Who Wrote the Qur’an?
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**With assistance from AC and KA**
Introduction:

The Qur’an

The Qur’an (literally the ‘recitation’, Popp suggests ‘the lectionary’) as it is encountered today is a collection of 114 bodies of text, called surahs, each of which divided into a number of verses (called ‘ayah’, literally ‘signs’). The fact that the ayah tend, in the original Arabic, to rhyme demonstrates that these texts are carefully composed and intended to be read aloud. Some verses make reference to the composer’s intention that they are memorised and that they should be regarded as forming part of a whole, although no verse ever specifically refers to a previously announced one.

Due to the fact that the surahs:

- can each cover a wide range of subject matter and styles,
- repeat content frequently, often using the same refrains (less than 50% of the text of the Qur’an appears only once\(^1\)),
- vary greatly in length (from Surah 112’s twenty-four words in English translation to Surah 2’s 286 verses),
- often address an audience within the context of an obviously dynamic situation, such as suffering exile, preparing to fight battles and coping with setbacks and victories, yet omit important information that would make its content comprehensible to later readers,
- on occasion clearly contradict one another, and
- are not arranged in an obvious order,

the Qur’an can give the impression of being badly disorganised. However, scholars, such as Nicolai Sinai\(^2\), have made progress in finding order within its apparent chaos, and Sinai in particular makes a strong case that the Qur’an follows several subtle internal organisational principles and should properly be considered as a single work: albeit one with a very complex history and structure.

Following a complex stylometric analysis of the Qur’an’s structure, Benham Sadeghi asserts that it can be demonstrated that, whatever the variety in the Qur’an’s content, its form and use of language demonstrates to a high level of probability that the Qur’an in fact has one author.

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\(^1\) The Qur’an, A Historical-Critical Introduction

\(^2\) Ibid
The traditional Islamic narrative

The Qur’an addresses religious themes, consistently emphasising God’s indivisible and transcendent nature, often composed in the first person as though speaking the words of God Himself. Classical analyses of its form and content invariably divide the Qur’an into ‘Meccan’ and ‘Medinan’ verses.

Meccan surahs, believed to have been announced by Mohammed in his home town of Mecca over a period of twelve years as he sought to gather followers, tend to be shorter, and consist of shorter verses. They are generally recognised as being more ‘poetic’ in style and recite versions of biblical stories and Arabic lore along the theme of the need to demonstrate obedience to God and His messengers, or suffer divine punishment on earth and with the hope of sensual pleasures and the fear of eternal torment on the Last Day. Some encourage personal virtues such as honesty, generosity and respect for others’ privacy.

Medinan surahs, believed to have been composed during Mohammed’s ten year campaign of banditry and conflict with the Meccans and others that led to his becoming the unchallenged ruler of Western Arabia, contain more, longer and less ‘poetic’ verses with many exhortations to fight and prescribed laws and punishments for a specific community.

The traditional Islamic narrative of the announcement of the Qur’an includes the following core premises:

❖ Mohammed was born in Mecca in the later sixth century (normally his year of birth is given as 570 or 571).

❖ Mecca was at that time a predominantly pagan town, although with some connection to Judeo-Christian traditions, it being a popular belief that the Ka’aba in Mecca had been built by Abraham and Ismael.

❖ Mohammed’s father, Abd’Allah, who had died before Mohammed’s birth, had been a monotheist, but neither he, nor any member of his family was Jewish or Christian.³

❖ Fully orphaned in his infancy, Mohammed worked until the age of forty, first as a herdsman in Mecca and then as a trader on long distance caravans.

❖ In 610 Mohammed began receiving visions in which the angel Jabril revealed messages to him from God, in Arabic, which Mohammed recited publicly and which were memorised and subsequently written down by his followers.

❖ Mohammed left Mecca in 622 and migrated with some of his followers to Yathrib (Medina) from whence he launched a series of raids on Meccan caravans and Bedouin tribes. Mohammed captured Mecca eight years later, and from this

³ The term ‘al din al hanif’ (‘the true faith’), is often used in Islam to describe monotheists who held to Islam’s core precepts, before Mohammed completed God’s revelation.
position he proceeded to dispatch further military expeditions throughout and beyond Arabia until his death in 632.

Mohammed was succeeded by four of his companions in turn – known to history as the ‘Rightly Guided [Rashidun]’ caliphs: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali. In 662 the Islamic community came under the control of a relative of Uthman, Muawiyah, who established the first Islamic dynasty; the Umayyad caliphate.

The written record of Mohammed’s divine recitations had been preserved by his followers in an incomplete format until the reign of the third caliph, Uthman, who by 653 had had them compiled into the present standard form Qur’an, (known as the Uthmanic recension), of which four copies were made and distributed throughout the new Islamic empire. All other written records of Mohammed’s revelations were destroyed.

Consequently, to a believing Muslim, the verses of the Qur’an are treated as composed by God Himself, and come to us verbatim, via Jabril and Mohammed as mere interlocutors, although the order in which they appear in the Qur’an was fixed by the early Islamic community.
The dearth of evidence concerning the origins of Islam

To non-Muslims it had long been assumed that the alternative to divine authorship was that the Qur’an had been the invention of Mohammed.

It is undisputed that in the mid-seventh century, the titanic seven centuries long struggle between Rome and Persia finally came to an end when an Arabian force overwhelmed the Middle Eastern and North African territories of both the Byzantine and the Sassanian Empires, capturing Damascus in 634, Ctesiphon in 637, Jerusalem in 638, and Alexandria in 641.

The traditional Islamic narrative that Mohammed was succeeded by the four Rashidun caliphs and thereafter the Umayyad and Abbasid Empires who each expanded an Islamic empire is still recited almost without question by encyclopaedias and textbooks.

However, over the last ninety years historians have commented upon the extraordinary dearth of contemporary physical or written evidence concerning these early years of Islam.

- Although there are two, short, contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous historical references by Byzantine scribes to conflicts with Arab raiders who were followers of a ‘Mhmt’, there is no physical or contemporaneous textual evidence whatsoever for the existence of any of Mohammed’s four supposed successors: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman or Ali (other than for the date of death of Umar scratched into an Arabian rock). This absence of evidence by itself undermines the traditional narrative that these four individuals oversaw the establishment of one of the world’s greatest empires that, by the death of Ali, is said to have stretched from Libya in the west to Sindh in modern Pakistan in the east.

- There is no evidence in terms of contemporary textual record or physical remains, such as buildings, monuments or inscriptions, of any centrally controlled empire replacing Byzantium or Sassanian authority in the areas conquered by the Arabs, until long after the Rashidun caliphate (supposedly ended 662).

- There is no evidence of Arab conquerors engaging in any practice that might be identified with Islam until, at the very earliest, the decoration of the Dome of the Rock shrine in Jerusalem in 691, sixty years after the death of Mohammed.

- Other than for the Qur’an itself and a contemptuous description of it by St John of Damascus in the 740s, there is no substantial document, relating to any Islamic theme, known to have existed prior to 750 - over a hundred and twenty years following the reported death of Mohammed, despite the conquerors’ supposed religiously motivated control of a vast territory including great centres of learning.

- The earliest account of Mohammed’s life and the origins of Islam were written by Mohammed Ibn Ishaq about a hundred and thirty years after Mohammed’s death. Even this book has now been lost in its original form, although lengthy passages are cited in later biographies written by Ibn Hesham in the ninth century and Al Tabari and Ibn Sa’d in the tenth century.

