus the Confessor, discussed in the next.

17 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 125.

18 For another translation, consult Lewis, “An apocalyptic vision” 321–322.

> When he understood that the kingdom of Ishmael would come upon [Israel], he began to say, “Is it not enough, what the wicked kingdom of Edom has done to us that [we must also endure] the kingdom of Ishmael?” And immediately Metatron the prince of the Presence answered him and said: “Do not be afraid, mortal, for the Holy One, blessed be He, is bringing about the kingdom of Ishmael only for the purpose of delivering you from that wicked one [i.e., Edom/Rome]. He shall raise up over them a prophet in accordance with His will, and he will subdue the land for them; and they shall come and restore it with grandeur. Great enmity will exist between them and the children of Esau [Rome].”
>
> Rabbi Shimʿōn answered him and said: “How will they be our salvation?” He [Metatron] said to him, “Did not the prophet Isaiah say: ‘When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs …’ [Isaiah 21:7]? Why does the one riding a donkey come before the one riding a camel? Should he not have said instead, ‘the one riding a camel, the one riding the donkey’? No, but rather when the one who rides on the camel comes [i.e., Muḥammad], through him the kingdom of the one who rides on a donkey [Zechariah 9:9] has emerged.” Another interpretation of the rider on the donkey is that when he comes he is [also] riding on a donkey. Therefore, they will be the salvation of Israel like the salvation of the one riding on a donkey.

As in the two Christian texts cited above, in this, too, the mission and movement of Muḥammad is interpreted through an eschatological lens. The Christian *Doctrina Iacobi* noted that Muḥammad proclaimed the coming of the messiah (but rejected these as false hopes). The Jewish *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn*, on the other hand, fully accepts the messianic status of the movement: the Arabian believers are a force for good, salvation for Israel, and harbingers of the eschaton. The depiction about the prophet Muḥammad is very optimistic: he has been raised by God according to His will and he is the rider on a camel, the herald of the messiah to come or perhaps the messiah himself.[19] The reference in the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn* is to Isaiah 21:6–9:

19 Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 141–143, identifies, perhaps too straightforwardly in my opinion, Muḥammad as the messiah in this text. Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions* 83, also accepts the idea that “some Jews might have considered Muhammad … to be the Messiah.” While this is certainly plausible, the end of the passage quoted from *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn* is somewhat equivocal about whether or not Muḥammad is the messiah or rather the messiah’s herald.

For thus the Lord said to me:
"Go, post a lookout,
let him announce what he sees.
When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs,
riders on donkeys, riders on camels,
let him listen diligently,
very diligently."
Then the watcher called out:
"Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord,
continually by day,
and at my post I am stationed
throughout the night.
Look, there they come, riders,
horsemen in pairs!"
Then he responded,
"Fallen, fallen is Babylon;
and all the images of her gods
lie shattered on the ground."

In this prophetic vision from the Hebrew Bible, the riders on camels signify the fall of Babylon (Rome, in the interpretation of the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn*) and idolatry.[20] The *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn* understands Muḥammad and his followers as such agents. The "salvation of the rider on an ass" at the end of the passage cited from the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn* refers to the redeemer, the messiah, who is further mentioned in, for example, Zechariah 9:9:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

As is well known, early Christians took these passages as proof texts that Jesus had been such a messiah. However, this is naturally not the view of our text, the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn*, which raises Muḥammad into a messianic position.

20 As Lewis, "An apocalyptic vision" 324, notes, this passage from Isaiah has always been "a popular one with apocalyptic authors."

These aspects provide evidence for a very early date for at least this passage of the text. While the text does not provide much information on Muḥammad, it does corroborate the notion that his mission was viewed as inaugurating the end times. This is by now a familiar idea to the reader of this book. What is novel here is that this was the view of some Jews as well. The conquests by his followers are also interpreted as thoroughly positive.

Though related to post-Muḥammadan times, one of the interesting facets of the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn* is that it mentions the "second king" (probably the caliph ʿUmar) as having restored the temple in Jerusalem. The *Armenian Chronicle of 661* attributed to Sebeos furnishes interesting information as regards this building:

> I will also speak about the plots of the seditious Jews, who when they secured an alliance with the Hagarenes [Arabians] for a little while, devised a plan to rebuild the Temple of Solomon. And when they found the spot that is called the Holy of Holies, they rebuilt it with a fixed edifice, a place for their prayers. And when the Ishmaelites [Arabians] became envious of them, they drove them out from that place and called the same house of prayer their own. The former then built there a place for their prayers in another spot at the base of the Temple. And there they hatched their wicked plot, desiring to fill Jerusalem from end to end with blood in order eradicate the Christians from Jerusalem.[21]

A few things stand out. First, it must be noted that the narrative contains palpably legendary features: there is no evidence in the material record of mass killings of Christians in Jerusalem or elsewhere (or destroying of Christian places, for that matter).[22] Moreover, here, in contrast to the *Secrets of Rabbi*

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21 Trans. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 65–66; also, Sebeos (trans. Thomson), *The Armenian history* 102–103.

22 See Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 109–159, on late Byzantine and early Islamic Jerusalem. He notes (p. 158): "In spite of many historical references to atrocities committed by Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem and to the damage and destruction of churches and monasteries, the archaeological findings present a picture of much greater tolerance on the part of the Muslim authorities towards other communities in the city. Christians were not prevented from conducting their religious rituals. Several pilgrimage sites, like the Tomb of Mary and the Kathisma Church, were even shared between Christians and Muslims, as the small and humble mosques constructed within the Christian churches show. The permission given to Jews to resettle in Jerusalem opened the road for the establishment of a permanent Jewish community that concentrated in segregated areas within the city."

Shimʿōn, the temple/prayer place is depicted as having been built by the scheming Jews, and then appropriated by the Arabian believers. Arguably, common Christian anti-Semitic tropes are put to use here. If one reads the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn* and this passage from the *Armenian Chronicle of 661* together, one could preliminarily suggest two things: a place of worship, identified by some at least as the new temple, was founded soon after the Islamic conquests; this sacred place was used by the Jews and the Arabian believers, perhaps consecutively or perhaps (as the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn* makes one think) at the same time. This building appears to be a precursor to the Dome of the Rock, though in the same place.[23]

1.4 *Conclusions*

While dating the passage cited from the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn* is difficult, the two other texts discussed in this chapter have more secure dating in the 660s–670s. The three texts are important evidence of how the prophet Muḥammad, his mission, and his community were seen soon after his death. One interesting point that arises in the non-Arabic sources is that they often portray Muḥammad as a merchant before his prophecy—a notion that Arabic historiography acknowledges though not usually calling him one.[24] If this is correct, what logically follows is that Muḥammad traveled far and wide in Arabia and the Near East. This book has argued that late antique religious phenomena were palpably present in Arabia at the beginning of the seventh century CE. But even if this were not the case, Muḥammad would still, through his travels as a merchant, have been part of that late antique world of monotheisms.

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23 This "new temple" is attested in quite a few early texts, in fact, so I deem plausible the existence of a place of worship on the Temple Mount before the Dome of the Rock, though the exact nature of this prayer place can naturally be debated. For other attestations than the ones mentioned here, see, e.g., Anastasius of Sinai (wr. between 660 and 690), Adomnán/Arculf (wr. ca. 680), and Pseudo-Shenoute's *Apocalypse* (wr. between 650 and 690) in Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 107, 166, 174; the question is discussed *passim* in Shoemaker's book. See also Stroumsa, *The making of the Abrahamic religions*, 145, 159–173; Nees, Lawrence, *Perspectives on early Islamic art in Jerusalem* (AAIW 5), Leiden: Brill, 2015, 5–57.

24 See the comprehensive survey of the merchant motif in Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 59–78. Note also that Q 106 refers to the summer and winter journeys of Quraysh. This and other relevant passages in the Qurʾān are discussed in Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 78–82. In Q 5:85, the word *qinṭār*, "hundredweight of gold," is used. This word is derived from the Latin *centenarius*. The Arabic historiographical narrative rather portrays the prophet as a shepherd before his mission; Rubin, *The eye of the beholder* 86–87.

The texts surveyed in this chapter are not "outsider" sources in the sense that they would be discussing someone or something that they had no idea about.[25] Rather, they point toward early interactions between Christians, Jews, and Muslims (though the latter did not yet call themselves by that name), and probably transmit somewhat reliable information not only about how Jews and Christians deemed Muḥammad but also about what those Arabians and others who believed in his revelations thought about him. Many of the aspects that this book has tried to highlight (the adopting of gentile purity and dietary regulation, Abrahamic descent, and eschatological outlook) arise in these three texts. What is also worthy of note is that while the *Doctrina Iacobi* might not proffer a flattering picture of Muḥammad, the *Armenian Chronicle of 661* has a rather and the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn* a completely affirmative view of the prophet. Rather than painting Muḥammad and the believers as something totally alien and menacing, these two texts do not construe a clear border between them and other religious groups. None of the texts of the seventh century CE (in Arabic or any other language) call Muḥammad or his followers "Muslims." In fact, this is in accordance with how the followers of the prophet Muḥammad viewed themselves in the first/seventh century as well. The next chapter offers concise reflections on the social categorizations of the Near East after the death of Muḥammad. Instead of concluding with a backward look, I conclude this book forward,[26] looking toward the early second/eighth century, when a social category known as "Muslims," with their religion, "Islam," starts to be visible in the evidence.

25 This point is lost on Brown, *Muhammad* 96, who claims: "to rely solely on these Christian sources [on the prophet and early Islam] would be like writing a history of the Soviet Union during the Cold War using only American newspapers." There are numerous problems in this statement. No scholar of early Islam advocates using solely Christian (or Jewish, or Zoroastrian) sources: however, they have to be used in addition to the Muslim literature. The biggest problem in Brown's analogy is the geographical and socio-historical ignorance that it displays. Many of the texts discussed in this and the next chapter—the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn*, John bar Penkaye's work, Ishoʿyahb III's letters—are not only early but also composed in the areas the Arabian believers conquered. They are not outsider sources in geographical terms then. Nor are they outsider sources in socio-historical terms since the writers often had eyewitness knowledge on the believers' movement: they had met the Arabian believers. Notably too, it might even be suggested that the writer of the earliest layer of the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn* affiliated with the movement. In other examples, the non-Arabic sources represent the voices of the conquered communities, which are valuable in their own right. Using only sources written by the conquerors is unsound from a scholarly point of view.

26 The idea of concluding "forward" came to me from Boyarin, Daniel, *Carnal Israel: Reading sex in Talmudic culture*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 1995, 227.

CHAPTER 8

Concluding toward Early Islamic Times

1 "No Two Religions"

Toward the end of his book, the biographer of the prophet, Ibn Hishām, included the following report: "I was told that the last injunction the apostle [Muḥammad] gave was in his words 'Let not two religions be left in the Arabian Peninsula.'"[1]

This study has argued that, during the life and at the time of the death of the prophet, Arabia (including Mecca and Medina) was multireligious and, indeed, a rainbow nation of Jews, Christians, and gentiles formed Muḥammad's community of believers, for which the name "Islam" was not yet used. Hence, the situation of "one religion" that Ibn Hishām wishes to see did not obtain, though some later sources state (implausibly) that, during the last years of the prophet, "all Arabs adopted Islam" (*aslamat al-ʿarab kulluhā*).[2] But did only one religion exist in Arabia later in the seventh century CE or, say, the eighth or ninth? Did Muḥammad, in this dictum, "foresee" a situation where only Islam existed in Arabia? The answer to that is a resounding "no." The Arabian Peninsula has never, up to this day, been a place where only one religion would have prevailed.

In what follows, I look at the surviving seventh-century CE literary evidence (in particular in Syriac) as well as material remains.[3] I argue that the situation

1 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 1024, trans. Guillaume 687. See also Munt, "'No two religions.'"

2 Al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* 962; for discussion, see Ibrahim, *Conversion to Islam* 162.

3 Much has been written in recent years on the period under discussion in this chapter (the first century AH). See, in particular, Bowman, Bradley, *Christian monastic life in early Islam* (Edinburgh Studies in Classical Islamic History and Culture), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021; Donner, *Muhammad and the believers*; Hoyland, Robert G., *In God's path: The Arab conquests and the creation of an Islamic empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015; Penn, *Envisioning Islam*; Johns, Jeremy, "Archaeology and the history of early Islam: The first seventy years," in *JESHO* 46 (2003), 411–436; Sahner, Christian C., *Christian martyrs under Islam: Religious violence and the making of the Muslim world*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018; Sarris, *Empires of faith*, 275–306; Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared*; Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East*; Weitz, Lev E., *Between Christ and caliph: Law, marriage, and Christian community in early Islam*, Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018—all studies that I am much indebted to. However, often in scholarship the focus is on Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia, while I concentrate (though not exclusively) on Arabia here. For interpretations (emphasizing quick identity construction and inter-group hostility) that are rather different from that which I propose here, see, e.g., Friedmann, *Tolerance*

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that prevailed during the life of the prophet (that is, the community of the believers that gathered around him and deemed him a prophet consisted of gentiles, Jews, and Christians) continued at least up to the early second/eighth century. A great variety of beliefs and praxes existed among the believers at this stage, when the Islamic dogmata, or other distinctive signs of identity, had not yet been articulated.[4] I also examine a separate but interlinked question: How did the Arabian believers treat Jews and Christians, in particular in Arabia but also elsewhere in the Near East? Though these two are somewhat distinct issues, they intersect: the idea that Jews and Christians would have joined the movement started by Muḥammad, willingly and without recanting their earlier identities, would be harder to sustain if it turned out that the Arabian believers treated Jews and Christians in a draconian fashion.

1.1 *Continuity and Change in the Literary Evidence*

As regards non-Arabic evidence, the Syriac Christian literature points toward the idea that border lines were fuzzy, often not clearly articulated, and even in those cases where they were, easily permeable.[5] This is, naturally, not categorical: some Syriac and other non-Arabic authors deemed and depicted a very clear border between Muḥammad's believers and the Christians.[6] This is

and coercion; Gil, Moshe, *A history of Palestine, 634–1099*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Hoyland, Robert G., "Reflections on the identity of the Arabian conquerors of the seventh-century Middle East," in *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 25 (2017), 113–140, at 131, n. 78, suggests that, though Islamic identity was still being articulated and shaped, "Muhammad had already initiated this process [of Islamic identity development] when he changed the *qibla*, opted for Ramadan as the month of fasting and instituted the hajj, as these sorts of practices tend to mark out people as different." However, as has been argued in this book, even these practices and rituals did not necessarily exclude Jews and Christians.

