

Religious Roots of Europe Master's Thesis:  
**The Origins of Islam in the Arabian Context**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the origins of Islam, and their relations with the Arabian context, with the help of two types of materials - the Qur'an and Muslim tradition, and the archeological finds. First, I analyze the external and internal situations of pre-Islamic Arabia. Then, I discuss the conditions of Mecca and pre-Islamic Arabian polytheism, and their roles in the emergence of Islam. After that, I examine various monotheistic elements in Arabia that may form the origins of Islam, as well as the origins of God's names. Finally, I focus on the condition of Yathrib and the relation between the old monotheisms (Judaism and Christianity) and Islam. Mecca and Yathrib were two crucial places for the emergence of Islam. Due to the differences of their milieus, the early Muslims were persecuted by polytheists in Mecca, while Yathrib (later Medina) became an arena for polemics with the old monotheisms according to the Qur'an and Muslim tradition. Based on the simple Abrahamism that was once popular in northwest Arabian peripheries, Muhammad's new proposition of Abraham's religion and the *Hanīfiya* may have played a key role in the emergence of Islam, producing a connection between his new monotheism and pre-Islamic Arabian history. The establishment of the Ka'ba in a central position in Islam, signalled the independence of early Islam from the old monotheisms. Later, the Arab Muslim conquest of Mesopotamia and the cultural and religious integration that followed added to the final shape of Islam. All these elements contributed to the origins of Islam.

## **Key Words:**

Pre-Islamic Arabia, Mecca, Yathrib, Polytheism, Monotheism, God, Abraham's Religion, Judaism, Christianity, the Qur'an, Muslim tradition, Origins of Islam

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## Introduction

Islam is a universal monotheism, which originated in the Arabian peninsula. The complexity of Islam should be noted as the starting point of research on the origins of Islam. The emergence of Islam was neither an independent process nor a simple evolvement. The foreign powers exerted both a political and a religious influence on pre-Islamic Arabs, which brought the late pre-Islamic Arabia into instability and uncertainty, for example Abraha's invasion of Hijaz, which was the last big event that occurred in Arabia before Muhammad's mission. Besides, the internal order of pre-Islamic Arabia was weak in front of powerful foreign interferences. In the general internal crisis of Arabia, Mecca became distinctive and exceptional, because of its high religious and commercial status, based on its well-run community and firm polytheistic religion. Muhammad's initial mission was to convert Meccan polytheists in a nearly purely polytheistic milieu, but he used many concepts from old monotheisms since he may have learned them during his caravan travels to Syria. Therefore, I would like to investigate what kind of monotheistic materials Muhammad could get for his mission, which is my main concern. Then, the Qur'an and the extra-Qur'anic Muslim tradition<sup>1</sup> both portray the followers of pre-Islamic Arabian religion as *Mushrikūn*, which does not correspond to the real situation of Arabian polytheism in Hijaz at all. Rather, the monotheistic trend of Arabian polytheism (i.e. the worship of a "High God") happened in northwest Arabia (like Negev) and south Arabia, which may help us to understand the origins of Islam. At the same time, Judaism and Christianity both had a significant presence in northwest Arabia (as well as northern Hijaz) and south Arabia. The two terms *Al-lāh* and *al-Rahmān* that are used by Islam to designate the One God, may both have been adapted into Islam from their usage in Judaism and Christianity, though the origins of these two terms were different. My other great concern is the Islamic conception of Abraham's religion by the Qur'an and of the *Ḥanīfiya* by Muslim tradition based on the Qur'anic account of the *Ḥanīf*. The first conception may have historical precedents, while the latter may be purely literary product. However, both conceptions not only serve to re-interpret the pre-Islamic religious history of Arabs and Mecca, but are also used as a literary weapon to counter the challenge of old monotheisms in Yathrib (later called "Medina"). Due to the essential difference between Mecca and Yathrib, the migration of Muhammad from Mecca to Yathrib played a crucial role in the successful rise of Islam. Despite the decisive effects of old monotheisms on his new religion, Muhammad's relations with Jews and Christians in Yathrib often changed as a result of confrontations and polemics, which definitely influenced the direction in which early Islam developed.

In this thesis, I propose six major questions and I try to solve them:

1. What were the external and internal situations of Arabia during Muhammad's time? Why were Judaism and Christianity treated as standing for foreign powers? How important was the event of Abraha's invasion, to the situation of Hijaz?
2. How could the town of Mecca get such a high status in pre-Islamic Arabia? And what was its role in the emergence of Islam?
3. What is the

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<sup>1</sup> The "extra-Qur'anic Muslim tradition" includes various genres of Muslim literatures: collections of the *Ḥadīth*, traditional lives of Muhammad (the *Sīra*), commentaries on the Qur'an (the *Tafsīr*), chronicles that begin with the creation and Mecca's history (*al-Tārīkh*), and many other types of Islamic works. Below, the "extra-Qur'anic Muslim tradition" is abbreviated to be "Muslim tradition".

connection between Muhammad's new monotheism and Arabian polytheism? And how was pre-Islamic Arabian religion presented in Islam? 4. Why was Muhammad forced to migrate to Yathrib from Mecca? 5. What kind of monotheistic materials could Muhammad get in the Arabian context? And how were those monotheistic materials adapted and presented in Islam? 6. How did the Islamic polemics with old monotheisms influence the shape of Islam?

This thesis will be based on secondary literature, combined with some references to the primary sources. I will discuss various scholarly opinions regarding the origins and emergence of Islam, including the "revisionist" ideas, by examining if they are sufficiently proved. My investigation will also consider the archeological finds of ancient northwest Arabia and south Arabia, which may assist us to interpret the origins of Islam. I will try to propose new ideas about the origins of Islam, based on conclusions of previous research and finds.

## 1. Foreign Influence on Pre-Islamic Arabia

### 1 - 1 The Politics of Arabia before the Advent of Islam

Before the advent of Islam, the Arabian peninsula was for long time regarded as a buffer zone by two great powers in the region - the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, as well as one lesser power - Abyssinia. Although the Arabian peninsula is mostly covered by desert or barren land, its geographical position is crucial: to the west of the Persian Gulf and the Sassanid sphere, to the east of the Red Sea and Egypt, to the south of the Byzantine empire connected by land, and to the north of Abyssinia crossing Gulf of Aden. The two great powers exerted their influence by controlling Arabian states or settlements in the peripheries of the Arabian desert: the Byzantine empire gave support to the Ghassanids in north Arabia, while the Sassanid empire gave aid to the Lakhmids in northeast Arabia. As for Yemen of south Arabia, due to its key position in the marine trade, it was increasingly driven into the political and religious conflicts between the Byzantine and Sassanid powers, and also had to deal with the Axum kingdom of Abyssinia, whose sphere of influence traditionally included Yemen. Yemen was always a multi-cultural place where Christian-Jewish relations were continuously in tension, which corresponded to the struggles between Byzantines and Sassanids for the control over south Arabia. Furthermore, the Axum kingdom in Abyssinia had for long time had the intention of conquering south Arabia, while interfering in the Byzantine-Sassanid struggles over Yemen: the Abyssinian conqueror Abraha's persecution of Jews in Yemen in mid-6th century is an explicit instance. Yemen's Abyssinian ruler Abraha is supposed to have waged an expedition with war elephants to Mecca in the latter half of the 6th century, aiming to destroy the Ka'ba, motivated not only by his political ambition, but also because he had built a new Christian sanctuary in Sanaa to compete with the famous Meccan *Haram*.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the civilized south Arabian states declined before Muhammad's time, because of instability and wars. The wars and chaos of pre-Islamic south Arabia caused the re-Bedouinization of the whole region before the coming of Islam.

The Byzantine emperor Justinian I (reigned 527-565 CE) was ambitious to recover the Roman domains in the West, and thus implemented a policy of appeasement with the Sassanid empire.<sup>3</sup> But Justinian I never gave up Byzantine interests in Arabia, so he encouraged the use of Christianity as a Romanizing and unifying factor to encounter the Persian influence in the Near East. Therefore, the Byzantine empire was in coalition with the Abyssinians who embraced Monophysite Christianity. Abyssinia is not merely geographically contiguous to south Arabia, but also traditionally had intimate relations with the Arabian peninsula in culture, economy, politics, and religion. So, the Abyssinian power could play a great role in the Byzantine confrontation with the Sassanids. Justinian I definitely permitted the Abyssinian conquest of Yemen in 525 CE, and, despite his own Orthodox faith, he preferred Monophysite Christianity there to Judaism and Nestorianism, both of which had strong Persian political connections.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Müller, Walter W. "Outline of the History of Ancient Southern Arabia", in Werner Daum (ed.), *Yemen: 3000 Years of Art and Civilisation in Arabia*. Felix, 1987; Ullendorff, Edward. *The Ethiopians: an Introduction to Country and People* (Second Edition). London: Oxford University Press, 1960. p 56.

<sup>3</sup> Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad at Mecca*. Oxford University Press, 1953. p 12.

<sup>4</sup> See Vasiliev, A. A. *Justin the First: an Introduction to the Epoch of Justinian the Great*. (Dumbarton Oaks Studies, I.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950. pp. 283-299.

The conflicts between Byzantians and Sassanids brought deep crisis to their buffer zone - pre-Islamic Arabia, in particular south Arabia, which not only drove the re-Bedouinization of the civilized Arabian towns, but also created a loose environment of international commerce and communication between different cultures and religions, from which Meccans benefited a lot through cross-regional trade. Mecca is a town located in Hijaz of west Arabia, far from those conflicting spots and just indirectly effected by the struggles between the two empires. Besides, unlike the oasis towns in other parts of Arabia, Mecca was one of the few towns that rose up only through trade because Mecca was situated in a barren valley surrounded by desert. Mecca only had the advantage of maintaining the active international trade routes.

## 1 - 2 Judaism and Christianity in Pre-Islamic Arabia

Foreign religions were introduced to the Arabian peninsula through trade routes. There was a strong foreign monotheistic influence especially in northwest Arabia, south Arabia and the east Arabian coastal area, in addition to possible Zoroastrian and Manichaean influence in northeast Arabia. Whatever the situation of pre-Islamic Arabian religion in late antiquity was like, it is evident that Judaism and Christianity had both permeated the pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula. Christianity exerted a deep influence along the eastern coast of the Arabian peninsula; there may have been a bishopric in the Bahrain archipelago by 410 CE, and a number of Syriac writers are known from this region.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, at the northern peripheries of the Arabian Peninsula in the border regions of Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia, Christianity had been adopted by many Arab settlers.<sup>6</sup> Christianity is also well attested in parts of south Arabia, especially at Najran from the mid-5th century CE.<sup>7</sup> As for Hijaz, the birthplace of Muhammad and Islam, two different areas may be distinguished: in southern Hijaz, represented by Mecca, Arabian polytheism was dominant; in northern Hijaz, represented by Yathrib (later Medina), Judaism had more significant presence. The religious situation of Hijaz, particularly Mecca around the beginning of the 7th century CE, has often been used to help account for the origins of Islam, which is equated with Muhammad's missionary career.

Religious rituals for the Meccan *Haram* (i.e. the Ka'ba) were developed along with the coming of Arabian polytheists of various backgrounds who introduced their deities and put their statues into the *Haram*. The Ka'ba is reported by Muslim tradition to have contained icons of Jesus and Mary.<sup>8</sup> The presence of Jesus' and Mary's icons in the Ka'ba suggests that they were venerated by Arabian polytheists, as a result of Christian influence. In fact, Meccans, including Muhammad himself, had

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<sup>5</sup> See Beaucamp, J. & C. J. Robin. "L'évêché nestorien de Mâšmâhîg dans l'archipel d'al-Baḥrayn (Ve-IXe siècle)", in D.T. Potts (ed.), *Dilmun: New Studies in the Archaeology and Early History of Bahrain*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1983. pp. 171-196; Brock, S. P. "Syriac writers from Beth Qatraye", *ARAM* 11-12, 1999-2000. pp. 85-96.

<sup>6</sup> See Fisher, G. *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity*. Oxford University Press, 2011. pp. 34-71.

<sup>7</sup> See Robin, C. J. "Nagrān vers l'époque du massacre: notes sur l'histoire politique, économique et institutionnelle et sur l'introduction du christianisme (avec un réexamen du *Martyre d'Azqīr*)", in Beaucamp et al., 2010. pp. 39-106. pp. 64-67.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, Chase F. "Waraka b. Nawfal," in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002. pp. 142-143; Al-Azraqī, Muḥd. bn 'Abd Allah. *Akḥbār Makka* (ed. Ruḥdī al-Salīḥ Malḥas R. Malḥas). 2 Vols. Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, n.d. I, pp. 165-169.

many opportunities for contact with different religious traditions such as Christianity and Judaism. Noteworthy is that Christians and Jews appear in Mecca more often in the form of individuals, so there seems never to have been a Christian or Jewish community in Mecca.

Modern scholars have made many efforts to demonstrate the historical existence of a Christian community in Hijaz around Mecca and Yathrib, but the evidence for this is still far from sufficient. Irfan Shahid, one of the more recent scholars arguing for the existence of a Christian community in pre-Islamic Hijaz, supposes that there existed some Christian monasteries at Wādī al-Qurā (northwest of Yathrib), mainly based on a few possible references in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry;<sup>9</sup> he also argues that Theodore, who was consecrated in 542/543 CE as the bishop of *Hirtā d-ṭ yāyē*, undertook a mission to spread Christianity in west Arabia, though it was unsuccessful.<sup>10</sup> However, such an assumption is mostly speculation. It seems that the episcopal geography in the late antique sources is totally silent on the part of Hijaz. One later (11th-century) Christian Arabic author, °Amr b. Mattā, definitely declares that Christianity never penetrated into Hijaz since the missionaries were too preoccupied with the kings of Kinda and Yemen.<sup>11</sup> So, when °Amr b. Mattā credited the well-known Mār Mārī with introducing Christianity to Bilād al-°Arab (the Land of Arabs), it was not necessarily meant to include the area of Hijaz.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the historical existence of a Christian community rather than a few Christian individuals in pre-Islamic Hijaz is yet to be well demonstrated.

Before Muhammad's mission, Jewish communities had existed in Arabia for long time. The Jews concentrated in certain towns of pre-Islamic Arabia, organized into different clans and tribes, like their Arab neighbors. They generally spoke Arabic and were gradually assimilated into their surrounding Arabian culture. Nevertheless, the Jews in pre-Islamic Arabia were still regarded as a distinct group because of their distinct Jewish customs and religion, in spite of their overall acculturation with the Arabs. Through close contacts with Jews, some Arabs became familiar with Jewish religious customs, ideas, ethical concepts, and homiletic lore. Some Hebrew and Aramaic terms were also learned by those Arabs.

Obviously, Judaism had gained more success than Christianity in pre-Islamic Arabia, at least in Hijaz, and epigraphic evidence attests that Jews were active in many settlements of pre-Islamic Arabia. The pre-Islamic Jewish community in Arabia was composed of either original Jews or Arab converts. Thanks to increasing epigraphic and archaeological findings in south Arabia, a more vivid picture of Judaism in pre-Islamic south Arabia is appearing: the Himyarite rulers who were supposed to have publicly advocated a form of monotheism since the late 4th century CE, are now generally assumed to have inclined to Judaism.<sup>13</sup> The 6th-century historian Procopius

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<sup>9</sup> Shahīd, Irfan. *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989. pp. 294-295.

<sup>10</sup> See Shahīd, Irfan. *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (2 Vols in 4 Parts). Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995-2009. I/ii, pp. 850-857.

<sup>11</sup> Samir, S. K. "The Prophet Muḥammad as seen by Timothy I and other Arab Christian authors", in D. Thomas (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam: The First Thousand Years*. Leiden: Brill, 2001. p 84.

<sup>12</sup> °Amr b. Mattā, *Akhbār fatāḥ rikat kursī al-mashriq min Kitāb al-Mijdal* (ed. H. Gismondi) (Maris Amri et Slibae de patriarchis Nestorianorum commentaria). 2 Vols. Rome: De Luigi, 1896-1899. II, p 1.

<sup>13</sup> See Robin, C. J. "Le judaïsme de Ḥimyar", *Arabia* 1, 2003. pp. 97-172; Robin, C. J. "Ḥimyar et Israël", *Comptes rendus des séances de l'année: académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres*, 2004. pp. 831-908.

noted that on the island of Iotabe (at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba), "Hebrews had lived of old in autonomy, but in the reign of Justinian they have become subject to the Romans"<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, inscriptions found in several sites in northern Hijaz (especially al-ʿUlā and al-Ḥijr/Madāʿin Ṣāliḥ) covering a period at least between the 1st century BCE and the 4th century CE, may attest the presence of sizable Jewish communities there.<sup>15</sup> However, the existence of pre-Islamic Jewish communities in Hijaz is still not sufficiently demonstrated by contemporary literary sources, although it may also be important that two rabbis in Hijaz of the 3rd-century CE are said to have considered it worth travelling to al-Ḥijr (Hegra) for improving their Aramaic.<sup>16</sup> Many towns in west Arabia - especially Khaybar, Fadak, Taymāʾ, Wādī al-Qurā and Yathrib, are known to have had a significant Jewish presence during pre-Islamic times; this is well-attested by Muslim tradition, in particular in the context of Muhammad's campaigns during his later missionary career.<sup>17</sup> Fred Astren proposes on the other hand that the assumptions of Muslim historians about the Jewish presence in pre-Islamic Arabia may in fact have been based on where Jews were still to be found in the own time of the historians themselves.<sup>18</sup> Besides, the origin of the Jewish communities in Hijaz (especially Yathrib) has been disputed since the 8th century CE: whether their origin mainly lies in Jewish migration from outside of Arabia, or by conversion among local Arabian tribes is still not clear.<sup>19</sup>

### 1 - 3 The Event of Abraha's Invasion of Hijaz

Although Judaism achieved more success in parts of pre-Islamic Arabia than Christianity, the foreign political support of Judaism was weaker than that of Christianity. In addition, Christian rulers had a stronger ambition of proselytization than the Jews. Christian rulers not only persecuted Jews in south Arabia, but also intended to eradicate Arabian polytheism. The most significant example is Abraha's invasion of Hijaz (approximately in 570 CE) and his intention of destroying the Kaʿba, which throws new light on our understanding of the situation of Arabian society and the status of Mecca just before the advent of Islam. Mecca was one of the most important polytheistic centres of Arabia, and its influence caused the dissatisfaction of Abraha for both Christian and political reasons.

In Muslim tradition, Abraha's invasion of Hijaz is narrated in detail. According to Ibn Ishāq's report, after Abraha the Abyssinian became the leader of Yemen, he commanded the construction of a huge Christian cathedral in Sanaa such as could not be found in anywhere else at that time, and wrote a letter to the *Negus* (i.e. the Abyssinian monarch) declaring: "I have built a church for

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<sup>14</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars* (trans. H. B. Dewing). Vol. 1. Loeb Classical Library, 1923. pp. 3-4; Hoyland, R. G. "The Jews of the Hijaz in the Qurʾān and in their inscriptions", in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān: The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context 2*. London: Routledge, 2011. pp. 91-116.

<sup>15</sup> See Hoyland, R. G. "The Jews of the Hijaz in the Qurʾān and in their inscriptions", in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān: The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context 2*. London: Routledge, 2011. pp. 91-116.

<sup>16</sup> Midrash Rabbah 79.7 (on Gen. 33:19), cited by Hoyland, R. G. "Mount Nebo, Jabal Ramm, and the status of Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Old Arabic in Late Roman Palestine and Arabia", in M.C.A. Macdonald (ed.), *The Development of Arabic as a Written Language*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010. p 40.

<sup>17</sup> See Newby, G. D. *A History of the Jews of Arabia*. Columbia, S.C.: The University Of South Carolina Press, 1988. pp. 49-96.

<sup>18</sup> Astren, F. "Re-reading the Arabic sources: Jewish history and the Muslim conquests", *JSAI* 36, 2009. p 93; Ibn Saʿd, *Kiṭāb al-abaqāt al-kabīr* (ed. E. Sachau et al.) 9 Vols. Leiden: Brill, 1904-1940. I/ii, p 38.

<sup>19</sup> See Gil, M. "The origin of the Jews of Yathrib", *JSAI* 4, 1984. pp. 203-224.

you, O King, such as has not been built for any king before you. I shall not rest until I have direct the Arabs' pilgrimage to it"<sup>20</sup>. This letter enraged Arabian calendar intercalators who were responsible for declaring the "sacred months" to Arabian pilgrims who used to gather around them as a religious practice after finishing the Meccan pilgrimage.<sup>21</sup> One person of the Kinānah tribe went to the Sanaa Cathedral and defiled it; afterwards, Abraha realized that this outrage was committed by an Arabian tribesman who came from Mecca, and that that it was done in anger at his threat to divert the Arabian pilgrimage of Mecca to the cathedral in Sanaa.<sup>22</sup> Abraha was enraged by this provocation and swore that he would conquer Mecca and destroy its shrine.<sup>23</sup> Abraha's intention got support from a few Arabs who had come to seek his bounty. Abraha continued to command his Arabian supporters to go among their people to invite them to make pilgrimage to his cathedral in Sanaa. Furthermore, Abraha's Arabian followers were attacked by the people of Kinānah; this increased his fury so that he again swore to raid Banū Kinānah and destroy the Meccan shrine that Banū Kinānah and other Arabian tribes venerated. Then, Abraha commanded Abyssinians to sally forth with elephants to conquer Mecca, which plunged his Arabian opponents into alarm; after having realized Abraha's plan of destroying the Ka'ba, most Arabs saw this as a critical moment, and a noble man called Dhū Nafr from Yemen summoned his people and other Arabs to follow him to fight against Abraha and stop Abraha from destroying "God's holy house".<sup>24</sup> However, Dhū Nafr failed and was jailed by Abraha, and Abraha continued on his way to Mecca until he was opposed by Nufayl b. Ḥabīb al-Khath'amī with his two tribes in Khath'am, but Abraha defeated them at last<sup>25</sup>.

These Islamic accounts reveal that before the rise of Islam the status of the Meccan sanctuary had become very high, since many Arabian tribes came to fight against Abraha's army because of his goal of destroying the Ka'ba. No wonder that the Ka'ba was seen as a great threat to the Christian cathedral in Sanaa, which was planned by Abraha as a pilgrimage centre for all of Arabia. The brave defense of Mecca may later have inspired Muhammad to think that he could make good use of the pre-Islamic status of the Ka'ba and give it a central position in his new religion, as it had among Arabian polytheists.

The temple of al-Lāt in al-Tā'if used to be venerated by local people there in the same way as the Ka'ba in Mecca.<sup>26</sup> When Abraha's invasion reached al-Tā'if, local people came to say to him: "O King, we are thy servants attentive and obedient to you; We have no quarrel with you and our temple (meaning that of al-Lāt in al-Tā'if) is not the one you seek; You want only the temple in Mecca, and we will send with you a man to guide you there"<sup>27</sup>. Abraha then went on, leaving them undisturbed. This shows that the Meccan sanctuary was more important than any other Arabian sanctuary before the advent of Islam, for Abraha only intended to destroy the Meccan shrine.

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<sup>20</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad* (A Transl. of Ibn Ishaq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, with introduction and notes). Oxford University Press, 1970. p 21.

<sup>21</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 22.

<sup>22</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 22.

<sup>23</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 22.

<sup>24</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 23.

<sup>25</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 23.

<sup>26</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 24.

<sup>27</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 24.

In response to Abraha's direct assaults, the Quraysh, the Kinānah, the Hudhayl and some other Arabian tribes in the region gathered in Mecca to plan the battle. They felt that they had not much power to resist Abraha's army. Abraha sent Ḥunātah, a Himyarite, to Mecca to tell them that he only came to destroy the Meccan temple, not to fight against Meccan people. At that time, ʿAbdu'l-Muṭṭalib b. Hāshim (Muhammad's grandfather) was a leading Shaykh of the Quraysh, according to Ibn Ishāq<sup>28</sup>. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib replied to Abraha's messenger: "God knows that we do not wish to fight him for we have no power to do so. This is Allah's sanctuary and the temple of his friend Abraham - or words to that effect - If He defends it against him it is His temple and His sanctuary; and if he lets him(self) have it by God we cannot defend it!"<sup>29</sup> The mention of "Allah" in this Islamic account may have been added by later Muslim tradition, and there is no sufficient historical evidence to confirm the attribution of the pre-Islamic Kaʿba to Allah - the One God, an idea which was probably created by Islam. The Islamic connection of the Kaʿba with Abraham and his One God is elaborated in detail in Muslim tradition, based on the simple Qur'anic account about Abraham. Hence, this Islamic connection of the Kaʿba apparently does not reflect the real pre-Islamic religious belief of Meccan people.