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4 Starting with an essay by a Soviet historian, Klimovich, ‘Did Mohammad Exist?’ (1930)
5 See Section X below.
6 Reputedly the first Islamic book is Kitab al Athar of the jurist Abu Hanif written after the Abbasid revolution in the late eight century.
The earliest written collection of hadith (short statements of Mohammed’s life and works usually supported by chains of transmission back to his companions) is thought to be The Muwatta of Malik bin Anas, written in the second half of the eighth century.

Malik’s concerns were judicial and it seems that the proliferation of hadith was due to parties seeking authority to support one or another legal proposition.

Later collections of hadith, such as Sahih Bukhari, contain a huge quantity of such sayings, containing far more assertions concerning Mohammed’s life and words than exist for any other ancient historical figure. All schools of Islam agree that many of these accounts are later inventions. Some giving the appearance of having been framed to provide an explain for an otherwise cryptic statement of the Qur’an. Others are virtually nonsensical.

It is suggested that the body of hadith cannot be dismissed in its entirety as later concoctions, merely on the basis of its age. Many are so innocuous, or so scandalous that they may well be thought to have been preserved by people conscientious to preserve as many stories as they could. But no consensus has been achieved in Islam or academia as to the mechanism to separate the credible from the false.

In short, there is a vast chasm between the Qur’an’s announcement in the period 610-632 (which this paper accepts as broadly correct) and the emergence of Islam as a structured religion after 750. During this period, one would have expected many large mosques to be built by the victorious generals in the lands that they conquered in the name of Islam, Medina and Mecca should have become important pilgrimage destinations, exclusively Islamic symbols and text would be found on coins and official monuments, and books would be written in Damascus, Jerusalem and Alexandria and further afield about the new religion by believers and non-believers alike.

There is no evidence that any of these things occurred and a solid body of evidence that they did not.

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7 The absence of a verse of the Qur’an prescribing the stoning to death for adultery is sometimes explained with the hadith (1944 in Sunan Ibn Maajah) that a goat wandered into the house of Aisha and ate a leaf upon which a unknown verse was written.

8 So for example verse [8.17], set, so it is said after the Battle of Badr:

“You did not slay them but God slew them. And thou threwest not when thou threwest but God threw that he might try the believers with a beautiful trial from him”

is explained in one hadith with a story of Mohammed picking up some dust before the battle and throwing it towards the Meccans and in another with a sudden wind blowing sand into the Meccans eyes.
A revisionist history of Islam

Since 1930 this almost total absence of any corroboration of the traditional Islamic narrative has given rise to a revisionist school of Islamic history. Many historians now find it manifestly implausible that such people as Mohammed and his successors might have lived the lives later ascribed to them, or that the Arab conquerors of the mid seventh century could have practised Islam as we now understand it, and yet have left little or no trace of having done so.

Revisionist historians now challenge whether Mohammed ever lived in Mecca - even whether either Mohammed as we think of him, or, indeed, seventh century Mecca existed at all.

This paper aims to summarise the positive evidence that is said to directly contradict the traditional Islamic narrative and to critically examine the understanding that the Qur’an was announced by Mohammed in Arabia in the early seventh century. This evidence includes:

I. the oldest Qur’an manuscripts,

II. a stylometric analysis of the Qur’an’s word use,

III. identification of Quranic source material,

IV. Quranic themes,

V. Analysis of the geographical descriptions of the setting of Mohammed’s story,

VI. New research into the orientation of early mosques,

VII. early ‘Islamic’ inscriptions

VIII. the Dome of the Rock,

IX. coins of the Arab conquests,

and

X. contemporary testimony.
The oldest Qur’ān manuscripts

To date, three manuscripts that contain portions of Quranic text have been radiocarbon dated to the sixth century.

- **BnF Arabe 328(c)**, dated to 568-645
- **the Sana’a Manuscript (DAM 01-27.01)**, dated to 578-669, and
- **the Tubingen fragment**, dated to 649-675

**BnF Arabe 328(c) (‘568-645’)**

During the Napoleonic Empire, a number of ancient Qur’ān manuscripts were acquired by French diplomats from the Mosque of Amr in Fustat, Egypt and brought to France, where most are now held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF). The pages have been identified as forming six different Qur’ān manuscripts that are catalogued as BnF Arabe 328 (a) through to (f).

In 2015 two pages of a Qur’ān that formed part of a collection of documents at Birmingham University (under the catalogue entry Mingana Islamic Arabic 1572a), were recognised to have originally formed part of the same Qur’ān manuscript as BnF 328 (c).

These two pages have been radiocarbon dated “with 95.5% accuracy” to the period 568-645.

Although the possibility of the folios being a palimpsest (a parchment that has had its original text removed and a new text written in its place) cannot be entirely excluded and the age of the ink used in writing the text on them has not been tested, the manuscripts are described as showing no signs of having been overwritten. Consequently, assuming for now that the ink on 328(c) is as old as the parchment on which it is inscribed, 328(c) is with the Sanaa manuscript (below) one of the two oldest known Quranic manuscripts.

**The Sana’a Manuscript (DAM 01-27.01) (‘433-643’)**

In 197 sacks containing over 12,000 individual fragments of ancient Qur’āns had been discovered in the eaves of the mosque undergoing renovation in Sana’a, Yemen. From these fragments, 926 separate Qur’ān manuscripts have been identified. 38 fragments were identified as belonging to one manuscript in particular (catalogued as DAM 01-27.01, hereafter referred to as ‘the Sana’a Manuscript’)

Samples of the parchment have been radio-carbon dated by five institutions: University of Arizona, ETH (tr. federal institute of technology) Zurich, University of Oxford, University of Kiel and the Centre de Datation par le Radiocarbone de Lyon.

Of these Arizona, Zurich and Oxford gave broadly similar results (an earliest date between 578-606 and a most recent date of 649-659).

Kiel found a much earlier date range 430-493 and Lyon produced three highly varied results.
Sana’a Manuscript radio-carbon test results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>566–669</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ETH Zurich</td>
<td>606–649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>566–657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Oxford</td>
<td>595–658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Kiel</td>
<td>430–493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDR Lyons</td>
<td>388–535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>433–599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>543–643</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although debates about the accuracy and possible consequences of these results is ongoing, for the purpose of this paper the range of 566–669 (the oldest and earliest dates from the Arizona, Zurich and Oxford results) is treated as most likely to be correct.

DAM 01-27.01 is a palimpsest, meaning that the date of the parchment is not the date of the uppermost text (which contains approximately half the Qur’an in its standard form). Therefore, by far the greatest interest in the manuscript lies in the lower text, which invisible to the naked eye but which can be revealed though viewing the manuscript in ultraviolet light or X-ray.

Written Arabic consists of a cursive script (the rasm) to indicate the ‘consonantal skeleton’ of a word. Of the twenty eight letters of the Arabic alphabet (all consonants), only six have a unique rasm, the other twenty two requiring additional diacritical marks to be added to the letter to make its pronunciation specific. For example, the shape  may indicate one of three consonants - or . None of the earliest Quran manuscripts have such marks, leaving considerable scope for any verse’s interpretation.⁹

Nor do the early manuscripts contain vowel markers which may also change a word (for example, as is fairly well known, the s-l-m consonantal structure without vowel markers may refer to either ‘salam’ meaning ‘peace’ or ‘islam’ meaning ‘submission’.)

Discussions concerning the possible differences of vowels are well known and a topic of open discussion by Islamic scholars. A hadith even, implausibly, states that Mohammed accepted seven different methods of reading the Qur’an on the basis that these were merely the accommodation of early Arabic ‘dialects’.