4 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 260–309, discusses this variety on the basis of Islamic-era Arabic literature.

5 What follows mostly discusses texts written by Christians. Texts written by Jews are fewer in number, but see the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn* discussed in the previous chapter. For recent translations and discussions of the non-Arabic evidence on early Islam, see Bcheiry, Iskandar, *An early Christian reaction to Islam: Išūʿyahb III and the Muslim Arabs*, Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2020; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*; Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared*; Penn, *Envisioning Islam*; *When Christians*. It should be noted that Brock, in his classic articles (Brock, Sebastian P., "Syriac sources for seventh-century history," in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 2 (1976), 17–36, and "Syriac view of emergent Islam," in Gualtherüs Hendrik Albert Juynboll (ed.), *Studies on the first century of Islamic society*, Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982, 9–21) already reached similar conclusions about the often overlapping and fuzzy social categories in the seventh-century CE Near East.

6 E.g., Sophronius, the patriarch of Jerusalem (d. 638), who described the Arabian believers in a very bleak way; see Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 45–54. Additionally, John bar Penkaye

to be expected, as Stephen Shoemaker notes: "One imagines that the new rulers were not always uniform in their treatment of Christians, and likewise, that different Christians may have perceived their collective treatment by Muhammad's followers differently."[7]

One of the earliest Syriac witnesses to early Islam is the writings of Ishoʿyahb III, who was the patriarch of the Church of the East in 649–659 CE. His letters survive in 106 specimens, written during the 630s–650s, before and during his patriarchate, hence being contemporaneous with the conquests and the early caliphate.[8] They offer significant and manifold depictions of the community of the believers; his letters have recently been treated in a comprehensive study by Iskandar Bcheiry, with new translations of many of the letters.[9] Ishoʿyahb's often positive depiction of the believers is linked with his idea that the Christians in the east were persecuted by the Persians, the new rulers being more embracing toward the Christians. The Arabian believers were liberators and supporters of the Church of the East.[10] Indeed, Ishoʿyahb notes that the Arabian believers praised Christianity; his remarks on the caliphs are, for the most part, extolling.[11]

Notably, Ishoʿyahb's views on the believers appear to have become more positive with the passing of the time. Though his early remarks (during the conquests) also contain censuring undertones,[12] this violent era appears to

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(wr. ca. 687) characterizes them thus: "Bloodshed without reason was their comfort, rule over all was their pleasure, plunder and captives were their desire, and anger and rage were their food. They were not appeased by anything that was offered to them"; trans. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 187. In the previous chapter, the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn ben Yōḥay* was examined. Some other contemporaneous Jewish texts, such as the *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, do not interpret the rise of Muḥammad and his community in as positive terms; see Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 144–149.

7 Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 104–105. Humphreys, *Muʿawiya* 13, notes: "the earliest Christian writings about Islam and the Arab Conquests often exhibit complex attitudes toward the new religion; they may be puzzled and confused but they are by no means always hostile."

8 Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 6.

9 Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction*; see also Hoyland, *Seeing Islam* 174–182; Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 93–100.

10 Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 82, 113, 154, 166. Gross, Simcha, "Playing with persecution: Parallel Jewish and Christian memories of late antiquity in early Islamic Iraq," in *JNES* 81 (2022), 247–260, at 254, notes that the notion of Persia as a persecutor of Christians appears often in Syriac sources, though it "ignores the ample evidence of Sasanian benefaction and support of Christian ecclesiastical figures and institutions."

11 Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 132, 136.

12 Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 85, 129.

have been followed by one of peace.[13] According to Bcheiry, Ishoʿyahb "openly supported the Muslim Arabs and considered their dominion as having been established by God himself."[14] (Note, however, that the words "Muslim Arabs" are anachronisms employed by Bcheiry: the category "Muslims" did not exist at all at the time and "Arabs" appears to have functioned in a rather different way than it did a century later, as explained in chapter 1 of the present study; Ishoʿyahb III calls these people *mhaggrē* and *ṭayyāyē*.) Indeed, he categorized both Christians and Arabian believers as "God-fearers."[15] In Bcheiry's interpretation, Ishoʿyahb III did this to incorporate the Arabian believers into a shared category.[16] Interestingly, Ishoʿyahb III notes that the *mhaggrē*'s Christological stances are more palatable than those of the Jacobite "heretics," who were miaphysites, since the former do not accept that Jesus suffered on the cross.[17]

There was no strict border line, then. Rather, Ishoʿyahb III classifies the Arabian believers as pious people whose rule was benign. In the famous so-called letter 14C, he remarks: "Not only are they not opponents of Christianity, but they even praise our faith and honor the priests and holy ones of our Lord and give assistance to the churches and monasteries."[18] Indeed, as the next section explains, the archaeological record supports the idea that the life of the Christians and the Church of the East continued without a break, in east Arabia as well. Churches were not destroyed during the conquest nor the early Islamic era; rather, they were built and thrived.

However, the statement just quoted from Ishoʿyahb's letter continues by bewailing that Christians in eastern Arabia are recanting their faith through, it appears, joining the movement founded by Muḥammad. This happened, so Ishoʿyahb tells us, because the *ṭayyāyē* were telling the Christians to give up "a portion (*palgūṯā*) of their possessions."[19] The word *palgūṯā* is usually translated as "half,"[20] which would be a gargantuan tax indeed. This has led many scholars astray.[21] As Bcheiry notes, however, *palgūṯā* is the feminine form of the

13 Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 73, 168.
14 Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 140.
15 Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 108, 112.
16 Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 116: "he chose a historical term, 'God-fearers,' to include the early Muslim Arabs in a new religio-political system that stood against an old Persian-Zoroastrian one. The Arab Muslim conquest inaugurated a new era in which the name of God was proclaimed and idolatries persecuted."
17 Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 92.
18 Trans. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 95.
19 Ishoʿyahb, *Liber Epistularum*, ed. Rubens Duval, Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1904, 151; Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 129.
20 E.g., Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 95.
21 See, e.g., Seppälä, Serafim, "Threat of conversion in the earliest Syriac writings on Islam?"

word *palgā* and is employed to mean "a portion, part," not "half," which is the signification of the masculine form.[22] This interpretation makes much more sense. Hence, Ishoʿyahb III is remarking that Muḥammad's followers "have not forced them [Christians] to abandon their faith, but only asked them to give up a portion of their possession and [thus] keep their faith."[23] Here and in other letters,[24] Ishoʿyahb III is complaining about what he deemed the laxity and paltry faith of the east Arabian Christians, not about the menacing and persecuting followers of Muḥammad.

All in all, Ishoʿyahb III characterizes both the Christians and the proto-Muslims as fearers of God. In this sense, they belong to the same superordinate category. It has to be remembered that his letters were written in Syriac, to other Christians. They are intra-Christian discourse. The positive depictions of the Arabian believers are *not* intended to curry favor with the caliphs or other rulers, who were not the addressees of the correspondence, nor did they have the slightest idea that this correspondence was going on. Nonetheless, his letters do not really offer proof for the idea that Christians had become part of the movement started by Muḥammad while still retaining their Christian identity (as suggested by the Qurʾān). But some other Syriac texts do.

The most famous example is the passage in the work of John bar Penkaye, the abbot of an East Syrian monastery, who wrote in the 680s in north Mesopotamia. Of the caliph Muʿāwiya, he has the following to say:

> a man named Muʿāwiya became king and took control of the kingdoms both of the Persians and of the Romans. Justice flourished in his days, and there was great peace in the regions he controlled. He allowed everyone to conduct himself as he wanted. For, as I said above, they upheld a certain commandment from him who was their guide concerning the Christian

in Timo Nisula, Anni Maria Laato and Pablo Irizar (eds.), *Religious polemics and encounters in late antiquity: Boundaries, conversions, and persuasion* (Studies on the children of Abraham 9), Leiden: Brill, 2022, 258–284; Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 98–99, too seems to take this almost at face value and suggests that it might have something to do with Muḥammad and the caliphs' policy of expelling Jews and Christians from Arabia or forcibly converting them. But, as argued in this section and the next, there is no evidence for such a policy in the first/seventh century.

22 Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 128, n. 27; Payne Smith, *A compendious Syriac dictionary* 447.

23 As translated by Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 129. Cf. trans. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 95.

24 See also letters 16C and 18C, translated and discussed in Bcheiry, *An early Christian reaction* 129–132.

> people and the monastic order. By this one's guidance they also upheld the worship of one God, in accord with the customs of ancient law. And, at their beginning, they upheld the tradition of their instructor Muḥammad such that they would bring the death penalty upon whoever seemed to have dared [transgress] his laws.
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> Every year their raiders went to far-off countries and islands and brought [back] captives from every people under heaven. But from everyone they only demanded tribute. They allowed [each] to remain in whatever faith he wished, there being not a few Christians among them [*b-hwn*]—some [aligned] with the heretics [i.e., West Syrian Miaphysites] and some with us [East Syrians]. But when Muʿāwiya reigned, there was peace throughout the world whose like we had never heard or seen, nor had our fathers or our fathers' fathers.[25]

What is notable here is not only the very positive description of the rule of Muʿāwiya (r. 661–680),[26] but also the possibility that John bar Penkaye suggests that some of the Christians had joined this movement, or at least its army, and participated in the conquests, while still apparently retaining their Christian affiliation.[27] The description of the movement and of Muḥammad is upbeat:

25 Trans. Penn, *When Christians* 92; some additional explanations in the brackets by me. For another translation, see Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 188–189; discussion of the passage in Donner, "Living together" 27; Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 196–197.

26 Interestingly, this very positive description of the caliph Muʿāwiya's rule is also present in Armenian sources, such as the historical work written by the Armenian priest Ghewond in the late eighth century CE, who notes the building of churches and that "there was a great peace during the days of his reign." Vacca, Alison M., "The Umayyad North (Or: How Umayyad was the Umayyad caliphate?)," in Andrew Marsham (ed.), *The Umayyad world*, London: Routledge, 2021, 219–239, at 222–223. In this connection, one should also consider the famous Greek Hammat Gader inscription, which has a cross but mentions the caliph Muʿāwiya; Zeyadeh, Ali, "Settlement patterns, an archaeological perspective: Case studies from northern Palestine and Jordan," in Geoffrey R.D. King and Averil Cameron (eds.), *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East II: Land use and settlement patterns* (SLAEI 1), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1994, 117–132, at 123–124. As Humphreys, *Muʿawiya* 9, 102–104, 125–129 and Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 306, note, in the Islamic historiographical tradition too, Muʿāwiya is sometimes remembered as indifferent to Islam and suspiciously pro-Christian. Since he waged war against the Byzantine empire relentlessly and for decades, as catalogued by Humphreys, *Muʿawiya* 50–60, 104–114, it appears that these wars were not seen by contemporaries as having been waged between two religions, Islam and Christianity.

27 However, it is naturally possible to understand John as indicating that there were Christians among the captives, not among the raiders. But as al-Qāḍī has shown (al-Qāḍī, Wadād, "Non-Muslims in the Muslim conquest army in early Islam," in Antoine Borrut

they are monotheists and law-abiding. Indeed, Muḥammad ("him who was their guide") is said to have instructed the believers to be benevolent toward the Christians and, in particular, monks. Here, as elsewhere in the seventh-century CE evidence, these believers are not named "Muslims." This category did not exist, nor was the affiliation of the believers in contrast to Christians or Christianity. Like the Qurʾān and other texts, John bar Penkaye suggests that one could be part of this movement without jettisoning one's Christian identity: "there being not a few Christians among them." Certainly, it is possible to suggest that these Christians mentioned by John did not see themselves as more than allies or some sort of ancillary members in the group of Arabian believers—with the evidence at hand, one simply cannot tell.

In any case, Michael Penn summarizes the contents of the Syriac texts written in the early Islamic period, saying that they contain "numerous Syriac references to Muslims requesting Christian exorcists, attending church, seeking healing from Christian holy men, visiting Christian shrines, and endowing Christian monasteries. There are also references to Christians attending Muslim festivals, becoming circumcised, referring to Muḥammad as God's messenger, and draping their altars with a Muslim confession of faith."[28] Though people had changing, hybrid, and multiple identities, crossed (fuzzy) borders, and interacted in intergroup settings later as well, this seems to have been remarkably common in the seventh and the early eighth century CE.

The previous chapter adduced the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn ben Yōḥay* as evidence for the idea that some Jews were delighted by the Arabian believers' conquest of Jerusalem and building of a place of worship on the Temple Mount. The "Constitution" of Medina suggested that Jews were considered full members of the believers' movement, at least in the early Medinan years (620s). There is some evidence that this situation continued, as it did in the case of the

and Fred Donner [eds.], *Christians and others in the Umayyad State*, Chicago IL: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2016, 83–128), later Arabic literature also portrays non-Muslims as part of the conquest and caliphal armies, though they are usually relegated to the role of guides etc. For Jews and Christians in the army of the Arabian conquerors, see also Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim state* 54–55; Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 459–460.

28 Penn, *Envisioning Islam* 4. Though Penn writes "Muslims," this is not a word used in these Syriac texts, which refer to this group with other words such as *mhaggrāyē* (from the Arabic *muhājirūn*, "emigrants") or *ṭayyāyē* (derived from the tribal group Ṭayyiʾ). On group nomenclature, see also Penn, *Envisioning Islam* 56–57. We should also suppose that Christians prayed in mosques. It was mentioned in chapter 6 that Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 402, portrays the Christian deputation from al-Najrān to the prophet praying in the prophet's mosque in Medina, the prophet mandating that they should be allowed to do this.