Abraha rejected the request of the Arabian tribes to offer cattle in exchange for destroying the Meccan shrine, which forced Meccans to prepare for the battle. Abraha had elephants in his army, which is why it is also called the "Elephant Army" in Muslim tradition. Ibn Ishāq reports two miracles by the God: one is that the leading elephant Maḥmūd suddenly knelt down facing Mecca and stopped in front of Mecca, which caused all the army to halt; the other one is that the God sent upon Abraha's army birds that carried stones to hit them.<sup>30</sup> In fact, due to some unclear frustrations, Abraha's army eventually withdrew to Yemen. The cause of the failure of Abraha's military action in Hijaz is unclear; it may have been due to an epidemic of measles and smallpox that were seen in Arabia for the first time in that year.<sup>31</sup>

However, Abraha's failed invasion to Mecca brought about more crisis awareness among Arabs of Hijaz. Although Abraha only swore to destroy the Kaʿba, as a zealous Christian, his final aim was to strike at the prevalent Arabian polytheism and Judaism in west Arabia, and consequently to convert all Arabian polytheists to Christianity by destroying their chief religious symbol - the Kaʿba. On the other hand, this event also promoted mutual communication between the Hijazi people and the Yemenites/Abyssinians. Ibn Ishāq reports that the honor of the Quraysh was raised among Arabs after this event.

After Abraha died, his son Yaksūm became king of Abyssinia, and the Himyarites and other Arabian tribes of Yemen remained under the control of Abyssinians.<sup>32</sup> The predominance of Abyssinians in Yemen reflects the fact that pre-Islamic Arabia was regularly falling under foreign domination, due to the lack of a central authority of its own and of unity. The emergence of Islam filled the need for a native institutional religion for the Arabs, promoting the independence of Arabia from foreign interference.

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<sup>28</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 24.

<sup>29</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 24.

<sup>30</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 26.

<sup>31</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 27.

<sup>32</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 30.

#### 1 - 4 Muhammad's Political Mission

In spite of his prophethood, Muhammad bore a strong political mission. His success largely lay in the fact that he advocated the unification of Arabian tribes and articulated the outward ambition of his people. The potential for Arabian unification and even conquest of other territories already existed in pre-Islamic Arabia. Muhammad's idea of a combination of Arabia-originated monotheism and political independence for Arabia exploited this potential at a favorable moment in time. His mission began in Mecca where he must first deal with the greatest internal obstacle - Arabian polytheism which was dominant in Mecca. As Ibn Ishāq informs us, Muhammad's open attack on the ancestral gods of the Quraysh and his denouncement of his own ancestors was a turning point in his career as a prophet.<sup>33</sup> It was necessary for Muhammad to provide some alternative visions for his own community as a basis for his mission in Mecca. Unlike the Christian concept of the One God, Muhammad's unique God is both an ancestral and a monotheistic deity. By rejecting the idol worship of his people, Muhammad expressed the exclusiveness of his supreme God. Traditionally, Arabian tribal groups were formed around ancestral deities; but Muhammad preached that all Arabs must be grouped together under the One and Only God of Abraham - the ancestor of the Arabs, and that all the ancestral deities that caused tribal divisions were false and should be abolished. This idea implied a severe incompatibility between his supreme God and the pre-Islamic tribal structure of Arabia (in particular Mecca). After his migration to Yathrib, Muhammad encountered the foreign monotheisms - Judaism and Christianity directly, which forced him to adjust his missionary work immediately.

In the 6th and early 7th century, the Arabian peninsula was subject to foreign political and religious penetration. There exists a hypothesis formulated by Patricia Crone, that Islam was based on a nativist movement, or as a reaction to foreign influence and interference.<sup>34</sup> The goal of this nativist movement was to expel foreign powers from Arabia. However, a resentment of foreign penetration is not significantly expressed in Arabian sources before the rise of Islam. Furthermore, foreign influence seems not to have changed anything essential in the traditional life-style of the majority of pre-Islamic Arabs. On the other hand, there was an intense dissatisfaction that "the Arabs were confined between the lions of Persia and Byzantium", as Qatāda b. Dī'āma tells in a passage contrasting the miserable situation of the Arabs in the *Jāhili* period with the success achieved after the advent of Islam.<sup>35</sup> It is also widely acknowledged that the early Arab Muslim conquest was "an outburst of Arab nationality"<sup>36</sup>. But, we still need more research about the extent to which the nativist model can be applied to the rise of Islam. The political and religious impact of Byzantines, Persians and Abyssinians on the Arabs had also caused a deep social and spiritual crisis in Hijaz and even in all Arabia before the emergence of Islam. However, foreign political and religious powers not only threatened the pre-Islamic Arabian society, but also brought new religious ideas to the Arabs in Hijaz.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibn Hishām, Abd el-Malik (ed.). *Das Leben Mohammeds nach Muhammed Ibn Ishāk* (trans. by Gustav Weil). Stuttgart, 1864. p 166 ff.

<sup>34</sup> Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Gorgias Press, 1987. p 247.

<sup>35</sup> Kister, M. J. "Al- Ḥīra: Some Notes on Its Relations with Arabia." *Arabica* 15, 1968. pp. 143-169. p 143.

<sup>36</sup> Bell, R. *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*. London, 1926. p 184.

## 2. Internal Crisis of Late Pre-Islamic Arabia

### 2 - 1 The Nature of Pre-Islamic Arabian Religion

The internal structure of pre-Islamic Arabian society itself had many problems. The nature of pre-Islamic Arabian religion made it incapable of competing with the universal foreign monotheisms, for instance Judaism and Christianity. In general, Arabian polytheism submitted to tribalism in pre-Islamic Arabia. When the tight connection between Arabian polytheism and tribalism was threatened by foreign influence and interference, a spiritual crisis was likely to have arisen. Then, the old order began to collapse. But Meccan society was an exception to this Arabian crisis.

Tribal gods were the ultimate sources of all phenomena which were of great significance in pre-Islamic Arabian society, but out of the direct control of human beings: natural phenomena, fertility, disease, fortune, and so on. On the other hand, tribal gods were definitely not for the Arabs the ultimate truth concerning the nature and meaning of life.<sup>37</sup> Pre-Islamic Arabs worshipped tribal gods just for practical purposes regarding these phenomena. The tribal gods did not require or receive from their devotees any emotional commitment or loyalty.<sup>38</sup> Compared to the followers of Islam who generally hold strict and loyal beliefs, Arabian polytheists seem to have been much more pragmatic and flexible. A well-known report reminds us that: "in the days of paganism Banū Ḥanīfa had a deity made of dates mixed with clarified butter. They worshipped it for a long time. Then they were hit by a famine, so they ate it"<sup>39</sup>. Also, when his idol had scared his camels away, a pre-Islamic Arabian tribesman was supposed to have said in disgust: "We came to S'ad so that he might get us together, but S'ad dispersed us; so we have nothing to do with S'ad"<sup>40</sup>. In the same way a whole Arabian tribe abandoned its tribal gods for Christianity after a Christian monk had cured the childlessness of its chief.<sup>41</sup> After all, the gods in Arabian polytheism, framed into tribal structure, were no more than powerful beings. The significance of worshipping and serving a tribal god only lay in that it was expected to respond and benefit its worshippers through its power.

An obvious example is the case of the *Haram* of Buss, which was desecrated and destroyed by the visitors when its protectors (such as the Ghatafan tribe) were defeated.<sup>42</sup> In the same way, it was the responsibility of the local tribes to provide protection to the Meccan *Haram* and to those who resided and traded at Mecca. A *Haram* became inviolate on the basis of tribal agreement. The tribalism that so much defined the pre-Islamic Arabian society primarily stressed tribal benefits,

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<sup>37</sup> Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Gorgias Press, 1987. pp. 237-238.

<sup>38</sup> Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. pp. 237-238.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Qutayba. *Kitāb al-Ma'ārif* (T. °Ukāsha ed.). Cairo, 1969. p 266.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-A'nām* (ed. and trans. by W. Atallah). Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1969. p 37; also cited in Ibn Hishām, Abd el-Malik (ed.). *Das Leben Mohammeds nach Muhammed Ibn Ishāk* (trans. by Gustav Weil). Stuttgart, 1864. p 53.

<sup>41</sup> Sozomenus. *Historia Ecclesiastica. Kirchengeschichte*. 4 Teil-bände. Griechisch-Deutsch. Übersetzt und eingeleitet von G. C. Hansen. Brepols Publishers Turnhout, 2004. VI, 38:14 ff; Sozomenus. *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen : Comprising A History of the Church from A. D. 324 to A. D. 440* (trans. by Edward Walford). London: Bohn, 1855. p 310.

<sup>42</sup> Kister, M. J. "Mecca and the Tribes of Arabia: Some Notes on Their Relations," in M. Sharon (ed.), *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization in Honour of Professor David Ayalon*. Jerusalem, 1986. p 42 seq.

without caring much about the inviolability of a religious site that was regulated by men. Therefore, the destruction of a *Haram* was possible, if it was not protected well.

W. Montgomery Watt interprets the violation of the Meccan *Haram* during the conflicts of Fijār as "probably a sign of declining belief"<sup>43</sup>. But it is more likely that before the advent of Islam, violation of holy places and months happened in Arabia from time to time, without being the result of a loss of belief. Muslim tradition tells as a fact that there was no malaise in Mecca, be it social, political, moral or religious; on the contrary, pre-Islamic Meccans are depicted by Muslim tradition as obviously successful in many aspects. But does not the mass conversion of Arabs to Islam testify to a spiritual crisis or decline of polytheistic religion in late pre-Islamic Arabia, as Julius Wellhausen argued?<sup>44</sup> It cannot be simply concluded that there is not such a phenomenon. There were evidently many threats from foreign powers against Arabian polytheism, both religious and political.

## 2 - 2 Arabian Polytheism and Tribalism

In pre-Islamic time, Arabian polytheism was generally prevalent in all Arabia. But Arabian polytheism was merely a traditional religion, which was not at all systematized, and there was neither theological discussion among Arabian polytheists nor any articulation of spiritual ideas connected to Arabian polytheistic gods. Hence, Arabian polytheistic deities were in fact not entrenched in the daily life of pre-Islamic Arabs. Arabian polytheism also lacked mythology or stories about gods. The religious life of Arabian polytheists consisted in regular visits to sacred places, stones or trees, the sacrifice of animals and the consultation of soothsayers. They apparently did not conduct annual pilgrimages in the name of a specific god, and their polytheistic practices could be easily transferred from one god to another.<sup>45</sup> Unlike Arabian polytheism, "tribalism"/"tribal humanism"<sup>46</sup> represented a more deep-seated system of belief in pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula, though it had already declined before Muhammad's era. Pre-Islamic Arabian society had for a long time balanced subtly between Arabian polytheism and tribalism, though, for many nomadic Arabs, their faith lay in their tribalism much more than in their polytheistic worship. Pre-Islamic Arabs generally committed their whole lives to their tribe and firmly defended the honor of that tribe. Meanwhile, the influence of an individual in public affairs relied on two factors - his own clan and his personal qualifications of morality and ability. The status of women in the pre-Islamic Arabian patriarchal society was quite low, according to traditional Islamic narratives. Arabian tribalism was at the root of pre-Islamic Arabian society, and some of its elements (such as the concept of "moral model") were later incorporated into Islam. The tribal identity, whose symbol was the tribal divinity, was always above that of individuals. Though human excellence and values were greatly emphasized, like other tribalisms, Arabian tribalism

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<sup>43</sup> Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad at Mecca*. Oxford University Press, 1953. p 23 ff.

<sup>44</sup> Wellhausen, Julius. *Reste arabischen Heidentums*. Berlin, 1927. p 220 ff.

<sup>45</sup> Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Gorgias Press, 1987. p 240.

<sup>46</sup> Tribalism or tribal humanism: a social concept put forth by Ibn Khaldūn as essential to the nomadic / Bedouin way of life. It is a belief in the authority and validity of the individual; and all the individuals in a tribe that give the tribe is worth and honor. With such a belief in the excellence of the tribal members, the actions and practice of the individuals are led to constantly defend the honor of the tribe. It is tied up with the *ʿAṣabiyya* (group consciousness) of the tribe, since this belief provides some of the social cohesion necessary for such solidarity.

focused on the tribe rather than on individuals in its value system. The concepts of Arabian tribalism are largely reflected in pre-Islamic Arabic poems, which reveal intense tribal identity and preoccupation with honor.

The Qur'an and Muslim tradition constantly attack Arabian tribalism for its ignorance of religion and the divisions it caused between people, because this tribalism stressed a blind loyalty to tribes at the expense of the religious belief of individuals. Due to their mobile life-style and harsh living conditions, most nomadic Arabs took "tribalism" seriously, but might ignore the performance of religious belief. However, the Qur'an still respects the ethical aspect of "tribalism", in accordance with which Muslim tradition portrays Muhammad as a typical moral ideal. In spite of the values given to human excellence and tribal honor, a strong sense of fatalism had existed among nomadic Arabs during pre-Islamic times; this fatalism was later absorbed into Islamic theology with some changes, such as what was ascribed to abstract concepts (like "time" and "fate") came to be attributed to the personalized One God of Islam.

Before Muhammad's time, however, the balance between Arabian polytheism and tribalism had been broken up, partly because of the rise of foreign monotheisms. In terms of external influence, Arabia became caught in the complicated conflicts between the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, and between Christianity, Judaism and Arabian polytheism. In this situation of strong foreign interference, many residents in Arabian peninsula started to seek for their individual salvation, and rethought their real position in the world, while the old Arabian belief and order had quickly lost its attraction.<sup>47</sup>

But the trade-oriented Meccans were an exception. They insisted on their polytheistic beliefs, because they lived depending on their *Haram* (the forbidden area around the Meccan shrine) and got much benefit from the commercial activities brought by pilgrimage to the Meccan *Haram*. Nevertheless, just as other Arabs, Meccans had not been able to systematize their native religion before the coming of Islam. Meccan polytheism was always a mixture of different polytheistic traditions from various parts of the Arabian peninsula, which was testified by the great amount of idols put in the pre-Islamic Ka'ba. The event of Abraha's invasion to Hijaz symbolizes the significant decline of the old order of the pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula. Arabian tribalism declined, while individualism was increasing in Arabian society. Meanwhile, more and more Arab polytheists converted to universal foreign monotheisms like Judaism and Christianity, in quest of individual salvation. The foreign monotheist power led by Abraha directly challenged the key shrine of Arabian polytheism - the Ka'ba at Mecca. Facing Abraha's invasion of Hijaz, Arabian tribes behaved in a state of disunity, and their polytheistic religion had been largely shaken. For Arabs, there was an urgent need of a native institutional religion to unify them and encounter foreign interference, either political or religious.

### **2 - 3 Meccan Crisis?**

Muhammad's message of a new monotheism offered a powerful solution to the problems of

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<sup>47</sup> See Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad at Mecca*. Oxford University Press, 1953. pp. 24-29.

political, social and spiritual crisis, generally faced by Arabs.<sup>48</sup> Were these problems shared by all Arabs, excluding Meccans? The pre-Islamic Meccan economy had flourished greatly along with the increase of pilgrims, which gave a new unique appearance to Meccan society. I suppose that the development or transformation of Meccan economy did not necessarily cause a general spiritual or social crisis in Mecca. The economic change of Mecca did not play a crucial role in the rise of Islam, either. According to W. Montgomery Watt, the transition of the Quraysh to a mercantile community undermined the traditional order of Meccan society, generating a moral and social malaise to which Muhammad's mission was a powerful response.<sup>49</sup> But Watt's hypothesis has been continuously challenged by other modern scholars. First of all, the effect of trade in Meccan society may have been overestimated by Watt; for instance, the commerce of the Arabian town Ḥā'il developed sharply in the 19th century, in a way which was very similar to the situation of Mecca in the 6th century, but this did not cause any quick breakdown of traditional norms of that town.<sup>50</sup> Secondly, Watt exaggerates the social chaos of Mecca. The Qur'an does not reflect an increasing concern with the social differentiation of Meccans. Like early Christianity, Islam criticizes people's excessive pursuit of wealth and their neglect of the poor and weak, which is a common preaching motif of any monotheism, together with the call upon people to depend on God. However, the role of Muhammad was played as a true heir to a prophetic tradition from Abraham, and his mission was definitely more religious and political than sociological with regard to pre-Islamic Meccan society. Watt's proposition that Muhammad built up a new religion to respond the social and moral crisis of Mecca is not sufficiently documented. On the other hand, I do not think Mecca should be excluded from Muhammad's major concern, and there must be a preparing process for Muhammad's prophetic message, to which the Meccan context where Muhammad grew up was very important. Therefore, the appearance of Muhammad's new monotheism can be explained as a blueprint for a general social and moral reform of the whole Arabia including Mecca, although this reform was not actually related to the rise of Meccan trade and the "problems" it may have brought. Muhammad's new message was not built upon the peculiarity of Mecca, instead, it addressed factors common to the whole of Arabia. It is obvious that a general social and spiritual crisis appeared in 6th-century Arabia, causing a need for social reform, a resolution of spiritual doubts and political concerns, and an end to the disunity of Arabian tribes. The feuds which were a constant in the pre-Islamic Arabian society, became more severe when all the foreign interference came to Arabia before the advent of Islam. So, the need of a unified Arabian power became urgent at that time. Muhammad's new religion responded to the Arabs' need for a solution for the deeper and deeper political and social crisis of Arabia. But it seems that initially Muhammad's new religion was far from being welcomed. On the contrary, Muhammad was persecuted by the Meccans. In a word, due to the general decline of the old order of pre-Islamic Arabian society and the rise of individualism, Muhammad was able to propose his new monotheistic ideas that may provide an alternative choice for Arabs at that time. But the town of Mecca was very different from the general situation of the pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula. Therefore, Mecca was in fact not suitable for Muhammad to spread his new religion.

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<sup>48</sup> Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Gorgias Press, 1987. p 235.

<sup>49</sup> Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Gorgias Press, 1987. p 231. See Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad at Mecca*. Oxford University Press, 2012; Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*. Oxford University Press, 1961.

<sup>50</sup> Musil, Alois. "Northern Neḡd: A Topographical Itinerary", *American Geographical Society*, 5. New York, 1928. p 241.

### 3. The Ka'ba and the Meccan Context of the Emergence of Islam

#### 3 - 1 The Emergence of the Ka'ba and Meccan Trade

The Arabian prophet Muhammad was born into the clan Hāshim of Quraysh, in Mecca about 570 CE.<sup>51</sup> He grew up and started his missionary career in Mecca. Thus, Mecca occupies a central position in the emergence of Muhammad's new religion. The origin of the town of Mecca is closely bound up with the sophisticated relation between the pre-Islamic Ka'ba and Meccan trade. Was trade the basis for the religious status of Mecca? Was pre-Islamic Mecca a trade centre and a religious centre at the same time? It is disputed whether the trade of Mecca was the major reason for the appearance of the Ka'ba, or on the contrary.

Despite being barren and without any grain product, pre-Islamic Mecca's high status derived from the fact that it occupied a crucial geographical position as crossroads in the western part of the Arabian peninsula, with links to several trade routes which made it convenient for international trade. The commercial activities at Mecca brought frequent cultural and religious communication between different Arabian tribes, resulting in the establishment and development of the *Haram* at Mecca. The Meccan *Haram* centered on a sacred spot (the Ka'ba) which existed before the start of commerce. The worship of stones is one of the most original forms of Arabian polytheism. The Black Stone (*al-Hajar al-Aswad*) of the Ka'bah may be an original cause for founding the Meccan sanctuary. A shrine for the Black Stone may first have been built in the barren valley by Arabian polytheists; then commercial activities emerged along with the pilgrims' gatherings, and meanwhile the polytheistic gods were invited to reside at the shrine one by one. In this way, the Meccan pilgrimage led to the appearance and boom of trade and market at Mecca. The commercial advantage of Mecca was further enhanced by the well of Zamzam, which made Mecca a more convenient stop in the trade. Maybe the pre-Islamic Zamzam well was originally divine in Arabian polytheism. But later its legend was made to connect with Abraham and Ishmael's stories in Islam.

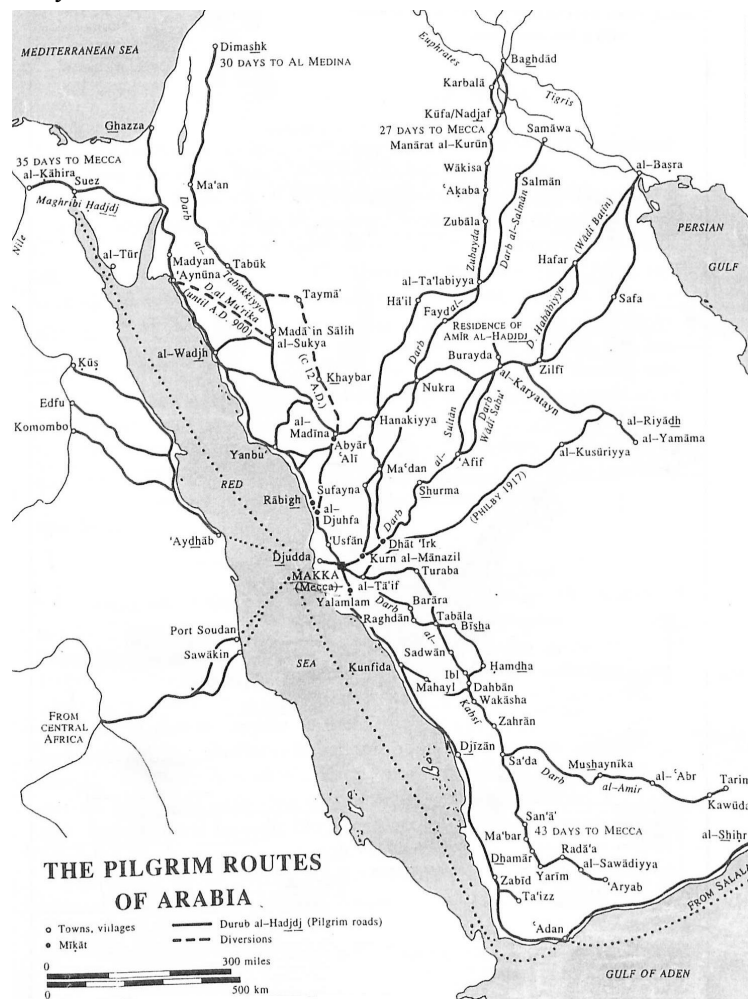
The Meccan *Haram* was guarded by a union of tribes to provide safer conditions for both pilgrimage and trade, especially during the Hajj season. According to Muslim tradition, different Arabian tribes controlled the Meccan *Haram* during different pre-Islamic periods, and they may at the same time have become traders and caretakers of the Meccan *Haram*. In late pre-Islamic times, the Quraysh and its allied tribes became guardians of the Ka'ba. Thus, the merchants asked the Quraysh and its allied tribes for protection of their commercial activities in Mecca as well as for the inviolability of their religious rituals performed at the Meccan *Haram*. Accompanying the pilgrims, traders could take advantage of the *baraka* of the pilgrimage by combining the Hajj and commerce.<sup>52</sup> But the Meccan *Haram* itself could not guarantee the safety of Meccan residents and merchants, because its holiness was limited to those who believe or obey, and it must be defended by force, which was demonstrated by Abraha's event in the "Elephant Year" (approximately equating to 570 CE). In other words, the inviolability of the pilgrims was not conferred by the *Haram* itself, but given by the guardianship of its responsible tribes.

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<sup>51</sup> Lévi-Provençal, E. & Ch. Pellat. "Makka". *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (VI:144-188) (11 Vols.; New ed.). Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991. p 146.

<sup>52</sup> Al-Marzūqī, *al-Azminah wa-l-amkinah*. Qatar, 1968-1969. II, p 236.