However, prior to the examination of the sana’a Manuscript, the oldest Qur’ans had seemed to contain the same rasm, despite the variety in possible diacritical and vowel markers.

⁹ In a series of videos entitled The Qur’an’s Many Problems presented by Dr Jay Smith and Al Fadi, episode 9, they refer to the work of Hatun Tash in cataloguing almost 60,000 variations in the Qur’an’s Arabic text, observed in thirty one different editions of the Qur’an circulating in the Islamic world, each of which is based upon a manuscript from the eight or ninth centuries.
But the lower text of the San’aa Manuscript shows significant changes even in the rasm – ie the presence of completely different words - to those that had previously been regarded as common to all Qur’ans. For this to be found in one of the two earliest manuscripts raises the prospect that the Sana’a text may be an original from which the ‘standard’ Qur’an is in fact a variant. The lower text is said to be only partially legible, and the changes identified thus far are mostly of a minor nature. However, the manuscript, which mostly remains in Yemen, had only been partially studied\textsuperscript{10} before the permission to continue the analysis was revoked. No work is currently ongoing on these manuscripts, negotiations to resume work no doubt complicated by the ongoing Yemen civil war.

The Tubingen fragment (‘649-675’)

A folio containing verses \{17:35\} to \{36:57\} - about a quarter of the entire Qur’an - in largely their standard form, was purchased in Damascus by a Prussian consul there in the nineteenth century. These have now been radiocarbon dated to the period 649-675.

Timeline of radio-carbon date ranges of the seventh century manuscripts

From the above tests we can produce the following chart. Whilst the evidence is consistent with the Qur’an having been composed during the traditional years of the life of Mohammed, it tends to indicate that it could well be older. It certainly challenges the traditional view of the Qur’an being first written down as a canon of text under Uthman, circa 654.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{timeline.png}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{10} Different leaves are said to have been separately examined by Gerd and Elizabeth Puin, Benham Sadeghi (see \textit{Il Stylometric analysis of the Qur’an} following) and Asma Hilali (\textit{per Variant Readings: The Birmingham Qur’an in the Context of Debate on Islamic Origins}, Gabriel Said Reynolds, TLS 7.8.2015).
The Quranic verses contained in the seventh century manuscripts

From the above three manuscripts we can now be fairly certain that at least the following sections of the Qur’an date to the seventh century.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surah</th>
<th>Verses</th>
<th>Manuscript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>191-4, 196, 209-11, 213-15 and 217</td>
<td>Sana’a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sana’a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>122 and 124-9</td>
<td>Sana’a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-11</td>
<td>10.35 - 11.110</td>
<td>BnF 328(c) (Paris)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.105 and 11.122</td>
<td>Sana’a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>19, 28, 30 and 31</td>
<td>Sana’a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 to 36</td>
<td>17.35 - 36.57</td>
<td>Tubingen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18.17-31</td>
<td>BnF 328(c) (Birmingham)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19.2-5, 7-9, 11-15, 19, 21-24, 26-28</td>
<td>Sana’a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19.91-20.40</td>
<td>BnF 328(c) (Birmingham)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most of 20.99 to 23.27</td>
<td>BnF 328(c) (Paris)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>15,19,22,23,25,27,48,50,54,56,58</td>
<td>Sana’a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section conclusion from *I The oldest Qur’an manuscripts*

1. At least a very substantial part of the Qur’an (probably most of it and possibly all of it) was in existence within the years in which Mohammed is traditionally said to have lived.

The Qur’an was compiled as a book by 645 at the latest, about a decade earlier than the date traditionally given for the compiling of the first Quran (the ‘Uthmanic recension’) in 653.

Some pages of the Qur’an may even date from the fifth rather than the seventh century.
II Stylometric analysis of the Qur’an


The essence of stylometric research is the measurement of the frequency of ‘morphemes’ (either complete words or parts of words) within blocks of text.

Sadeghi took as his starting point a division of the Qur’an into 194 blocks of text devised by Mehdi Bazargan, an Iranian intellectual based upon the mean, mode and median verse lengths of each surah, their themes and other factors such as rhyme patterns.12 Sadeghi reduced these 194 text blocks into twenty two groups thereafter into seven ‘clusters’.

Sadeghi then used a computer program to conduct three different analyses of morpheme frequency across these sections of text:

- **List A**: the twenty-eight most common morphemes in the Qur’an,
- **List B**: 114 morphemes, less common than those in List A,
- **List C**: 3693 very infrequent (‘smoking gun’) morphemes that each occurred only between two and twenty times within the Qur’an.

In setting out the basis of stylometric analysis, Sadeghi emphasises, using the example of a broken window, that the rationale for Bazargan’s original division of the text into blocks, and his (Sadeghi’s) later arrangement of those blocks into clusters and choice of morphemes is irrelevant.

> ‘As an analogy imagine somebody who picks two jagged shards of glass from a heap of broken windows, shows that they fit perfectly, and claims that they are from the same window. What validates his claim is the improbable fit, not how he went about finding the matching fragments. Had he picked them in a random fashion, his argument would be no less valid.’

For each of the three lists he arranged the seven clusters into a sequence from lowest frequency to highest frequency, and compared these three sequences with Bazargan’s initial verse length criteria. He found that when ordered by each of the four criteria, the seven clusters of text blocks fell in the same order and that the variations over time progressed in a ‘smooth’ transition from the first to the last.

Sadeghi’s conclusions appear to demonstrate that, despite a great variation in style between different parts of the Qur’an, the verses, arranged in these clusters, show a consistent trajectory, by multiple criteria, rather than a ‘jagged’ pattern such as one would expect from placing together the work of different authors.

11 *Arabica* 58 (2011) 210-299.
12 Published as *Sayr-i tahawwul-i Qurʾān*. Bazargan had performed this analytical exercise whilst in prison in pre-revolutionary Iran. He would become Iran’s first post-revolution prime minister, but resigned his office following the Iran revolutionary guard’s acquiescence in the seizing of the US embassy in 1979.
As Sadeghi concludes:

‘... What could one conclude about the Qur’an’s composition just from the formal, stylistic patterns observed?

One would conclude that the style backs the hypothesis of one author. For the sake of argument, suppose there were two authors: let’s say A wrote Groups 1-11 [of Bazargan’s twenty two text blocks] and B wrote 12-22. Then one would have to say that the style of A moved along a trajectory towards that of B or that B picked up from where A stopped, with respect not only to verse length but also the frequencies of the most common words and the frequencies of uncommon words. It is much easier to imagine a single author.

Furthermore, if one assumed three, four or more authors instead of two, the improbability would increase exponentially... ‘

Section conclusion from II Stylometric analysis of the Qur’an

2. Although the content of the Qur’an may derive from multiple original sources, it appears that at least the final stage of its composition into rhyming verse was conducted by one person over a substantial period of time.
III The Qur’an’s source material

Biblical allusions in the Qur’an

The Qur’an contains very many references to Biblical figures and stories including from the Talmud Adam, Noah, Lot, Abraham, Isaac, Ismail, Jacob, Joseph Moses and Aaron, Samuel Solomon David, Jonah and Job and, from the New Testament, Zacharias, Mary and Joseph, John the Baptist and, clearly of special significance, Jesus.

It appears to be no coincidence that no women are named in the Qur’an other than for Mary the mother of Jesus, even where their name would be expected (eg Eve).

Unlike the Hebrew and Christian bibles that place these figures into a chronological context, the Qur’an does not tell these characters’ stories in a continuous narrative (with the sole exception of Joseph who has his story told from beginning to end in Surah 12). Instead the biblical allusions are partial and fragmentary.