Christians. Maximus the Confessor, in a letter written between 634 and 640 CE, suggests that Jews joined the conquering "barbarous people from the desert," as he calls them.[29] This could be rebuffed as Christian anti-Jewish polemic, but, as Stephen Shoemaker correctly notes, since there is other evidence (the "Constitution," the Qurʾān, and the later *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn ben Yōḥay*) suggesting that Jews, like Christians, were part of the believers' movement, it could be a rash decision to simply reject Maximus the Confessor's testimony.[30] The *Armenian Chronicle of 661*—which, as stated in the previous chapter, bases its narrative on a source from ca. the 640s and is thus roughly contemporary with the letter by Maximus—also notes this:

> And when all the remnants of the people of the children of Israel assembled, they [the Jews and the Arabian believers] joined together, and they became a large army. And after that they sent a letter to the Greek [Byzantine] king, and they said as follows: "God gave that land to our father Abraham and to his descendants after him as a hereditary possession. We are the sons of Abraham. You have occupied our land [Jerusalem/Palestine] long enough. Leave it in peace, and we will not come into your land. Otherwise, we will demand that possession from you with interest."[31]

To sum up, non-Arabic literary evidence from the seventh century CE indicates that things were continuing as they were when Muḥammad was alive: the community of the believers, who had begun to conquer huge areas of the Near East and beyond, consisted of gentile, Jewish, and Christian believers. It must be acknowledged that, as far as I am aware, there is no text (except the Qurʾān) that would note, in a single instance, that there were *both* Jews *and* Christians among the movement emerging from Arabia. John bar Penkaye remarks that there were Christians among them, while Maximus the Confessor, for instance, mentions Jews. Why this is remains uncertain, but it might reflect geographical peculiarities or other factors. Also, perhaps some Christian writers might have been loath to say that Christians had joined the movement and only mentioned Jews. What is important to note here is that these texts describe Jews and Christians joining the community of the believers as Jews and Christians, without recanting their former religious identities.

As for Arabic literature (which is, for the most part, non-contemporary), it also contains significant evidence that drawing the border between (and, to

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29 Letter 14, trans. in Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 58.

30 Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 59.

31 Trans. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 65. Brackets added by me.

begin with, creating the categories of) Muslims and non-Muslims is an early second/eighth century phenomenon, not earlier. One can, for example, adduce the so-called *shurūṭ ʿUmar*, "the pact of ʿUmar," and *ghiyār* ordinances (ordinances that religious communities should dress and look different), which, according to the careful study of Milka Levy-Rubin, stem from the time of the caliph ʿUmar II (r. 98–101/717–720).[32] Their ascription to the caliph ʿUmar I cannot be sustained. These texts exist in different forms. Moreover, even if ʿUmar II appears to have been behind some of these ordinances, the texts were reworked over the centuries. As noted by Steven Wasserstrom, some of the versions mention the Karaites as a subcategory of the Jews, though the Karaites did not exist before the mid-second/eighth century, postdating ʿUmar II by fifty years or so.[33]

The aim of the ordinances was to create and maintain the boundaries between Muslims and the others, as put forward by Albrecht Noth.[34] They display rules (probably never followed or enforced in toto) that require Muslims and non-Muslims to differ in dress and hairstyle, for example.[35] It was during this time that the concept of a religion named "Islam" and a group called "Muslims" was emerging. What ensued from this was the wish that the non-Muslims should be set apart from the Muslims. Some versions of these texts include strict restrictions that churches should not be built nor repaired; nor should

32 Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims* 61, 88. But note that Yarbrough argues that the date of these ordinances, and their ascription to ʿUmar II, is not certain (Yarbrough, Luke, "Origins of the *Ghiyār*," in *JAOS* 134 [2014], 113–121). On the *shurūṭ ʿUmar*, see also Wilde, Clare, "'We shall neither learn the Qurʾān nor teach it to our children': The covenant of ʿUmar on learning," in Jens Scheiner and Damien Janos (eds.), *The place to go: Contexts of learning in Baghdād, 750–1000 C.E.*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2014, 237–265.

33 Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew* 160.

34 Noth, Albrecht, "Abgrenzungsprobleme zwischen Muslimen und nicht-Muslimen: Die 'Bedingungen ʿUmars (*aš-šurūṭ al-ʿumariyya*)' unter einem anderen Aspekt gelesen," in *JSAI* 9 (1987), 290–315. It should be noted that this is rejected by Milka Levy-Rubin, who operates with the notion that the category "Muslim" was already operative in the first/seventh century. But this is not supported by any examples from the contemporary evidence. To refute Noth's suggestion, Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims* 127, notes: "If differentiation of the unformed Muslim community was the issue then it would have been much more fitting for such prohibitions and requirements to be applied during the period following the conquest!" This argument is odd and should be rejected. Levy-Rubin confuses the phenomena of the conquests, political rule, and communal identity. My argument, following Noth, is that the contemporary evidence shows that a distinct Muslim identity was not conceptualized during the first/seventh century. The community called themselves "believers" and included people from a variety of backgrounds, Jewish, Christian, and gentile. The *shurūṭ ʿUmar* and *ghiyār* stipulations are part and parcel of the distinct identity articulation, not different from it.

35 See the documents translated in Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims* 171–176.

crosses be displayed.[36] However, other versions are much more lenient: pork, crosses, and the *nawāqī*s (clappers used to call Christians to prayer) cannot be used in Muslim neighborhoods, but are allowed in predominantly Christian areas.[37] Some texts explicitly avow that the Christians have the right to carry their banners and crosses during celebrations such as Palm Sunday.[38] In any case, the ordinances appear to have been more theoretical rather than always enforced in practice.[39]

One should also note the treaty that the prophet Muḥammad purportedly made with the people of Najrān.[40] Milka Levy-Rubin suggests that this text has been authentically preserved and contains formulae that show its early date, differing from many other treaty texts contained in Arabic literature.[41] Hence, this treaty would be similar to the "Constitution" of Medina: an authentic text stemming from the time of the prophet. This is possible but would require a more detailed study. For my purposes here, it does not really matter whether or not the text is from the time of the prophet or originates at a later time: in any case, it shows that the idea that there were Christians in Arabia was accepted. Not only is their existence tolerated, it is protected.

The treaty with the inhabitants of Najrān survives in the work of al-Balādhurī.[42] In exchange for tribute, the text acknowledges the rights and freedom of the people of Najrān, including their Christian faith. Quite remarkably, the treaty notes that the inhabitants are *not* responsible for any previous crimes,

36 Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims* 175. As will be seen in what follows in this chapter, churches were built throughout the Middle Ages.

37 Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims* 77.

38 Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims* 71–72.

39 Dridi, Audrey, "Christian and Jewish communities in Fusṭāt: Non-Muslim topography and legal controversies in the pre-Fatimid period," in Robert G. Hoyland (ed.), *The late antique world of early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2015, 107–132.

40 The mission of Najrānite Christians to Muḥammad, as it is described in the literary sources, was discussed in chapter 6 of this book. Note also that, in later Christian literature, Najrān functions "as a symbol for Muslim-Christian cooperation," Wood, Philip, *The Chronicle of Seert: Christian historical imagination in late antique Iraq*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 253. The "features of Arab ancestry and participation in the wars of the Muslims lie behind the assertions of the story in the *Chronicle* [*of Seert*] that the Najranites were allies of the Muslims, representatives of a brother religion. Furthermore, this story of the seventh century was written against a context of a continued presence in Arabia at the time of writing," Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert* 250.

41 Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims* 53–55; see also Bowman, *Christian monastic life* 83–84.

42 Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān* (*Liber expugnationis regionum*), ed. Michail Jan de Goeje, Leiden: Brill, 1866, repr. 1968, 64–65.

which are exonerated.[43] The text notes that the people and their possessions are protected, alongside their churches (*biyaʿihim*) and their icons (*amthilatihim*).[44] No bishop (*usquf*), monk (*rāhib*), or churchwarden (*wāqih*)[45] should be harassed. The only prohibition that the treaty has is against usury (*riban*). The text ends by noting that the protection toward the Christian community continues "indefinitely, until the reign of God [i.e., the eschaton] comes" (*abadan ḥattā yaʾtī amr Allāh*).[46] The eschatological expectation of the text appears to confirm its early date; possibly, the text goes back to the prophet himself.[47] If, on the other hand, the text is forged, it only makes sense that the forgers were Christians; it would seem unlikely that a later Muslim scholar would have forged such a text (after all, Christians were supposed to have been banished from Arabia). Be that as it may, no less significant is the fact that this text was still known and quoted in the late third/ninth century by al-Balādhurī.

Hence, we can say that Christianity survived in the south too. Arabic historiography notes that the famous church in Ṣanʿāʾ, called al-Qalīs, was in use at least until the 130s/750s.[48] As for Najrān, it had a Christian community much later. The seventh/thirteenth-century traveler Ibn al-Mujāwir notes that Najrān had three religious communities of similar size: Jews, Christians, and Muslims.[49] These pieces of information disprove the idea that the prophet Muḥammad enjoined, and the caliph ʿUmar soon after carried out, the expulsion of Christians from Najrān. This is nothing but hegemonic and violent fantasy, though it is repeated time and again in Arabic Muslim literature.[50]

A detailed treatment of early Islamic Arabic poetry is outside the scope of this study, but, according to my preliminary survey of this source set, it should be noted it contains pieces of evidence corroborating the general picture that I

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43 Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims* 54.

44 For the meaning "icons" and "images" for *amthila* (sing. *mithāl*), see de Biberstein-Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire* 1062. The word also means "ways of life" (as understood by Levy-Rubin), but taking the context into account, I think the meaning "icons" is to be preferred here.

45 For this rare word, see de Biberstein-Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire* 1578, 1592, who notes that it is synonymous with *wāfih* (perhaps due to a scribal error).

46 Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān* 65.

47 Other notable aspects that appear to corroborate the authenticity of the text are listed in Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims* 54–55.

48 See Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 125. Piotrovsky, "Late ancient and early mediaeval Yemen" 215–216, notes that the churches of Ṣanʿāʾ were only gradually turned into mosques: the first mosques of the city were new constructions, built on unoccupied land.

49 Ibn al-Mujāwir, *Taʾrīkh al-Mustabṣir*, ed. Oscar Löfgren, Leiden: Brill, 1951–1954, 209; Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar* 205. Indeed, there were Jews living in Najrān, as elsewhere in South Arabia, in the 20th century: King, "Settlement in Western and Central Arabia," 204.

50 See, e.g., Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-Buldān*, 5 vols., v, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1977, 269.

am arguing for. Distinctly Islamic dogmata or praxes are for the most part missing in the verses of the poets who, according to the tradition, "converted" to Islam. Take the poet al-Khansāʾ, for instance. She died in the 640s, after having become a Muslim (or so the Arabic literary sources tell us). Though her poetry is monotheistic, it cannot be called specifically Islamic. In one poem, a representative example, she grieves the death of her brother. To give my translation of the last three verses of the poem:

> It is as if the Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*) created him [her dead brother] in the image
> of a gold coin that people examined [and found it to be pure gold].
>
> Depart! [Though you are] deprived of us, may God reward you with His garden,
> and may you forever reside in Paradise.
>
> You lived among us, and no one blamed you for an indecency (*fāḥisha*);
> now, the Lord of humankind has taken you unto Him in praise.[51]

Such verses could have been composed by a monotheist of almost any tradition.

1.2 *Material Evidence*

The archaeological record, like the literary evidence discussed above, does not buttress the idea that the early Islamic conquest, rule, and period would have brought about the destruction of or a decline in churches, synagogues, or other religious buildings or communities; or a great change in the region to begin with.[52] For instance, if we look at the archaeological remains in east Arabia (the Persian Gulf), we come to the interesting conclusion that the early Islamic period seemingly generated a *revitalization* of the Christian communities there.

The east Arabian churches and monasteries were dated in earlier scholarship to the Sasanid era because scholars thought it an impossibility that Christian communities could have existed in the area after Muḥammad. In fact, the opposite is true, as put forward by Robert Carter: when the archae-

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51 Al-Khansāʾ, *Dīwān*, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1963, 40.

52 For a general survey of the archaeological record of the early Islamic period, see Milwright, Marcus, "Archaeology and material culture," in Chase F. Robinson (ed.), *The new Cambridge history of Islam*, 6 vols., i: *The formation of the Islamic world: Sixth to eleventh centuries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 664–682.

ological remains are approached with C14 dating and other objective methods, it appears that *all* known remains of churches and monasteries in east Arabia are to be dated to the Islamic period, between the first and third/seventh and ninth centuries.[53] According to the literary sources, the east Arabian Christian communities were founded in the third century CE; according to the literary and archaeological evidence, they lasted (at least) until the ninth.[54] As Carter remarks, "eastern Arabia and the Gulf littoral was a heavily Christianised landscape up to and following the Muslim conquest."[55] In 676 CE, the Synod of George I convened in Darein in east Arabia to discuss, and resolve, intra-Christian disputes.[56] Nothing points toward the notion that Muḥammad's mission, or the actions of his followers after him, had affected the Christian populations of east Arabia in a negative sense. Rather, they thrived, building numerous churches and monasteries. This situation continued until the late second/eighth century, when there appears to have been pressure to convert to Islam, which now existed as a category and religion. For example, the Arabic-speaking tribal group Banū Tanūkh, who lived in northeastern Arabia, Syria, and Iraq, remained Christian until ca. 780 CE; a Syriac inscription from a church in Ehnesh mentions their forced conversion to Islam at that time.[57]

Much archaeological work remains to be done in Arabia. However, east Arabia is not the only region to suggest enduring Christian communities in the early Islamic era. In a recent article, Robert Hoyland describes a new Arabic inscription from Kilwa, north Saudi Arabia. The site of Kilwa included a church but it is not clear which building the slab with the inscription actually is from.[58] In any case, the inscription begins with a cross, signifying a Christian affiliation. Hoyland reads the (unfortunately, damaged) text after the cross as follows: "In the name of God (*bi-sm Allāh*), the people of Kallā/Taklā, from

53 Carter, Robert, "Christianity in the Gulf after the coming of Islam: Redating the churches and monasteries of Bet Qatraye," in Christian J. Robin and Jérémie Schiettecatte (eds.), *Les préludes de l'Islam: Ruptures et continuités dans les civilisations du Proche-Orient, de l'Afrique orientale, de l'Arabie et de l'Inde à la veille de l'Islam*, Paris: De Boccard, 2013, 311–330, at 311. See also Munt, "'No two religions'" 259.

54 Carter, "Christianity in the Gulf" 312–313.

55 Carter, "Christianity in the Gulf" 314.

56 Carter, "Christianity in the Gulf" 313, 326.

57 Palmer, Andrew, *The seventh century in the West-Syrian chronicles*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993, 71. The year given in the inscription is 1091 (of the Seleucid era).