According to Arabian polytheistic tradition, certain months were regarded as sacred, and during those days fairs took place at Mecca, because the safety of merchants was then guaranteed much better by the tribes. The existence of the *Haram* and its safety drove the prosperity of Meccan trade, demonstrated by the Qur'anic verse: "Have We not established a secure sanctuary for them, where fruits of every kind are brought as a provision from Us?" (Qur'an 28:57). The commercial use of the *Haram* in return improved its status and fame in the religious sphere through communication between different peoples, although trade itself could not constitute a basis for the religious status of Mecca. Pre-Islamic Mecca had become a trade centre and a religious centre at the same time. The Arabian polytheists' combination of pilgrimage and trade at Mecca was later inherited by the early Muslims.



**Map of the Pilgrim Routes of Arabia at the Time of the Rise of Islam**  
 (from F.E. Peters, *The Hajj: the Muslim Pilgrimage at Mecca and the Holy Places*,  
 Princeton University Press, 1994)

It has been generally acknowledged that Islam was originally based on the commercial culture of Meccans centered on their polytheistic sanctuary. The trade-originated life-style of Meccans was obviously contrary to the life-style of nomadic Arabs who had no fixed residence and grabbed wealth and food from Arabian caravans or settlers. Nor was the living situation of Meccans the same as that in northwest Arabia or Yemen where the influence of foreign powers and cultures had

been quite strong. Yet, the Meccan milieu of Muhammad was inevitably impacted by the outside world. The interlaced trade routes throughout Arabia connected Mecca with the outside world. The main interregional trade route passing through Hijaz has a key function accounting for the rise of Mecca and the emergence of Islam, and helps to interpret Muhammad's success.

In her book *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Patricia Crone argues that the Meccan sanctuary was without any significance prior to the advent of Islam. But her extreme statement seems not convincing, since the Meccan shrine may have become a crucial polytheistic sanctuary for Arabs long before. Besides, pre-Islamic Meccans may have already gained some knowledge about Biblical materials from different neighboring places through the caravan trade, when they travelled and communicated with others. It is possible that the merchants in Mecca who were coming back and forth contributed to the emergence of Islam. Admittedly, the valley of Mecca was short of natural resources and could not attract settlers if there was no other peculiarity at Mecca. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon in pre-Islamic Arabia for a sanctuary to be situated in a barren place similar to the valley of Mecca. Moreover, it was not unusual for a sanctuary and its more or less well-organized pilgrimage to involve trade. Meccans could not get foodstuffs or earnings unless by trade. If the stories about the commercial activities and agreements of the Qurayshites with other Arabian tribes in pre-Islamic times were fabricated (as Patricia Crone has implied), the commercial and religious superiority of Mecca in Arabia which Muhammad was able to exploit did not exist. Regardless of Patricia Crone's theory to the contrary, most modern scholars agree that pre-Islamic Mecca was a major sanctuary and pilgrimage centre in Hijaz or even all Arabia, in addition to having a few minor sanctuary-markets associated with the Meccan *Haram*. Besides, the visit to Mount ʿArafāt (near the town of Mecca) is parallel to the annual pilgrimages to sites where some sanctity attached which were very common in south Arabia. In a word, because of Mecca's religious significance, many Arabian tribes would make annual pilgrimages to it, something which contributed importantly to its becoming a centre for commerce and trade in the Arabian peninsula.

### **3 - 2 The Religious Situation of Pre-Islamic Mecca**

The ancient Arabs mainly worshipped either local gods or heavenly bodies, in addition to unseen creatures like angels and Jinns. Moreover, stones and trees were revered with formulas containing special characteristics that were often used to describe a particular tribe, or were sometimes shared by several tribes. Hence, it was not unusual for a tribal confederation to share a divine patron that was adopted as the lord of a common sanctuary and served as the central cult of this federation.<sup>53</sup> The Meccan *Haram* was such a sanctuary attended to by the Quraysh tribe and shared by many other Arabian tribes, but it is disputed if there was one common divine patron for the Meccan *Haram*, above the "uncountable" deities worshipped in the Ka'ba.

Arabian polytheism was initially a worship of features of nature. Later, outside influences brought abstract concepts of divinity to Arabs, establishing connections between natural objects and heavenly deities in worship. However, most nomadic Arabs just treated their polytheistic religion as an unimportant thing before the rise of Islam, mainly because of the incompatibility of the

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<sup>53</sup> See Peters, F. E. *Muhammad and the Origin of Islam*. New York State University Press, 1994. pp. 105-107.

religious beliefs in agricultural societies with the nomadic environment of the Arabian peninsula. In contrast to the "unfaithful" nomadic Arabs and Roman-Hellenistic Arabian settlers, Meccan polytheists were one of the few exceptions of a group that had grown a strong awareness of religious belief, and they could therefore react powerfully to any challenge from monotheisms. With its commercial prosperity and the accompanying interaction with foreign cultures, Mecca became a cross point of communication between different religious traditions, on condition that the Ka'ba and Meccan polytheism were not offended. Compared to the Jewish-dominated Yathrib, Arabian polytheism was predominant in Mecca, though with some form of monotheistic influence. In terms of religious faith, Meccans were described as "zealots" on behalf of their polytheistic sanctuary, and "loyal devotees" of a range of deities by whom they swore, after whom they named their children, and whom they took with them in battles against early Muslims.

The Ka'ba was not the only sanctuary for Arabian polytheists, and their religion was far from being unified. There was another "Ka'ba" known as *Dhū al-Ka'abāt* belonging to the Banū Bakr and the Banū Taghlib, located in north Najran, about which A'sha from Banū Qays b. Tha'laba made the verse: "Between al-Khawarnaq and al-Sadir and Bāriq; and the temple Dhū al-Ka'abāt of Sindād"<sup>54</sup>. Our knowledge about the holy places in pre-Islamic Arabia mainly relies on the reconstruction of Muslim traditions that focus on Mecca as a *Jāhilī* cult centre. M. J. Kister has found that Muslim tradition indicates that the Ghaṭafān tribe built their own shrine called "Buss", which was modeled on the Meccan Ka'ba and in immediate competition with it, and that the Ghaṭafān also set up rites modeled on those of the Ka'ba.<sup>55</sup> Two other sanctuaries - Abraha's cathedral in Sanaa (though not polytheistic but Christian) and another in Qawdam - were also apparently built with a similar intention.<sup>56</sup> The temple of the goddess al-Lāt in al-Tā'if was also famous. Muslim tradition mentions numerous pagan shrines in addition to the Meccan one; but it maintains that the Meccan shrine always was the most important sanctuary, and that the others were built essentially with the intention of competing with Meccan supremacy, or of seeking to extend Meccan sanctity to their own places. But no other sanctuaries had a better chance of development than the Meccan *Haram*.

Mecca was famous for housing various deities/idols from many different Arabian tribes in the Ka'ba. Obviously, this polytheistic worship was a major obstacle to Muhammad's monotheistic message to the Meccans. Patricia Crone supposes that the reason why Meccans came across as morally bankrupt in the Islamic sources is not that their traditional life-style had broken down, but that it functioned too well: the Meccan polytheists preferred their traditional life-style to the Islamic one.<sup>57</sup> So, when Muhammad came with his prophetic message of an absolute monotheism, Meccan polytheists perceived it not merely as a huge religious threat but also as a new system that would totally change the economic and social structures they were used to. Furthermore, Meccan

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<sup>54</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad* (A Transl. of Ibn Ishaq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, with introduction and notes). Oxford University Press, 1970. p 39.

<sup>55</sup> Kister, M. J. "Mecca and the Tribes of Arabia: Some Notes on Their Relations," in M. Sharon (ed.), *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization in Honour of Professor David Ayalon*. Jerusalem, 1986. pp. 43-44, and n. 52 for sources.

<sup>56</sup> Kister, M. J. "Mecca and the Tribes of Arabia: Some Notes on Their Relations," in M. Sharon (ed.), *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization in Honour of Professor David Ayalon*. Jerusalem, 1986. p 44 and nn. 58-59.

<sup>57</sup> Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Gorgias Press, 1987. p 234.

polytheist leaders were afraid of losing profits from the homage paid by pilgrims and the trade based on the pilgrimage to the gods at the Meccan sanctuary, if they allowed Muhammad to spread his new belief system in Mecca. In response, the Qur'an mentions several Arabian idols by name, and derides them as factitious creations that provide no spiritual or material benefit: "So have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā? And Manāt, the third - the other one? Is the male for you and for Him the female? That, then, is an unjust division. They are only names (that) you have named them - you and your forefathers - for which Allah has not sent down authority. They only follow the assumption, and what (their) souls desire, and there has already come to them the guidance from their Lord. Or, is (there) for the man what he wished? Rather, to Allah is the Hereafter and the First" (Qur'an 53:19-25).<sup>58</sup> However, after the victory of Islam, the Meccan *Haram* continued to be respected and valued by Muslims. The benefits of the Meccans and the high status of Mecca in Arabia were guaranteed after the Meccans' conversion to Islam. Certain Meccan pagan practices, particularly the rites of pilgrimage, were retained in Islam.

### **3 - 3 The "Revisionist" Attitude towards the Place of Islamic Origins**

The "revisionist school" challenges the traditional Islamic accounts of the place and time of the origins of Islam, by locating them in a more northern area (such as Syria and Mesopotamia) and at a later time (roughly 8th or 9th century). The revisionist criticism of Muslim tradition originated from Western academic scholarship which had already investigated Christianity in a critical way, which is not a phenomenon in the Muslim world. Christianity rose in a clear historical and geographical milieu - Judea, a region in the Roman empire. In contrast, Muslim tradition puts the origins of Islam in Hijaz, for which scholars can find no independent historical evidence other than the "self-evident" Qur'an and Muslim tradition. The northwestern and southern fringes of the Arabian peninsula have provided better documented historical sources and more archeological finds, but they cannot offer any useful historical data for researching Hijaz as the birthplace of Islam, particularly Mecca and Yathrib. Muslim tradition has much to say about it, but is not regarded as sufficient historical evidence.

Was Mecca really the cradle of the emergence of Islam? The religious situation of Mecca during Muhammad's time and earlier is still very ambiguous because both archeological evidence and non-Islamic historical record about pre-Islamic Mecca are scarce. But some inscriptions have been found in northwestern and southern parts of the Arabian peninsula, which probably have a direct or indirect relationship with Mecca. However, it is problematic that we have no non-Islamic sources contemporary with the Qur'anic context. Can we throw new light on the Qur'an depending on Muslim tradition only? Nor does a convincing source from outside of Arabia ever mention or reflect the polytheistic situation of Mecca before Muslim conquest. This difficulty of lack of available contemporary evidence has given birth to the skeptical theory that Muhammad's main career may not have happened in Mecca but took place in northwest Arabia, where the Christian and Jewish presence was much stronger than that in Hijaz. In addition, the Qur'anic description of plants (such as the grains and date palm trees) reveals that the Qur'anic context may more likely be a kind of agricultural society, definitely not the harsh natural environment of Mecca, for instance:

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<sup>58</sup> Hawting, Gerald. "Idols and Images", in J. D. McAuliffe (Ed.) *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, Vol. 2. Leiden: Brill, 2001. pp. 475-484. particularly p 142.

Qur'an 50:9: "And We send down from the cloud water abounding in good, then We cause to grow thereby gardens and the grain that is reaped"; Qur'an 16:11: "He causes to grow for you thereby herbage, and the olives, and the palm trees, and the grapes, and of all the fruits..."

An obvious contradiction also emerges: on the one hand, "revisionist" scholars like G. R. Hawting propose that the presence of some kind of native monotheism is strongly reflected in the Qur'anic polemics; on the other hand, we have no evidence to demonstrate that Mecca had a monotheist community before the rise of Islam, and the existence of an Arabian monotheistic movement at least in the pre-Islamic Hijaz has not been proved, either. In order to solve this problem, Hawting adopts John Wansbrough's radical hypothesis of an "extra-Arabian Qur'an"<sup>59</sup>, which states that the Qur'an crystallized somewhere other than in the Arabian peninsula, in a strong non-Arabian monotheist polemical context. But they cannot find or prove where the "somewhere else" specifically refers to. Hawting, like many other hard-core revisionists, seems to treat Muslim tradition in an "all-or-nothing" fashion. But Hawting's argument that the post-Qur'anic Muslim tradition tells us nothing about the pre-Islamic time, and that it only reflects later Islamic ideas about the Abrahamic roots of Islam in the idolatrous Hijaz, is too extreme. In contrast, we should give more attention to the penetration of the old monotheisms (Judaism and Christianity) into Hijaz, which provided a more or less monotheistic environment in which the Qur'an emerged. As Muslim tradition reports, Jews and Christians existed in many places of the pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula, for instance the sizable Jewish community in Yathrib. The Qur'an was a product of a partially monotheistic environment shaped by Judaism and Christianity, and we should not ignore the metaphorical quality of the Qur'anic reference to *mushrikūn* just as Hawting has figured out. The Qur'anic reference to *mushrikūn* in fact serve polemics, not reflecting the real historical situation of the Hijazi polytheists. Although the context of Muhammad's life in Hijaz is a historical vacuum, it does not mean that Muhammad is implausible figure. At least, Muhammad's biography is relatively complete. The god of the Ishmaelites dwells in a fixed sanctuary, unlike a nomadic god, which is confirmed by south Arabian evidence and invalidate the "revisionist" attempts to situate the origins of Islam apart from Hijaz.<sup>60</sup>

Patricia Crone proposes that the place where Muhammad began to receive divine revelation was outside Mecca and somewhere else in Arabia, which lacks evidence. Admittedly, at the very beginning of Islam, Muhammad's message was rejected by most of the Meccans, but it was later well received in Yathrib. In Mecca, Muhammad could be only a would-be prophet. His mission may have not been successful had he continued to stay until his death in Mecca, where Arabian polytheism was dominant. It is probable that Mecca had no big crisis before the advent of Islam. Instead of suffering the hypothesized Arabian crisis before Muhammad's time, Meccan society seems to have run well, which was unique at that time. So, Muhammad's new monotheism had to find a market outside of Mecca, being first accepted in Yathrib and then expanding to other parts of Arabia. Meccans became the most stubborn people in terms of Muhammad's missionary work, albeit they converted after Mecca was conquered at last. The "revisionist" view of underestimating Mecca's position in the emergence of Islam is problematic, because Muhammad also got some

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<sup>59</sup> See Wansbrough, John. *The Sectarian Milieu*. Oxford University Press, 1978.

<sup>60</sup> Neuwirth, Angelika; Nicolai Sinai & Michael Marx. *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*. Brill, 2010. p 621.

support from a few Meccans, and some of his Meccan followers moved to Yathrib together with him - the *Muhājirūn* in Muslim tradition.

Muhammad's new monotheism commanded people to destroy the idols at Mecca, but otherwise retained the Ka'ba as well as much of the original polytheistic ceremonies, and legitimized the entire sacred complex by endowing with it an Abrahamic pedigree. G. R. Hawting estimates that the adoption of the pagan Ka'ba into Islam was completed at a much later time than the traditional Islamic accounts allow. According to Hawting, this adoption meant a determination to make Muhammad's new monotheism fully independent of its Judeo-Christian origins; however, many of its attributes are in fact late borrowings of Jewish ideas.<sup>61</sup> We can also reconstruct many features of the pre-Islamic Ka'ba, based on the details offered by Muslim tradition. The pilgrimage to Mecca, the circumambulation of the Ka'ba, and many relevant rituals have no conceivable rationale corresponding to the core Islamic creeds; but they are apparently remnants of the Meccan pagan past. Though Islam has inherited many pre-Islamic pagan elements, the Qur'an and Muslim tradition do not present pre-Islamic Arabian religion in Hijaz as what it may have been in real history. Admittedly, Muhammad initially faced persecution at Mecca, and he may not get any monotheistic material in the Meccan context. We cannot deny the close relation between the polytheistic town of Mecca and the emergence of Islam.

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<sup>61</sup> See Hawting, G. R. "The Origins of the Muslim Sanctuary in Mecca," in G. H. A. Juynboll (ed.), *Studies in the First Century of Islamic Society*. Carbondale, Illinois, 1982.

## 4. The Image of Pre-Islamic Arabian Religion in Islam and Its Historicity

### 4 - 1 Pre-Islamic Arabian Religion in the Qur'an and Muslim Tradition

The Arabian idolatrous background is always emphasized by the Qur'an and Muslim tradition. Likewise, from the start of his mission, Muhammad's target was mainly Arabian polytheists, in particularly those of Mecca. But there are many differences between the Qur'an and Muslim tradition regarding Arabian pagans.

Most inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia are said in Muslim tradition to have been "idolaters" (i.e. *Mushrikūn* in the Qur'an), though it is still uncertain what that means precisely in practice. The pre-Islamic era is called *Jāhiliyya* (i.e. "era of ignorance") in Muslim tradition, which means that pre-Islamic Arabian polytheists were ignorant of the One God. But the Qur'an itself does not say explicitly that pre-Islamic Arabian polytheists (in particular the Meccans) were totally ignorant of the One God. As the Qur'an declares, idolatry (associating the God with others) and unbelief were both prevalent before the advent of Islam.

Despite the great amount of deities worshipped in pre-Islamic Arabia, the Qur'an only refers to a few of them that were well known. Three goddesses are mentioned by name in Qur'an 53:19-20: al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā and Manāt, which all had their own shrines in Mecca's neighborhood, at al-Tāʿif, Nakhla and Qudayd respectively. These three goddesses were described by Arabian pagans as three "daughters to Allah" (الله البنات) (Qur'an 16:57), in the Qur'anic criticism of the Quraysh. Why is it alleged in the Qur'an that the pagan opponents regarded them as "angels" and as "daughters" of God? Alford Welch interprets the Qur'anic passage 53:19-20 as an attack upon the three goddesses that were venerated by Meccan pagans who really identified them as "daughters" of "Allah", but the identification of them as "angels" (Qur'an 53:26-28) may just have served the purpose of Qur'anic polemics and was not accepted by the Meccan pagans themselves.<sup>62</sup> Other Qur'anic passages accuse pagan opponents of regarding the angels as "female" (Qur'an 37:150; 43:19), although it is problematic whether the pagan opponents themselves would have admitted that they treated the angels as "female" or not. The Qur'anic verses that denounce the idea of pagan opponents that the angels were female offspring of "Allah" (Qur'an 17:40; 37:149-153) can be seen as a reflection of the accusation appearing in Qur'an 53:19-20 about worshipping those three goddesses as "daughters" of "Allah". The Qur'anic passage associates the names al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, Manāt with "angels" and "daughters of Allah" in the usage of pagan opponents (*mushrikūn*); but later Muslim tradition further interprets these three goddesses as typical idols, which reveals that they were real deities worshipped by Arabian pagans, especially by Meccans.<sup>63</sup> It is easy to see that the only Qur'anic reference to the names of al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā and Manāt presents a very different image from what we read about them in Muslim tradition. In other words, there is an inconsistency or tension between the Qur'anic narrative relating to the three beings and the Muslim traditional accounts regarding them. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the Muslim traditional accounts about the three goddesses were products of pure invention or speculative

<sup>62</sup> See Welch, Alford T. "Allah and Other Supernatural Beings: The Emergence of the Qur'anic Doctrine of tawhid", *JAAR*, thematic issue, *Studies in Qur'an and Tafsir* (Guest ed. Alford T. Welch), 47, no. 4, 1979. pp. 733-753.

<sup>63</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. Cambridge University Press, 2015. p 144.

exegeses.

Admittedly, Meccans may have known the term *Allāh* since pre-Islamic times. The term *Allāh* had not been well-defined by Meccan polytheists, and *Allāh* may not refer to a specific god in the polytheistic context of Mecca.<sup>64</sup> So, the identification of the three goddesses as "daughters of Allah" could only happen after Muhammad's start of mission. Paul Eichler suggests that some pagans attempted to represent their polytheistic deities as "angels" or "daughters" of "Allah", in order that Muhammad would allow them to go on to worship them besides of Allah.<sup>65</sup> If this is the case, this phenomenon may have emerged under the pressure that Muhammad exerted on Meccans. According to al-Ṭabarī's narrative (based on a different version of Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*), Muhammad seems to have temporarily permitted their intercession with *Allāh* (as the story of the "Satanic verses")<sup>66</sup>, but then he changed his mind. It is obvious that Muhammad would not permit it at last, because of its striking violation against the Islamic core creed - the exclusive belief to the One God. In addition, five other gods are named in the account of Noah (Qur'an 71:23) - Wadd, Suwāc, Yaghūth, Ya'ūq and Nasr,<sup>67</sup> who were probably worshipped in Arabia around 600 CE, especially by south Arabian tribes.

The Ka'ba may have been originally devoted to a deity called Hubal.<sup>68</sup> The Qurayshites had worshipped several gods in and around the Ka'ba, but "the greatest of these was Hubal".<sup>69</sup> Ironically, the Qur'an itself seems to completely ignore the account of Hubal which was in fact the tribal god of the Qurayshites and whose significant presence in the Ka'ba was well-known among Arabian polytheists. Since the Ka'ba is also labeled as the "House of Allah" in Islam, the relation between the god Hubal and Allah is yet to be known. But I suppose that the pre-Islamic origin of the One God - Allah is not to be found in Hubal, who was an idol in the Meccan shrine. In the process of accusing Meccan polytheists, Muhammad gradually re-defined and thus diminished the deities of his pagan opponents, which culminated in the total denial of their existence.

The Muslim historian, Ibn Ishāq (704-767 CE) lists the deities/idols worshiped by Arabian polytheists in his *Sīra Rasūl Allāh*.<sup>70</sup> After that, *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, written by Ibn al-Kalbī (737-819 CE), mentions a great number of gods and goddesses and reports in detail the rites associated with Arabian polytheistic worship. Some parts of Ibn Kalbī's work display a more scholarly historical method, unlike many other traditional Islamic works where uncontrolled elaboration goes as far as to mere inventions. These two first-hand works are the most ancient sources for Arabian polytheism, at least as seen by early Muslims. It should be noted that the traditional Islamic sources about the pre-Islamic Arabian deities often indicate that they had originally been relevant

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<sup>64</sup> See Wellhausen, Julius. *Reste arabischen Heidentums*. Berlin, 1927. pp. 217-224.

<sup>65</sup> Eichler, Paul Arno. *Die Dschinn, Teufel und Engel im Koran*. Leipzig, 1928. pp 101-102.

<sup>66</sup> Watt, W. Montgomery. "Belief in a "High God" in Pre-Islamic Mecca", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, XVI (1), 1971. pp. 35-40. p 37; Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad at Mecca*. Oxford University Press, 1953. p 102.

<sup>67</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. Cambridge University Press, 2015. p 90.

<sup>68</sup> Rodinson, Maxime. *Mohammed* (trans. by Anne Carter). Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1971. p 40.

<sup>69</sup> Faris, Nabih Amin. *The Book of Idols*. (transl. from *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām* of Ibn al-Kalbī, with introduction and notes). Princeton University Press, 1952. pp. 23-24.

<sup>70</sup> See Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad* (A Transl. of Ibn Ishaq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, with introduction and notes). Oxford University Press, 1970.

to agriculture or fertility, similarly to what was the case was with the Ba'al religion of pre-Israelite Canaan. We may deduce that most pre-Islamic Arabian deities were originally imported from the adjacent Hellenized or Persianized regions around the Arabian peninsula, such as Syria, Nabatea, and south Mesopotamia.