For example, Moses is introduced to readers of the Qur’an in Surah 2:

47. O children of Israel, Remember my blessing which I bestowed upon you and that I favoured you above the worlds.

48. And be mindful of a day when no soul will avail another soul in any way, and no intercession shall be accepted from it, nor ransom taken from it; nor shall they be helped.

49. And remember when we delivered you from the House of Pharaoh who inflicted a terrible punishment upon you, slaying your sons and sparing your women.

And in that was a great trial from your Lord.

50. And when we parted the sea for you and so delivered you and drowned the House of Pharaoh as you looked on.

51. And when we appointed forty nights for Moses and you took up the calf while he was away, while you were wrongdoers.

52. Then We pardoned you after that that haply you may give thanks.

Listeners who are familiar with the biblical Book of Exodus will immediately appreciate the significance of the references to the enslavement of the Israelites, the parting of the Red Sea, the wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites’ lapse into idolatry with their creation of a golden calf idol whilst Moses’ ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. However, to a person who was not already familiar with the biblical story, this passage would be all but meaningless.
Traditional approaches to Biblical allusions in the Qur’an

Although the accounts in the Qur’an of stories involving biblical figures are generally broadly similar to the narrative of those figures in the Bible, there are many also differences.

i Muslim

On points where a Quranic verse accords with a passage of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament a Muslim is likely to say such an agreement is unsurprising, since they derive from the same two sources: historical fact and revelation from God.

Where the scriptures differ, that same Muslim is likely to say that such differences also should be expected, since part of the purpose of the Qur’an is to correct earlier errors and corruption in the transmission of God’s message.

ii Non-Muslim

For non-Muslims, on the other hand, it was long assumed that biblical stories reflected in the Qur’an were due, not to divine revelation, but to Mohammed having gained some imperfect knowledge of biblical traditions from his surrounding milieu. This did not seem implausible given that:

all three of the major powers surrounding Arabia – Byzantium to the north west, the Sassanid (Persian) Empire to the north east and Axum (modern Ethiopia) to the west – were all predominantly Christian in the fifth and sixth centuries;

the traditional Islamic narrative talks of a significant Jewish presence on the Arabia Peninsula at that time of Mohammed;

the biographies of Mohammed record Mohammed as having various contacts with Christians (including Waraka ibn Naufel, his Christian cousin in law.)

St John of Damascus, who gives the earliest account of Mohammed’s teachings, suggests he:

“having chanced upon the Old and New Testaments and likewise, it seems, having conversed with an Arian monk ... devised his own heresy.”

Later the figure of this Arian monk came to be adopted by both Muslim biographers and anti-Muslim polemists, both of whom gave him the name Bahira (alternatively Sergius). The former developed a pious legend that Bahira foretold Mohammed’s future greatness to Mohammed’s uncle, Abbas, during a chance stop on a trade caravan.

Consequently, where Quranic and biblical stories agree, a non-Muslim might readily ascribe this to Mohammed having adopted stories already well known in Judeo-Christian culture. And where they diverged, these differences may be attributed to errors and gaps in Mohammed’s knowledge, or to his changing the story to suit his ends. There is evidence of both these phenomena at play.

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13 See Part V below and Appendix 2.
14 Ibn Hesham, part 1.
Reliance on sources other than the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the Gospels

Comparison of the Qur’an with ancient Christian and Jewish has revealed that it contains many elements that differ or add to biblical stories that reveal that the Qur’an is partially derived from sources that one would not expect a person such as the Mohammed of tradition to have either knowledge of or use for.

These sources include:

- non-canonical commentaries, law texts and homilies of Jewish and Christian writers, and
- completely non-religious sources (such as the Legend of Alexander the Great).

The fullest documentation of these to date is The Qur’an and the Bible (2018) by Gabriel Said Reynolds. This work takes the form of the full text of the Qur’an annotated with references to its Judeo-Christian source material - canonical or otherwise - wherever this has come to light.

Examples of the Qur’an ‘borrowing’ from non-canonical sources are very many and include the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qur’an story/detail not in the Bible</th>
<th>Non-canonical source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A raven teaching Cain (who is unnamed in the Qur’an) how to bury the body of his brother Abel, {5.31}.</td>
<td>Rabbinic commentaries of \textit{Pirque Eliezer ben Hyrcanus} (1st–3rd centuries)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob turning blind with grief after being told that his son Joseph had died, {12.84}, and Joseph’s innocence of attacking Potiphar’s wife being proven by his robe having been torn from behind, {12.26-28}.</td>
<td>\textit{Syriac History of Joseph} (6th century), and commentary on Genesis written by St Ephrem the Syrian (4th century) quoted in the writings of Jacob of Serugh (c.451-521), respectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Queen of Sheba mistaking a glass floor in Solomon’s palace for water, {27.15-45};</td>
<td>\textit{Second targum} (Aramaic translation and Rabbinic commentary) of \textit{the Book of Esther}.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Description</td>
<td>Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph’s random selection (‘the casting of arrows’) from a group of men to marry</td>
<td><em>The Protoevangelum / Gospel of James</em> (2nd century).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary, {3.44}.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The newly born infant Jesus’ miraculous creating a spring for his mother’s</td>
<td><em>The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew/ Infancy Gospel of Matthew</em> (600-625).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refreshment, and his ordering trees to offer their fruit to her, {19.23-24}.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A young Jesus making clay models of birds, then bringing them to life, {5.110}.</td>
<td><em>The Infancy Gospel of Thomas</em> (before 185).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The story of the ‘sleepers in the cave’, pious youths who had taken shelter from</td>
<td>A Christian legend, <em>The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus</em>, first known to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>persecution to be placed in hibernation by God and awakened many years later when</td>
<td>have been recorded by Jacob of Sereugh (450-521).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the danger had passed, {18.10.12}.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The story of Dhu’l Qarnayn building a wall of iron and brass across a valley to</td>
<td>The early seventh century <em>Legends of Alexander the Great</em>, (with whom Dhu’l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hold back the tribes of Gog and Magog, {18.94-98}.</td>
<td>Qarnayn, ‘the two horned one’, is generally associated), building on an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>earlier association of Gog and Magog (who appear in the Books of Ezekiel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Revelations) with Alexander first made by <em>Josephus</em> (1st century).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The story of ‘al-Khidr’, in the Qur’an an unnamed servant of God, who teaches a</td>
<td>A story attributed to <em>John Moschus</em> (d. 619) in which an angel teaches a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>young Moses about wisdom, by sinking a ship, killing a child and building a wall</td>
<td>monk about wisdom, by killing a boy and building a wall, later offering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for no apparent reason, only to disclose afterwards his reasons based upon his</td>
<td>explanations that are almost identical to those offered by the Qur’an’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge of future events {16.65-82}.</td>
<td>Servant of God.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.32: ‘Whoever slays a soul ... slays the whole world’

One of the most oft-quoted (and misquoted) verses of the entire Qur’an is shown to derive from a Talmudic commentary:

**Surah 5 The Table Spread**

32: “For this reason We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whoever slays a soul - unless it be for another soul or for working corruption on the earth – it is as though he slew mankind altogether and whoever saves the life of one, it is as though he saved the life of mankind altogether “

**Misrah Sanhedrin**

(3rd century)

“For so we have found concerning Cain that he slew his brother for it is written ‘the bloods_of_your_brother cry’ [to God]. It says not the ‘blood’ of your brother but the ‘bloods’ of your brother. His blood and the blood of his posterity ...