58 Hoyland, Robert G., "Two new Arabic inscriptions: Arabian castles and Christianity in the Umayyad period," in Laïla Nehmé and Ahmad al-Jallad (eds.), *To the madbar and back again: Studies in the languages, archaeology, and cultures of Arabia dedicated to Michael C.A. Macdonald* (SSL 92), Leiden: Brill, 2017, 327–337, at 334.

(the church/province of …?), engraved/encircled it."[59] The inscription does not contain a date in the surviving part of the text, but, interestingly, the paleography suggest an early Islamic-era date rather than a pre-Islamic one.[60] As Hoyland notes: "As regards Arabian Christianity, the Kilwa text suggests that it was not extinguished by ʿUmar I (634–644), as the Muslim tradition would have us believe, and did not suffer an immediate decline after the Arab conquests, as modern scholars had tended to think."[61]

Literary texts corroborate the continuing existence of Christians and Jews not only in Arabia more generally but the Ḥijāz more particularly. Writing in the latter half of the seventh century CE, Anastasius of Sinai narrates:

> Some men, true servants of Christ our God who had the Holy Spirit in them, told us that a few years ago a Christian man was present in the place where those who hold us in slavery[62] had the stone and the object of their worship. He said: "When they had slaughtered their sacrifice, for they sacrificed there innumerable myriads of sheep and camels, we were sleeping in the place of sacrifice. Around midnight, one of us sat up and saw an ugly, misshapen old woman rising up from the earth. And immediately he nudged us and woke us up, and we all saw her take the heads and feet of the sheep that they had sacrificed and toss them into her lap, and then she descended into the netherworlds whence she had come. Then we said to one another: 'Behold, their sacrifices do not rise up to God, but go downward. And that old woman is the fraud of their faith.'" Those who saw these things are still alive in the flesh unto this very day.[63]

Though Christian polemics are obvious in this passage (a female devil is brought to the fore as a symbol of the Arabian believers' sacrifice and faith), it seems to convey real information about the pilgrimage rites in Mecca.[64] If this is accepted, then it also follows that the text witnesses that there was a Christian in Mecca. Though Anastasius calls the Arabian believers "those who

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59 Hoyland, "Two new Arabic inscriptions" 331.

60 Hoyland, "Two new Arabic inscriptions" 333–336.

61 Hoyland, "Two new Arabic inscriptions" 336. On the (purported) expulsion of non-Muslims from Arabia, see the valuable study by Munt, "'No two religions.'" He argues that no such expulsion took place, at least in a sudden or comprehensive fashion.

62 The phrase "those who hold us in slavery" is Anastasius's (colorful) way of referring to the political dominance of the Arabian believers and should not be taken literally.

63 Trans. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 110.

64 Cf. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 121, who problematizes the idea that the reference is to Mecca.

hold us in slavery," a metaphorical turn of phrase first and foremost, he does not appear to indicate that the Christian in question had been enslaved or taken forcibly to Mecca.[65]

Moving onward in time, Gaonic (or Geonic) responsa indicate that Jews lived in Wādī al-Qurā (near Medina) at the beginning of the second millennium CE.[66] This is corroborated by the fourth/tenth-century Muslim geographer al-Muqaddasī, who notes that Wādī al-Qurā was a rich and splendid town, adding: "It is dominated by Jews."[67] Islamic-era Arabic literature also places Christians in Medina.[68] Moreover, according to a unique and somewhat perplexing Christian and Arabic source, the *Taqwīm al-Kanā'is al-Nasṭūriyya*, there was a metropolitan bishop of the Church of the East in Medina, and Christian communities and bishops elsewhere in Arabia, such as at al-ʿUkāẓ, as late as the seventh/thirteenth century.[69] Scholars often doubt the information provided by this source,[70] but one wonders if they are simply operating with the preconceived notion that there should not have been any Christians in Arabia, in particular western Arabia. Since western Arabia contained Christian communities on the eve of Islam and since there is compelling reason to doubt the expulsion of non-Muslims, I do not find this information inherently impossible. The idea that there were Christians in later medieval Arabia, even in or near Medina, aligns well with the longevity of Jewish communities.

Though areas outside Arabia are not the main focus of this book, a quick glance at them might be helpful, since the evidence from Arabia is currently limited. What I am suggesting is that what the believers did outside Arabia can serve to help understand what they did inside it (and vice versa). The archaeological record from, for example, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine, supports the reconstruction that I have been putting forward in this chapter. There is an

65 In chapter 3, I noted that Islamic-era Arabic literature mentions two interesting toponyms: *maqbarat al-naṣārā*, "the graveyard of the Christians," in Mecca and *mawqif al-naṣārā*, "the halting place of the Christians," near al-Muzdalifa. It is difficult to corroborate the date and authenticity of these toponyms, but they would seem to suggest the presence of Christians in Mecca in pre-Islamic or Islamic times, or both.

66 Bar-Asher, *Jews and the Qur'an* 17–18; Mazuz, *The religious and spiritual life* 109–116; Munt, "'No two religions'" 261. On Gaonic learning, see Abate, "'Until his eyes light up.'"

67 Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm fī Maʿrifat al-Aqālīm*, ed. Michail Jan de Goeje, Leiden: Brill, [2]1906, 83–84, trans. in Munt, "'No two religions'" 261 (a study that drew my attention to this passage).

68 Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 434–435, 443.

69 *Taqwīm al-Kanā'is al-Nasṭūriyya*, ed. and trans. Pierre Aziz as *Statistique inédite de l'ancienne église chaldéo-nestorienne*, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1909, 8.

70 See the discussion in Munt, "'No two religions'" 261, n. 56.

emerging consensus that the early Islamic-era conquests did not bring about large-scale destruction of buildings, towns, or communities in the Near East. Rather, the conquests were followed by things continuing as they were before: Jews or Christians were not, for the most part, harassed, churches or synagogues were not destroyed (rather, they were built and rebuilt), nor were towns, cities, or villages. Trade continued unabated.[71] According to Martin S. Jaffee, the exilarchate thrived during early Islamic times.[72] Gideon Avni has summarized the state of research as follows:

> The Early Islamic conquest of Palestine is described in historical sources as a violent episode that involved military confrontations between the invading Arab forces and the Byzantine Army. Recent archaeological research and excavations present a striking different picture of relative stability with no evidence for destruction of settlements. Public and private construction continued uninterruptedly throughout the region during the first half of the 7th century … There is no archaeological evidence whatsoever to large scale destruction or damage in the course of the conquest. Cities and villages continued to flourish, and in many sites additional constructions were conducted.[73]

Not only were churches not damaged in the early Islamic period,[74] they were, as in east Arabia, repaired, reconstructed, and built from scratch.[75] Synagogues also continued to be in use, though there has been less archaeological work on them.[76] Many churches, monasteries, and synagogues continued to be repaired

71 For the continuing trade on the Red Sea, see, e.g., Morriss, Veronica and Donald Whitcomb, "The Umayyad Red Sea as an Islamic *mare nostrum*," in Andrew Marsham (ed.), *The Umayyad world*, London: Routledge, 2021, 267–292.

72 Jaffee, *Early Judaism* 51.

73 Avni, Gideon, "Archaeology and the early Islamic conquest of Palestine: Three regional case studies," in Christian J. Robin and Jérémie Schiettecatte (eds.), *Les préludes de l'Islam: Ruptures et continuités dans les civilisations du Proche-Orient, de l'Afrique orientale, de l'Arabie et de l'Inde à la veille de l'Islam*, Paris: De Boccard, 2013, 57–84, at 57. See, in more detail, Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition*; Schick, Robert, *The Christian communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic rule: A historical and archaeological study* (SLAEI 2), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1995.

74 Avni, "Archaeology and the early Islamic conquest" 67: "Byzantine Jarash contained no less than 15 churches and a careful examination of the sequence of use in these churches shows that none of them were damaged or went out of use in the course of the conquest, and most churches continued well into the 8th century."

75 Avni, "Archaeology and the early Islamic conquest" 58.

76 But see Bonnie, Rick, "A sustained presence: Synagogue buildings in Galilee during the

and used for centuries, some up to this day. Below, I will note the buildings in the Palestine-Jordan region[77] that were *novel* Islamic-era constructions, in the period of the first four caliphs, the Umayyad dynasty, and the early ʿAbbāsid dynasty, in a rough chronological order:[78]

- Rihab (village to the east of Jarash): two churches were dedicated in 635 CE, right after the early Islamic conquests.
- Khirbet es-Samra: in two of the churches in this village, new mosaic floors were laid in 635 and 640 CE.
- Humayma: A small church was built in the village in the mid-seventh century.
- Khirbet Shubeika: a church was constructed in the seventh century, possibly after the conquests; a Greek inscription attests to the second stage of the church, mentioning the repair of the church in 785 CE.
- Jerusalem: churches and monasteries were expanded and constructed in the early Islamic era.
- Nessana: the central church was built after the conquests, in the late seventh century.
- Jericho had a synagogue that was built after the conquests, in the seventh or eighth century CE, and that continued to be in use until the ninth or tenth century.
- Khirbet Aristobulia: A church was built in this large village in 700–701 CE.
- Tamra: the church in the eastern part of the village, though probably pre-Islamic originally, was restored in 725 CE, as the Greek inscription notes. What is interesting is that the Greek inscription actually uses the Islamic era dating, mentioning the year 106 AH.
- Ramla (founded in the early eighth century CE by the caliph-to-be Sulaymān ibn ʿAbd al-Malik) contained at least two churches and three synagogues.

early Islamic period and later," in *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean archaeology and heritage studies* (forthcoming).

77 Note the limited geographical range. If one looked at the whole MENA region as well as Central Asia, the list would in all likelihood be much longer.

78 My list is based on Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 84, 96, 97, 148, 157, 159, 179, 214, 215, 228, 229, 254, 266. This list does not feign to be comprehensive. I do not take into account later developments in the ninth century CE and beyond. For instance, Cairo (founded in 969) had churches and synagogues built after its founding; Munt, "'No two religions'" 264. Though the topic of this book and this chapter is Arabia, the point of this list is to prove that the early Islamic conquest and reign did not bring about a marked impoverishment in Jewish or Christian communities, nor did the early Arabian believers restrict the building of places of worship by Jews and Christians.

– Hammat Tiberias: The southern synagogue was destroyed in the 749 CE earthquake, but later reconstructed and used until the tenth century.
– Nabi Samwil: A monastery was dedicated in 785 CE.

Rather than characterizing the early Islamic conquest and era as one of violent or drastic change, we should call these events "invisible," at least according to the archaeological record.[79] Religious buildings or communities were not, the archaeological research suggests, damaged, let alone wiped out. In some contexts and to some communities (e.g., some non-Chalcedonian Christians and Jews), the early Islamic period might have meant that their socio-economic situation was better than before, leading to a revitalization of religious and social life. For instance, in the case of Tiberias, Gideon Avni remarks: "both the Jewish and the Christian communities thrived during the Early Islamic period."[80]

Moreover, there are a few archaeological remains that suggest that the Arabian believers and other communities shared prayer and sacred spaces.[81] One can, for instance, adduce the possible example of the Kathisma Church, located near Jerusalem and rebuilt in the Umayyad period. The church has an east-facing apse, indicating the Christian prayer direction, but *also* a south-facing prayer niche (toward Mecca), suggesting that, if the niches are contemporaneous, the proto-Muslims, too, prayed there.[82] The most famous and imposing

79 As suggested by Avni, "Archaeology and the early Islamic conquest," 76; similarly, Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim state* 45–46; Zeyadeh, "Settlement patterns" 131. Thus also MacAdam, Henry Innes, "Settlements and settlement patterns in northern and central Transjordania, ca 550–ca 750," in Geoffrey R.D. King and Averil Cameron (eds.), *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East II: Land use and settlement patterns* (SLAEI 1), Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1994, 49–94, at 51: "archaeology and epigraphy have demonstrated that the period directly following the Conquest was one of peaceful transition during which the non-Muslim communities were comfortably integrated within the Islamic state." Though wanton destruction of human lives or property did not ensue from the conquests, a large number of people in the conquered populations were taken as captives; Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 477–490.

80 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition*, 78.

81 In addition to what follows, see Bursi, Adam C., "Fluid boundaries: Christian sacred space and Islamic relics in an early *ḥadīth*," in *Medieval encounters* 27 (2021), 478–510; Chrysostomides, Anna, "'There is no harm in it': Muslim participation in Levantine Christian religious festivals (750–1000)," in *Al-Masāq* (2021), https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2021.1910783 (last accessed: 24 January 2023); Guidetti, Mattia, *In the shadow of the church: The building of mosques in early medieval Syria*, Leiden: Brill, 2016; Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 461–473. Cf. Griffith, Sidney H., *The church in the shadow of the mosque: Christians and Muslims in the world of Islam*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.

82 Avner, Rina, "The Kathisma: A Christian and Muslim pilgrimage site," in *ARAM* 18–19 (2006), 541–557; Donner, "Living together" 33. Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 151:

example is probably the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, which functioned as a church and a mosque for decades after the conquests.[83] Also worth mentioning is the open-air place of worship in Be'er Ora in the southern Arabah. The construction is not, unfortunately, well preserved, but it has two round prayer niches: one facing to the south and the other to the east. This is similar to the case of the Kathisma Church, perhaps indicating that here, too, Arabian gentile believers and Christian believers prayed in the same building.[84] This is doubted by some scholars who would rather see it as evidence of the idea that the Arabian believers had not agreed on the prayer direction toward Mecca yet.[85] While this might be, in a sense, true, it seems to me that this solution fails to put two and two together. An eastward prayer niche and direction is a sign of Christian influence; or, perhaps put better, of Christians praying in that building. However, as an open-air building, it is different from churches known elsewhere in the late antique and medieval Near East. The existence of such buildings is not surprising since, as has been seen in the course of this book, Christians (as well as Jews) joined the Arabian believers' movement without recanting their own practices. Deciding whether to call the Be'er Ora building a mosque, a church, or something else presupposes that we can arrive at clear classifications in the first/seventh century, which seems unlikely in many instances. In fact, Hagit Nol notes that there is no surviving material evidence of *any* mosques before the Dome of the Rock, which might mean that the first/seventh-century Arabian believers did not generally build distinct buildings for prayer and worship but used existing structures.[86]

"The incorporation of a Muslim shrine within an existing [Kathisma] church represents one of the most interesting early examples of mutual Islamic and Christian worship. It seems that the two cultic installations functioned together for some time, with both Christians and Muslims praying in the same site." However, Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared*, 260, n. 25, suggests that the Kathisma Church was simply converted into a mosque: according to him, the Christians and Muslims did not pray there together. However, one wonders what the word "mosque" actually means in the first/seventh century.