#### 4 - 2 The *Mushrikūn*, Not Real Polytheists?

Muslim tradition relates the term *mushrikūn* to the Meccan contemporaries of Muhammad and the term *shirk* to their religious practice of associating other entities (as worship objects) with the supreme god Allah. Thus, seen from a traditional Islamic perspective, the *mushrikūn* were not real polytheists, for they did not deny the existence of the supreme god Allah and even occasionally prayed to and worshipped Allah. But they in general associated other beings with Allah and thus dishonored him.<sup>71</sup> "Allah" is also thought by some scholars to have been well known as the name of a deity among the pre-Islamic Arabs,<sup>72</sup> which indicates that Muhammad shared the same deity as the Arabian polytheists. According to the Qur'an and Muslim tradition, the conflicts between Muhammad and his Arabian polytheistic contemporaries mainly related to the position of the supreme God among other objects of veneration, rather than to the identity of the god that had to be worshipped.<sup>73</sup>

"*Shirk*" and "idolatry" are both often regarded as terms that were used against pagans/polytheists outside the monotheistic traditions. But this usage may not be primary usage of the word *shirk* in the Arabic Islamic context. Admittedly, the term *shirk* (with verbal form *ashraka* and the active participle *mushrik*) is often understood as "polytheism" or "idolatry". However, this term can also refer to the concept of "making someone or something a partner or associate, of someone or something else" in a non-religious sense. Therefore, the term *shirk* may have been used in polemical way by Muhammad and early Muslims against individuals or groups who identified themselves as "monotheists". Given its etymological sense of "associationism", there may be less reason to assume that the charge of *shirk* was initially targeting those real polytheists than is the case with *Eidōlolatreia* in Judeo-Christian usage.<sup>74</sup> However, some scholars have argued that the Arabic word-root *sh-r-k* was already used by the so-called monotheists of South Arabia to refer to real polytheism before the advent of Islam.<sup>75</sup> If this is the case, it becomes more problematic to suggest that the Islamic use of *shirk* originated in intra-monotheist polemics.

However, in Muslim tradition the *shirk* of Arabian pagans means a combination of the recognition of the One God (*Allāh*) with the worship of other lesser gods or idols, and it is used for interpreting certain Qur'anic verses, for example the Qur'anic story about the Khawlān tribe's idol called *ʿUmyānis*. *ʿUmyānis*' devotees preferred their God *ʿUmyānis* to the One God (*Allāh*) as they divided the shares of their crops and cattle between Allah and His associates (Qur'an 6:136). It

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<sup>71</sup> Rubin, Uri. "Al-Ṣamad", *Isl.*, 61, 1984. p 199.

<sup>72</sup> Wellhausen, Julius. *Reste arabischen Heidentums* (2nd ed.). Berlin, 1897 (repr. with a new introduction as the 3rd ed. Berlin, 1961). p 217f.

<sup>73</sup> Rubin, Uri. "Al-Ṣamad", *Isl.*, 61, 1984, p 199.

<sup>74</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. Cambridge University Press, 2004. p 69.

<sup>75</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. p 69.

seems as if the Qur'anic verses inspired the stories of *mushrikūn*, or these stories were extrapolated from the Qur'an, such as that about 'Umyānis' devotees, rather than that these stories report real polytheistic practice in pre-Islamic Arabia. Relating these stories of *mushrikūn* to the pre-Islamic pagan practices helps to make up a "historical" discourse for the background of the Qur'an as well as a good reason for the rise of Islam.

It is quite common for Muslim tradition to add details (with specific names) to interpret the concise Qur'anic verses, or to complete the information provided by the Qur'an. The instance of Qur'an 6:136, whether it refers to the Khawlān tribe or something else, does reflect an agricultural context for the Qur'an. However, the frequent Qur'anic references to agriculture and irrigation neither suit the living condition of nomadic Arabs nor correspond to the situation of Meccan residents whose major activity was trade. According to Isaiah Goldfeld, the name of the Khawlān tribe can be identified as a variation of a word found in South Arabian inscriptions mentioning agricultural serfs, and the name of the god 'Umyānis is related to the name of the Moon God found in South Arabian inscriptions, though the name of that god appears differently in various accounts in Muslim tradition.<sup>76</sup> Goldfeld also thinks that the situation mentioned in the accounts of Muslim tradition is a real referent for the Qur'anic verse: Qur'an 6:136 is indeed an attack on a more widespread pagan practice (attributed to the Khawlān tribe), which is usually described only generally, without names in the *Tafsīr* (Qur'anic commentaries).<sup>77</sup> In other words, Qur'an 6:136 is just an attack on the Arabian pagan rivals of Muhammad. Furthermore, Goldfeld develops the argument that before Muhammad's time, the Quraysh of Mecca had already built up their authority over other Arabian tribes regarding the Meccan sanctuary devoted to the god Allah, although that authority had become weak at Muhammad's time.<sup>78</sup> Goldfeld's argument reflects a general theory that the pre-Islamic Ka'ba at Mecca was superior to all other sanctuaries in Arabia and that Allah was superior to all Arabian pagan deities, which suits well the attitude of Muslim tradition on pre-Islamic Arabian religion that is thought to contain a "High God" worship.

One of the characteristics of Muslim tradition is to avoid anonymity - the Qur'anic stories involving peoples, tribes or places without names often generate different versions that supply variant names. The parallel stories like that of the Khawlān's idol worship differ from each other regarding precise details, and the names of the religious, social or tribal groups under attack are often unspecific. Normally, if there is no mention of names for persons, tribes or places in a passage of the Qur'an, the Muslim tradition interprets it by supplying specific names and details. Thus it might be supposed that the account of Khawlān's idol worship arose from a felt need to put some flesh onto the exegesis of the Qur'an. The Khawlān account regarding Qur'an 6:136 may be the result of exegetical elaboration rather than a historical fact, though Isaiah Goldfeld believes in the historicity of the two names (Khawlān and 'Umyānis) given by Muslim tradition for the tribe and its god. In fact, the suggested relation between the accounts of Muslim tradition and those attested in the South Arabian archeological evidence is rather speculative and tenuous. On the other hand, it is very problematic to directly accept the identification of *shirk* with "real" polytheism, of the *mushrikūn* with pre-Islamic Arabian polytheists, and the interpretation of their

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<sup>76</sup> See Goldfeld, Isaiah. "'Umyānis the Idol of Khawlān", *IOS*, 3, 1977. pp 108-119.

<sup>77</sup> See Goldfeld, Isaiah. "'Umyānis the Idol of Khawlān". pp 108-119.

<sup>78</sup> See Goldfeld, Isaiah. "'Umyānis the Idol of Khawlān". pp 108-119.

pre-Islamic polytheistic religion as a deliberate attempt to cheat Allah for the sake of lesser deities and idolatry.

The Islamic polemical attitude to Arabian pagans first appears in the Qur'an, for instance Qur'an 29:61–65: "If indeed you ask them, 'who created the heavens and the earth, and subjected the sun and the moon?' they will indeed say, 'God (*Allāh*)'. How then are they (so) deluded? . . . If indeed you ask them, 'who sends down water from the sky, and by means of it gives the earth life after its death?', they will indeed say, 'God (*Allāh*)'. Say: 'Praise be to God.' But most of them do not understand . . . When they sail in the ship, they call on God, devoting (their) religion to Him (*mukhlisīna lahu*). But when He brings them safely to the land, at once they associate (others with Him) (*yushrikūn*)." The Qur'an criticizes the *mushrikūn* for associating other beings with Allah despite their recognition of Allah as the supreme god. The *mushrikūn* in the Qur'an are consistently interpreted by Muslim tradition as referring to the *shirk* of the Arabian pagan ancestors and contemporaries of Muhammad. Besides, Muslim tradition contains the information that certain elements of Abraham's monotheism still remained in Arabia until Muhammad's time, although Abraham's monotheism was about to fade away in Arabia. The so-called remnants of Abraham's monotheism in Arabia may explain why the sin of the Arabian pagans was *shirk* rather than real polytheism and idolatry.<sup>79</sup> Also, the supposed existence of Abraham's religion in ancient Mecca expressed an Meccan/Arabian pride, suggesting that Arabs once had their own monotheistic lineage directly from Abraham, and were not worse than Jews and Christians who declared that they were the only true descendents of Abraham. However, in Islam, all of them are accused of corrupting Abraham's original monotheism.

It is still disputed whether the Qur'an really talks about the actual situation in Hijaz (particularly Mecca) in Muhammad's time, or just gives some vague examples of *mushrikūn* (pagan monotheists) to create a bridge between the old real polytheists and the new pure monotheists. The historical Meccan polytheists may not have worshipped like the so-called *mushrikūn* mentioned in the Qur'an. The lack of theology in Arabian polytheism gave Muhammad the opportunity to explain it as the result of a corruption of Abraham's monotheism and of associating other beings with the One God, an explanation that was later elaborated by Muslim tradition. Therefore, we cannot deny that the Qur'anic passages about the *mushrikūn* were mainly used to target Arabian polytheists. However, if we only had the Qur'an without the Muslim tradition, it would be very difficult for us to deduce that the polemics against the *mushrikūn* were directed against Arabian polytheists. Muslim tradition developed the close connections between the Qur'anic *mushrikūn* and the Arabian pagan contemporaries of Muhammad in order to explain the mission of Islam in the Arabian polytheistic context. Since the Qur'an provides much anonymous or obscure material, Muslim tradition often gives itself a wide space of interpretation, going beyond the Qur'anic texts by elaborating it in ways that would be less obvious if the accounts only derived from the Qur'an itself. In other words, the Muslim tradition goes considerably beyond what is evident from the Qur'an itself, even though it does not contradict it openly.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibn Hishām, Abd el-Malik (ed.). *Kitāb Sirat Rasūl Allāh* nach Muhammed Ibn Ishāk. Aus d. Hs. zu Berlin, Leipzig, Gotha u. Leyden hrsg. von Ferdinand Wüstenfeld. 2 Bde. Göttingen 1858-1859. I, p 76 ff.; Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-A'nām* (ed. and trans. by W. Atallah). Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1969. p 3 ff. = p 32 ff. (trans.); Al-Azraqī, Muhd. bn 'Abd Allah. *Akhbār Makka* (ed. Rushdī al-Salih Malhas R. Malhas). 2 Vols. Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, n.d. I, p 80 ff.

Regardless of the details provided by Muslim tradition, the accusations made against the *mushrikūn* and the account of Abraham's religion in the Qur'an may have served as a strategy for Muhammad to more easily convert Meccan polytheists whose religious level was relatively higher than other Arabian polytheists, whose faith was often not taken seriously. This strategy had many advantages: 1. a proper explanation of the existence of Meccan polytheism and their idolatrous practice; 2. a direct connection between the lineage of the Meccans and Abraham's monotheistic religion; 3. the establishment of the superiority of Mecca (with the Ka'ba) over other Arabian towns. After conquering Mecca, it became much easier for Muhammad to bring all other Arabs under the banner of Islam. In brief, the narratives about pre-Islamic Arabian religion in the Qur'an and Muslim tradition mainly serve polemical purposes, and do not reflect the real Arabian polytheistic context of the emergence of Islam.

Islam is seen by Muslim tradition as the result of God's divine interventions in the historical process, and His revelations to an Arabian prophet who lived in an idolatrous Arabian peninsula. Hence, Islamic accounts generally posit a sharp break between pre-Islamic Arabia and the era of Islamic revelation, and a direct link between ancient Arabian polytheistic ideas and the Islamic faith is always denied by Muslim tradition. Therefore, the potential influence of pre-Islamic Arabian religion on early Islam is not easily traceable, though many pre-Islamic Arabian political and social elements remained after the rise of Islam. However, non-Muslim scholars have identified some remains of pre-Islamic Arabian pagan elements in Islam (for example the status of the Ka'ba and its related ceremonies). Unlike what the designation *Jāhiliyya* indicates from a traditional Islamic perspective, pre-Islamic Arabs in fact did not live in a status of isolation or ignorance. On the contrary, many Arabs, particularly those who lived in the peripheries of the Arabian peninsula or in the Roman/Persian-controlled Arabian states, had already become acquainted with Persian, Syriac, and Greco-Roman cultures through the trade routes connecting them with the entire Near East.

#### **4 - 3 The Pre-Islamic Arabian Religion and the Archeological Evidence in Arabia**

Based on the Qur'an, Muslim tradition provides us with Muhammad's biographies, commentaries on the Qur'an, law books, *Hadīth* collections, histories of early Islam, and so on. The value of the Muslim tradition varies from different perspectives. But traditional Islamic accounts are still treated by many historians as important sources, for the reconstruction of the origins of Islam. All other evidence, either literary or archeological, has also been interpreted in the light of the information offered by Muslim tradition. But none of the traditional Islamic accounts can be said to predate the beginning of the 3rd century AH, as far as we know.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, comparing Ibn Hishām's edited version with Ibn Ishāq's original *Sīra*, it is obvious that Ibn Hishām removed many materials concerning the *Jāhili* period from Ibn Ishāq's original version. Ibn Ishāq and his colleagues paid much attention to the *Jāhiliyya* period, while Ibn Hishām and his contemporaries replaced the interest in distant pre-Islamic Arabian past by an emphasis on the Islamic period.

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<sup>80</sup> Hawting, G.R. "John Wansbrough, Islam, and Monotheism". *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1997. pp. 23-38. p 29.

The use of the archeological and epigraphical resources has proven unfruitful in the interpretation of the Qur'an. In recent years, Western and local archeologists have conducted systematic archeological investigations and excavations in the Arabian peninsula and the Jordanian desert, and their finds and results have challenged what we assumed before. Greco-Roman, Nabataean, and early Byzantine remains have been found in this region (particularly west Arabia and northwest Arabia), as have a lot of pagan inscriptions in different Arabian peninsular dialects dating from the first few centuries CE.<sup>81</sup> However, no remains of local Arabian polytheistic sites or Classical Arabic inscriptions from the 6th and 7th centuries have been discovered in Arabia, with the exception of some Ṭamūdian and Ṣafaitic tumuli and inscriptions in the Jordanian desert, and no indications of settlements.<sup>82</sup> According to current archeological and epigraphical finds, it seems that no polytheists in the entire Near East used Classical Arabic to record their religious materials.<sup>83</sup> More specifically, the Arabian pagan cults recorded by traditional Islamic sources may have never existed in Hijaz, as far as the archeological and epigraphical evidences in Hijaz go. In other words, Hijaz has so far yielded no physical remains of polytheistic sanctuaries from the 6th and 7th centuries CE. Therefore, the pagan cults worshipping a "High God" recorded by Islamic sources may not be a Hijazi phenomenon.<sup>84</sup>

The shortage of extensive materials based upon archeological finds in the central and western Arabia has meant that situating the Qur'an in the Hijazi context has not yet proven possible. Likewise, it is hard to find archeological remains that can corroborate the traditional Islamic accounts. Though the Qur'an and Muslim tradition do not reflect the real polytheistic situation of the pre-Islamic Hijaz during the 6th and early 7th centuries, a monotheistic trend among Arabian polytheists from elsewhere seems to be embodied in the accounts of the *mushrikūn* in the Qur'an and Muslim tradition. In the absence of archeological evidence in Hijaz for the forms of Arabian polytheism/paganism described in traditional Islamic sources, we need to search for traces of pre-Islamic Arabian religion somewhere else. Further field work and archeological excavation of the entire area is still definitely needed.

#### 4 - 4 The Paganism of Negev Arabs

There ought to be at least some correlations between traditional Islamic accounts and extant archeological evidence, if the traditional Islamic accounts were to some extent historical. We fail to find any archeological evidence for a pagan cult in Hijaz during Muhammad's era such as is described in the traditional Islamic sources, whereas a Arabian pagan cult very similar to those Islamic descriptions may have existed in Negev of northwest Arabia. The accumulated archeological research indicates that Arabian polytheism in Negev largely resembles what the

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<sup>81</sup> Nevo, Yehuda D. & Judith Koren. *Crossroads to Islam: the Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*. Prometheus Books, 2003. pp. 173-174.

<sup>82</sup> See Winnett, Frederick V. & J. L. Harding. *Inscriptions from Fifty Safaitic Cairns*. Toronto University Press, 1978.

<sup>83</sup> Nevo, Yehuda D. & Judith Koren. *Crossroads to Islam: the Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*. Prometheus Books, 2003. p 174.

<sup>84</sup> Nevo, Yehuda D. & Judith Koren. *Crossroads to Islam: the Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*. p 174.

Islamic accounts describe as the *Jāhilī* cult of Hijaz.<sup>85</sup>

The settled Arabs who lived at the peripheries of northwest Arabia, were part of the Byzantine empire, including the Arabs of Negev towns. Negev's Arabian polytheism can be regarded as a local variation of Greco-Roman paganism, and Negev pagan texts were written in Greek,<sup>86</sup> which suggests that the Negev Arabs' culture and religion were strongly influenced by the Byzantines. Judging from the archeological evidence, it is sure that there was a direct transition from Arabian polytheism to Christianity in Negev Arabian towns from the 5th to the 6th century.<sup>87</sup> Based on the archeological remains, Christianity seems to be predominant among the Arabian town dwellers in Negev since the 5th century, though Arabian polytheism had not disappeared in Negev towns at least by the 6th century as the conversion of Arabs to Christianity was still going on at that time. In many other parts of the Byzantine empire, Greco-Roman paganism had not been totally replaced by Christianity, either. As one of the bordering areas, Negev retained a relatively harmonious co-existence of Arabian polytheism and Christianity for a long time after the latter became the sole state religion of the Roman Empire in 380 CE,<sup>88</sup> authorized by the emperor Theodosius I (reigned 379-395 CE). Moreover, the Negev Arabian Christians may have adhered to Monophysite sects, because Monophysite Christianity was predominant in Syria and Jerusalem to the north of Negev and in other surrounding regions. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to affirm which specific sect those Arabian Christians really belonged to, because, as Alexander A. Vasiliev states, it is hard to believe that the Arabs cared much about the nuanced theological differences between various Christian sects.<sup>89</sup> The conversion of some northwestern Arabs may have a historical basis, because the status of Christianity was so important to Byzantine officials that conversion to Christianity was probably required of Byzantine subjects, particularly those who participated in the Byzantine administration or army.

It should also be noted that polytheism did not fade out in northwest Arabia (including Negev) in spite of the penetration of Christianity into the region. The town dwellers in northwest Arabia were culturally assimilated by the Byzantines, while the rest of the Arabs there more generally retained their ancestral life-style, polytheistic religion and culture during Byzantine times, though being influenced by the Byzantines. Nor did Arabian polytheism perish in the 7th century with the advent of Islam. Pre-Islamic Arabian religion was not totally replaced by Islam in a short time. The archeological remains attest that the Negev Arabian pagan cult even went through a significant revival, perhaps during the reign of Hishām ibn ʿAbd al-Malik (724-743 CE), when a number of new pagan cult centers were constructed in Negev. Arabian polytheism survived in Negev until the late 8th century when the Negev pagan sites were unhurriedly and methodically shut down at last.

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<sup>85</sup> Nevo, Yehuda D. & Judith Koren. *Crossroads to Islam: the Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*. p 179.

<sup>86</sup> See Negev, Avraham. *The Greek Inscription from the Negev*. Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1981.

<sup>87</sup> Colt Archeological Institute. *Excavations at Nessana: Report of the Colt Archeological Expedition*. 3 Vols. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950-1962. Vol. III, p 15.

<sup>88</sup> Forster, Greg. *The Contested Public Square: The Crisis of Christianity and Politics*. IVP Academic, 2008. p 41; Honoré, Tony. *Law in the Crisis of Empire 379-455 AD*. Oxford University Press, 1998. p 5.

<sup>89</sup> See Vasiliev, Alexander A. "Notes on Some Episodes Concerning the Relations of the Arabs and the Byzantine Empire from the Fourth to the Sixth Century". *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 9-10, 1955. pp. 306-316.

Despite the scarceness of the archeological evidence for Arabian polytheism in Hijaz and other parts of the Arabian Peninsula from the same period, the excavated polytheistic remains in Negev that have been discovered so far (for example the Sede Boqer site) highly correspond to and verify the depictions of the traditional Islamic accounts about the Arabian pagan sites.<sup>90</sup> The only main difference between them lies in the use of animal sacrifice: the Negev Arabian pagans seem not to have practiced animal sacrifice to their deities; the traditional Islamic sources state that Arabian pagans did sacrifice animals to their gods/idols, and add that the slaughtered animals would mostly be eaten by people after the rituals. The place and time in which that Arabian pagan cult recorded by Muslim tradition existed was more probably Negev by 8th century. On the other hand, we still lack evidence to either prove or disprove that such a cult ever existed in pre-Islamic Hijaz as is claimed by traditional Islamic accounts. However, the belief in a "High God" among the pagans may be more easily found in Negev where Arabian polytheism and Christianity had co-existed for so long time, and the former still had power to counter the expansion of the latter. To sum up, the Islamic narratives about pre-Islamic Arabian religion mainly serve polemics, rather than recording a real historical situation of religion in Hijaz.

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<sup>90</sup> See Nevo, Yehuda & Judith Koren. "The Origins of the Muslim Description of the Jahili Meccan Sanctuary". *JNES* 49, 1990. pp. 23-44.

## 5. The "High God" and the One God

### 5 - 1 The Belief of "High God" in Pre-Islamic Arabian Religion as an Origin of Islam?

Muhammad was born in the Arabian polytheistic context, but he developed a set of native monotheistic theories that suited the Arabs. Muhammad's new message was initially a call on the Arabian pagans to abandon their corrupt way of life and to recognize and worship the One God - Allah. From where did Muhammad get the monotheistic materials for his new monotheism? From the old monotheisms, or from a monotheistic tendency inside Arabian polytheism, or somewhere else? There may have existed a primordial monotheism (*Urmonotheismus*) in Arabia, which is sometimes used to account for the development of Islam as an Arabian form of monotheism.<sup>91</sup> Except the attribution of Muhammad's monotheistic messages to God's revelations, Muslim tradition does tell us nothing about where and how Muhammad had gotten his materials of Qur'anic ideas and stories which were similar with those well-known in Judaism and Christianity. Muslim tradition rather focuses on the dominance of Meccan paganism and idolatrous worship from a critical perspective.

Was there any monotheistic tendency in pre-Islamic Arabian polytheism, like that in Greco-Roman paganisms? The study of inscriptions has shown that the belief in a "High God" or even "Supreme God" had become common throughout the Greco-Roman paganisms even before the rise of Christianity. But Arabian polytheism may have had a different process of development, because of its lack of mythology and the restraints of tribalism on it.

The archeological evidence from northwest Arabia shows that there may have been a monotheistic trend among Arabian polytheists in the region. Monotheistic-like ideas in pre-Islamic Arabian religion probably emerged due to Judeo-Christian influence. Furthermore, we should not exclude the possibility of some influence from other minor traditions, like the Sabians who professed a monotheism primarily based on Greek philosophy. Arabian polytheists may have faced the criticism of monotheistic groups, by whom they could be easily influenced and led to borrow new ideas from foreign religious traditions. In reaction, Arabian polytheists in some parts of Arabia might have made some modifications of Judeo-Christian ideas in order to adapt them to an Arabian outlook. The concept of a "High God" in pre-Islamic Arabian religion may have been born in the context of interaction and debate with old monotheisms. In other words, Arabian polytheism itself was not able to evolve a monotheistic trend without frequent contact with old monotheisms.

I do not intend to judge the degree of actual development of the monotheistic trend among Arabian polytheistic inhabitants in the early 7th century. But the monotheistic tendency of Arabian polytheism may be more or less reflected in the change of some notions and religious practices among the Arabs. The concept of a "High God" may be reflected in an abstract way by the common notion of *Dahr* or "Time/Fate"<sup>92</sup> in pre-Islamic Arabian poetry. The idea of a "High

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<sup>91</sup> See Brockelmann, Carl. Allah und die Götzen: Der Ursprung des islamischen Monotheismus. *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 21, 1922. pp. 99-121. Also see Watt, W. Montgomery. "The 'High God' in Pre-Islamic Mecca", in *Actes du Ve Congrès International d'Arabisants et d'Islamisants*, Brussels, 1970. pp. 499-505.

<sup>92</sup> Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad at Mecca*. Oxford University Press, 1953. pp. 24 & 28.

God" had permeated some Arabian settling communities to the extent that their worship of a High God together with lesser deities was interpreted by the Qur'an as a recognition of a supreme god - Allah, while they were thought to maintain their "superstitious" rites in association with their (High) God. This phenomenon may correspond to the situation of northwest Arabia or Yemen where the number of foreign-influenced Arabian settlers and Jewish/Christian communities was greater.