For this reason man was created one and alone in the world to teach that whoever destroys a single soul is regarded as though he destroyed a complete world and whoever saves a soul is regarded as though he saved a complete world”.
Apparent errors in the Qur’an’s recounting of biblical stories

There are several discrepancies between the Hebrew and Christian bibles on the one hand and the Qur’an on the other that appear to be mere errors by the author of the latter. For instance:

- The identification in the Qur’an of Imran as the father of Maryam, mother of Jesus {3.35}, and the reference to her as ‘sister of Aaron’ {19.29} both suggest that the author confused Maryam, mother of Jesus her with Miriam, the daughter of Amran and sister to Aaron and Moses in the Book of Exodus. This is a spectacular error since anyone with the most rudimentary knowledge of the Bible must have realised that the lives of Jesus and Moses were separated by centuries.

- The Qur’an repeatedly, {6.84, 11.71, 19.49, 21.72, 29.27}, presents Jacob as a third son of Abraham, mentioned immediately after Isaac, whereas in the book of Genesis Jacob is Isaac’s son.

- {2.249} recounts an episode in which King Saul instructs his fighters not to lap water straight from a stream but rather to lift the water up to their lips with their hands: a very similar story\textsuperscript{15} appears in the Torah, but it involves Gideon.

- An individual called Haman is referred to in three surahs as a servant of Pharaoh {{28.6-8, 38, 29.39} and 40.24} apparently confused with Haman (who appears in the Book of Esther) who served Ahasuerus, king of Persia.

- {9.30} states:

  \textit{“The Jews say that Ezra is the son of God”. Those are the words form their mouths They resemble the words of those who believed before God curse them! How they are perverted!”}

  although there is no record that any sect of Judaism has ever made such a claim.

- In both {5.75} and {5.116} the author of the Qur’an appears to think that Christians believe the Holy Trinity includes Mary rather than the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Judges 7.5

\textsuperscript{16} Surah 5. 73. “They certainly disbelieve, those who say:

‘Truly God is the third of three, whilst there is no god save the one God’... 75. The Messiah, son of Mary was naught but a messenger – messengers have passed away before him. And his mother was truthful. Both ate food. Behold how We make the signs clear to them yet behold how they are perverted!”

116 “O Jesus, son of Mary, did thou say unto mankind:
Errors and omissions in drawing on non-canonical sources

The Qur’an also makes errors and omissions in the recounting of non-canonical stories that make it appear that its author did not fully appreciate the significance of the stories he was retelling. For example:

- In the story of the sleepers in the cave, reference is made to the sleepers having money, a fact that is irrelevant to the Qur’an’s retelling of the story, but which in the original provides the means (in the image of the Emperor Decius, the boys’ persecutor, on the coins) for their discovery how long they had been asleep.

- In the apocryphal story of Jesus giving life to clay birds this was to avoid his being scolded for creating the models on the Sabbath. This is an element that gives a meaning to the story which one would expect the Qur’an author to sympathise with (since the Qur’an elsewhere dismisses the sabbath as a test and punishment imposed upon the Jews for their disbelief) but which is missing from the Qur’an story.

- In the story of Joseph, when Benjamin was accused of theft, his ten half-brothers insinuated that he might be guilty because he came from a dishonest stock:

  ‘They said: ‘If he has stolen, a brother of his has stolen aforetime.’ (12.77).

However there is no tradition of Joseph having ever been accused of theft. In the Syriac History of Joseph, however, it is said that Benjamin’s brothers disowned him as: ‘the son of a thief and the brother of a liar’. Reynolds observes that Joseph’s and Benjamin’s mother, Rachel had (in Genesis 31.34-5) taken and hidden her father’s idol and suggests that “The Qur’an seems to conflate the two originally distinct insults the son of a thief and the brother of a liar’ into one’

III The Qur’an’s source material

‘Take me and my mother as gods apart from God’?

He said:

‘Glory be to Thee It is not for me to utter that which I have no right. Had I said it thou wouldst surely have known it. Thou knowest what is in Thyself and I know not what is in Thyself. Truly it is thou Who knowest best the things unseen.’”
Apparent deliberate distortion of biblical stories by the Qur’an author

In addition to apparent errors, it is also clear that many of the retellings of biblical stories in the Qur’an, along with three tales involving non-biblical figures, apparently from Arabian folklore, Hud, Saleh and Shuaib, presents a frequently recurring pattern that one might call a ‘punishment narrative’. This motif consists of three parts:

1. A prophet instructs their people to adopt monotheism, acknowledge him as a prophet and be ‘righteous’.
2. The people reject the warning, often mocking the prophet as a liar or insane.
3. God wreaks divine vengeance on the disbelieving people, saving only the prophet.

The punishment narrative motif is particularly significant in the figure of Noah as he appears in the Qur’an. The Flood story is referred to on seven occasions in the Qur’an (although the flood itself is only described in two of these). In each the clear emphasis of the story is upon Noah attempting to warn ‘his people’ of the imminent disaster only to be rejected and mocked. However, this preaching is entirely absent from the account of Noah in Genesis, where there is no report of any warning having been given to anyone other than Noah, and the emphasis is upon the salvation of Noah.

Furthermore, not only does the Qur’an refute Jesus’ crucifixion (see below) but in {61.14} Jesus and his disciples are said to have prevailed over their enemies: a clear reversal of the fundamental Gospel narrative.

**Surah 61 ‘The Ranks’**

14 O you who believe!

Be helpers of God just as Jesus, son of Mary, said to his apostles: ‘Who are my helpers unto God?’

The apostles relied ‘We are helpers unto God.’

Then a group from the children of Israel believed and a group disbelieved. So we strengthened those who believed against their enemies and they came to prevail.

The obvious morale of these narratives is that God will wreak vengeance upon a people who do not heed his prophet. This theme is repeated frequently throughout the Qur’an, with little more than the names of the prophets and the nature of the punishment changing. The morale would be of such obvious advantage to any self-proclaimed prophet struggling to stir up anxiety in his audience of the consequences should they reject him, that it would be naïve not to conclude that biblical stories and Arab lore were not being adopted and adapted in a deliberate attempt to frighten listeners into accepting the author’s authority as prophecy.
Section conclusion from *III The Qur’an’s source material*

3. Some passages of the Qur’an were originally composed by a person, who was familiar not merely the Bible, but a wide range of non-canonical Jewish and Christian religious literature.

4. However, the Qur’an reflects numerous basic errors and gaps in the author’s knowledge of the biblical stories and the non-canonical sources.

5. Some passages of the Qur’an, in particular the ‘punishment narratives’ and {61.14} clearly show deliberate changes to biblical stories, and their presentation alongside tales from Arabic folklore, in order to bolster the position of a prophet trying to manipulate his audience.

It is interesting that whilst there are many incidents of punishment narratives adapting biblical stories to assist a would-be prophet attempting to gather adherents, the very many exhortations in the Qur’an for believers to wage *jihad* in God’s name\(^\text{17}\) are given with relatively little reliance on the war stories of Saul, David and Joshua that one might have expected.