83 Khalek, Nancy A., *Damascus after the Muslim conquest: Text and image in early Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 85–134.

84 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 284, though note his cautionary remarks: "The fragmentary nature of the structure and the fact that it was constructed in a remote desert site should restrict any far-reaching conclusions based on this single find."

85 Sharon, Moshe, "The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land," in Moshe Sharon (ed.), *The Holy Land in history and thought*, Leiden: Brill, 1988, 225–235, at 230–232; Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 207: "the archaeology of the site confirms its original construction as mosque with an eastward *miḥrāb*," a formulation which seems to suppose a firm mosque-church dichotomy. For the eastward *qibla*, see also Bashear, Suliman, "Qibla Musharriqa and early Muslim prayer in churches," in *MW* 81/3–4 (1991), 267–282.

86 Nol, Hagit, "Early mosques that have never been (found): Literary sources versus phys-

Literary evidence both in Arabic and Syriac, written by Muslims and Christians, corroborates the idea of shared sacred spaces suggested by archaeological research. Suliman Bashear has noted that the question of praying in churches is discussed by later (second-third/eighth-ninth-century) Muslim scholars, who sometimes frowned upon the practice but others, perhaps surprisingly often, approved of it.[87] Both the caliphs ʿUmar[88] and Muʿāwiya[89] are depicted as praying in the Church of Mary in Jerusalem. Muʿāwiya's prayer is noted in, for example, the Syriac *Maronite Chronicle* written ca. 665 CE. When he was to pledge the oath of allegiance as caliph, many believers "gathered in Jerusalem and made Muʿāwiya king. And he went up and sat at Golgotha and prayed there. And he went to Gethsemane and went down to the tomb of the blessed Mary and prayed there."[90] The text is narrating events that happened just a few years before, in 660 or 661 CE. If the information contained in the chronicle is correct, and I do not see any specific reason to doubt these reports narrated by both the Muslims and Christians,[91] it means that not only did rank-and-file members of the community of the believers sometimes pray in churches, the elite did too, at least in a few instances.[92]

In addition to some church-mosque hybrids, the archaeological record evinces mosques that were built adjacent to churches. In the towns of Jarash and Tiberias, mosques were constructed near existing churches and used at the same time.[93] In the small village of Mseikeh in the Golan, a church and a mosque also existed and functioned side by side.[94] Significantly, the mosques that were built near churches in the conquered areas appear to have been *smaller and humbler* constructions than the churches. For instance, at Shivta, in the Negev, the early mosque was completely eclipsed in size by the so-called south church next door (both buildings were in use at the same time).[95] In Jarash, the congregational mosque, though large, is not bigger than the

ical remains," in *Der Islam* (forthcoming). I thank Hagit Nol for sending this article to me in advance of its publication and for discussing the issue of the first/seventh century mosques with me.

87 Bashear, "Qibla Musharriqa." The development was from a more benevolent attitude toward a more harsh one.

88 For the Muslim sources noting this, see Bashear, "Qibla Musharriqa" 273–277.

89 Humphreys, *Muʿawiya* 83–84.

90 Trans. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 153.

91 See the discussion in Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 159–162.

92 Bowman, *Christian monastic life* 8.

93 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 335.

94 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 212.

95 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 264, fig. 4.15.

church of St Theodore and the cathedral, both to the north of the mosque. The so-called Triple-church complex, on the west side of the town, is also larger than the congregational mosque.[96] The churches were in use until the eighth century, if not later.[97] The smaller mosque in Jarash, known as the Umayyad Mosque, was built next to the Propylaea Church, which was somewhat bigger than the mosque.[98] All in all, the mosques of the early Islamic Jarash were more modest and less numerous than the churches.

One should also note the case of al-Ruṣāfa (in modern Syria), known as Sergiopolis in Byzantine times.[99] In this city, a large church, known among today's archaeologists as Basilica A, was originally built in the fifth century to honor and hold the relics of St Sergius, the famous soldier-martyr. As mentioned in chapter 3, the Ghassānid ruler al-Mundhir (r. ca. 569–582) sponsored and enlarged buildings in al-Ruṣāfa. Some 150 years later, the Umayyad caliph Hishām (r. 105–125/724–743) made the city his place of residence and funded a mosque, which was built adjacent to the grand basilica (which was naturally still in use). Interestingly, the basilica and the mosque shared the same courtyard. Apparently, those worshipping in the mosque also wanted to visit the basilica and make obeisance to St Sergius. This was, then, a multi-confessional building complex. (In this instance, though, the mosque was bigger than the basilica.)[100] On the basis of the evidence of the Ghassānid building activities, it is somewhat safe to say that (alongside others) Arabic-speaking Christian groups had worshipped in al-Ruṣāfa/Sergiopolis since the sixth century. The Umayyad era does not spell an end to this.

Such mosques of early Islamic times, built next to churches, cannot automatically be taken as evidence for colonial domination or a situation where a mosque was built next to a church to outdo and outshine it.[101] Rather, other explanations have to be looked for. I would suggest that the Arabian believers built these (often simple and austere) prayer places near or next to churches and other buildings that were considered places of sanctity, to draw on

96 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 94, fig. 2.13.

97 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 95.

98 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 94, fig. 2.13.

99 Treated in detail in Fowden, Elizabeth Key, *The barbarian plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran*, Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1999; for a shorter discussion, see Penn, *Envisioning Islam* 144–145.

100 Guidetti, *In the shadow of the church* 54, fig. 3.10.

101 Penn, *Envisioning Islam* 144, notes on al-Ruṣāfa: "The architectural elements of adjoining worship spaces, a doorway, and a shared hall were not effective symbols of supersession. Rather, they both symbolized and helped create a more contiguous religious identity."

the charisma, so to speak, of these places.[102] Since some Arabian believers were, in fact, Christians, they might have worshipped in both churches and mosques. Moreover, it is not excluded that the gentile believers might have visited churches too, though mosques might have been their primary places of prayer.[103]

The case of Jerusalem in the early Islamic period is important in this respect. In the previous chapter, I noted that, soon after the conquests, a prayer place was built on the Temple Mount—a building some took to represent the new temple. Though the evidence is scant,[104] and no archaeological trace of this building remains, I suggest that it might have been venerated and used by both Jewish and Arabian gentile believers. It must be remembered that Jews were, in theory and probably also sometimes in practice, not allowed to settle in Jerusalem during the Byzantine era. The seventh-century CE Arabian believers, on the other hand, did not restrict the Jewish presence in the city: the lot of the Palestinian Jews was then greatly bettered by the new rule.[105] It must also be noted that the Christian presence in and pilgrimage to Jerusalem was not affected by the conquests.[106] The new buildings, sacred or secular, built by the Arabian believers were carefully placed in areas and quarters where they did not eclipse existing Christian buildings.[107] Christian sites in Jerusalem—monasteries and churches—were repaired, expanded, and even built from scratch.[108] The earlier Persian conquest of and rule in Jerusalem (614–628) is connected by modern archaeologists to mass graves of Christians, thus indicating the violent nature of this era.[109] However, Islamic conquest and rule does

102 Similarly, see Guidetti, Mattia, "The contiguity between churches and mosques in early Islamic Bilād al-Shām," in *BSOAS* 76/2 (2013), 229–258.

103 See, e.g., Guidetti, *In the shadow of the church* 68: "It is reasonable to imagine that individual Muslims or very small groups of Muslims entered particular Christian spaces willing to conduct their personal prayers as a means of paying homage to these sites." However, I should note that the category of "Muslims" is not really operative before the second/eighth century.

104 See the previous chapter and Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 161–164; Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 3.

105 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 125.

106 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 107–108.

107 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 136: "it seems that the Muslim rulers incorporated the new Islamic compound into the already existing Christian city, taking care not to damage other areas of the city inhabited by the non-Muslims. The large esplanade of the former Temple Mount, which was not significant to the Christians, was chosen as the core for the new Islamic section of the city."

108 Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 157.

109 See the detailed discussion in Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 305–311.

not appear to have meant mass killings of people in Jerusalem. In fact, as far as I know, mass burials linked with the early Islamic conquests have not been found *anywhere* in the Near East. This is not to say that the conquests were non-violent. But the evidence at hand does suggest that the descriptions, in some literary works, of mass killings and ubiquitous violence might belong to the realm of fantasy.[110]

Even the Dome of the Rock, built in 691 CE on the Temple Mount (*al-ḥaram*) in Jerusalem, probably replacing the older building mentioned above, is not necessarily an example of "Islamic" identity or "Islamic" dominance as is often supposed.[111] It is naturally true that its inscriptions contain many of the Qurʾānic passages (discussed in chapter 6 of the present work) that take issue with high Christological dogmata. However, as Stephen Shoemaker has pointed out, rather surprising pieces of information surface in the Arabic literary evidence: the staff of the Dome of the Rock included "a crew of Jews and Christians who cleaned the sacred precincts and attended to its lamps and sacred vessels. The public was allowed to worship in the Dome only on Mondays and Thursdays; on other days, only the staff were allowed inside. The rituals for these days commenced in the evening, the customary beginning of the day in Jewish and Christian liturgical time."[112] Thus, if the Arabic literary reports are anything to go by, the Dome represented one more example of sacred spaces open to different communities in the seventh-century Near East.[113] The important passage in question, from the work of Ibn al-Murajjā, is translated by Amikam Elad as follows (the brackets and parentheses are supplied by him):

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110 See, e.g., the *Chronicle* of Thomas the Presbyter (wr. ca. 640 CE), trans. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 61: "And around four-thousand poor peasants of Palestine were killed: Christians, Jews, and Samaritans. And the Nomads [*ṭayyāyē*] devastated the entire region." Shoemaker's translation of *ṭayyāyē* as "Nomads" is not completely successful, since it is simply Syriac authors' conventional way of referring to (usually) north Arabian and Arabic-speaking groups, with no clear indication of a lifestyle. It is derived from the tribal name Ṭayyiʾ. Projecting the meaning of nomadism to the *ṭayyāyē* mostly reflects modern scholars' stereotypes of "the Arabs." As Donner, "Talking about Islam's origins" 15 and Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 525–531, remark, the word was also used in reference to settled communities of Arabia. On this, see also chapter 1 of the present work.

111 Thus, e.g., Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 142–143.

112 Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire* 165. See also Guidetti, *In the shadow of the church* 69, who notes that the plan of the Dome of the Rock was probably inspired by the Kathisma Church, which was also octagonal. If so, perhaps the multi-confessional nature of the Kathisma Church also inspired practices at the Dome of the Rock?

113 For a comprehensive, but somewhat difficult to navigate, collection of sources on the Dome of the Rock, see Kaplony, Andreas, *The ḥaram of Jerusalem, 324–1099: Temple, Friday Mosque, area of spiritual power*, Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002.

> It [the Ḥaram?] had ten Jewish attendants on whom poll tax was not levied. Their number increased and they became twenty. They were engaged to clean the dirt (left by the) people during the pilgrimage seasons and in winter and summer, and to clean the places for ablution (*al-maṭāhir*) around al-Masjid al-Aqṣā [*al-Jāmiʿ*]. It [i.e. the Ḥaram] had ten Christian attendants, of [one] family, among whom the role of servicing the building [*khidmat al-bayt*] was passed on by inheritance, that is, making the plaster, sweeping the mats of the mosque and the canals leading to the water reservoirs, as well as cleaning the water reservoirs. In addition to this, it had a group of Jewish attendants who used to make the glass for the lamps, the (big) bowls and the glass vessels (*al-bazzāqāt*), and other things besides this. The poll tax was not taken from them, neither from those who were in charge of the preparation of the wicks (*al-surāqa*) of the lamps.[114]

Granted, cleaning the dirt left by visitors is a menial task, but the same cannot be said about the (one assumes, esteemed) duties of taking care of the places of ablution and the lamps. Note that, according to this report, these Jews and Christians did not have to pay the poll tax; this would seem to imply (if we take this narrative to transmit authentic information about the events), I submit, that they were considered members of the community of the believers.

The surviving first/seventh century papyri, while not numerous, are in accord with this general sketch. Rather than corroborating categories "Muslims" versus "non-Muslims," a much more varied picture emerges, with ill-defined group borders and changing delineations.[115] For instance, the papyri do not depict the poll tax (*jizya*), which was paid by (many but perhaps not all) conquered populations, as having been a religious tax, as it is later understood in

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114 Ibn al-Murajjā, *Faḍāʾil Bayt al-Maqdis wa-al-Shām wa-l-Khalīl*, ed. Ofer Livne-Kafri, Shefarʿam: Dār al-Mashriq li-t-Tarjama wa-l-Tibāʿa wa-l-Nashr, 1995, 61–62, trans. in Elad, Amikam, "ʿAbd al-Malik and the Dome of the Rock: A further examination of the Muslim sources," in *JSAI* 35 (2008), 167–226, at 181.

115 See Sijpesteijn, Petra M., "Establishing local elite authority in Egypt through arbitration and mediation," in H. Hagemann and S. Heidemann (eds.), *Transregional and regional elites: Connecting the early Islamic empire*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020, 387–406; Legendre, Marie, "Aspects of Umayyad administrations," in Andrew Marsham (ed.), *The Umayyad world*, London: Routledge, 2021, 133–157. For other important studies on early Arabic papyri, see Ragheb, Youssef, "Les premiers documents arabes de l'ère musulmane," in Constantin Zuckerman (ed.), *Constructing the seventh century*, Paris: Assocation des Amis du Centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2013, 679–729; Sijpesteijn, "Arabic papyri and Islamic Egypt" 452–472; *Shaping a Muslim state*, and "An early Umayyad papyrus invitation for the Ḥajj," in *JNES* 73/2 (2014), 179–190.