Although the Arabian pagan belief in a High God together with minor gods does not constitute a separate monotheism, the increasing emphasis on such belief is definitely evidence of a monotheistic tendency within Arabian polytheism, which could develop towards the exclusion of other gods' existence.<sup>93</sup> But in the Qur'an and much of Muslim tradition, the monotheistic trend in pre-Islamic Arabian religion seems to be reflected in a distinct way: the monotheistic tendency in Arabian polytheism is interpreted as the remains of a pre-Islamic "Arabian monotheism" inherited from Abraham and Ishmael, which was later polluted by pagans, and accordingly, Mecca was the major centre where that native "Arabian monotheism" started. So, the mission of Islam was to cleanse the corrupted parts of pre-Islamic "Arabian monotheism" and recover Abraham's religion. It seems that Islam does not recognize itself as having evolved from the monotheistic tendency of Arabian polytheism. However, we can deduce that Muhammad may have been inspired by the monotheistic trend in pre-Islamic Arabian religion that may have originally occurred in northwest Arabia or Yemen. Muhammad made use of that monotheistic trend to support his mission by making a literary connection between it and what he faced in Mecca.

Traditional Muslim scholars, such as Ibn al-Kalbī (d. c. 819 CE), Ibn Hishām (d. c. 833CE), and Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb (d. 860 CE), all presented a picture of Hijaz (and even Arabia as a whole) as full of idols' shrines and worshippers.<sup>94</sup> But some modern scholars have expressed much skepticism regarding the conclusions of these traditional Muslim scholars because they seem to contradict the Qur'anic narratives about Arabian pagans. Those labeled as *mushrikūn* in the Qur'an have been interpreted by Patricia Crone as actually "believers in the same God as the Messenger, the God of the Biblical tradition"<sup>95</sup>. G. R. Hawting argues that the Qur'anic criticism of the *mushrikūn* is not necessarily to be taken as a binding evidence that the Qur'an emerged in a thoroughly pagan or idolatrous environment of the pre-Islamic Hijaz, as is emphasized by the traditional Islamic narratives.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, Hawting supposes that the Qur'anic term *mushrikūn* can be understood in a metaphorical or hyperbolic way: in fact the Qur'an just accuses those who were weak in their belief of the God, of "being as bad as idolaters" or "worshipping like idolaters", and so calls them *mushrikūn* (meaning "associaters", or "idolaters") directly.<sup>97</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>93</sup> Teixidor, Javier. *The Pagan God: Popular Religion in the Greco-Roman Near East*, Princeton 1977. p 17.

<sup>94</sup> See Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-A'nām* (ed. and trans. by W. Atallah). Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1969; Ibn Hishām. *Al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (M. al-Saqqā, I. al-Ibyārī & °A.-Ḥ. Shalabī ed.) (4 Vols.), Cairo: Mustafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1936. I, pp. 78-91; Ibn Ḥabīb. *Kitāb al-Mu'abbar* (I. Lichtenstaedter ed.). Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-°Uthmāniyya, 1942. pp. 315-319.

<sup>95</sup> See Crone, Patricia. "The religion of the Qur'anic pagans: God and the lesser deities", *Arabica* 57/2-3, 2010. pp. 151-200; Crone, Patricia. "The Quranic mushrikūn and the resurrection (part I)", *BSOAS* 75/3, 2012. pp. 445-472. p 451.

<sup>96</sup> See Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. Cambridge University Press, 1999. pp. 45-66.

<sup>97</sup> See Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. pp. 45-66.

Muhammad seems to leave much space to Meccans for replacing their traditional polytheism by a new monotheism, without subjecting them to a complete criticism. Such an exaggerated use of charges of "idolatry" can also frequently be seen in the monotheist polemics between different Christian and Jewish sects. In a later period, some Muslims also charged each other with being *kāfir* (pl. *kuffār*) because of their fierce divergences on belief issues, for example the founder of the Wahhābī school, Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792 CE), argued that the *kuffār* whom Muhammad fought against were imperfect monotheists.<sup>98</sup> Hawting points out that those monotheists often tended to depict their opponents who claimed themselves to be monotheists as *kuffār* or idolaters. Thus, it is not strange that the Meccan pagans are labeled as *mushrikūn* by the Qur'an, even though they are deemed to still keep their belief in the One God.

## 5 - 2 The Origin of "Allah" (*Al-lāh*)

The worship of the One God (Allah) is the first priority in Islam. The origin of the term "Allah" closely relates to the origins of Islam. Though having been influenced by the Arabian pagan belief in a "High God" which may have existed in some places of Arabia, the One God (Allah) in the Islamic creed may not be identified as having originated from the "High God" of Arabian pagans, but may have an external origin.

Allah may have been already known to pre-Islamic Arabs, at least as one of the Meccan deities which could not be precisely defined before the emergence of Islam. The origin of *Al-lāh* is thought to be from the antonomasia of *al-ilāh* (the most likely etymology; another suggestion is *alāhā* in Aramaic).<sup>99</sup> It is yet to be discussed whether Allah was considered the supreme divinity (though not the sole) in pre-Islamic Meccan religion, which was later developed by the Qur'an into the unique god of the universe.

The term *ilāh* (pl. *āliha*, meaning "god" or "deity") appears in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry as an impersonal divine name, with the article *al*. For Christians and Jews of Arabia, *al-ilāh* in their poetry explicitly refers to their God; for Arabian polytheists, it may refer only to the "one who is worshipped", so in this context *al-ilāh* means "the god already mentioned" or "the god of whom the poet is thinking", an usage that has survived until today.<sup>100</sup> Before the rise of Islam, *al-ilāh* had already been contracted to *Al-lāh* because of being frequently used, a fact that is often reflected in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Then *Al-lāh* became a proper name. During the Islamic era, the term *ilāh* (without the article) seems to refer only to a specific god, and its plural form *āliha* means gods. In the Qur'an, when the two terms do not appear together in a verse, the term *Al-lāh* sometimes preserves the same meaning as *al-ilāh*,<sup>101</sup> for example Qur'an 6:3.

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<sup>98</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. Cambridge University Press, 1999. p 63.

<sup>99</sup> Bearman, P. J.; Th. Bianquis; C. E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel & W. P. Heinrichs et al. (eds.). "Allāh", *Encyclopædia of Islam* (12 Vols. with indexes, etc., 2nd Edition). Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960–2005.

<sup>100</sup> Lewis, B. & V. L. Ménage, Ch. Pellat & J. Schacht (eds.). *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: H-Iram* (Vol. 3, New Edition). Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986. p 1093.

<sup>101</sup> az-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf* (Nassau Lees ed.). Calcutta, 1856. p 394.

وَهُوَ اللَّهُ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَفِي الْأَرْضِ  
 al-lāh huwa  
 Equivalent Referring to Al-lāh,  
 to al-Ilāh as a proper name

Qur'an 6:3 : "And He (Allah) is the god in the  
 heavens and the earth..."

But in Qur'anic verses like Qur'an 28:70, the juxtaposition of *Al-lāh* and *ilāh* makes the two terms different in meaning<sup>102</sup>.

وَهُوَ اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ  
 Ilāh al-lāh (Allah)  
 "god" or "deity"; Proper name  
 singular & - Allah  
 without article

Qur'an 28:70 : "And He is Allah ; there is no  
 deity except Him ..."

The Arabic word *ilāh* (إله), is identical with the Aramaic word *elāh* (ܐܠܗ) and the Hebrew word *elōah* (אֱלֹהִים), both etymologically and semantically, having the same Semitic trilateral word-root *ʿ-l-h*. *Elāh* was used for describing both pagan god and the God of the Jews. *Elōah* was an expanded form of a common Semitic noun *il/el*, like *ēl* (אֵל) in Hebrew. The nouns *Elōah* and *Ēl* are used as proper names or generically, and in both cases they can be interchangeable with *Elohīm* (אֱלֹהִים).<sup>103</sup> It is very possible that the Arabic usage of the term *al-ilāh* and its contraction or derivation *Al-lāh*, referring to the One God, was firstly adapted by Arabic-speaking Christians or Jews from other Semitic monotheist groups, but it differed in meaning from that used by Arabian polytheists. Besides, some lexicographers point out that the termination *-īl* appearing in some proper names on south Arabian inscriptions indicates the deity<sup>104</sup>.

It is striking that the term Allah was known to Meccans, regardless of whether this resulted from the growing influence of a monotheistic trend in Arabian polytheism or of Judeo-Christianity at that time, or it was introduced into Meccan society through commercial contacts with northwest Arabia. Nevertheless, Allah alone was never represented by an image in the Meccan sanctuary.<sup>105</sup> This fact suggests that Allah was conceived to be very different from other deities and had not become a formal part of the Meccan pantheon. This fact also implies that there was a difference in what Allah referred to between the different groups that used Arabic as their religious language. Meccan polytheists may have employed the term Allah not as a proper name, but generically in the sense of "the deity", as a term that could be applied to any god in Meccan pantheon. In contrast, the pre-Islamic Arabic-speaking Christians or Jews who lived in Hijaz may have adopted the term in the same way that other Judeo-Christians used it. Therefore, in pre-Islamic Mecca,

<sup>102</sup> az-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf* (Nassau Lees ed.). Calcutta, 1856. p 1064.

<sup>103</sup> Van der Toorn, K.; Bob Becking & Pieter Willem van der Horst (eds.). *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (revised 2nd edition). Brill, 1999. pp. 274 & 352-353.

<sup>104</sup> See Jamme, A. "Le Panthéon Sud-Arabe Préislamique D'après Les Sources Épigraphiques", *Le Muséon*, vol. 60, 1947. pp. 57-147.

<sup>105</sup> Peters, F. E. *Muhammad and the Origin of Islam*. New York State University Press, 1994. p 107.

Allah never had a uniform meaning, either just as an Arabic designation for "god" or as the name of the One God. As Robert Morey points out, "the Qur'an does not explain who Allah was because Muhammad assumed that the pagan Arabians already knew who he was"<sup>106</sup>. Muhammad introduced the term Allah into his new monotheism as a name for the One God, not only to unify the tribal gods of Arabian polytheists, but also to attract Jews and Christians who were familiar with this usage.

### 5 - 3 *Al-Raḥmān* of South Arabia

Besides the God *Allāh*, the Qur'an appears to make a special reference to the term *al-Raḥmān*. The epithet *Raḥmānān* may have been the name of a deity from pre-Islamic South Arabia, who is mentioned frequently in pre-Islamic Arabic poems.<sup>107</sup> The south Arabian term *Raḥmānān* is directly equivalent to *al-Raḥmān*, another name for *Allāh*, which appears in the Qur'an for some 170 times (including *basmala*).<sup>108</sup> In the Qur'an, *al-Raḥmān* is used only to indicate the One God *Allāh*. The Qur'an also explicitly says that the Meccans, being *mushrikūn*, did not understand *al-Raḥmān* as a name of the God<sup>109</sup>: "And if it is said to them, 'Prostrate (yourselves) to the *Merciful*', they say, 'And what is the *Merciful*? Shall we prostrate to what you order us?' And it increases them in aversion" (وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ اسْجُدُوا لِلرَّحْمَنِ قَالُوا وَمَا الرَّحْمَنُ أَنَسْجُدُ لِمَا تَأْمُرُنَا وَزَادَهُمْ تُفُورًا) (Qur'an 25:60); "Thus We have sent you to a nation before which (other) nations had passed away so you might recite to them that which We revealed to you, while they disbelieve in the *Merciful*. Say, 'He is my Lord; there is no deity except Him. Upon Him I rely, and to Him is my return' " (كَذَلِكَ أَرْسَلْنَاكَ فِي أُمَّةٍ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهَا أُمَمٌ لِيَتْلُوَ عَلَيْهِمُ الَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ وَهُمْ يَكْفُرُونَ بِالرَّحْمَنِ قُلْ هُوَ رَبِّي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ مَتَابِ) (Qur'an 13:30). These two passages suggest that Muhammad's polytheistic opponents were not aware of a god by the name of *al-Raḥmān*. In Qur'an 25:60, *قَالُوا وَمَا الرَّحْمَنُ* just means "they said, 'and what is *al-Raḥmān*'"; and Qur'an 13:30 implies that the polytheistic opponents of Muhammad lacked faith in *al-Raḥmān* (i.e. *Allāh*). From this, Jacques Jomier concludes that the divine name *al-Raḥmān* was unknown to the Meccans.<sup>110</sup>

In Yemen, the worship of a god called *al-Raḥmān/Raḥmānān* seems to be well-attested, which has led to the hypothesis of a primordial monotheistic Raḥmānism in the 5th and early 6th centuries which "bore neither obviously Jewish nor obviously Christian traits and which not only members of the Jewish and Christian religious communities but also the adherents of a local Arab monotheism were thus able to adopt"<sup>111</sup>. What was the Raḥmānism in pre-Islamic south Arabia?

<sup>106</sup> Morey, Robert A. *Is "Allah" Just Another Name For God?*. Austin, Tex.: Research and Education, 1992. p 7.

<sup>107</sup> Neuwirth, Angelika; Nicolai Sinai & Michael Marx. *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*. Brill, 2010. p 310.

<sup>108</sup> See Jomier, Jacques. "Le nom divin 'al-Raḥmān' dans le Coran", in *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, II, Damascus, 1957. pp. 361-381.

<sup>109</sup> Neuwirth, Angelika; Nicolai Sinai & Michael Marx. *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*. Brill, 2010. p 310.

<sup>110</sup> See Jomier, Jacques. "Le nom divin 'al-Raḥmān' dans le Coran", in *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, II, Damascus, 1957. pp. 361-381. Translated as "The divine name 'al-Raḥmān' in the Qur'an", in *The Qur'an: Style and Contents*, edited by Andrew Rippin. Aldershot, 2001. pp. 197-212.

<sup>111</sup> Neuwirth, Angelika; Nicolai Sinai & Michael Marx. *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*. Brill, 2010. p 311; Müller, W. W. "Religion und Kult im antiken Südarabien", in: M. Krebernik & J. van Oorschot (Hgg.), *Polytheismus und Monotheismus in den Religionen des Vorderen Orients* (AOAT 298), Münster, 2002. pp. 175-194. p 190.

Iwona Gajda has formulated two alternative hypotheses: either an old south Arabian Jewish monotheistic sect in the strict sense, or a native monotheistic religion inspired by Judaism, which Gajda inclines toward the latter hypothesis.<sup>112</sup> But Andrew Rippin keeps a skeptical attitude towards the existence of a non-Jewish and non-Christian form of south Arabian primordial monotheism.<sup>113</sup>

In fact, the pre-Islamic south Arabian worship of *al-Rāḥmān/Rāḥmānān* had many connections. As Philip Hitti points out, the Nabateans of north Arabia may have brought both terms *al-Rāḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm* from Syria to South Arabia, where these pagan gods found a position in the pantheon of pre-Islamic South Arabian religion.<sup>114</sup> The South Arabian epithet *Raḥmān* may derive from a traditional pagan usage in Syria, since the worship of the "Merciful" (*Rāḥmānān*) was widespread during the first centuries CE in non-Jewish and non-Christian Syrian pagan contexts under Mesopotamian cultural influence.<sup>115</sup> Alfred Beeston offers an alternative view by picturing a South Arabian context, and supposing that the transformation of the term *Rāḥmānān* from pagan usage to monotheistic usage took place in the general South Arabian context during the monotheistic period (from the end of 4th century CE).<sup>116</sup> However, the use of the term *Rāḥmānān* is regarded by some scholars as being of Jewish origin, and this title was used by both Jews and Christians at the same time, both in South Arabia and elsewhere.<sup>117</sup> *Raḥmānān* was used to designate the God in Jewish texts and the Father God in Christian texts, of South Arabian inscriptions. In a word, the term *Rāḥmānān* was used by South Arabian people in three different spheres: Arabian polytheism, Judaism and Christianity. Muhammad may have borrowed this title from any of these three sources, which all were known in his milieu. It is most likely that Muhammad adopted it directly from Jews and Christians, and that the introduction of the term *al-Rāḥmān* into the Qur'an took place from either of these communities;<sup>118</sup> meanwhile, Arabian polytheists of Yemen may have worshiped a "High God" by the name of *Rāḥmānān* in Sabaeen, together with other deities.<sup>119</sup> However, we cannot know for sure from which religion Muhammad adopted the title *al-Rāḥmān* as a name of the One God.

To explore the genesis of *al-Raḥmān* in the Qur'an, we must also carefully examine how the title *Rāḥmānān* was used in South Arabian inscriptions. The epigraphical south Arabian materials can

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<sup>112</sup> See Gajda, Iwona. *Ḥimyar gagné par le monotheisme (IV<sup>e</sup>-VI<sup>e</sup> siècle de l'ère chrétienne). Ambitions et ruine d'un royaume de l'Arabie méridionale antique*. 2 vols. PhD dissertation. Université de Provence Aix-Marseille 1, 1997. Vol. 1, pp. 323-330.

<sup>113</sup> See Rippin, A. "RḤMNN and the Ḥanīfs". *Islamic studies presented to Charles J. Adams* (ed. W.B. Hallaq and D.P. Little). Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991. pp. 153-168.

<sup>114</sup> Hitti, Philip K. *History of the Arabs : From the Earliest Times to the Present*. Basingstoke, 2002. p 105.

<sup>115</sup> Healey, J. F. "The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus", *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 136. Leiden 2001. p 96.

<sup>116</sup> Beeston, A. F. L. "Himyarite Monotheism", in A. T. al-Ansary et al. (eds.), *Studies in the History of Arabia*, vol. 2. Riyadh: King Saud University Press, 1984. pp. 149-154. p 151.

<sup>117</sup> Sima, A. "Religion", in: St. J. Simpson (ed.), *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen*. London, 2002. p 165; Jeffery, Arthur. *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*. Baroda, 1938. pp. 140-141.

<sup>118</sup> Hallaq, Wael B. & Donald P. Little (eds.). *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991. p 166; Kościelniak, Krzysztof. "Quelques remarques sur la littérature pré-islamique arabe chrétienne", *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 57, 2004. pp. 70-72, 75-76.

<sup>119</sup> Kościelniak, Krzysztof. "Jewish and Christian religious influences on pre-Islamic Arabia on the example of the term RḤMNN ('the Merciful')". *Orientalia Christiana Cracoviensia* 3, 2011. pp. 67-74. p 73.

provide a context that may help us to understand the spiritual background to Muhammad's new monotheism, the history of monotheisms in pre-Islamic Arabia, and the polemics which were conducted by Muhammad and early Muslims against the old monotheisms and polytheism. Some of those *Rāḥmānān* inscriptions are obviously Jewish; others are thought to be Christian.<sup>120</sup> Although dating the different eras in South Arabian history is a disputed issue among scholars, a monotheistic period is evidenced in the inscriptions, beginning from around the end of the 4th century CE (late Sabaean Period), when what are identified as clearly Jewish inscriptions first appear, later to be followed by Christian ones. Many of these Jewish and Christian inscriptions employ the term *Rāḥmānān* as the name of their One God. The most famous Christian Sabaean inscriptions that mention the epithet *Rāḥmānān* are two texts from Abraha's time: Abraha's inscription on the Maʿrib Dam (CIS 541)<sup>121</sup>, and Abraha's Murayghan inscription (Ry 506)<sup>122</sup>, which are from the period of Ethiopian rule (c. 525–575 CE), when Christianity played a crucial role in South Arabia.

The title *Rāḥmānān* was also employed in Arabian polytheism, which was highly developed in South Arabia, where various kingdoms succeeded one another. South Arabian polytheism contains many different deities because of a great number of tribal gods. According to Jacques Ryckmans, in the late 4th century the pagan formulas were replaced by monotheistic ones using the terms "Lord of Heaven"/"Lord of Heaven and Earth" and the "Merciful" (*Raḥmānān*); thus, by using the same terminology, Judaism and Christianity supplanted Arabian polytheism.<sup>123</sup> This process of monotheizing the pagan worship of the "Merciful" (*Raḥmānān*) became an important aspect of the latest phase of pre-Islamic South Arabian religion - a worship of the "High God", in which Judaism and Christianity undoubtedly played important roles during late Sabaean time.<sup>124</sup>

Also, Jacques Jomier points out that *al-Raḥmān* was venerated as a monotheistic deity by the followers of the "false prophet" Musaylimah, in al-Yamāma of central Arabia, which is testified by two passages of al-Tabari's history which depict Musaylimah as having claimed to receive his revelations from *al-Raḥmān*.<sup>125</sup> But, this account is yet to be confirmed as a historical fact in the absence of any further evidence; moreover, Musaylimah appears to have begun his religious and political activities only around 630 CE.<sup>126</sup>

To sum up, the originally pagan term of *Raḥmānān* may have originated in Syria, but after it was

<sup>120</sup> See Robin, C. J. "Judaïsme et Christianisme en Arabie du Sud d'après les sources épigraphiques et archéologiques", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, X, 1980. pp. 85-96.

<sup>121</sup> *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum ab Academia Inscriptionum et Litterarum Humaniorum Conditum atque Digestum*, Pars Quarta: *Inscriptiones Himyariticas et Sabæas continens*, Tomus 2, no. 541, Paris, 1911. p 278.

<sup>122</sup> Beeston, A. F. L. "Two Bi'r Hima Inscriptions Re-Examined", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48, 1985. p 45. See translation of this inscription: Beeston, A. F. L. "Notes On The Mureighan Inscription", *Bulletin of The School of Oriental and African Studies* 16, 1954. pp. 391-392.

<sup>123</sup> Ryckmans, J. *The Old South Arabian Religion*, in W. Daum (ed.), *Yemen: 3000 Years of Art and Civilisation in Arabia*. Innsbruck 1988. p. 110.

<sup>124</sup> Kościelniak, Krzysztof. "Jewish and Christian religious influences on pre-Islamic Arabia on the example of the term RĤMNN ('the Merciful')". *Orientalia Christiana Cracoviensia* 3, 2011. pp. 67-74. p 68.

<sup>125</sup> Jomier, Jacques. "Le nom divin 'ar-Raḥmān' dans le Coran", in *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, Damascus, 1957. pp. 361-381. p 379f, n. 3; the passages are from al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh*.

<sup>126</sup> See Watt, W. Montgomery. "Musaylima", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2015.

introduced into South Arabia, local Judaism and Christianity monotheized the pagan usage of the term *Raḥmānān* by turning it into the name of the monotheistic God. The monotheizing process of the pagan name in return influenced South Arabian polytheism, so as to develop the worship of *Raḥmānān* as a "High God", which may be identical to the so-called Raḥmānism in pre-Islamic South Arabia. Muhammad thus borrowed this title from Judaism and Christianity of south Arabia, and he used this title to counter Arabian polytheists by modifying their worship of "High God" to a monotheistic belief in the One God. Compared to South Arabia, Northwest Arabia had more colorful environment of monotheistic traditions, which exerted a profound influence on early Islam.

## 6. Abraham's Religion and the *Hanīfiya*

### 6 - 1 Abrahamism in the pre-Islamic Negev

As is well-known, the Arab population of Sham (region)<sup>127</sup> and its desert interface areas mostly adhered to either Arabian polytheism or Christianity, except for the Jewish presence. But there may also have existed a form of non-denominational monotheism in Sham and its interfaced areas with the Arabian peninsula, which mainly emphasized Abraham as spiritual founder and exemplary model, throughout the first centuries CE, according to Shlomo Pines' discussion. Tertullianus (ca. 155-240 CE) from Carthage is the earliest Christian author who mentioned and even debated with a monotheistic group that only followed the way of Abraham, which may have existed in the 2nd century CE as Pines supposes.<sup>128</sup> The Christian author who showed the greatest knowledge of this Abraham's monotheism is Sozomenus (ca. 400-450 CE) from Gaza, and his knowledge may have come from his experience of living close to those people whose religious situation he recorded. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Sozomenus described a form of "Ishmaelite monotheism" which he considered to be identical with the pre-Mosaic monotheism of the Jews. Similarly to what Muslim tradition affirms, Sozomenus stated that the pagan religion of Ishmaelites resulted from the corruption of that "Ishmaelite monotheism", caused by the long influence of their polytheistic neighbors.<sup>129</sup> An important piece of information in Sozomenus is that the Arabian pagans had recently learned from the Jews about their descent from Abraham and adopted some kind of Jewish life-style; thus some Arabian pagans had reverted to pre-Mosaic beliefs.

From the 5th century CE on, some kind of Abrahamic monotheism may have appeared in the quite multi-religious Negev, which is at least evidenced by the extraordinary frequent occurrence of "Abraham" (*Abraamos, Abraamios* etc.) as a baptismal name in 6th-century Negev Greek texts, both inscriptions and papyri.<sup>130</sup> From this, it might be inferred that some Negev Christians were recent converts from paganism, which is reflected by the preferential use of the name of Abraham who was an exemplary model of giving up his ancestor's polytheism and worshipping the One God. Another possibility is that some who were already "Abrahamists" in the Negev converted to Christianity, which may also be why they so preferentially gave their children the name "Abraham".<sup>131</sup> According to current archaeological and epigraphic evidence, the belief called "Abrahamism" appears to have been very prevalent specifically in the Negev, attracting many Negev Arabs, though not there alone.