Therefore, one might add a further conclusion:

**The Qur’an makes little use of biblical stories to support its call for *jihad*.**

\(^{17}\) Over a hundred and sixty verses supporting ‘*jihad*’ are listed in *The Qur’an as it was Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 2 Jihad*, IRG.
IV Quranic Themes

Main Quranic themes

The Qur’an contains a number of general themes, including:

❖ Promotion of strict monotheism, and a repeated rejection of the sin of ‘shirk’, the association of worldly things with God,

❖ subservience of the individual will to divine authority expressed in:

   i. the Sharia (literally ‘path’, commonly ‘law’) set out in the Qur’an including:

      • precise, although not always clear, laws on marriage, divorce, inheritance, and the punishment of certain prohibited conduct,

      • ritual obligations (fasting, pilgrimage, prayers, etc)

      • a social hierarchy of relationships in which slavery is regulated and praised, women are consistently afforded a subservient role to men (and sexual intercourse consistently presented as the satisfaction of male lust over women with no autonomy over their participation), and justice can be family based;

   ii. and the instructions and imitation of the ‘Messenger of God’.

❖ General exhortations to its audience to show virtues such as generosity, honesty (especially in trusts and transactions), respect for others’ privacy, forbearance and forgiveness in their personal relationships with others.

❖ enmity to the following classes of unbelievers described as:

   1. kuffar –literally ‘those who cover up (the truth)’,
   2. ‘mushrikun’ – literally ‘those who associate (worldly things with God)’,
   3. Hypocrites

whom believers are repeatedly forbidden from taking as allies or treating them equally with fellow believers, and against whom believers are instructed in over a hundred and fifty verses to wage ‘jihad’
Repeated warnings of divine punishment both on earth (see *Punishment narratives* above) and after death or on the Last Day, with graphic depictions of the Hellfire, and corresponding blessings on earth and rewards in Gardens of Paradise.

The criteria for salvation is never clearly expressed, with the Qur’an variously promising it to:

- those who believe,
- those who submit \(\{49.14\}\),
- those who do good works \(\{52.21, 74.38, 99.7-8\}\),
- those who believe and do good works \(\{4.12-14, 5.9, 16.97, 42.26, 103.3\}\), and
- those who avoid ‘grave’ sins \(\{5.65, 8.29, 29.7, 47.2, 48.5, 64.9, 65.5\}\);

or suggesting that it may be granted, at God’s discretion, to those who repent \(\{2.105, 4.17, 66.8\}\).

The only clear promise of salvation in Quranic soteriology is the ‘bargain’ that immediate entry to Paradise is promised to those who die fighting jihad \(\{61.12\}\).

**The Jews**

The Qur’an is frequently said to confirm the Book the Torah and Injeel (normally translated as ‘gospel’) as it had been ‘sent down’ by God.

However, Jewish people themselves are often referred to in derisive terms and, in contradiction to the confirmation of the Torah, accused of altering its provisions.

Some see in this, and in the Qur’an’s retelling of Old Testament stories, a shift in emphasis away from the Torah’s central theme of the covenants between God and the Jews as God’s chosen people, to the importance of universal obedience to the Mosaic law, or a variation of it, and the honouring of God’s appointed messengers, independently from the people they preached to. That is, a shift in emphasis ‘from patriarchy to prophesy’.

**Christology**

The role of Jesus in the Qur’an is one of its most intriguing aspects. Clearly Jesus is an extremely important figure, more than merely one in a series of prophets, with chapters named after his mother and (presumed) grandfather. The Qur’an agrees with the gospels that Jesus:

- was born of a virgin \(\{3.47\text{ and }19.21\}\),
- performed miracles including healing the sick and resurrecting the dead \(\{5.110\}\).
Interestingly it also:

• refers to Jesus:
  ▪ eight times as the Messiah \( \{3.45, 4.171-2, 5.17, 5.72, 5.75, 9.30-31\} \),
  ▪ at least twice as the Word of God \( \{3.45\} \) and \( \{4.171\} \) (also possibly \( \{19.34\} \)) and
  ▪ in \( \{4.171\} \), equates him with 'a Spirit from God':
    
    'Verily the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and his Word which he committed to Mary, and a Spirit from him',

• associates him three times with the Holy Spirit, and

• describes his revelation as the 'Injeel' - 'the gospel' (strangely in the singular, although Christianity recognises four canonical gospels),

• foretells that he shall return to earth to herald the imminent judgment of God on the Last Day ('he is indeed a portent of the Hour', \( \{43.61\} \)).

However, the Qur’an appears to deny that Jesus was crucified \( \{5.72\} \) (‘appears to’ because it has been pointed out that \( \{5.72\} \) could be read to deny only that it was the Jews that had crucified him). Most importantly, it utterly rejects, including at \( \{4.171, \text{Surah 5: 17, 72-77 and 116-8, Surah 9: 30-31, 17.111, 19.34-38, 43.57-59}\} \) and \( \{112.1-4\} \), the Christian belief in the divinity in Jesus, and \( \{5.73\} \) and \( \{4.171\} \) the Holy Trinity.

Christology had been a highly controversial subject in the early church. The Western Church expressed the divinity of Jesus in clear terms at the First Council of Nicaea (325), refuting the Arian heresy that he was a creation of God and adopted the formula that Jesus had one nature that was both fully human and fully divine at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. These articles of faith have subsequently come to define Christianity, but were highly controversial in their time.

There were, in late antiquity, a wide range of followers of Jesus, who revered him as the promised Jewish messiah but rejected the Chalcedon formula. One such movement comprised a group condemned by the mainstream church as ‘Ebionites’ or ‘Nazarenes’. Little is known of them but they appear to be the descendants of Jesus’s Jewish followers, who had not only rejected the Council of Chalcedon formula, but also the decision of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts of the Apostles 15) that Christianity was open to non-Jews, who were not to consider themselves bound by the Mosaic law.

These sects are known to have compiled several ‘Hebrew gospels’, all of which are now lost other than for short excerpts quoted by the church fathers (always referring to them in the
singular as ‘the Hebrew gospel’) to condemn them for their heresy. The traditional narratives of the circumstances in which the Qur’an was announced has Mohammed well acquainted with Jews and coming into occasional contact with Christians. According to a hadith account, the second person whom Mohammed told about his revelations was his wife, Khadija’s, cousin, Waraqa bin Nawfal who, during the Pre-Islamic Period became a Christian and used to write the writing with Hebrew letters. He would write from the Gospel in Hebrew as much as Allah wished him to write.\footnote{See the Priest and the Prophet, 2005, Joseph Azzi; also Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam, 2015.}

It is suggested that through:

- their reverence of Jesus but rejection of his divinity,
- their preaching of the strict observance of the Mosaic law
- their possession of a single gospel, presumably written in Hebrew, the Jewish-Christian Ebionites/Nazara - or a group with similar views - may well have been the original source of the Qur’an’s Judeo-Christian theology. The similarity of the name ‘Nazarenes’, applied to one of these sects to ‘Nasara’, the term used for Christians in the Qur’an, seems to offer some corroboration of this connection.\footnote{See the Priest and the Prophet, 2005, Joseph Azzi; also Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam, 2015.}

It is notable that whilst the term ‘mushrikun’ (literally ‘associator’) is generally translated as ‘pagan’, ‘polytheist’ or ‘idoler’, in fact the use of the word ‘association’ is inappropriate to describe such people, who, presumably do not associate their idols with believe in a single all powerful God. The term seems far more apposite as a pejorative description of the belief in Jesus as the Son of God.

## Pagan themes

Although the Qur’an’s overriding theme is Judeo-Christian or Arabic monotheism, some verses seem to express beliefs or encourage practices that seem likely to have pagan origins:

- The jinn are referred to in several verses of the Qur’an (15.15-27, 34, 72.1-11), although belief in such independent supernatural creatures can be found in Jewish lore, the jinn, with their eavesdropping into heaven, and capacity to eat, engage in sexual intercourse, work, suffer pain and humiliation, sin or be virtuous and make mistakes, appear more pagan in than any equivalent creature in the Hebrew bible – and inconsistent with mainstream Christianity.