Islamic jurisprudence and scholarship. Rather, the poll tax "was a convenient form of fiscal payment that could be asked from conquered populations without any new complex calculations that the establishment of new rates on other types of taxes, such as the land or corn taxes, would have required. In other words, the poll tax was paid by the conquered and the conquerors received that payment among others—there was no religious consideration attached to these two categories."[116] However, it appears to be true that the tax that, for example, the Egyptian population paid was, generally speaking, higher in the early Islamic era than it had been before. The increased tax burden brought about, in some cases, fugitives (people fleeing their tax obligations) and social unrest, even revolts.[117] Moreover, documents indicating that a person had paid his tax duties were needed for travel. Since women appear to have been exempt from any tax obligations, this raises the interesting question of whether they were freer to travel than men were.[118]

As regards art and pictorial culture (including pictures on coins), the first/seventh century does not bring about any sudden change, though there is a slow emergence of aniconic coins toward the end of the century. Before that, the caliphs and governors minted coins that continued the imagery of the Byzantine and Sasanid coins, though they added Arabic inscriptions, which often appear alongside Greek and Persian ones. They did not even hesitate to mint coins with crosses and fire altars on them.[119] As for architecture, the Ara-

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116 Legendre, "Aspects of Umayyad administration" 138. Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition* 68, also notes that the supposedly heavy tribute described in literary sources, including transfers of houses and other buildings, is not reflected in the archaeological record. But cf. Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim state* 72–78, 172–199, who describes both the poll and land tax as being based on religious categories Muslim vs. non-Muslim. This I find somewhat open to question for the seventh century CE at least.

117 Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim state* 100–107. But, as Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim state* 193, notes, there were also fugitive Muslims who did not want to pay their alms tax obligations.

118 As discussed by Schenke, Gesa, "Christian women in Muslim Egypt: A public minority," in Robert G. Hoyland (ed.), *The late antique world of early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2015, 63–84.

119 For the numismatic record, see, e.g., Foss, Clive, *Arab-Byzantine coins: An introduction, with a catalogue of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2008; Gaube, Heinz, *Arabosasanidische Numismatik*, Braunschweig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1973; Heidemann, Stefan, "The evolving representation of the early Islamic empire and its religion on coin imagery," in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in context: Historical and literary investigations into the Qurʾānic milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 149–195; "Numismatics," in Chase F. Robinson (ed.), *The new Cambridge history of Islam*, 6 vols., i: *The formation of the Islamic world: Sixth to eleventh centuries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 648–663. Foss, *Arab-Byzantine coins* 22–35, 66, suggests that coins with crosses (and accompanying

bian believers for the most part took up and continued the existing forms of late antique Near Eastern buildings: "it is often difficult to distinguish what was Umayyad or Abbasid from what was Byzantine or had been Sasanian."[120]

In recent decades, a wealth of early Arabic inscriptions has been recorded and published.[121] Moreover, there are important studies discussing this corpus.[122] The first/seventh-century Arabic inscriptions can be characterized as

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Arabic legends) were minted by the believers until ca. 670 CE, while the use of fire altars continued even further, up to the 690s.

120 Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 157. Or as Grabar puts it: "there was almost nothing that could not have been accepted and understood by non-Muslims" (Grabar, Oleg, *Formation of Islamic art*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1987 [rev. ed.], 167). See also Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth* 143–149, on how the Quṣayr ʿAmra fits with the late antique architectural forms.

121 E.g., el-Hawary, Hassan Mohammed, "The most ancient Islamic monument known dated A.H. 31 (A.D. 652)," in *JRAS* 1930/2 (1930), 321–333; Ghabban, ʿAli ibn Ibrahim, "The inscription of Zuhayr, the oldest Islamic inscription (24 AH/AD 644–645), the rise of the Arabic script and the nature of the early Islamic state," in *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 19 (2008), 209–236; al-Ḥārithī, Nāṣir b. ʿAlī, "Naqsh kitābī nādir yuʾarrikhu ʿimarāt al-khalīfa al-umawī ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān li-l-Masjid al-Ḥarām ʿām 78 AH," in *ʿĀlam al-makhṭūṭāt wa-l-nawādir* 12/2 (2007), 533–543; al-Jbour, Khaled Suleman, "Arabic inscriptions from Wādī Salma," in *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 7 (2001), 673–679; Karīm, Jumʿa M., "Naqsh kūfī yaʿūdu li-l-ʿaṣr al-umawī min janūb sharq al-gharra," in *Dirāsāt: al-ʿulūm al-insāniyya wa-l-ijtimāʿiyya* 28/2 (2001), 391–413; "Nuqūsh islāmiyya taʿūdu li-l-ʿaṣrayn al-umawī wa-l-ʿabbāsī min janūb al-Urdunn: Qirāʾa, taḥlīl wa-muqārana," in *Majallat Jāmiʿat Dimashq* 18/2 (2002), 295–331 and *Nuqūsh islāmiyya duʿāʾiyya min bādiyat al-Urdunn al-janūbiyya al-sharqiyya*, Amman: al-Maṭābiʿ al-Taʿāwuniyya, 2003; Nevo, Yehuda D., Zemira Cohen and Dalia Heftman, *Ancient Arabic inscriptions from the Negev*, i, Jerusalem: IPS, Midreshet Ben-Gurion, 1993; Ory, Solange, "Les graffiti umayyades de ʿAyn al-Ğarr," in *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth* 20 (1967), 97–148; al-Rāshid, Saʿd b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, *Kitābāt islāmiyya ghayr manshūra min ruwāwat al-Madīnat al-munawwara*, Riyadh: Maktabat al-Malik Fahd, 1993; *Kitābāt islāmiyya min Makka al-mukarrama*, Riyadh: Jāmiʿat al-Malik Saʿūd, 1995; *Dirāsāt fī al-āthār al-islāmiyya al-mubakkira bi-l-Madīnat al-munawwara*, Riyadh: Muʾassasat al-Ḥuzaymī, 2000; *Mudawwanāt khaṭṭiyya ʿalā al-ḥajar min manṭiqat ʿAsīr: dirāsa taḥlīliyya wa-muqārana*, Riyadh: Maktabat al-Malik Fahd, 2008, and *Al-Ṣuwaydira (al-Ṭaraf qadīman): āthāruhā wa-nuqūshuhā al-islāmiyya*, Riyadh: Layan Culture Foundation, 2009; Rihaoui, Abdul Kader, "Découverte de deux inscriptions arabes," in *Les Annales archéologiques de Syrie* 11/12 (1961–1962), 207–208; Sauvaget, Jean, "Les inscriptions arabes de Palmyre," in Jean Cantineau (ed.), *Inventaire des inscriptions de Palmyre*, Damascus: Imprimerie Catholique, 1930, and "Les inscriptions arabes de la mosquée de Bosra," in *Syria* 22 (1941), 53–65; al-ʿUshsh, Muhammad Abū al-Faraj, "Kitabāt ʿarabiyya ghayr manshūra fī Jabal Usays," in *Al-Abḥāth* 17 (1964), 227–316.

122 E.g., Bacharach, Jere L. and Sherif Anwar, "Early versions of the shahāda: A tombstone from Aswan of 71 A.H., the Dome of the Rock, and contemporary coinage," in *Der Islam* 89 (2012), 60–69; al-Bqāʿīn, Firas, Glenn J. Corbett and Elias Khamis, "An Umayyad era mosque and desert waystation from Wadi Shīreh, southern Jordan," in *Journal of Islamic*

"generally monotheist"; for the most part, they do not make mention of Muḥammad as a/the prophet, Islam as a religion, or specifically Islamic rites as practices. These features become common in the second/eighth century, suggesting an increasing effort to define and delineate a communal identity.[123] According to the epigraphic record (as well as other types of evidence), the social category of "Muslims" (*muslimūn*), with their religion "Islam" (*al-islām*), begins to be visible in the early decades of the second/eighth centuries.

There are two inscriptions said to be from the 70s/690s that are often adduced as evidence for the appearance of the word *al-islām* in a reified sense. However, one of them (the ʿAbbāsa epitaph)[124] is, in fact, not from the 70s/690s and the other (the monumental inscription from the Dome of the Rock)[125] con-

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Archaeology 2/1 (2015), 93–12; Hoyland, Robert G., "The content and context of the early Arabic inscriptions," in *JSAI* 21 (1997), 77–102; Imbert, Frédéric, "Inscriptions et espaces d'écriture au Palais d'al-Kharrāna en Jordanie," in *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 5 (1995), 403–416; "Le Coran dans les graffiti"; "Graffiti arabes de Cnide et de Kos: Premières traces épigraphiques de la conquête musulmane en mer Égée," in Constantin Zuckerman (ed.), *Constructing the seventh century*, Paris: Assocation des Amis du Centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2013, 731–758; "Califes, princes et poètes dans les graffiti du début de l'Islam," in *Romano-Arabica* 15 (2015), 59–78, and "Le prince al-Walīd et son bain: Itinéraires épigraphiques à Quṣayr Amra," in *BEO* 64 (2015), 321–363; Lindstedt, "Who is in, who is out?", and "Religious warfare"; al-Muaikel, Khaleel Ibrahim, *A critical study of the archaeology of the Jawf region of Saudi Arabia with additional material on its history and early Arabic epigraphy* (PhD Diss.): University of Durham, 1988, 2 vols., http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/6722/—published as *Study of the archaeology of the Jawf region* (different pagination), Riyadh: King Fahd National Library, 1994; al-Thenayian, Muḥammad, *Nuqūsh al-qarn al-hijrī al-awwal al-muʾarrakha fī al-Mamlaka al-ʿArabiyyah al-Saʿūdiyya*, Riyadh: Jāmiʿat al-Malik Saʿūd, 2015; Whelan, Estelle, "Forgotten witness: Evidence for the early codification of the Qur'an," in *JAOS* 118 (1998), 1–14.

123 For a detailed look at the development of the early Islamic-era Arabic inscriptions, see Lindstedt, "Who is in, who is out?"

124 El-Hawary, Hassan Mohammed, "The second oldest Islamic monument known dated AH 71 (AD 691)," in *JRAS* 1932/2 (1932), 289–293; Hoyland, "The content and context" 87, n. 65, notes that the date in all likelihood actually refers to 171 or 271 AH, with the century omitted (a known feature in funerary inscriptions) because of the elaborate script and phraseology. One finds the phrase *inna aʿẓam maṣāʾib la-muṣībat al-nabī muḥammad* (which occurs in this epitaph) in various epitaphs of the late second and third centuries AH, but not before. Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith* 35–36, argues anew that the epitaph should be dated to the first/seventh century, but no novel evidence is adduced. It is almost impossible to believe that epitaph formulae that are ubiquitous in the late second-third century AH specimens would appear in an inscription from 71 AH, then disappear for a century, before becoming standard. I do not think the first-century AH date is in any way warranted, if similar phraseology is not found in other roughly contemporary inscriptions.

125 For the text of the Dome of the Rock and analysis, see Kessler, Christel, "ʿAbd al-Malik's

tains Qurʾānic quotations; as I have argued in this book, in no passage of the Qurʾān should *al-islām* be translated as "Islam."

With those two examples out of the way, let me adduce the early second/eighth century evidence, where the words *al-islām* and/or *al-muslimūn* appear in the sense of "Islam" and "Muslims." There are five important inscriptions:

> 107 AH, Wādī al-Gharra, Jordan, graffito: *raḍiya allāh ʿan aqraf ibn murr bn riḍā lā ashraku aḥadan wa-lā* [*ṭāghūt*] *wadd wa-hubal* [*sic*? written *h-ā-b-l*] *āmīn yā rabb al-muslimīn allāh sabʿ wa-miʾa*
>
> May God be pleased with Aqraf ibn Murr ibn Riḍā; I do not associate anything [with Him], and not the false deities of Wadd and Hubal; amen, O Lord of the Muslims, God; [in the year?] one hundred and seven [AH = 725–726 CE].[126]
>
> 119 AH, Jabal Usays, Syria, graffito: *rabbī allāh wa-dīnī al-islām ʿalayhi tawakkaltu wa-ilayhi unību wa-ilayhi al-maṣīr wa-kataba ḥafṣ fī dhī al-qaʿda* [mistakenly written *al-ʿ-q-d-h*] *sanat tisʿ ʿashara wa-miʾa man maḥāhu ajzāhu allāh fī al-ākhira āmīn*
>
> My Lord is God and my religion is Islam; upon Him I rely and to Him I turn [Q 11:88] and to Him is the returning [Q 40:3]; Ḥafṣ wrote in Dhū al-Qaʿda in the year one hundred and nineteen [AH = October–November 737]; may God recompense [i.e., punish] in the afterlife the one who erases it [the inscription], amen.[127]
>
> 123 AH, ʿAyn al-Jarr/ʿAnjar, Lebanon, graffito: *taraḥḥama allāh ʿalā al-qāsim bn hilāl al … wa-raḍiya ʿanhu wa-ʿāfāhu min sharr yawm al-ḥisāb wa-ṣallā allāh ʿalā ʿāmmat al-muslimīn wa-adkhalahum jannāt al-naʿīm wa-kutiba/kataba fī rajab sanat thalāth wa-ʿishrīn wa-miʾa*

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inscription in the Dome of the Rock: A reconsideration," in *JRAS* 1970/1 (1970), 2–14; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam* 696–699; Whelan, "Forgotten witness"; Milwright, Marcus, *The Dome of the Rock and its Umayyad mosaic inscriptions*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

126 Karīm, "Naqsh kūfī." The reading given in the publication is problematic and the photograph is very poor. I have tried to give a better interpretation of the text on the basis of the tracing but I admit that this reading, too, is somewhat conjectural.