The Negev Arab Abrahamists seem to have been drawn to a special element in this monotheism that was specifically related to their own Arabian ethnic identity: Arabs are the descendents of

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<sup>127</sup> Sham (region): the region bordering the eastern Mediterranean Sea, usually known as the Levant or the region of Syria: today's Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel and Jordan.

<sup>128</sup> Pines, Shlomo. "Notes on Islam and on Arabic Christianity and Judaeo-Christianity", *JSAI* 4, 1984. pp. 135-152. p 143.

<sup>129</sup> Pines, Shlomo. "Jāhiliyyah and 'Ilm", *JSAI* 13, 1990. pp. 175-194. p189; Cook, Michael. *Muhammad*. Oxford University Press, 1983. p 81. See Sozomenus. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Patrologia Cursus Completus (Series Graeca) (J.-P Migne ed.) 67, Cols. 1408-1413. Greek text.

<sup>130</sup> Negev, Avraham. *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev*. Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1981. p 76.

<sup>131</sup> Nevo, Yehuda D. & Judith Koren. "The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhili Meccan Sanctuary". *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 1990. pp. 23-44. particularly p 42.

Abraham and his son Ishmael as their monotheistic progenitors. The newly institutionalized Arabian monotheism (Islam) that emerged in the 7th century was possibly influenced by Abrahamists whose creeds may have been known by some Hijazi Arabian merchants and then were borrowed by Muhammad, who had many opportunities to get to know different types of beliefs, including Abrahamism. Islam seems to be built upon Abrahamism, which successfully embodied a special Arab identity and a clear expression of Arabian allegiance. The connection between the Ka'ba and Abraham's religion in Islam is a prominently successful example. Although polytheism and idolatry were vigorously rejected by Muhammad, the originally pagan shrine of the Ka'ba was eventually incorporated into Muhammad's new monotheism, by imposing on it the stories of Abraham and Ishmael and the rituals they had created there. Though Islam holds that faith is more important than descent, the pedigree link between Abraham and the Arabs was worked out in the Qur'an and in Muslim tradition: This allowed Abrahamists to be easily absorbed into Islam, which gradually came to replace all other beliefs in the Negev, following the Arab Muslim conquest of the Middle East.

All the evidence accumulated so far indicates that Abrahamism, which was a basic form of monotheism and emphasized Abraham, co-existed in the Negev with Arabian paganism and Christianity for some centuries before the coming of Islam.<sup>132</sup> Abrahamism even seems to have been a specifically Negev sect, as far as the current archeological and epigraphical evidence shows. But there is still lack of other literary evidence for Abrahamism in the Negev. The Arabic monotheistic inscriptions discovered in the Negev suggest that the early development of Islam was based on a simple Abrahamism that was introduced from northwest Arabia, particularly the Negev, as well as some Judeo-Christian ideas.

## **6 - 2 Abraham's Religion and the Islamic Use of *Ḥanīf***

According to the Biblical tradition, Ishmael - the son of Abraham and Hagar, was the ancestor of certain nomadic tribes who dwelt in the deserts between Palestine and Egypt and north Arabia.<sup>133</sup> Initially the tradition did not identify those nomadic tribes specifically with the Arabs. But in later Judeo-Christian and Muslim traditions, the terms "Arabs" and "Ishmaelites" become generally associated with each other and are even regarded as interchangeable, referring to the same ethnic group. Over the generations, the association of the Arabs with Abraham's lineage gained far-reaching historical and cultural consequences.

Islam appears to find in Abrahamism many features which had already been attractive to Arabs for providing them with historical roots, and an ethnic link and unity associated with the monotheistic faith; therefore, Abrahamism was adopted by Muhammad as one of the central features of what became Islam.<sup>134</sup> The Qur'an roots Arab origins in Hijaz by connecting Abraham and Ishmael with the Meccan sanctuary, thus transferring Abrahamism to the region of Hijaz. On the other

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<sup>132</sup> Nevo, Yehuda D. & Judith Koren. "The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhilī Meccan Sanctuary". *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 1990. pp. 23-44. particularly p 42.

<sup>133</sup> See Eph'al, I. "'Ishmael' and 'Arab(s)': A Transformation of Ethnological Terms", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1976. pp. 225-235.

<sup>134</sup> Nevo, Yehuda D. & Judith Koren. "The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhilī Meccan Sanctuary". *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 1990. pp. 23-44. p 44.

hand, the Qur'an centered its new native Arabian monotheism (i.e. Islam) on the Meccan sanctuary, coloring Mecca with Abrahamic roots in addition to its polytheistic appearance. The accounts of the *Jāhili* pagan sanctuary at Mecca in Muslim tradition also provide the new Islamic sanctuary around the Ka'ba with Arab ethnic roots. In this way, the Islamic adoption of the Meccan pagan sanctuary received a good explanation by the attribution of an Abrahamic origin to it. Thereafter, the *kerygma* of the Meccan shrine had to be Abrahamic in Muhammad's new monotheism, while Arabian polytheism was relegated to being the source of some rites. The Islamic Ka'ba cult was institutionalized after Muhammad's migration to Yathrib.

Muhammad himself must have noticed the Abrahamism existing among the Arabian population in the northern peripheries of Arabia; but the Qur'an describes what he saw as a phenomenon of Mecca associated with the *mushrikūn*. Again, we need to make a historical critical reading of the materials presented in the Qur'an and Muslim tradition about the religious conditions of Mecca during Muhammad's time, which should not be understood simply as a reflection of the real historical context. The materials in Muslim tradition about Muhammad's context contain two fundamental Islamic beliefs: 1. Islam itself is identical with Abraham's religion (*milla Ibrāhīm*); 2. The Qur'an is revealed within the contexts of Mecca and Medina.<sup>135</sup> The first point is connected by the Qur'an and later Muslim tradition with narratives about Abraham's religion and its decline in Mecca and the Arabian peninsula. The second point leads to the explanation that the term *mushrikūn* in the Qur'an refers to the Arabian pagan contemporaries of Muhammad, particularly the Meccans. The Abrahamic aspects of the Ka'ba are much emphasized in the Qur'an and in Muslim tradition. The situation of early Islam is often presented as if this new monotheism was built upon the native (Abrahamic) monotheistic elements that had already existed in the Arabian pagan environment.

The Islamic stories about Abraham and Ishmael in Mecca may have been created by Muhammad, in order to connect these figures to the Meccan sanctuary, as well as to interpret the monotheistic trend in Arabian polytheism. The accounts of the Arabian prophets Hūd and Ṣāliḥ, sent to the peoples of 'Ād and Thamūd are instances of the new Islamic application of the Judeo-Christian conception of prophethood. Contemporary with Muhammad, a "false" prophet called Musaylimah set up in Najd, which also illustrates how the Judeo-Christian concept of prophethood had taken root in Arabia. Such things were in the air before the advent of the Qur'an, and formed part of Muhammad's preparation for being a universal prophet as well of his missionary environment.

An ideal of true monotheism - "Abraham's religion" - was proposed by Muhammad and functioned as a powerful weapon in the battle against both Meccan polytheists and old "corrupted" monotheists who had gone astray from the original "Abraham's religion". The Qur'an specially emphasizes Abraham's destruction of idols, which was regarded as a model example by Muhammad in his fight against Meccan polytheists and their idolatry. The faith of Abraham was also used by Muhammad in his polemics against Jews, just like Pauline Christian polemics against the Jewish exclusiveness, by conveying a strong universalist motif.

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<sup>135</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. Cambridge University Press, 2015. p 20.

In the Qur'an, "Abraham's religion" commonly appears in the term *milla Ibrāhīm*, but in the post-Qur'anic Muslim tradition this term is often glossed as *dīn Ibrāhīm*, which is equivalent to the former one but not found in the Qur'an. In the Qur'an the word *milla* is not only used on most occasions associated with Abraham, but also with reference to the *mushrikūn* who are presented as polytheists and idolaters in post-Qur'anic tradition, as well as once with reference to Jews and Christians. According to Arthur Jeffery, the word *milla* was most probably adapted into Arabic from Syriac *mellā*, which can also be used to refer to the Greek *Logos*.<sup>136</sup> The term *milla Ibrāhīm* may at the beginning have indicated something more specific, instead of a simple reference to his religion, most possibility to God's covenant with Abraham, or to God's commands upon him. It is hard to distinguish the meanings of *milla* and *dīn*, because both of them can refer to either the "true religion" or "false religion" in an Islamic sense, and they even appear in the same verse (Qur'an 4:125) with slightly different senses. However, in the Qur'an, the term *milla Ibrāhīm* seems to be such a well-established formula that the Qur'an does not use the term *dīn Ibrāhīm*. Thus we may infer that the Qur'an just borrowed *milla Ibrāhīm* as a fixed term from other religious traditions. Also, the abstract term *milla Ibrāhīm* was never elaborated in the Qur'an. Besides, it should be noted that the term *ḥanīf* often accompanies *milla Ibrāhīm*, and also applies to Abraham and his religion.

In Islam, the term *ḥanīf* is not only used for Abraham and the followers of "Abraham's religion", but also refers to Muhammad and Muslims. The term *ḥanīf* (pl. *ḥunafāʾ*) may originally have referred to Arab converts to Christianity, but afterwards it became used for the "followers of Abraham's religion" in Islam. Some scholars suggest that the term *ḥanīf* was either formed from an Aramaic root or derived from a Hebrew or an Ethiopic term. Others think the term *ḥanīf* originated from Syriac *ḥanpē*, probably coming first in its plural form *ḥunafāʾ*, primarily meaning "heathen" or "pagan". However, in Syro-Aramaic contexts, the original meaning of "heathen" or "pagan" may have been overshadowed by its secondary connotations, such as "of Hellenistic culture", so that this term could also be applied to philosophically-minded individuals who were essentially monotheistic.<sup>137</sup> Thus, we can deduce that the Qur'anic usage of the term *ḥanīf/ḥunafāʾ* (representing Syriac *ḥanpē*) ignored its primary meaning, but developed its secondary connotations, which can be treated as a semantic process that also happens elsewhere. Another possibility is that the Qur'anic usage of the term *ḥanīf* may have been influenced by the Pauline Christian view of Abraham as a "gentile". Abraham's faith in the One God is a central theme shared by Pauline Christianity and Islam, which both stress the spiritual inherence of Abraham's religion instead of blood lineage, as a key polemical point against Jews and Judeo-Christians. So, Muhammad's missionary goal was similar to Paul's, both trying to find elements of universalism in the figure of Abraham, for sake of attracting different kinds of converts. Abraham's universal covenant of faith was thus renewed by Islam through a re-interpretation in which Islam replaced the broken revelations of the "People of the Book". Therefore, the term *ḥanīf* in Islam also has a universal significance. In contrast to *ḥanīf*, the Qur'anic term *mushrikūn* mainly refers to the Meccan polytheists, which in the Qur'anic context means that they associate other beings with the God, testifying to the decline of "Abraham's religion" in Arabia and the Meccan pagans' abuse of

<sup>136</sup> Buhl, F. & C.E. Bosworth. "Milla", *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2nd ed.), Vol.7. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993. p. 61.

<sup>137</sup> Lewis, B. & V. L. Ménage, Ch. Pellat & J. Schacht (eds.). *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: H-Iram* (Vol. 3, New Edition). Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986. p 166.

the Ka'ba that had originally been constructed by Abraham and Ishmael.

### 6 - 3 The *Hanīfī* Individuals and the Religion of *Hanīfīya*

The common Islamic conceptions of the *hanīf* and the *Hanīfīya* are both solely derived from the Qur'an. The Qur'an evidently declares that Abraham founded the original monotheism - the *Hanīfīya*, from which Judaism and Christianity deviated.<sup>138</sup> Muhammad's mission was presented as recovery of Abraham's religion or a continuation of the *Hanīfīya*, in Islam. Muslim tradition offers several examples of the adherents of this Abrahamic creed during the *Jāhili* period, such as Salmān the Persian and Zayd b. ʿAmr, who both represent the prototypical *hanīf*. Here, the "pre-Islamic Arabian monotheism"/*Hanīfīya* is regarded as a definite creed which may even be compared to Christianity. The tradition or movement of the *Hanīfīya* is often asserted by Muslim tradition to have ever existed. Moreover, some Western scholars also claim that during Muhammad's early life there may have been a *hanīfī* tradition or movement in Hijaz or even throughout Arabia, whose basis was just like the concept of "Abraham's religion" that is mentioned by the Qur'an and early Islamic interpretations. However, there is so far no historical evidence to attest the existence of a native Abrahamist movement in the pre-Islamic Hijaz.

Due to the dearth of historical sources for the real situation of pre-Islamic Arabia, pre-Islamic Arabian poetry may shed new light on the *Jāhili* period. Since interpreting the early Arabic poetical texts still present many difficulties, their use in a lexicographical approach had proven unsuccessful. Youakim Moubarac's research on relevant poetic passages throws little light on what the term *Hanīfīya* specifically referred to, and gives little help regarding the primary historical question of whether the *Hanīfīya* really existed as a movement.<sup>139</sup> The statements in Muslim tradition attempt to provide some fabricated backgrounds for certain Qur'anic texts, probably to counter the hostile assertion that the Qur'an was copied from Judeo-Christian ideas. However, it should be noted that the Qur'an itself neither explicitly mentions such a *hanīfī* movement or community, nor makes a clear reference to the traditional Islamic account that Abraham introduced monotheism to Arabia but that it later degenerated to paganism/idolatry among Abraham's descendants there. The account of Abraham's monotheism/*Hanīfīya* was not derived from the Qur'an, but was applied to the pre-Islamic Meccan setting as a traditional topos accounting for the origins of Arabian polytheism/idolatry, and later served the polemics against Jews and Christians. Nevertheless, we should not deny that despite the monotheistic trend in Arabian polytheism, there may have been some pre-Islamic Arabs who were searching for a native indeterminate monotheism without dependence on a foreign power. Judaism was supported by the Sassanid empire, while Christianity was connected with the Byzantine and Abyssinian empires. So, Abrahamism was embraced by some Arabs of Negev, but it did not much penetrate inner Arabia. Finally, it was Islam which gave all Arabs the hope of adhering to a native monotheism without any foreign political implication.

The whole conception of the term *Hanīfīya* is definitely apologetical, resulting from the attempt of Muslim scholars to find a pre-Islamic historical basis for Islam. Therefore, Muslims sought to find

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<sup>138</sup> For example, Qur'an 2:60.

<sup>139</sup> See Moubarac, Youakim & J. Vrin (eds.). *Abraham dans le Coran*. Paris, 1958. pp. 153-159.

traces of the actual *ḥanīf* individuals. Muslim tradition contains specific narratives referring, though not always consistently, to Arab individuals named as *ḥunafāʾ* who lived before or during Muhammad's lifetime and rejected the dominant polytheism, but worshipped the One God and adhered to a non-denominational kind of monotheism which may be equated with "Abraham's religion". Muslim tradition describes their spiritual development and quotes their poems; the *Sīra*, for instance, provides several stories of *ḥunafāʾ*. First, there is a figure called "Salmān the Persian" who went to Jesus to ask about the *Ḥanīfiyya* (the religion of Abraham). The man whom Salmān the Persian sought for (i.e. Jesus) also predicted the advent of Muhammad, saying, "the time has come near when a prophet will be sent with this religion from the people of the *Ḥaram*"<sup>140</sup>. Then, the *Sīra* describes four other well-known *ḥunafāʾ* who broke with polytheism because they thought that their people had corrupted the religion of their ancestor Abraham: Warāqa ibn Nawfal, ʿUbayd-Allāh ibn Jaḥsh, ʿUthmān ibn al-Huwayrith, and Zayd ibn ʿAmr. Other sources mention as *ḥunafāʾ* Umayya ibn Abī al-Ṣalt, Quss ibn Sāʿida, Abū Qays Ṣirma, Khālīd b. Sinān ibn Ghayth, Abū ʿĀmir ʿAbd ʿAmr b. Ṣayfī, and Abū Qays b. al-Aslat.<sup>141</sup> According to later reports about the *ḥanīf* individuals, the *ḥanīf* beliefs of Abū ʿĀmir and Abū Qays b. al-Aslat expressed a close attachment to Mecca and the Quraysh, as well as devotion to the sanctity of the Kaʿba. Both were prominent men from the tribe Aws in Yathrib and strong enemies of Muhammad after his *hijra*.<sup>142</sup>

Seeking for Abraham's religion, three of the four *ḥunafāʾ* - Warāqa, ʿUbayd-Allāh and ʿUthmān eventually turned to Christianity. But Zayd was different from the other three, for he accepted neither Judaism nor Christianity; he just abandoned the pagan religion of his contemporaries and abstained from idols, dead animals, blood, and sacrifices offered to idols.<sup>143</sup> The *Sīra* says that Zayd worshipped Abraham's God only, and that he was harassed by the Qurayshites who did not allow him to enter Mecca. Zayd travelled throughout Mesopotamia and Syria, seeking out rabbis and Christian monks in his search for Abraham's religion. During his travels, Zayd visited a Christian monk in Balqā (in Jordan) by whom Muhammad was predicted as a coming prophet.<sup>144</sup> But Zayd was finally told to return to Arabia. It is obvious that Christianity plays a crucial role in the accounts of the *Sīra* about the *ḥunafāʾ*, with three of the four converting to Christianity. These *ḥanīf* stories may have functioned as apologetic narratives, serving polemical motives and stereotypically describing the Christian rejection of Islamic messages, since these *ḥunafāʾ* turned to the wrong monotheism although they imitated Abraham's break with polytheism. However, these *ḥunafāʾ* probably introduced the idea of Abraham's religion to the young Muhammad in Mecca.<sup>145</sup> Unfortunately, we do not know the details of Muhammad's contact with the so-called

<sup>140</sup> Ibn Hishām, Abd el-Malik (ed.). *Kitāb Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* nach Muhammed Ibn Ishāk. Aus d. Hs. zu Berlin, Leipzig, Gotha u. Leyden hrsg. von Ferdinand Wüstenfeld. 2 Bde. Göttingen 1858-1859. I, p 222 ff. (trans. in Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*, p 98 ff.)

<sup>141</sup> Trimmingham, J. Spencer. *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. Longman Publishing Group, 1979. pp. 263-264; Uri Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and Kaʿba. An Inquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic Background of *dīn Ibrāhīm*", In: *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*. 13, 1990, S. p 85ff.

<sup>142</sup> See Rubin, Uri. "Ḥanīfiyya and Kaʿba. An Inquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic Background of *dīn Ibrāhīm*", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13, 1990. pp. 86-99.

<sup>143</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad* (A Transl. of Ibn Ishaq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, with introduction and notes). Oxford University Press, 1970. p 99

<sup>144</sup> Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad*. p 103

<sup>145</sup> Rubin, Uri. "Ḥanīfiyya and Kaʿba. An Inquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic Background of *dīn Ibrāhīm*", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13, 1990. pp. 86-99. p 99.

*ḥunaḥā*<sup>146</sup>. It is thus difficult to know how much inspiration Muhammad got from them for his new religion.

There are other motifs in the stories about Muhammad's arguments with certain *ḥanīf* individuals, and in those associating other *ḥunaḥā* with Christianity, which may have been literarily constructed by Muslim tradition, not only to polemicize against Christians but also in order to elaborate or embellish the stories of Muhammad's career. However, Uri Rubin has objected to interpreting the *ḥanīf* tradition as functioning to sketch out the Islamic concept of *Jāhiliyya*.<sup>146</sup> This means that there may after all be some historical truth in the accounts of the *ḥunaḥā*, and that they need not to be entirely invented by later Muslims. After all, some *ḥanīf* individuals are explicitly portrayed by Muslim tradition as strong opponents of Muhammad. A historical memory may be contained in these narratives. Besides, some scholars consider them certain evidence for the existence of the *Ḥanīfiyya* and have attempted historical reconstructions of the *Ḥanīfiyya* based on them. For instance, Jacques Waardenburg concludes: "(Muhammad) now moved toward identifying his movement completely with the religion of Ibrāhīm, *milla Ibrāhīm*, the *Ḥanīfiyya*... Significantly, the movement took the name of the *Ḥanīfiyya* now, before becoming known as 'Islam' .... The old name of the movement, the *Ḥanīfiyya*, suggests, besides the originally Meccan religious purification movement against polytheism, a kind of 'reform movement', with regards to *Ahl al-Kitāb*"<sup>147</sup>. It is interesting that Waardenburg suggests that Muhammad took the name *Ḥanīfiyya* for his new monotheism at the beginning, although the existence of the *Ḥanīfiyya* as the name of a organized religious group cannot be proven in history. The term *Ḥanīfiyya* is just an abstract noun that was not applied to any religious movement or community before it emerged with a specific meaning in later Muslim tradition. Waardenburg's statement inclines to adopting the perspective of Islamic apologetics, in which Islam is regarded as a continuation of the *Ḥanīfiyya* - a recovery of "Abraham's religion", targeting as *mushrikūn* Jews and Christians who were thought to be either corrupted or misled. Furthermore, there may not have been an autochthonous Meccan religious purification movement against polytheism, since the belief system of Meccan polytheism seems to have been generally accepted before the Muslim conquest. In conclusion, I think the idea of a *ḥanīf* community was constructed literarily by later Muslim tradition on the basis of the Qur'anic term *ḥanīf*, and such a community did not exist in real history.

The monotheistic trend or movement reported by Sozomenus,<sup>148</sup> as part of an Abrahamic mythology adopted by some Arabs, cannot be identified with a "historical" *Ḥanīfiyya*. Besides, a clear echo of the Biblical understanding of the place of Arabs that is reflected in Sozomenus' accounts can also be found in later Muslim writings, such as *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām* of Hishām ibn al-Kalbī (d. 819 CE), a fact that does not remove our doubts concerning their historicity. The whole Abrahamic mythology of Islam, which portrays him as both *ḥanīf* and Muslim, was taken literally by later Muslim generations, resulting from the Islamic historicization of materials that

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<sup>146</sup> See Rubin, Uri. "Ḥanīfiyya and Ka'ba. An Inquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic Background of *dīn Ibrāhīm*", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13, 1990. pp. 86-99.

<sup>147</sup> Waardenburg, Jacques. "Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam According to its Relations with Other Religions", in Rudolph Peters (ed.), *Proceedings of the Ninth Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants*. Leiden, 1981. pp. 311 & 313.

<sup>148</sup> Cook, Michael. *Muhammad*. Oxford, 1983. pp. 81 & 92; Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Gorgias Press, 1987. pp. 190-191, n. 104.

just expressed this mythology in a spiritual way,<sup>149</sup> in the same way that the term *ḥanīf* was transformed from narratives of merely spiritual qualities to a historical "fact". The *Sīra* and other Muslim writings performed a significant role in this transformation, by developing simple myths that were proposed by the Qur'an into detailed historical narratives. I do not think the narratives of *Ḥanīfiya* that were transmitted in later Muslim tradition can be relied on as independent historical witnesses, because they are colored too much by later Islamic ideas.

Even if there did exist a *ḥanīfī* community in Hijaz, it might still have formed a great threat to Muhammad's mission, even though they shared many common elements. Since Muhammad himself bore a political mission of unifying Arabs under the banner of his new native monotheism, what he could do was to either absorb other monotheists or conquer them. Admittedly, Muhammad may have made reference to some Abrahamist creeds that appeared among the people of Negev and Sham. However, the fact that Muhammad was capable of regarding himself and his followers as direct successors of Abraham the *ḥanīf*, suggests again that there may not have been an organized *Ḥanīfiya* as a religious body in Hijaz in the early 6th century CE.