- The ka’aba towards which Muslims face when they pray, following the traditional understanding of (2.144), includes, set in one corner, fragments of a mysterious glassy black stone. An implausible pious legend in which Mohammed as a young man, happened to be randomly selected to put the stone in place following a restoration of the Ka’aba, seems to provide a potent echo of a strand of paganism in Islam’s origins.
In the following section, it will be argued that much of the traditional Islamic narrative is incorrect. However, it is not here disputed that Mecca has some role in the foundation of Islam.

The ‘changing of the Qibla’ verse, if it involved, as it is suggested seems likely, the changing of the direction towards which Muslims pray from the site of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem towards the pagan Mecca - ‘a direction more pleasing’ to the early believers - has the look of permitting a concession to accommodate pagan followers.

- The occasional reference to ‘sacred months’ including months of truce

> *They ask you about the sacred month, abought fighting therein ... fighting therein is a great sin, but averting people from the way of Allah and disbelief in him ... is a greater evil* {2.217}

> *when the sacred months have passed, slay the mushrikun wherever you find them* {9.5} and

and fasting {2.183}, also seems indicative of a non-Judeo Christian outlook.

**Section conclusion from IV Qur'anic themes**

6. The Qur’an’s theology appears to stem from a Christian tradition, but one that

- does not accept Jesus as in any way the son of God
- confirms the continued applicability of parts of the Mosaic law.

It seems to share this outlook with Jewish-Christian sects such as the Ebionites or Nazarenes, but too little is known of these groups to make a detailed comparison.

7. The Qur’an also appears to accommodate some beliefs that seem rooted in paganism, possibly in the context of an apparent concessions to early followers, rather than forming the core of its message.
V The geography of Mecca

Parts of the Qur’an are composed against a background of conflict over a place generally called ‘Masjid al Haram’ (translatable as the ‘sacrosanct place of worship’), alternatively called ‘the mother of all cities’. From this holy place, the Qur’an’s composer and audience felt they had been unjustly expelled, establishing a new base at a place referred to as ‘madinah’ (‘the town’ or ‘city’- although the word may possibly be derived from ‘din’ meaning faith).

Traditionally these two locations are identified with Mecca and modern Medina, formerly called Yathrib, respectively. Each of these places is named once in the Qur’an: Mecca at {48.24} (in which it appears in the phrase ‘the belly of Mecca’, suggesting, some say, a geographical region rather than a specific settlement) and Yathrib at {33.13}.

The traditional description of Mecca in the story of Mohammed is that it was a trading centre and an ancient and important site of pilgrimage, with a sanctuary precinct around a structure the Kaaba.

Cryptic verses in the Qur’an are explained in Islamic tradition by the beliefs that:

- Mecca is the place where Adam and Eve descended to earth following their expulsion from Paradise,
- the Ka’aba is said to have been built by Abraham and Ishmael

Neither of these stories is known from pre-Islamic period, and they seem suspiciously convenient for giving a Judeo-Christian gloss to Islam’s geographical focus on a pagan shrine, incorporating the ‘black stone’.

As with the practice of Islam itself, Mecca’s late appearance in the historical record is found by many to be highly significant. Despite its apparent importance to the Mohammed narrative and the supposed devotion to Islam by the Arabs after Mohammed’s death, other than for its solitary reference in the Qur’an, there has been no certain reference to the existence of a place called Mecca found on any map or in any text until 741, more than a century after the supposed death of Mohammed.

19 Imams and Emirs, 1990, Khuri, p.28
20 Prof. Sean W Anthony has suggested that a name identifiable as Mecca appears in the Geography, of Ananias of Sirak (600-70), the Edessene Apocalypse (690s) and the writings of John bar Penkaye (c.687). The author has not been able to assess these sources yet. Prof. Anthony’s also asserts:

- the Khuzestan Chronicle (660) includes a reference to ‘the Dome of Abraham’ where Arabs ‘pray and offer sacrifices’ (although its location is not given),
- the fourth letter of Jacob of Edessa to John the Stylite refers to ‘emigrants’ (Muhajirun) praying towards the Ka’aba (also without saying where that is), and
- in a piece of Arabian rock graffiti in the region of Tabouk, beginning ‘There is no god but God, and muhammed is His messenger’ a pilgrim seeks guidance and forgiveness from God, and dates his inscription ‘in the year the sacred mosque was built’ (possibly meaning rebuilt) in the year 78 [i.e.697-
Mohammed. Moreover, that first reference does not seem to refer to a location on the Arabian Peninsula. This reference appears in the Continuatio Byzantii Arabica, a chronicle maintained in the Seville, and refers to a battle fought between one Habdemale and his father Habdella:

“At Mecca, Abraham’s House as they [the Arabs] believe which lies between Ur in Chaldea and Carras, a city in Mesopotamia in a wasteland (alternatively desert)”

In Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam (1987), Patricia Crone argues, it is generally thought by scholars convincingly, that Mecca, lying as it does deep in the Arabian desert, could not possibly have lain on any major trade route.

Moreover, despite – or, for the conspiratorially-minded researchers, because of - extensive modern building work around the Kaaba to accommodate the vast numbers of pilgrims making the annual Hajj pilgrimage, not a single archaeological object or trace of habitation from Mohammed’s time or earlier has ever been discovered.

Supposedly Meccan epithets in the Qur’an

The Qur’an contains a number of epithets for geographical locations that are traditionally treated by Muslims as references to Mecca or to the Kaaba.

**i. The ‘House’ of Abraham at Bakkah**

{3.96-7, 2.125-8} and {14.37}

Three passages of the Qur’an refer, in the context of the life of Abraham, to a House/Sacred House that was:

- ‘the first house established for mankind’ at Bakkah (sometimes also translated as Makka) {3.96},
- built on a foundation raised by Abraham and Ishmael {2.127} in an uncultivated valley {14.37} that was chosen by Abraham to settle his progeny {2.128, 14.37},
- which offers security to those who enter it {3.97}, and
- is a place of pilgrimage, prayer, circumambulation, bowing and prostration, and in relation to which Abraham prayed for ‘fruit’ {2.128, 14.37}.

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698, see An Inscription mentioning the rebuilding of Al Masjid al Haram 78AH/697-698, Islamic Awareness website.

21 Cited in in Early Islam, A Critical Reconstruction Based on Contemporary Sources, ed. K-H Ohlig. A review of other ancient sources was conducted by Prof. Sean W Anthony:
The references to the ‘House’ being a place of pilgrimage, circumambulation, bowing and prostrating resonates strongly with the image of Mecca as we now know it today. But Abraham is said in the Book of Genesis\textsuperscript{23} to have been led by God from ‘Ur of the Chaldees’, probably located around southern Iraq, to Canaan which was promised to his progeny. This route, already a significant journey undertaken by foot, would require a two thousand mile detour to take in Mecca. The text of the Qur’an offers no grounds for the connection of Bakkah with Mecca, nor any explanation as to how or why Abraham might have found himself in Southern Arabia.

Moreover, whilst the association of Mecca with the house of Abraham accords with the information given in Meccas first extra-Quranic reference in Continuatio Byzantia Arabica (see above) this reference clearly places Mecca ‘between Ur in Chaldea and Carras, a city in Mesopotamia’, on Abraham’s route, but far from modern Mecca.