127 Al-ʿUshsh, "Kitabāt ʿarabiyya" 290–291.

> May God have mercy on al-Qāsim ibn Hilāl al … and may He be pleased with him and may He efface evil off him on the Day of Reckoning; and may God bless all Muslims and let them enter Gardens of delight; and it was written/he wrote in Rajab in the year one hundred and twenty-three [AH = May–June 741].[128]
>
> 105–125 AH, Quṣayr ʿAmra, Jordan, damaged painted monumental inscription: *allāhu[mma] a[ṣli]ḥ (?) walī [ʿa]hd al-muslimīm wa-l-muslimāt … ʿāfiya min allāh wa-ra[ḥ]m[a]*
>
> O God, keep pious the heir apparent [al-Walīd ibn Yazīd] of male and female Muslims … pardon from God and mercy.[129]
>
> 131 AH, Southeastern Jordan, graffito: *[gha]fara allāh [li-]muʿādh bn ʿumar [wa-li-l-] muslimīn wa-li-ma[n qāla āmīn] … layāl li-dhī al-ḥijja sanat wāḥid wa-thalāthīn wa-miʾa*
>
> May God forgive Muʿādh ibn ʿUmar and the Muslims and who says ʻamen' … days of Dhū al-Ḥijja in the year one hundred and thirty-one [AH = 748–749 CE].[130]

What is interesting to note in these inscriptions is their rather wide geographical distribution as well as the fact that they represent both graffiti and monumental inscriptions. They are important evidence for my argument that, in the early second/eighth century, the word "Muslims" became common as an endonym, and the religion of the Muslims was understood to be called "Islam." For instance, the 119 AH graffito from Jabal Usays has the expression *dīnī*, "my *dīn*." Here, I would argue, we can witness the semantic development apparent and well known in later stages of Arabic: *dīn* comes to mean "a religion," that one can identify with and which one can refer to as "my religion." In the Qurʾān, the *dīn* belongs to God or is God's: it is the system of law and ethics revealed and assigned by God to human beings.[131] A human being does not possess, in this sense, *dīn* (except in Q 12:76, where "the king's law" is mentioned; see also Q 3:24, where *dīnihim* refers to the disbelievers' judgment on the last day).

128 Ory, "Les graffiti umayyades" 100.
129 Imbert, "Le prince al-Walīd" 340.
130 Karīm, *Nuqūsh islāmiyya* 355–358.
131 See chapters 5 and 6.

Reconstructions of early Arabic literature and its development support this timeline. As was noted in chapter 6, the category *muslimūn* is mentioned only in passing in the "Constitution" of Medina (it might also be a later addition to the text). I have also argued that the word never means "Muslims" in the Qurʾān but more generally people who obey God and the law. The social category and the name of the religion, Islam, appear to be first attested in texts produced by ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr (d. 94/713) and his generation. Though we have the problem that their texts were transmitted and reworked by their students (and students' students), this fits the general timeline that surfaces from dated, contemporary evidence. One of ʿUrwa's letters has a reference to "the people of Islam (*ahl al-islām*) who followed the Messenger of God."[132] Here the locution *ahl al-islām*, nowhere to be found in the Qurʾān, is quite clearly denoting a group, which is further characterized as the followers of the prophet.

Surviving papyri also attest the category "the people of Islam" (*ahl al-islām*) in the early eighth century CE but not, as far as I know, before that. The locution appears in a papyrus letter found at the Fayyūm oasis and dated by Petra Sijpesteijn to between 730 and 750 CE.[133] In the letter, Nājid ibn Muslim, who was in charge of the Fayyūm province, gives ʿAbdallāh ibn Asʿad, who held some sort of lower-level administrative position, instructions on the collection of the alms tax (*ṣadaqa, zakāt*).[134] The letter invokes "the people of Islam" (*ahl al-islām*) and, interestingly, *ahl al-dīn al-islām al-dīn al-qayyim*, which can be translated as "the people of the religion, Islam, the upright religion," or, supposing that the definite article before the first *al-dīn* in the phrase is a mistake and should be dropped, "the people of the religion of Islam, the upright religion."[135] In any case, the appearance of the phrase *ahl al-islām* in this papyrus of the first half of the eighth century aligns well with the timeline suggested by epigraphy and reconstructions of the layers of Arabic literature.

Taking into account both the surviving documentary and narrative evidence, I suggest it is possible to say with some confidence that, by the early eighth century CE, the word *al-islām* had started to signify the religion of a social group, shifting its Qurʾānic meaning of God- and law-obedience, which is not, in the Qurʾān, group-specific. The active participle *muslimūn* had begun to function as a synonym for *ahl al-islām*, those identifying with the religion Islam. It is from this point onward (the first decades of the eighth century) that I suggest that the words should be translated as "Islam" and "Muslims,"

132 Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, i, 1181, trans. in Anthony, *Muhammad and the empires of faith*, 110.
133 Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim state* 312–315.
134 On these figures, see Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim state* 124–151.
135 Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim state* 314, ll. 8 and 17.

respectively. The rise of a distinct Islamic identity starts a significant historical process: the Jews, Christians, and others begin to be treated, all and sundry, as something different from Muslims. They are *ahl al-dhimma*, protected people, subject to the *jizya* tax. Above, it was noted that the early papyri understand the *jizya* as being paid by the conquered communities, not according to their religious affiliation. All this changes in the second/eighth century. This new social categorization does not, naturally, mean that Muslims, Jews, Christians, and others did not intermingle anymore.[136] But it means that when they met and interacted, they did so in the context of their specific social identities; these identities could still be equivocal, mixed, hybrid, or intersecting, but they now included a new option, unattested for the seventh century CE: Muslim.[137]

But let me return to an era where the category of Muslims did not yet obtain. There are some interesting Arabic inscriptions, written by Jews and Christians in the first/seventh century or perhaps somewhat later, which attest to, perhaps, the fuzzy borderlines and, moreover, to the survival of Jewish and Christian communities in Northern Arabia. A graffito stemming from Dedan/al-ʿUlā is written in Hebrew letters, though the language is Arabic and the formulae are influenced by early Islamic inscriptions. It reads: "Naʿīm/Nuʿaym son of Isaac trusts in God. He has written (this) (*nʿym bn ʾsḥq b-ʾlh ytq ktb*)."[138] I would interpret this as an Islamic-era inscription written by an Arabic-speaking Jew, though the inscription is unfortunately not dated nor does it contain any signaling of a specific religious affiliation. Naʿīm/Nuʿaym was, I would claim, affected by and had adopted some religious formulae repeated by the community of the believers: He was Arabic-speaking. Yet he chose the Hebrew script as his mode of communication, though it would have been incomprehensible to most Arabians and speakers of Arabic. Robert Hoyland suggests that the inscription might have been written by a (former) Jew who converted to Islam,[139] but the notion of conversion is naturally speculation and does not address the Hebrew script as a medium of writing. Naturally, it is possible that this person of proba-

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136 The literature on Muslim-Christian and Muslim-Jewish relations and dynamics is very large; there is even a journal called *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. For orientation on these topics, see, e.g., Griffith, *The church in the shadow of the mosque*; Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew*.

137 Though intra-Islamic (proto-)groups naturally existed at this stage, Heider has argued with interesting data and methodology that the Shīʿa identity starts to form in the first half of the second/eighth century (Haider, Najam, *The origins of the Shīʿa: Identity, ritual, and sacred space in eighth-century Kūfa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

138 Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz" 102. There are similar inscriptions that are Arabic in language and Hebrew in script, idem 102–104.

139 Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz."

bly Jewish background, Naʿīm/Nuʿaym, lived in the first/seventh century, when Islam was not yet Islam, and affiliated with the community of the believers. Perhaps it is this fuzziness of categories that we should be emphasizing.

In chapter 1, a recently published Sabaic inscription from South Arabia was cited as a (rare) example serving as proof for the longevity of the Sabaic epigraphic habit: though the inscription is undated, it is likely from Islamic times, given the *basmala* at the beginning—I would hypothetically suggest the first/seventh century as its date. The inscription reads:

1 In the name of God, the Merciful, the Benevolent, Lord of heavens (*b-s¹m-Lh Rḥmn Rḥmn rb s¹mwt*),
2 the Provider of grace to you [O human], the Giver of His favor; He has given you faith (*r*[*zq*]*n mfḍl-k w-ʾṯrn mḫh s²kmt ʾymn*).[140]

The inscription is not only undated, but also unsigned. Who wrote it? Since most Yemenis appear to have Jewish or Judaizing affiliations, as explored in chapter 2, it can be assumed that the writer of this inscription also self-identified as Jewish or came from a family that had at some point in recent history done so. Though the inscription has Qurʾānic influences (in particular, the *basmala* at the beginning) and Arabic loan words (such as *ʾymn*, unattested in other Sabaic inscriptions and stemming from the Arabic *īmān*), the language of the inscription cannot be called Arabic. Nor is it specifically "Islamic" in content. As was the case of the inscription written by Naʿīm/Nuʿaym in the Hebrew script, the Sabaic inscription in question can be interpreted as a trace left by a Jew who had joined Muḥammad's group of believers (during the prophet's lifetime or later) and adopted some of the religious formulae circulating in the community, but without necessarily understanding her affiliation in the believer group as annulling her previous commitments, practices, and identity as part of Israel.

Another Arabic graffito, from Jordan, published in 2017, presents a related but somewhat different case. It was written by a Christian, as indicated by the cross that is attached to the text. The inscription is probably from the first/seventh century, though it is undated as such. The text reads: *dhakara al-ilāh yazīdū al-malik*, "May God remember Yazīd the king" (see figure).[141] This extremely interesting inscription displays some notable features. First, according to the epigraphic evidence discussed in chapter 3, the uncontracted *al-ilāh*

140 Al-Ḥājj, "Naqsh"; Jabal Ḏabūb 1 in CSAI.
141 Al-Shdaifat, Younis et al., "An early Christian Arabic graffito mentioning 'Yazīd the king'," in *Arabian archaeology and epigraphy* 28 (2017), 315–324.

FIGURE 7 Inscription reading "May God remember Yazīd the king"
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

was the standard Christian way of referring to God in Arabic before Islam but seems to have been in use longer. Second, the authors of the publication note that the *wāw* at the end of the personal name Yazīd is the so-called *wawation*, which rather often marks Arabic anthroponyms in Nabataean inscriptions and which survives, albeit rarely, up to the Islamic era (and in Classical Arabic in the personal name ʿAmr, which is written *ʿmrw*). And finally, the "king" mentioned in the inscription would seem to refer to the caliph Yazīd I (r. 680–683 CE). Naturally, as the authors remark, other interpretations are possible too: perhaps the *wāw* signals the word "and," which would render the translation "May God remember Yazīd and the king." This would complicate the identification of the person(s) mentioned. Or perhaps "king Yazīd" denotes someone other than the caliph Yazīd I. However, I am inclined to agree with the authors that the most likely candidate is indeed the said caliph.

This graffito (written by a person who did not wish to identify him- or herself by name) indicates the blurriness of the borders between different religious groups, though there is no indication that the writer necessarily self-identified as part of the believers' community. The writer of this inscription chose to identify her- or himself as a Christian (as indicated by the cross); yet, s/he chose to ask God to be mindful of the caliph Yazīd, a "Muslim" caliph, not some other political or religious authority.

Both the literary and material evidence indicate that it is very difficult to speak of a reified, distinct Islam, or a bounded group of Muslims, in the first century AH. Rather, the surviving contemporary evidence evinces communi-

ties that overlapped and individuals that partook in many social identifications. Islam did not signify a sudden or violent break in the social and religious life in al-Ḥijāz, wider Arabia, or elsewhere. For a century or so, Islam did not even signify Islam. As Harry Munt notes, there is meager evidence of the expulsion of non-Muslims from al-Ḥijāz. Rather, "the widely attested classical prohibition on non-Muslims residing in the Ḥijāz had much more to do with the gradually evolving need to draw up firmer communal boundaries, which could help distinguish Muslims from others, and the role played by sacred spaces in doing so."[142]

To be clear, in this chapter I have noted and argued for two interrelated but ultimately distinct phenomena that were going on in Arabia: 1) in the first/seventh century, people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds were joining Muḥammad's movement without always fully discarding their old identities; 2) even those who did not affiliate with the believers' movement, later (the second/eighth century onward) called Islam, were not expelled from Arabia or forcibly converted to Islam: their communities lasted for centuries.

1.3 *Conversion in the First/Seventh Century*

It is customary put forward that the first/seventh century Muslims did not really seek converts in the areas that they conquered. For instance, on the basis of the quantitative study by Richard Bulliet, it would appear that the number of Muslims did not really grow at all during the first Islamic century.[143] This disinclination to convert is often explained by the supposition that the non-Muslims of the caliphate paid a heavier tax than the Muslims.

But perhaps the whole concept of "conversion" is anachronistic.[144] As Jessica Mutter has noted: "In the seventh century, conversion is probably the wrong term to use for movement between Islam and Christianity."[145] The reader will

142 Munt, "'No two religions'" 249.

143 See the figures in Bulliet, Richard W., *Conversion to Islam in the medieval period: An essay in quantitative history*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1979, 44, 82, 97, 109.

144 See the important and detailed treatment in Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 263–272, 310–399. For instance, p. 361: "it was possible for one to be a Muslim and yet make use of any distinctively 'Christian' religious elements in one's everyday existence." Note that, though Tannous accepts (and propounds) that people held multiple and mixed affiliations and ideas, he still speaks of "Christians," "Muslims," and "conversion," as if they were meaningful concepts for the seventh-century CE Near East. I have suggested in this book a different reading of the evidence. In my opinion, we should also problematize the reified nature of the social categories. See also Sahner, *Christian martyrs* 29–117, in particular for a number of interesting cases of Muslims converting to Christianity in the literary evidence.

145 Mutter, Jessica S., *By the book: Conversion and religious identity in early Islamic Bilād al-*

have noticed that, in this book, I have talked about "joining" the group rather than of "converting" to it.[146] As I have also argued, the category "Muslim" did not exist at the time and, in the Arabic contemporary evidence, there is no allusion to or explanation of a conversion rite or process that the would-be members of the community of the believers had to undergo.[147] Nor am I aware that any other seventh-century CE source (say, Syriac Christian literature) would mention such a rite. There is no word in Qurʾānic Arabic that would signify "conversion."

As mentioned above, Islamic-era Arabic sources depict a swift and violent conversion of non-Muslims to Islam in Arabia, or expulsion of non-Muslims from Arabia during the life of the prophet and soon after ("no two religions!"). But these sources are highly problematic: "They present quite schematic overviews of the tribes' acceptance of Islam and rely upon generous use of literary *topoi*; they are far more interested in using conversion narratives to demonstrate the tribes' role in the realization of God's plan for mankind than in understanding the messy reality of how conversion actually works," as remarked by Harry Munt.[148]

In any case, I would suggest that "conversion," in the sense of joining the early believer movement during the lifetime of Muḥammad and sometime after, should be understood as a much more subtle and piecemeal process than a sudden change of religion.[149] The Qurʾān and other contemporary material suggests that people joining the group could hold on to their previous identities while taking on a new one.[150] In the "Constitution" of Medina, the believer affiliation is articulated as a superordinate identity, under which one could still be Jewish (for instance). I have discussed above some non-Arabic literary evidence, written by both Jews and Christians, which substantiates this notion.