After the Arab Muslim conquest of Syria, Islam absorbed many local cultures and borrowed much more from old monotheistic beliefs there. The Islamic accounts of the *Ḥanīfiya* religion and the *ḥanīfī* individuals originated from the creative activities of later Muslim authors in their development of mythic narratives. Any assertion that someone of pre-Islamic time is a *ḥanīf* in the Islamic sense, is probably the work of later Muslim apologetics, or a result of Islamic influence.<sup>150</sup>

#### **6 - 4 The Monotheistic Raḥmānism and the Ḥanīfiya**

A substantial proportion of the south Arabian monotheistic inscriptions of pre-Islamic time, is neither Jewish nor Christian in terms of their explicit terminology, but they still invoke the One God, sometimes with the term *Raḥmānān*.<sup>151</sup> These indeterminate monotheistic inscriptions contain phrases like "*Raḥmānān*, Lord of Heaven" and "*Raḥmānān*, Lord of Heaven and Earth"<sup>152</sup>. Some scholars argue that these inscriptions are Jewish and give evidence of Jewish proselytizing activities in 5th-century Yemen.<sup>153</sup> However, these indeterminate monotheistic inscriptions may also be taken to represent some kind of native monotheistic movement of South Arabia that worshipped the One God under the name *Raḥmānān*/al-Raḥmān and which, furthermore, may be identified with the *ḥanīfī* movement mentioned by Muslim tradition. Although lacking clear evidence, Alfred Beeston opts for this hypothesis: "If the main body of Raḥmānists before the 6th century was monotheistic without being committed Jews or Christians, they can only have been what a Muslim would call *Ḥunafā*"<sup>154</sup>. Later, H.A.R. Gibb inferred from these inscriptions that

<sup>149</sup> See Rippin, Andrew. "The Function of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in Qur'ānic Exegesis", *BSOAS*, 51, 1988. pp. 1-20.

<sup>150</sup> Watt, W. Montgomery. "Ḥanīf". *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Vol. III, New Edition). Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986. pp. 165-166.

<sup>151</sup> Robin, C. J. "Judaisme et Christianisme en Arabie du Sud d'après les sources épigraphiques et archéologiques", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, X, 1980. pp. 92-93.

<sup>152</sup> See Ryckmans, G. "Heaven and Earth in the South Arabian Inscriptions", *JSS*, 3, 1958. pp. 225-236.

<sup>153</sup> Ullendorff, Edward. "Hebraic-Jewish Elements in Abyssinian (Monophysite) Christianity", *JSS*, 1, 1956. pp. 216-256. especially p 223.

<sup>154</sup> Beeston, A. F. L. "Himyarite Monotheism", in A. T. al-Ansary et al. (eds.), *Studies in the History of Arabia* (Vol. 2). Riyadh: King Saud University Press, 1984. pp. 149-154. p 151.

there must have been *ḥunafāʾ* in pre-Islamic Arabia.<sup>155</sup> In this case, the use of the name *Raḥmānān* for the One God may be seen as providing a connection between the *Ḥanīfiya* and those indeterminate monotheistic inscriptions, since the non-Jewish and non-Christian monotheism of South Arabia and Muhammad's *Ḥanīfiya* both employed *Raḥmānān/al-Raḥmān* as a name of the God.

The possible relation between the Qur'anic term *ḥanīf* and the epigraphical data provided by those South Arabian indeterminate monotheistic inscriptions, has been a significant problem for interpreting the origins of Islam. The use of these pre-Islamic South Arabian indeterminate monotheistic inscriptions as evidence for the existence of a native monotheistic movement, can be associated with the so-called *ḥanīfī* movement narrated by early Islamic sources? This assumed association rests on two propositions: 1. Those non-Jewish and non-Christian monotheistic south Arabian inscriptions witnesses a native monotheism in south Arabia; 2. They also offer a witness to a *ḥanīfī* movement in pre-Islamic time. However, both propositions are tenuously evidenced and they cannot be used to support one another mutually.

Thus, the archeological data of pre-Islamic South Arabia cannot give sufficient proof or independent evidence for the existence of a non-Jewish, non-Christian native monotheism in South Arabia or a *ḥanīfī* movement of the kind asserted by Muslim tradition. Alfred Beeston interprets the South Arabian inscriptions within the "pre-figured system of co-ordinates" given by the Islamic literary tradition.<sup>156</sup> In fact, the attribution of these inscriptions to the *ḥanīfī* movement is just an attempt to find a context for them. However, rejecting this context does not mean that a connection between pre-Islamic South Arabian archeological data and the Qur'an and Muslim tradition should not be explored. We should assess both the Islamic materials and the South Arabian archeological finds carefully even if these two weak historical interpretations cannot be combined to make a convincing historical "fact". To conclude, current evidence does not necessarily provide support for the existence of a South Arabian or West Arabian native monotheism of pre-Islamic times. Thus, the emergence of Islam was probably primarily based on the old and foreign monotheisms existing within Yathrib's monotheistic milieu.

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<sup>155</sup> See Gibb, H. A. R. "Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia", *Harvard Theological Review*, 55, 1962. pp. 269-280.

<sup>156</sup> Hallaq, Wael B. & Ponal P. Little (eds.). *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991. pp. 165-166.

## 7. The Relation between Old Monotheisms and Islam

### 7 - 1 The Condition of Yathrib and the Reason of Muhammad's Migration

Most scholars put their focus on Mecca where Muhammad spent most of his life, and Mecca's history is explored deeply, while Yathrib's history has not been researched enough. The division between old monotheists and polytheists in pre-Islamic Hijaz seems obvious, because there was little Jewish/Christian settlement in Mecca while Yathrib (later called "Medina") was once characterized by a significant Jewish/Christian presence or was even dominated by Jews. Mecca was a trade town and a centre of Arabian polytheistic pilgrimage, while Yathrib had a great number of Jews living as farmers and artisans. From the beginning, Muhammad's missionary work in Mecca went far from smoothly. In a very early period, Islam appeared to be a continuation of Judaism and Christianity. In Muhammad's argument with Meccan polytheists, he allied himself with Judaism and Christianity, concentrating on criticizing the idolatry of Meccans. Persecuted by Meccan polytheists, Muhammad and his early followers were forced to move to Yathrib where the old monotheists formed a majority and where Muhammad restarted his mission and gained considerable success. Hence, Yathrib/Medina's history should be paid equal attention by scholars, including its pre-Islamic situation, which had decisive effects on Yathrib's acceptance of Muhammad's new religion after his arrival.

Yathrib was a town in a fertile valley located in northern Hijaz of west Arabia. In pre-Islamic time, the whole desert oasis was referred to by the name "Yathrib" which was also the name for the town to its northwest. The later name "Medina" is often held to have originated from the Muslim usage after the *hijra*: Medina specifically refers to the Islamic town which was developed surrounding the "Prophet's Mosque" that was thought to be originally built by Muhammad himself. Yathrib had better agricultural conditions than Mecca, so during the early Islamic centuries some prominent individuals had acquired and exploited agricultural enterprises in the area.<sup>157</sup> The date palm appears to be the most prominent production of Yathrib/Medina in early Islamic sources. There seems to have been even intense competition between Yathrib's residents for the natural resources of the area in pre-Islamic times.

The area of Yathrib is thought to have been settled for a quite long period by the time of Muhammad's migration. Some Muslim scholars supposed that the town of Yathrib was very ancient: Ibn Zabāla (d. after 814 CE) even thought it to be inhabited by the Amalekites during the time of Moses,<sup>158</sup> which is a legend rather than a historical fact. Though probably based on very early sources, those references to Yathrib's settlement are the result of the editorial work of later Muslim tradition. The 7th-century geography attributed to the Armenian scholar Anania Shirakatsi (610–685 CE), which contains some information on Arabia and mentions a place "which I think the Arabs call Mecca", but does not refer to Yathrib.<sup>159</sup> Eventually, we have mainly to depend on

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<sup>157</sup> See Al-ʿAlī, Ṣ. A. "Milkiyyāt al-arādī fī al-Hijāz fī al-qarn al-awwal al-hijrī", *Majallat al-ʿArab* 3, 1969; Kister, M. J. "The Battle of the Ḥarra: Some Socioeconomic Aspects", in M. Rosen Ayalon (ed.), *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*. Jerusalem, 1977.

<sup>158</sup> Al-Samhūdī. *Wafāʾ al-wafā bi-akhbār dār al-muṣṭafā* (Q. al-Sāmarrāʾī ed.) (5 Vols.). London, 2001. Vol. 1, pp. 296-297.

<sup>159</sup> See Ananias of Shirak (attrib.). *The Geography of Ananias of Širak (Ašxarhacʿoycʿ): The Long and Short Recensions* (trans. by R. H. Hewsen). Wiesbaden, 1992. pp. 70-72.

later sources for more details about pre-Islamic Yathrib and its residents.<sup>160</sup> The later sources that discuss pre-Islamic Yathrib's history mostly agree that on the eve of the *hijra* in the early 7th century CE, two kinds of people - Jews and Arabs inhabited this town.<sup>161</sup>

In pre-Islamic times, the Jews dominated the town of Yathrib with sizable settlements and extensive property. Yathrib was one of the leading Jewish towns in north Hijaz, along with Tayma and Khaybar in northwest Arabia, which made Yathrib quite different from polytheistic Mecca nearby. By the first centuries CE, Yathrib's population consisted mostly of Jews, whose origins may have been Judeo-Palestinian, Judeo-Arabian, or from Arab converts to Judaism. How exactly Jews moved to Yathrib, and whether they were originally Jewish migrants from outside the Arabian peninsula, local Arab converts, or even a mixture of them, are questions that have been much debated by both pre-modern and modern scholars.<sup>162</sup> Arabs continuously migrated to Yathrib as well, but many of them were assimilated into its Jewish milieu, adopting Judaism and obtaining knowledge and skills from the Jews. The Arab inhabitants of Yathrib are said mainly to belong to two tribes, the Banū Aws and the Banū al-Khazraj, both consisting of numerous clans. Banū Aws and Banū al-Khazraj are usually held to have come from South Arabia by the mid-5th century CE, and it is said that they migrated due to the breaking of the Ma'rib dam that ruined their homelands.<sup>163</sup> These two tribes even claimed a common ancestor, so that some sources refer to them together as the Banū Qayla. When Banū Aws and Banū al-Khazraj moved to Yathrib, the Jews had clearly settled there already. Like their Arab neighbors, the Jews of Yathrib were also divided into different tribes and clans, of which Banū al-Naḍīr, Banū Qurayza and Banū Qaynuqā' are the best known ones due to their distinct roles in the biographies of Muhammad.<sup>164</sup> Whereas Yathrib's Jews and Muhammad came into conflict soon after the *hijra*, Yathrib's Arabian tribes - Banū Aws and Banū al-Khazraj became "helpers" (*Anṣār*) of Muhammad, something that was crucial for the rise of Islam.

In pre-Islamic Yathrib, some Arabs lived apart from the Jewish settlements, while others resided among the Jews. The Arabs were generally subjects of the Jewish tribes. Violent struggles frequently happened among Yathrib's different groups. In the late pre-Islamic time, the Banū Khazraj eventually got some independence from the Jews after a fierce battle, which is supposed to have happened as a consequence of the Jewish leader Faytun's policy of implementing *droit du seigneur* on his Arab subjects.<sup>165</sup> Then, the Jewish control of Yathrib gradually loosened following

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<sup>160</sup> For Yathrib on the eve of Islam, see for example Wellhausen, Julius. *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten*. Berlin, 1889. IV, pp. 1-64; Wensinck, A. J. *Muhammad and the Jews of Medina*. K. Schwarz, 1975. pp. 6-38. Michael Lecker's studies on this topic are also extremely important.

<sup>161</sup> Many studies refer to the non-Jewish inhabitants simply as "Arabs", but because there is one possibility that many (perhaps the majority) of the Jews in the area were local converts rather than the descendants of emigrants from Palestine or other places, some scholars seem not to appropriate to divide the population in this way.

<sup>162</sup> An important recent study of the Jews in the pre-Islamic northern Hijaz, based on the contemporary epigraphic evidence, is Hoyland, R. G. "The Jews of the Hijaz in the Qur'an and in their inscriptions", in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Quran: The Quran in Its Historical Context 2*. Routledge Press, 2011. pp. 91-116.

<sup>163</sup> See al-Samhūdī. *Wafā' al-wafā' bi-akhbār dār al-muṣṭafā* (Q. al-Sāmarrā'ī ed.) (5 Vols.). London, 2001. Vol. 1, pp. 309-326.

<sup>164</sup> See al-Samhūdī. *Wafā' al-wafā' bi-akhbār dār al-muṣṭafā*. Vol. 1, pp. 299-308.

<sup>165</sup> Skolnik, F. & M. Berenbaum (eds.). *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2nd edition). Vols. 1-22. Macmillan, 2006. Vol. 13, p 757. See Munt, Harry. "The Prophet's City before the Prophet", in Philip Wood (ed.), *History and Identity in the Late Antique Near East*. Oxford University Press, 2013. pp. 112-117.

the rise of the Arabs in the town and the growing disunity of the Jewish tribes. The lands of the (Jewish) Banū al-Naḍīr was once threatened by other Jewish tribes that aligned themselves with the Arabs. Thereafter, new alliances emerged in the 6th century CE: the Arab tribe Aws and its Jewish clients the Banū al-Naḍīr and the Banū Qurayṣa fought the Arab tribe al-Khazraj and its Jewish ally the Banū Qaynuqā'.<sup>166</sup> This complex inter-tribal conflict was terminated by the temporary victory of the Aws and it was then solved peacefully with al-Khazraj. Thus, during the entire 6th century, Yathrib was marked by internal struggles, which are recalled by pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, particularly that of the Jewish poet al-Samaw'al b. 'Ādiyā'. Prior to Muhammad's encounter with the six men from Yathrib in 620 CE, a great battle was again fought between the two Arab tribes Aws and Khazraj, known as the "Battle of Bu'āth", in which lots of leading figures on both sides died and left Yathrib in disorder.<sup>167</sup> Following that, the traditional rules for maintaining law and order in Yathrib no longer functioned, and neutral men with authority to mediate issues could not be found, so that Yathrib became instable.<sup>168</sup> Thus, Muhammad got the chance to play a mediating role in Yathrib between different groups.

However, no single group was able to dominate Yathrib at the time of the arrival of Muhammad. Sometimes Muslim authors present these Yathrib events to us in colorful way: by the time of Muhammad migration to Yathrib, the two Arab tribes Aws and al-Khazraj had together vanquished Yathrib's Jews and already controlled this town.<sup>169</sup> However, Michael Lecker has carefully analyzed the relevant accounts and points out that many Jewish clans actually maintained a strong position for a few years after Muhammad's migration to Yathrib.<sup>170</sup>

Yathrib had a multi-cultural environment, composed of a powerful Jewish community, a significant presence of Christianity as well as a certain portion of Arabian polytheists. External powers may have also exerted some control over Yathrib during the first six centuries CE. This external influence was not merely Greco-Roman, Syriac and Jewish cultural encroachments from the Byzantine empire, but also the political attempts of some Himyarite and Ethiopian leaders, such as, most prominently, Abraha's invasion of Hijaz in the mid-6th century CE, the success of which is debated by modern scholars.<sup>171</sup> The recently discovered inscription of Abraha does

<sup>166</sup> Skolnik, F. & M. Berenbaum (eds.). *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2nd edition). Vols. 1-22. Macmillan, 2006. Vol. 13, p 757.

<sup>167</sup> Holt, P. M.; Ann K. S. Lambton & Bernard Lewis. *The Cambridge History of Islam*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. p 39.

<sup>168</sup> Holt, P. M.; Ann K. S. Lambton & Bernard Lewis. *The Cambridge History of Islam*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. pp. 39-40.

<sup>169</sup> For one colorful account featuring the Jewish king al-Fiṭyawn, who insisted on being the first to sleep with all newly married non-Jewish women, see Munt, Harry. "The Prophet's City before the Prophet", in Philip Wood (ed.), *History and Identity in the Late Antique Near East*. Oxford University Press, 2013. pp. 112-117.

<sup>170</sup> See Lecker, M. *Muslims, Jews and Pagans: Studies on Early Islamic Medina*. Leiden, 1995; Lecker, M. "Were the Jewish tribes in Arabia clients of Arab tribes?", in M. Bernards & J. Nawas (eds.), *Patronate and Patronage in Early and Classical Islam*. Leiden, 2005. pp. 50-69.

<sup>171</sup> See Gajda, Iwona. *Le royaume de Himyar à l'époque monothéiste* (Mémoires de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres 40). Paris: De Boccard, 2009. pp. 51-58, 77-79 & 137-146; Robin, C. J. "L'Arabie à la veille de l'Islam", *Orient & Méditerranée* 3, 2009; Robin, C. J. "Arabia and Ethiopia", in Scott F. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*. Oxford University Press, 2012. pp. 272-273, 285-287; Rubin, Uri. "Abraha", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*. Edited by: Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas & Everett Rowson. Brill Online, 2016; Bowersock, G. W. *Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam*. Oxford University Press, 2013. pp. 115-117.

mention Yathrib within the region under his control, but we cannot be sure that this reflects historical reality.<sup>172</sup> Maybe the monotheist-dominant Yathrib was just an unfinished part of his conquering plan of Hijaz. Furthermore, there are also a few pieces of evidence, principally offered by Ibn Khurradādhbih's geographical treatise (late 9th century CE), suggesting that some Sassanid political power and influence were exerted over Yathrib during the mid-6th and the early 7th centuries CE. Although the name "Medina" may be a later interpolation into the literary sources, the claim of the Sassanid rulers that their power extended as far as Yathrib may not be anachronistic. Since the Sassanid empire struggled actively with the Byzantine empire over the Arabian peninsula in pre-Islamic times, Western Arabia did not avoid some form of Sassanid influence through the empire's Arab allies, such as the Lakhmids. According to Ibn Saʿīd al-Andalusī (d. ca. 1286 CE), the ruler of al-Ḥīra, al-Nuʿmān III b. al-Mundhir (reigned 580-602 CE), appointed a Khazrajī called ʿAmr b. al-It̤nāba as the "king" (*malik*) of Yathrib on his behalf.<sup>173</sup> Nonetheless, when Muhammad migrated to Yathrib, there seems to be no more trace of any external power controlling or influencing the town. According to recent discussions based on the historical evidence, after the mid-6th century CE, the major players in Arabian politics such as the Himyarites, the Ghassanids, the Lakhmids and others, who had long been controlled by or allied with foreign powers, began to collapse dramatically and lost authority over Hijaz and its surrounding areas.<sup>174</sup> At that time, Muhammad escaped the persecution of the powerful Meccan polytheists, but found that Yathrib had an authority vacuum of either external or internal power, and suffered the rivalry between the Jews and their Arab neighbors. Thus, Yathrib had a more tolerant environment to Muhammad than any other Arabian towns. However, the monotheistic milieu already existing there also presented a huge challenge to Muhammad's new monotheism.

## 7 - 2 The Muslim Encounters with the Old Monotheists in Yathrib

Muhammad and the early Muslims found a shelter in Yathrib where people behaved more friendly to Muhammad and his new but simple monotheistic theory. At the beginning of Muhammad's arrival, the old monotheists of Yathrib may have welcomed Muhammad, for they shared the concept of the One God, or they sought his mediation between different groups or even his assistance in fighting against their respective enemies. The presence of a powerful monotheistic community offered an atmosphere conducive to the acceptance of monotheistic ideas among the Arabs in Yathrib. Therefore, Muhammad's new monotheistic faith found a receptive audience among many polytheists and Christian Arabs, and even among a few Jews. As a minority in Yathrib that lived side by side with monotheists, the Arabian polytheists must have found it quite easy to obtain certain knowledge about Judaism and Christianity, even if they could not further

<sup>172</sup> For Abraha's inscription, Christian J. Robin suggests that Abraha once controlled the Hijaz, including Yathrib (Medina), for a short time after 552 CE before south Arabian power throughout that region collapsed entirely, perhaps as a result of the famous failed assault on Mecca recollected by later Arabic works. See Robin, C. J. "Arabia and Ethiopia", in Scott F. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*. Oxford University Press, 2012. pp. 287 & 301.

<sup>173</sup> See al-Rahman, Nasrat 'Abd (ed.). *Nashwat al-ṭarab fī jāhiliyyat al-ʿArab* (2 Vols.). Amman, 1982. I, pp. 189-190 & 196. Also see discussion in Kister, M. J. "Al- Ḥīra: Some Notes on Its Relations with Arabia." *Arabica* 15, 1968. pp. 143-169. pp. 147-149.

<sup>174</sup> See Robin, C. J. "Arabia and Ethiopia", in Scott F. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*. Oxford University Press, 2012. pp. 297-299. Also see Korotaev, A et al. "Origins of Islam", *Acta Orientalia* (Hungary) 52, 1999. pp. 243-245.

distinguish between different Judeo-Christian sects. They may have known that the Jews were waiting for the arrival of a future prophet, according to Jewish scriptures. The existence of Arab Christians in Yathrib further contributed to this multi-cultural environment, which made the Yathrib Arabs more open for new ideas. This may also explain why Yathrib's residents, especially the polytheists, were more open to Muhammad's mission than the Meccans. Thus, Yathrib's Arab polytheists may have been immediately attracted to Muhammad. The Jews also kept good relation with Muhammad and his early followers when they just arrived at Yathrib.

However, the harmony between the Muslim migrants and Yathrib's Jews did not last long. The Jewish community of Yathrib became gradually wary of Muhammad's self-declaration as a prophet and a spiritual leader with the mission to replace all old monotheisms and of his call to all Arabs to adopt a new native monotheism. In consequence, the relations between Muhammad and Yathrib's Jewish community broke, and later there was continuous tension between them. This tension caused a significant adjustment of early Islamic thoughts and rituals, making Islam independent and farther away from the old monotheisms. The change of the *qibla* from Jerusalem to Mecca symbolizes the desire to make Islam thoroughly independent of Judaism and Judeo-Christianity. Also, the Qurayshite tribal deity Hubal as the main god for the Ka'ba was replaced by the One God *Allāh* of Islam. The Islamic designation *Bayt Allāh* for the Ka'ba was part of a strategy for taking the control of this crucial sanctuary out of the hands of the Meccan polytheists by endowing it with a brand new significance connected with Abraham's and Ishmael's monotheism. The Muslim competition with Judaism and Christianity in Yathrib made Muhammad decide to transform the Arab local culture into a core component of Islam to counter the old monotheisms. The Ka'ba in Mecca was eventually shifted from an Arabian polytheistic sanctuary to a universal monotheistic shrine after the success of Islam in Mecca.

Christianity in Yathrib was mainly embraced by converts from Arabian polytheism and had not gained a powerful position in Yathrib. The attitude of Yathrib's Christians towards Muhammad was much more moderate than that of Jews, and is friendly responded to by the Qur'an, compared to the negative image of the Jews in the Qur'an. Muhammad's contacts with Jews had a profound impact on the development of Islam, so that the Islamic attitudes towards Jews and Judaism are generally more negative than those towards Christians and Christianity. It is striking that the Qur'anic revelations during Muhammad's Medinan period frequently mention the Jews in a negative context.<sup>175</sup> These negative pronouncements in the Qur'an have been later broadened and amplified in the Muslim literary tradition like the *Hadīth*, Muhammad's biographies and the *Sīra*, as well as in Muslim oral tradition. It should be noted that Muhammad never doubted the original validity of the old monotheisms, although he argued strongly against Jews and accused them of having corrupted the original divine revelations from the God. Muhammad's proposition of Abraham's religion, on the other hand, emphasizes the common value between Islam and the old monotheistic heritages from Abraham.

Christianity appears in the Qur'an, in the form of Christian communities rather than a Christian religion. The Qur'an honors Christians in several verses, though the sectarian differences among them are denounced, and the doctrine of the trinity is viewed as a severe corruption. The

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<sup>175</sup> See Qur'an 2:61; 4:44; 4:160; 5:82.

designation *Naṣārā* for Christians appears frequently in the Qur'an, and has remained to be used for Christians by modern-day Muslims. The Qur'anic term *Naṣārā* seems to refer to all Christians including Byzantines, Monophysites and Nestorians. It is noteworthy that those issues concerning Christians seem only to occur in the Medinan suras, and that the Jews become a main target in these suras as well verses; this indicates that Muhammad began to concern himself with the problem of how to deal with the old monotheisms only after his migration to Yathrib. The difference between the cultural and religious contexts of Mecca and Yathrib decisively influenced Muhammad and the development of early Islam. The "People of the Book" (mainly Jews and Christians) is referred to very often in the Medinan suras, perhaps as a result of Muhammad's direct confrontation with Jews (and later with Christians) in Yathrib, and also as a consequence of the expansion of the early Muslim community beyond its initial little circle. However, the references to the "People of the Book" are always ambivalent in the Qur'an, a fact that may demonstrate the contradictory attitude of early Islam towards them and testify to Muhammad's complex attitude towards the old monotheisms. Criticism on Judaism and Christianity became intensified especially after his prophetic mission was increasingly rejected by Jews and Christians, but Muhammad's relationship with Christians was always better than that with Jews.