Shām and al-Jazīra (PhD Diss.): University of Chicago, 2018, 248. Though, I should add, perhaps "Islam" too is the wrong term for this period.

146 See also Humphreys, *Muʿawiya* 40, n. 5, who prefers the word "accepting" Islam (rather than "converting" to it).

147 Similarly, Sarris, *Empires of faith* 267–268. Though it is of course true that, in later Islam too, the rite to convert is rather straightforward, with the would-be convert pronouncing the *shahāda*, testimony of faith.

148 Munt, Henry, "What did conversion to Islam mean in seventh-century Arabia?" in Andrew C.S. Peacock (ed.), *Islamisation: Comparative perspectives from history*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 83–101, at 83–84.

149 Munt, "What did conversion," also emphasizes this in his important study.

150 See also Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 5: "when viewed from the standpoint of ordinary religious believers, a conversion from Christianity to Islam may not have been as momentous, in religious terms, as one might expect. We are dealing with a world, I will suggest, in which one could become a Muslim and still hold on to many Christian

To be sure, there are some seventh-century sources, written by Christians, that suggest that people joining Muḥammad's movement *did* have to recant Christianity in order to join. Ishoʿyahb III's bewailing of east Arabian Christians leaving their faith is a case in point.[151] Additionally, Anastasius of Sinai writes in his *Edifying Tales* (wr. sometime between 660 and 690 CE) that the "Saracens" (as he calls them) conquered Sinai and forced "those Saracens who were already there and were previously Christians to apostatize from faith in Christ."[152] However, this appears to run counter to the other evidence and, indeed, can be interpreted as Anastasius's own social categorization rather than a reflection of what the Arabian believers required.[153] The point remains: first/seventh-century sources written by Arabian gentile believers, Jews, and Christians,[154] in various languages, all attest the idea that there were Jews and Christians that joined the community of the believers founded by the prophet Muḥammad, both during his life and after, as Jews and Christians, without having to recant their earlier faith or identity. No conversion rite, phrase, or procedure is attested for this early period. The whole question of conversion to Islam in the first/seventh century has to be revisited with this in mind.

Indeed, Ayman Ibrahim has argued that the conversion narratives included in Islamic-era Arabic literature were part and parcel of the project, or process, of formatting and articulating an Islamic identity, different from Judaism and Christianity.[155] The stories of, say, a Christian monk or a Jewish rabbi converting

practices and even beliefs." However, in the context of the first/seventh century, I would problematize the notion of "conversion" from Christianity to Islam altogether.

151 See above and Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 95.

152 Trans. Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 108.

153 Well put in Shoemaker, *A prophet has appeared* 119–120: "it is possible that in this instance it is Anastasius, rather than Muhammad's followers, who is determined to draw a firm religious boundary. It could be, for instance, that Muhammad's followers were simply welcoming these Christians into their community of the Believers even as they remained Christians, a practice suggested by some of our early sources, while Anastasius regarded any such association with this new religious community as tantamount to apostasy." In any case, as Marinides notes, Anastasius was more worried about and polemical against other (non-Chalcedonian) Christians than the Arabian believers (Marinides, Nicholas, "Anastasius of Sinai and Chalcedonian Christian lay piety in the early Islamic Near East," in Robert G. Hoyland [ed.], *The late antique world of early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 2015, 293–312, at 305).

154 A crude dichotomy would call these "insider" and "outsider" sources, but such a dichotomy should be rejected.

155 Ibrahim, *Conversion to Islam* 131–132, 238–239. See also the important study by Mutter, *By the book*.

to Islam, "indicated not only how Islam surpassed and replaced earlier revelations but also how Muhammad was the greatest and final prophet. In each of these narrative examples, conversion to Islam serves as a literary tool, allaying concerns among Muslims and presenting a persuasive case for Islam to non-Muslims."[156] That later Muslim literature discusses these phenomena in the context of sharp and definite changes of affiliations cannot be, then, taken as evidence that this is how the first/seventh-century believers understood them: later views are simply retrojected to the early period.

I will give here two modern analogues to conceptualize the process of "conversion" in the early Islamic period. First, I could compare this process to a modern-day process of receiving a second citizenship. But rather than forsaking one's earlier nationality, one could still possess the earlier one, thus having a dual citizenship. Another analogue would be a mainstream Lutheran Christian joining a Christian revival movement, such as The Awakening. Though acquiring new beliefs and practices, the person would still consider himself (and would be considered by others) Lutheran and Christian.[157] Or, in the context of some individuals joining the first/seventh-century believers' movement, a more fitting modern analogue would possibly be a (say, Catholic) Christian becoming a Jehovah's Witness, or a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: she would still consider herself Christian, though others would in some cases disagree (and she would be outside the World Council of Churches, whether she knew it or not).

Modern scholars of religious studies emphasize that the phenomenon of conversion should, in any case, be understood as a slow and piecemeal process rather than a moment of drastic change. Moreover, a person's religious views and beliefs are in flux throughout her life, *even if* she retains the same self-identification as, say, Bahá'í. As Lewis Rambo notes in his classic book:

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156 Ibrahim, *Conversion to Islam* 233.

157 As another, historical, analogue, compare this with the following statement about the early Jesus movement: "Consider the following scenario as a possibility: Paul claims that Jesus is the Messiah. He further claims that other *ioudaioi* [Judeans/Jews] should acknowledge that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, and thus acknowledge that these are the last days, and that non-*ioudaioi*, having been made pure by the newly available *pneuma* of the Messiah, are now to join together with *ioudaioi* in worshipping their ancestral god, who expressed this desire for joint worship in the book of Isaiah. *Ioudaioi* would still carry out their ancestral traditions; they would have to change their behavior only in regard to interacting with these newly purified non-*ioudaioi*. To characterize those kinds of behavioral changes as *ioudaioi* 'converting to Christ' would be baffling," Nongbri, Brent, "The concept of religion and the study of the Apostle Paul," in *Journal of the Jesus movement in its Jewish setting* 2 (2015), 1–26, at 14, n. 47.

> conversion is a complex, multifaceted process involving personal, cultural, social, and religious dimensions. While conversion can be triggered by particular events and, in some cases, result in very sudden experiences of change, for the most part it takes place over a period of time. People change for a multitude of reasons, and that change is sometimes permanent and sometimes temporary. Certain contemporary theologians believe that genuine conversion transpires over an entire lifetime …
>
> Conversion is malleable. It is a complex process that transpires over time, shaped by the expectations of those advocating a certain type of conversion and the experience of the person who experiences the process. While we may often discern general patterns, it is impossible to assert that every single convert goes through precisely the same experience. Groups differ, individuals differ, and modes of interacting between the person and the group differ.[158]

It is true and worth emphasizing that conversion was often differently conceived in the late antique and medieval Near East than it is in a more individual modern-day society such as the United States. Harry Munt notes that, at least according to the literary evidence, it was common for whole tribes to convert to a religion such as Christianity[159] (consider the cases of the Taghlib or the Ghassānids discussed in chapter 3). Conversion was commonly political and social, though it was sometimes also driven by individuals and their choices. Regardless of these differences (whether the phenomenon is more group-based or individual-driven), emphasizing conversion as a *process*, not a moment, is important. For example, if affiliation to Muḥammad's movement was decided by tribal or other leaders, as one supposes it was in some cases, what did it mean for the religious beliefs and practices of the members of the tribe, if they presently possessed a Jewish or Christian identity, given that (as I have argued) there was no requirement to completely abandon these former identities, dogmata, or praxes? For some, the new affiliation might have been an important event in their lives. For others, it probably meant rather little.

158 Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion* 165, 170–171.

159 Munt, "What did conversion" 88. See also Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity" 295–296. This (i.e., the whole tribe converting) is also how conversion to Islam is conceptualized in many Muslim historiographical texts, see Ibrahim, *Conversion to Islam* 162, 209.

2 Conclusions

I hope to have shown in this book that the message of the Qurʾān and the community established by Muḥammad fit seamlessly and are understandable in the context of late antique Arabia, where (in all probability) the majority of the inhabitants were Jews or Christians. I also hope that I have put forward a somewhat comprehensive interpretation of what the career of the eschatological gentile prophet was about and how it affected those around him as regards their social identities. Moreover, I hope that my reading of the Qurʾān and the "Constitution" of Medina has taken into account the various facets of these texts and not just emphasized some aspects at the expense of the totality of the evidence. As opposed to the reconstructions of Muḥammad offered by Juan Cole and Stephen Shoemaker recently,[160] I fail to find evidence of interest in imperial politics in the Qurʾān. The prophet did not envision, I suggest, that warfare and conquests would usher in the end-times. His followers might have seen a connection between the eschatology and conquests after his death—the non-Arabic evidence (that is contemporary with the conquests but not with him, at least if we accept the conventional date of death of the prophet) certainly suggests this. If imperial politics or world conquest were key to Muḥammad's mission, one supposes that we would have evidence of this in the Qurʾān. But we do not. Though Muḥammad was a prophet *and* a politician, as far as the eschatological urgency goes, the significant thing for the believers to do was to have faith and repent.

One of the points that this book has tried to make is that "letting go" of the Arabic historiographical tradition, which presents the narrative of the prophet and his earliest followers as a sort of salvation history, or relegating it to the role of a secondary source, does not mean stepping into a void. We have enough contemporary witnesses—Arabic poetry, epigraphy, the Qurʾān, and non-Arabic texts—to distil reconstructions of historical trajectories. I have tried to portray letting go of this tradition as an optimistic scenario. I do not wish to suggest that the Arabic biographies of the prophet and other historical texts are worthless; on the contrary, they appear to contain rather much that is factual or close to being so, though events and phenomena are viewed with lenses of (often, much) later Muslims who had viewed religious groups and social categories differently than the first generation did. Arabic historiography is valuable, but its somewhat secondary status as a source set has to be borne in mind. Historical reconstructions should start with the primary, con-

160 Cole, *Muhammad*; Shoemaker, *The apocalypse of empire*.

temporary sources, and compare and contextualize Arabic literature with it, not the other way around. Much has to be unlearned. At the same time, much will be learned.

The prophet Muḥammad or his followers did not call themselves Muslims. They did not see themselves as founding or constituting a new religion, Islam. For one thing, eschatological urgency did not allow for that. Moreover, groups were categorized differently when Muḥammad lived. There were believers, who consisted of gentiles, Jews, Christians, and others. And then there were disbelievers, who consisted of gentiles, Jews, Christians, and others. Naturally, things were not this simple and dichotomous: there were large groups of people in the grey area: for instance, the so-called hypocrites, who affiliated with the believer group but did not wholly participate in its endeavors; and the majority of the People of the Book, who did not fully accept Muḥammad as a prophet but who could still be considered semi-believers, fit to receive the paradisal recompense (I should reiterate that the minority of them did accept Muḥammad's mission and were considered, fully, believers).

The social categorizations present during the time of the prophet lived on until at least 700 CE: there were, as the literary evidence suggests, a number of Jews and Christians who joined the group without, it seems, forsaking their earlier identities. Recent archaeological surveys and other research into the extant material evidence indicate that the early Islamic conquests, in particular, or caliphal rule, in general, did not signal the disappearance or dwindling of Jewish or Christian communities in Arabia or elsewhere. In fact, the archaeological record from east Arabia indicates that the local Christian community engaged in significant building activities. The east Arabian Christians were revitalized, rather than wiped out, during the first/seventh century, at least if their building activities are anything to go by. The same is true for Jews in, for example, Jerusalem, where they were allowed to live anew. The hegemonic and violent fantasy of "no two religions," whether in Arabia or elsewhere, does not represent first/seventh-century (or even much later) realities. In this book, I have suggested that, when the prophet was born, the Jews were probably the majority in southern Arabia, while the Christians were the majority in northern Arabia. I would furthermore hypothesize that the situation might have stayed the same for (at least) a century after his life.

The archaeological record (and, at times, literary evidence) shows that the believers and others shared sacred spaces and prayed next to each other in the Near East.[161] The Kathisma Church and the open-air prayer place in Be'er

161 For this topic, see also Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East* 380–386.

Ora, for example, suggest that Christians and Arabian gentile believers shared a place of worship. Or, perhaps it would be more to the point to say that the evidence suggests that the Arabian believers prayed in churches and that there was no strict conceptual demarcation between the communities to begin with. Later Arabic literature written by Muslim scholars acknowledges, and often tolerates, that some early Muslims prayed in churches. Moreover, a few Muslim scholars of the second/eighth century and later still considered it permissible to pray in churches, though other scholars frowned upon this practice.[162] The literary evidence on the Dome of the Rock suggests that Jews and Christians were also present (and, one assumes, prayed) in it. The *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn ben Yōḥay* celebrated the second caliph as a lover of Israel, who restored the temple by building a place of worship on the Temple Mount. Though the reference is to a building that predated the Dome of the Rock, the point remains: some Jews deemed the place(s) of worship built on the mount the new temple.[163]

The evidence marshaled here does not mean that sharing of sacred spaces was ubiquitous or considered unproblematic everywhere and by everyone. But it does point toward the fuzzy borderlines in the religious map of the first/seventh-century Near East, where a *muʾmina* (Arabian believer who deemed Muḥammad a prophet) might enter a church to pray; a Jew venerate the building founded by the *muʾminūn* in Jerusalem as the new temple; and the patriarch of the Church of the East characterize the *muʾminūn* as God-fearers who honor the church and the Christians.

162 Bashear, "Qibla Musharriqa" 281: "As for prayer in churches, the present inquiry has proved beyond doubt that such was not an uncommon practice all over the area and throughout the first and early second centuries [AH]."

163 Lewis, "An apocalyptic vision" 324–325.

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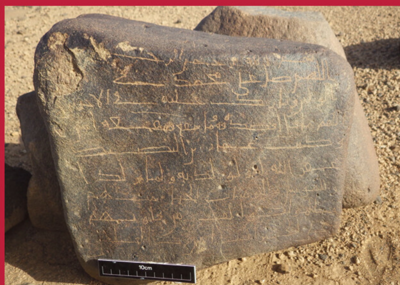

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