The images of Judaism and Christianity in the Qur'an are based on what Muhammad and other Meccans knew about Jews and Christians in terms of their existing worships. It is obvious that some Qur'anic statements about the old monotheisms are clearly false or at least different from what the followers of Judaism and Christianity themselves really believed, because the Qur'anic references to those beliefs were communicated to the receivers without correcting their misunderstood parts. The Meccans had made contacts with Christians, but a Christian community did not exist in pre-Islamic Mecca, only with a few individual Christians. Besides, there were hardly any Jews in Mecca, while the Jewish community was sizable in Yathrib where Meccan caravans sometimes made a stop on their way to northwest Arabia. Overall, the difference between Arabian polytheistic Mecca and Judeo-Christian Yathrib is so great that Meccan polytheists could only obtain an external knowledge of the old monotheisms. However, the *Sīra* says that a few Meccans had read some Christian scriptures and eventually converted to Christianity, the best known of whom is Waraqa ibn Nawfal, Khadija's cousin.

Muhammad may have been encouraged by the monotheists of Yathrib, both Jews and Christians. However, this did not make his missionary career in Yathrib easier. Muhammad faced opposition there too. Local Jews publicly contradicted the Islamic versions of Biblical stories and Midrashic lore, and ridiculed Muhammad himself, which forced him to adjust his missionary strategy. In return, Muhammad explained the Jewish rejection of his divine message by their envy and arrogance. He blamed how they had tampered with their sacred scriptures. Through the converts to Islam from old monotheisms such as ʿAbd-Allāh b. Salām, who zealously exposed the falsehood of his former coreligionists, Muhammad may have already known the common Christian charge against the Jews of having corrupted the Hebrew Bible. The accusation against the Jews (and later of the Christians) that they had falsified their sacred scriptures later became an Islamic dogma.

Due to the vehement opposition of most of Yathrib's Jews, Muhammad finally abolished his agreement with them, and commanded the expulsion of all the Jewish tribes from Yathrib, which

was completed within just a few years. The three main Jewish tribes Banū al-Naḍīr, Banū Qurayṣa and Banū Qaynuqāʿ apparently were not able to unite against their common enemy and were defeated one by one, until 627 CE. Thereafter, only a small population of powerless Jews remained in Medina, and was gradually assimilated into Arab Muslims. Following the dying out of the Jewish community in Yathrib, Muhammad conquered Mecca, using Yathrib as his Muslim base. After defeating the old monotheists in Yathrib and the polytheists in Mecca, the two biggest obstacles of Muhammad's new monotheism had been removed. Then the rest of Arabia was easily conquered by the Muslims, helped by the general decline of external powers in the Arabian peninsula. Based on its active polemics against polytheists and old monotheists, Islam quickly established itself through its conquering process.

### **7 - 3 The Connection between the Emergence of Islam and the Old Monotheisms**

Regardless of the Islamic break with Arabian polytheism in Muslim tradition, there has been a common approach among scholars to view the origins of Islam in terms of an internal religious evolution in the Arabian peninsula - from the decline of Arabian polytheism to the emergence of a native Arabian monotheism, inspired by foreign monotheistic influence. It is sometimes assumed that all religious societies ultimately evolve from polytheism to monotheism.<sup>176</sup> Muslim tradition, on the other hand, has firmly disconnected Islam from the previous history and evolution of monotheism, because Islam is thought to have originated only by God's revelations, of which Muhammad's mission was the final one. Islam as a part of the monotheistic tradition of religion in the Near East is cut off by Muslim tradition. By emphasizing Islam's discontinuity with the history of the Near East, Muslim tradition presents the origins of Islam as events in a remote and isolated Arabia that only reflected God's divine revelation and His direct intervention in the historical process. The special Arabian background and associations of Islam make it more difficult to understand Islam as an integral part of the Near Eastern monotheistic tradition in the same way as Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. Islam has traditionally been perceived in terms of its rejection, adaption, or acceptance of original Arabian features, which constituted the context of the emergence of Islam. In contrast, Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity both emerged in a strong monotheistic region of the Near East. The emergence and basic formation of Islam took place outside of that region. Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity were both constructed on the basis of a common Jewish monotheistic tradition, which they referred to and redefined. But Islam does not admit such a tight connection between itself and the old monotheisms, even though Muslim tradition regards the emergence of Islam as a purification and restoration of polluted monotheism. From its beginning, Islam mainly attacked Arabian polytheism and idolatry which it totally rejected. The early Islamic concern with Arabian paganism seems to be more intense than that with old monotheistic traditions (specially the Judaism of Yathrib), if we accept the traditional Islamic accounts. Arabian paganism was the biggest challenge to Muhammad's new religion from the beginning. However, the effects of the old monotheisms on Islam became more intensive during Muhammad's later missionary career in Yathrib.

In his *Ecclesiastical History* from the 5th century CE, Sozomenus of Gaza speaks of certain Arabs who had learned through their contacts with Jews of their common descent from Abraham and

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<sup>176</sup> See Wellhausen, Julius. *Reste arabischen Heidentums* (2nd edition). Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1897. pp. 215-224.

who consequently adopted some Jewish practices, like circumcision.<sup>177</sup> Thus, the link with Abraham seems already to have been accepted by some Arabs before Muhammad's revelation. But, Sozomenus' isolated and question-begging text does not take us very far towards explaining from where the account of Abraham in Islam was inspired. After Muhammad's migration to Yathrib from Mecca, he had frequent but gradually more acrimonious contacts with the Jewish community of Yathrib. Muhammad's relations with Yathrib's Jews had some effect on the developing direction of Islam. However, the Muslim tradition denies any borrowing or influence from those Jews and implies that the origins of Islam do not lie in Muhammad's contacts with Jews and Christians.

In discussions about the origins of Islam, it is common to attempt to connect early Islam with one or more old monotheistic sects in history. A particular monotheistic sect is thought to have influenced Muhammad, and the origins of Islam are discussed within this framework. Then, the existence of such a particular monotheistic group in Arabia is speculated on. How a specific monotheistic influence may have reached Muhammad in Western Arabia is still very difficult to trace. Among those monotheistic sects, most often mentioned are the Samaritans<sup>178</sup>, Judeo-Christians such as Elkasaites or Ebionites<sup>179</sup>, or a Qumran-related community<sup>180</sup>. The Qur'anic Christology seems to point to Judeo-Christianity as an important influence.<sup>181</sup> Muhammad's attitude towards Jesus' divinity came from the Jews, although he did not accept the Jews' refusal of Jesus' prophethood.<sup>182</sup> C. C. Torrey has attempted to demonstrate that Muhammad's knowledge of Christianity probably came from Jews rather than from Christians.

In his early life, Muhammad may have met Jewish and Christian missionaries on his trade caravan into Sham, from whom he heard homiletic versions of Biblical stories and learned the basics of Judeo-Christian ethics and eschatology. Thus, Muhammad's poetic revelations, which were deemed by Islam as divine words from Allah transmitted via the angel Gabriel, have many similarities with Jewish and Christian lore. In his early preaching at Mecca, Muhammad even commanded the "People of the Book" to confirm the authority of his monotheistic messages to Arabian polytheists. During this time he appears to have held a relatively positive attitude towards Jews, who are often referred to in both historical and contemporary contexts as the "Children of Israel". Muhammad's positive view of Jews changed dramatically after his *hijra* to Yathrib, where he and his early followers faced the dominant presence of Jews.

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<sup>177</sup> Cook, Michael. *Muhammad*. Oxford University Press, 1983. pp. 81 & 92; Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Gorgias Press, 1987. pp. 190-191, n. 104; Shahīd, Irfan. *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989. pp. 167-172; Rubin, Uri. "Ḥanifiyya and Ka'aba: An Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of Dīn Ibrāhīm", *JSAI* 13, 1990. pp. 85-112. p 99, n. 68.

<sup>178</sup> See Finkel, Joshua. "Jewish, Christian, and Samaritan Influence on Arabia", in *The Macdonald Presentation Volume*. Princeton University Press, 1933. pp. 145-166. Also see Crone, Patricia & Michael Cook. *Hagarism, the Making of the Islamic World*. Cambridge University Press, 1977.

<sup>179</sup> See Schlatter, Adolf. "Die Entwicklung des jüdischen Christentums zum Islam", *Evangelisches Missions-Magazin* N.S. 62, 1918. pp. 251-264. Also see Schoeps, H. J. *Theologie und Geschichte des Judentums*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1949.

<sup>180</sup> See Rabin, Chaim. *Qumran Studies*. Oxford University Press, 1957.

<sup>181</sup> Hawting, G. R. "John Wansbrough, Islam, and Monotheism", *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1997. pp. 23-38. p 35.

<sup>182</sup> Torrey, C. C. *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*. New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1933. p 74.

No matter if it was through Jews or Christians that his religious knowledge was transmitted to Muhammad, the Qur'an definitely repels rumors about an old monotheist (probably an Abyssinian Christian slave called *Jabr*<sup>183</sup>) having taught Muhammad most of what he brought. The Muslim tradition also stresses that the Qur'an does not contain any information obtained in this way, which had already been self-proved by the Qur'an itself: "Certainly We know that they say, 'Only a human being teaches him (i.e. Muhammad)'. The tongue of him at whom they allude is foreign, and this is a clear Arabic tongue" (Qur'an 16:103).<sup>184</sup> Other cases of close interaction between Muhammad and the "People of the Book" are also reported by Muslim tradition. But any connection between the "People of the Book" and the origins of Islam is firmly denied by Muslim tradition.

Islam is a complex religion whose emergence took place over a long period of time and in an expanding geographical area, so that we cannot clearly distinguish which kind of old monotheistic influence on Islam was decisive. Discussions about the precise connections between old monotheistic sects and the origins of Islam have been, however, speculative and inconclusive. We cannot prove specific influence or borrowing based only on similarities. Thus, it is more meaningful for us to try to understand how Islam - an ultimately distinct and independent new monotheism - could emerge in such an Arabian milieu, than to identify the precise old monotheistic group which may have had a decisive influence on the emergence of Islam.

#### 7 - 4 The Effects of the Old Monotheisms on Early Islam

The images of Judaism and Christianity in Islam do not correspond to what we know about those religions today. It seems that the doctrines that the Qur'an ascribes to the *Naṣāra* are not consistent with those of mainstream Christianity in Syria and Mesopotamia at Muhammad's time, but closer to those of the ancient Judeo-Christian sects called "Nazoreans" in the Catholic polemics. Early Islam may also have been influenced by Judeo-Christianity.<sup>185</sup> Unlike what is often supposed, Judeo-Christianity is not a phenomenon that only existed in ancient Christianity. The medieval Muslim scholar Abu'l-Faraj b. al-Nadīm attests that the adherents of at least one Judeo-Christian sect (perhaps Elchasaites) lived in southern Mesopotamia as late as the 10th century.<sup>186</sup> Clearly, Judeo-Christianity was still alive in later times.

The distinctive commonalities that are shared by Islam with both Judaism and Judeo-Christianity include: prohibition of carrion and pork, circumcision, praying towards Jerusalem (but the Islamic *qibla* was changed to be Mecca after the *hijra*),<sup>187</sup> none of which are required by Pauline

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<sup>183</sup> See Jabr was thought to be an Abyssinian slave, and the name Jabr may be an Arabic version of the name *Gabrū* (or *Gabrē*) meaning "slave" in Ethiopic. See Parrinder, G. *Jesus in the Qur'an*. Oneworld Publications, 1995. p 161.

<sup>184</sup> See Guillaume, A. *The Life of Muhammad* (A Transl. of Ibn Ishaq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, with introduction and notes). Oxford University Press, 1955. p 180.

<sup>185</sup> See De Blois, François. "Elchasai - Manes - Muhammad. Manichäismus und Islam in religionshistorischem Vergleich", *Der Islam*, 81 (1), 2004. pp. 31-48.

<sup>186</sup> Neuwirth, Angelika; Nicolai Sinai & Michael Marx. *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*. Brill, 2010. pp. 621-622.

<sup>187</sup> Neuwirth, Angelika; Nicolai Sinai & Michael Marx. *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*. p 622.

Christianity. But there are also some features that separate Islam from both Judaism and Pauline Christianity, but connect it with Judeo-Christianity: the prohibition of wine, and more crucially, a prophetology that stresses the identity of the teachings of all preceding prophets and that particularly treats Jesus as a champion of Moses' law, instead of its abolisher.<sup>188</sup> There may have existed in the Arabian peninsula in late pre-Islamic time at least one Judeo-Christian (Nazorean) sect that used Arabic as their cultic language, which prohibited carrion and pork, practiced circumcision, prayed towards Jerusalem, but worshipped the trinity composed by the father God, the son Jesus, and the female Holy Spirit (Jesus' mother), and kept a canon that only included the Torah and certain parts of the Gospel, and excluded the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>189</sup> It seems that Judeo-Christianity may have denied that there was any prophet between Moses and Jesus, just as the Qur'an does not mention the prophets of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible.

The names of prophets in the Qur'an can be divided into two categories: 1. the names of patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible and the main figures of Gospels (such as Jesus (*ʿĪsā*), Mary (*Maryam*), John (*Yahya*), Zachariah (*Zakarīya*)), which all originated from either Hebrew or Aramaic forms, though sometimes reconstructed; 2. the names of post-Mosaic prophets (for instance Jonah (*Yūnus*)), which originated from Greek forms found in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament.<sup>190</sup> This difference of derivation of names may indicate that Muhammad had noticed the difference between Judeo-Christians (Nazoreans) and Melkite Christians at his time, and that figures like Jonah were not derived from Judeo-Christianity.

During his early missionary period in Mecca, Muhammad adopted the Jewish or Judeo-Christian way of praying in the direction of the holy temple of Jerusalem. But after Muhammad's *hijra* to Yathrib, the relation between Muslims and Jews deteriorated. Following that, Jerusalem as the *qibla* (praying direction) for Muslims was replaced by the Ka'ba of Mecca. Then Muhammad re-interpreted the Ka'ba of Mecca as the House of God, which had been erected by Abraham and his son Ishmael. The figure of Abraham was thus constructed by Muhammad as a paradigm for the salvation of the "Gentile", which also is used by the apostle Paul and later Christianity. Muhammad's break with the Jews forced his new religion to absorb more elements from Christianity which estranged him from the Jewish community. Eventually, Islam became totally independent from all the old monotheisms.

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<sup>188</sup> Neuwirth, Angelika; Nicolai Sinai & Michael Marx. *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*. p 622.

<sup>189</sup> De Blois, François. "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and ḥanīf (ἔθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 65 (1), 2002. pp. 1-30. particularly p 12.

<sup>190</sup> Neuwirth, Angelika; Nicolai Sinai & Michael Marx. *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*. Brill, 2010. p. 622, n.16.

## 8. The Final Shape of Islam

Muslim tradition tends to equate Muhammad's missionary career in Mecca and Yathrib (later Medina) with the origins of Islam, which effectively dissociates Islam from the historical evolution of the Near Eastern monotheistic tradition.<sup>191</sup> According to Muslim tradition and much of modern scholarship, Islam was in existence by the time of Muhammad's death in 632 CE, although it is widely recognized that the Qur'an (as God's revelation) was not collected and edited until a certain time after Muhammad's death. The internal dissension among Muslims in the early post-Muhammad period led to a division of the newly established Muslim *Umma*, which was seen by many Muslims as a sign of decline from the golden age of Muhammad's time, and later reenforced the impression that the original true Islam is only represented by that during Muhammad's time.

As traditionally interpreted, God's revelation was tightly connected with Muhammad's missionary activities in Mecca and Yathrib. There has always been a tendency to identify Islam with the Qur'an, since the Qur'an is treated as the main source of the basic beliefs and rituals in Islam. In this case, *Hadīth* collections just assist Muslims to understand the original meanings of the Qur'an, in addition to giving more details about the Qur'anic narratives. Muslim tradition informs us that Islam emerged with Muhammad's preaching and his reception of the Qur'anic verses from God. What Muslim tradition expresses is that Muhammad's mission in Hijaz was only the result of divine revelations and intervention. But non-Muslim scholars find it hard to accept this information given by Muslim tradition as a fact, and they attempt to interpret Muhammad's success and influence by political, social, economic, and religious-cultural factors. It is also claimed that some significant features of Islam were developed after Muhammad's time. Another trend regards them as the elaboration or further development of foundational components which Muhammad himself had initially created.

The innovative approach of John Wansbrough and a few other scholars put the emergence of Islam much later, in the context of the Arab Muslim conquest of the Middle East. They suppose that the concept of Islam evolved from the sectarian monotheistic context of Mesopotamia, along with the massive Arab immigration and the formal establishment of Arab Muslim rule there. In this perspective, the independence of Islam from the old monotheisms and the formation of a Muslim identity came from a gradual evolution of Islamic ideas, practices and institutions in the wake of the Arab Muslim conquest of Mesopotamia. After moving out of the Arabian peninsula, the Muslim community redefined itself once more by reformulating the existing Islamic features and tendencies within the monotheistic context of the Middle East. A new independent religion eventually took shape within the Mesopotamian monotheistic context, after the emergence of a series of distinctive Islamic beliefs, rituals and institutions that were developed and combined with local traditions. In Wansbrough's analysis, the Muslim accounts of the origins of Islam and of Muhammad's life should be understood as a part of their own realization of Islam, which means that the Muslim tradition was neither a product of Muhammad's contemporaries, nor made by originally nomadic Arabs from the Arabian peninsula. On the contrary, a reconstruction of the

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<sup>191</sup> Hawting, G. R. "John Wansbrough, Islam, and Monotheism", *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1997. pp. 23-38. p 24.

origins of Islam was needed by the Arab Muslim conquerors and the new Mesopotamian converts. Thus, according to Wansbrough's model, Islam as the third major component of the Middle Eastern monotheistic tradition,<sup>192</sup> is rooted not only in the Arabian pagan milieu, but also has its roots in the Near Eastern context as a whole.

After unifying Arabian peninsulars under the banner of Allah, the Arab Muslim conquest of the Near East did not make Arabs lose their original identity, but converted the majority of the conquered peoples to become Arabic-speaking Muslims, a process that was radically different from what had happened to previous conquerors who were either assimilated to the local culture or expelled from the region. The traditional approach supposes that Arabs had already formed their own unified religious and linguistic identities (both Islam and Qur'anic Arabic) before encountering the religions and languages of the conquered. But I think the traditional approach sees the Arab Muslim conquest of the Near East in a too simplistic way. Islam is a complex system which contains both the part that was brought out of the Arabian peninsula and the part that gradually evolved through the interaction of the Arab conquerors with the peoples they conquered in the multi-religious context of the region. The rise of Islam in the Middle East replacing its previously dominating Hellenistic character can be seen as the result of a process of cultural communication and fusion that lasted several centuries. During this Arabian Islamization process, some non-Arabian elements were absorbed into Islam, which also contributed to making Islam into what we see today.

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<sup>192</sup> Hawting, G. R. "John Wansbrough, Islam, and Monotheism", *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1997. pp. 23-38. p 36.

## Conclusion

The emergence of Islam was based on two basic elements: foreign interference into pre-Islamic Arabia, and the internal crisis of pre-Islamic Arabia. Pre-Islamic Arabia did not lack political and religious conflicts. In fact, late pre-Islamic Arabia was in a quite weak and chaotic situation. Abraha's invasion of Hijaz was a direct challenge to pre-Islamic Arabian society and intensified the crisis awareness of Arabs. In this situation, Muhammad initially had a strong political mission: to unify the Arabs and hold back foreign encroachments. A spiritual crisis among the pre-Islamic Arabs was a more urgent concern: the balance between Arabian polytheism and tribalism had nearly collapsed in Arabia, and due to the lack of an institutionalized belief system, Arabian polytheism was not able to either satisfy the spiritual pursuits of Arabs or counter the threats of the old monotheisms. But Mecca was an exception in the chaotic situation of pre-Islamic Arabia, due to its unique religious status in Arabian polytheism and the prosperous commercial activities that followed the pilgrimage to the Meccan polytheistic sanctuary. Polytheistic pilgrimage was the basis of Meccan society, together with trade. Polytheistic religion was so important to Meccans that they strongly opposed Muhammad as a threat to Mecca's polytheistic tradition.

The difference between Mecca and Yathrib (later Medina) may explain well why Muhammad was persecuted by Meccans, but gained success after his migration to Yathrib. Although Muhammad faced severe attacks from Meccan polytheists, the town of Mecca still enjoyed a high status in Muhammad's new religion. The distinctive commercial culture of Mecca was also an important factor in the emergence of Islam. As to Yathrib, it was characterized of too significant Jewish and Christian presences, which had a double-edged nature for the later expansion of Muhammad's new monotheism.

During Muhammad's early years in Mecca, his new religion mainly absorbed old monotheisms, and attacked Arabian polytheism. However, the Qur'an still gave some space to Arabian polytheists in Hijaz by portraying them only as *mushrikūn* or idolaters, instead of describing them as real polytheists, a portrayal which may only have corresponded to the "High God" worship of the paganism in northwest Arabia (particularly Negev). This strategy may be related to Muhammad and early Muslims' experiences with the pagans in northwest Arabia, which could be the real context of the image of pre-Islamic Arabian religion in the Qur'an and Muslim tradition. But Muhammad's new religion was influenced less by the monotheistic tendency of Arabian polytheism (i.e. the worship of a "High God"), than by Judaism and Christianity. Muhammad may also have been inspired by the simple Abrahamism in northwest Arabia. But current evidence shows that a native Arabian monotheism (such as the *Rahmānism* and the *Hanīfiya*) did not exist in pre-Islamic Arabia. The idea of such a monotheism may have been created by Islam to serve its own system of polemics.

In conclusion, Islam did not evolve from a monotheistic tendency within Arabian polytheism, nor from a pre-Islamic native Arabian monotheism. Instead, Islam directly inherited the monotheistic materials from the old foreign monotheistic sects that existed in Arabia, particularly those of Northwest Arabia (such as Negev) and South Arabia (such as Yemen), rather than Hijaz, although

the Qur'an and Muslim tradition deny any connection of Muhammad's ideas with those of the old monotheisms. Muhammad's new monotheism was originally a continuation or reformation of the old monotheisms. Most of the early Islamic terms and concepts were borrowed from Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians, such as *Al-lāh* and *al-Raḥmān* as the names for the One God. The South Arabian term *al-Raḥmān* was adopted by Islam from its usage in the Judaism and Christianity of South Arabia. The first task of Muhammad was to create an Arabian native monotheism and to convert Arabian polytheists, although his intention was probably to offer a solution for the entire Arabia. Since Islam was born in an Arabian polytheistic context, it had to be given an Arabian cultural clothing and combined with the political ambitions of the Arabs. Based on the monotheistic materials that Muhammad got from his caravan travels or contacts with others, Muhammad proposed the concepts of "Abraham's religion" and the "*ḥanīf*", which connect Arabian ethnic roots and pre-Islamic Meccan history with Abraham and his original true monotheism. Muhammad's new monotheism catered to the needs of the Arabs, who faced external threats and internal disorder. But the Meccans were an exception to this general crisis of the Arabian peninsula. This forced Muhammad to bring his new religion to another town, Yathrib, that had fallen into instability like other Arabian communities. Muhammad found a suitable soil for his new religion in Yathrib, where there was an authority vacuum and political disorder. In the course of his increasing arguments with the old monotheists in Yathrib, Muhammad introduced changes into his new monotheism, adding more native Arabian elements, which led Islam to be independent from the old monotheisms.

After the Muslim conquest of Mecca and other Arabian towns, and the unification of Arabs under the banner of the One God, the Arabian political ambition of expansion was stimulated. In the process of the Arab Muslim conquest of the Middle East (particularly Mesopotamia), Islam absorbed much from local traditions, and Islam as an independent universal monotheistic religion was finally shaped.

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