\textit{ii. ‘The Mother of Cities, and those around her’, \{6.92\} and \{42.7\}\textsuperscript{24}}

The Qur’an contains two reference to ‘the Mother of Cities and those around her’. The title is generally taken by Muslims as an honorific term for Mecca. However whilst the context offers no clues to the location of the Mother of Cities, the grandiose title seems to implicitly suggest a large metropolis surrounded by smaller towns and cities- wholly inappropriate for Mecca, which was, even according to the traditional Islamic narrative, a modestly sized trading and pilgrimage site in a remote location, which, unlike many other ancient middle eastern cities, has no surviving early architecture, and which was unrecorded by the wider world.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{23} 11.28-31
\textsuperscript{24} Surah 6
\end{flushright}

\textbf{92.} “And this is a blessed Book that we have sent down confirming that which came before it, \textit{that thou mayest warn the Mother of Cities and those around her…”}

\textbf{Surah 42}

\textbf{7.} “This we have revealed unto thee an Arabic Qur’an \textit{that thou mayest warn the Mother of Cities and those around it and that thou mayest warn of the day of gathering in which there is no doubt…”}
iii. Masjid al Haram (the Forbidden Mosque/the Sacred Sanctuary)

{Surah 2: 144, 149, 150 192, 196 and 217};
{Surah 5: and 95-97};  {8.34}  {Surah 9: 7, 19 and 28},
{17.1  22.25, 48.25 and 48.27}

Thirteen verses of the Qur’an refer to a place described as the ‘masjid al haram’, where ‘masjid’ means a place of worship (often translated as ‘mosque’, but also used for ‘church’ by Christian Arabs); and where ‘haram’ means ‘forbidden’ (supposedly meaning where violence is forbidden) or ‘sacrosanct’. These include verses extremely important for the traditional Mohammed narrative:

{17.1} The account of Mohammed’s miraculous night journey to the ‘farthest mosque’ – traditionally placed at Jerusalem - from whence he ascended to heaven;

{2.191} said to be the first permission granted by God to Muslims to fight the Meccans who had denied them access to the Masjid al Haram;

{2.217} said to have retrospectively approved Muslims fighting during the traditional months of truce, following their first successful raid on a Meccan caravan at Naklah, carried out during the truce month;

{2.142-150} the setting of a new qibla (‘direction’) normally understood as the direction in which Muslims pray [of which more will be said below]

{9.18} The statement that performing acts of kindness for pilgrims is of less value than making jihad in the cause of God; and

{9.28} The barring of idolaters from coming near the haram al masjid.
Geographical differences between the setting for events in the traditional Islamic narrative and Mecca

Revisionist historians have observed that the topography, vegetation and other geographical features attributed to the ‘Mecca’ of the traditional Islamic narrative are missing from Mecca.

**Topography**

In the Qur’an Mecca is described as lying in a valley (\(48.24\)).

The traditional Islamic literature (sira and hadith) describe this valley as having two entrances, an upper and lower one, that are described as thaniya (meaning mountainous pass).  

In an account of a story told concerning Mohammed’s grandfather, Abdul Muttalib, in relation to God smiting an invading army from Yemen, who had with them an elephant, the location of Mecca is described as being close to steep sided mountains where the Meccans retreated, and from where they were able to look down upon the invaders.  

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25 Sahih Bukhari 2.645:

“Narrated Ibn ‘Umar: Allah’s Apostle used to enter Mecca from the high Thaniya and used to leave Mecca from the low Thaniya”

26 This relates to the following incident as recorded in Ibn Ishaq’s *Sirat Rasul Allah*:

“When they left him Abdul Muttalib went back to the Quraysh and having given them the news, ordered them to withdraw from Mecca and take up defensive positions on the peaks and in the passes of the mountains for fear of the excesses of the soldiers…”

Abdul Muttalib then let go of the knocker of the door of the Ka’ba and went off with his Quraysh companions to the mountain tops where they took up defensive positions waiting to see what Abraha would do when he occupied Mecca. In the morning Abraha prepared to enter the town and made his elephant ready for battle and drew up his troops...

When they made the elephant (its name was Mahmud) face Mecca Nufayl bin Habib came up to its flank and taking hold of its ear said: ‘Kneel Mahmud, or go straight back whence you came, for you are in God’s holy land’.

He let go of its ear and the animal knelt and Nufayl made off at top speed for the top of the mountain. ...

Then God sent upon them birds from the sea like swallows and starlings, each bird carried three stones, like peas and lentils, one in its beak and two in between its claws. Everyone who was hit died, but not all were hit. They withdrew in flight, by the way they came, crying out for Nufayl bin Habib to guide them on the way to Yemen. **When he saw the punishment that God had brought down on them Nufayl said:**

“Where can you flee when God pursueth, Al-Ashram is the conquered, not the conqueror.”“
The valley in which Mecca lay may have been **one of two adjacent valleys** as in one hadith Umar is described as camping between two **thaniya** prior to his entering Mecca.\(^{27}\)

Several hadith relate to pilgrims to Mecca, including Mohammed, making a journey between **two mountains, Safa and Marwa**. One hadith refers to a rainwater passage running between these two sites.\(^{28}\)

However,

- although Mecca lies within a mountainous region and the settlement would be visible from nearby mountains, its situation in no way matches the description of being located amongst steep sided mountains and approached by two narrow paths;

- the two ‘mountains’ that are identified with Safa and Marwa of the hadith are in fact rather small rocky mounds and are now contained within the Masjid al Haram mosque complex, linked by a gallery 450 meters long; and

- the nearest ancient watercourses are wadis in the nearby mountains, several miles from the hills identified as ‘Safa’ and ‘Marwa’.

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\(^{27}\) Sahih Bukhari (2.820):

“Narrated Nafi:

Ibn `Umar used to spend the night at Dhi-Tuwa in between the two Thaniyas and then he would enter Mecca through the Thaniya which is at the higher region of Mecca, and whenever he came to Mecca for Hajj or `Umra, he never made his she camel kneel down except near the gate of the Masjid (Sacred Mosque) and then he would enter (it) and go to the Black (stone) Corner and start from there circumambulating the Ka’ba seven times: hastening in the first three rounds (Ramal) and walking in the last four. On finishing, he would offer two rak’at prayer and set out to perform Tawaf between Safa and Marwa before returning to his dwelling place. On returning (to Medina) from Hajj or `Umra, he used to make his camel kneel down at Al-Batha which is at Dhul-Hulaifa, the place where the Prophet used to make his camel kneel down.”

\(^{28}\) Sahih Bukhari 2.685:

“Narrated Ibn `Umar: When the Prophet performed the Tawaf of the Ka’ba, he did Ramal during the first three rounds and in the last four rounds he used to walk and while doing Tawaf between Safa and Marwa, he used to run in the midst of the rain water passage”

Sunan Abu Dawood:

“The Apostle of Allah... came and entered Mecca, and after the Apostle of Allah... had gone forward to the stone, and touched it, he went round the house (the Ka’ba). He then went to as-boafa and climbed it so that he could look down at the house. Then he raised his hands began to make mention of Allah as much as he wished and make supplication.”
Mecca’s topography

1. Photograph of the Kaaba facing north-west, taken before recent building works
   (Al-Sayyid abd al-Ghaffar, 1885-8)

2. Aerial view of Mecca facing east in 1970s

5. Aerial view of Mecca facing south east today
Safa and Marwa in the Masjid al haram
Vegetation

The traditional Islamic literature describe Mohammed as having been a sheep and goat herder in his youth: an activity that requires pastoral land. It also various describes Mecca as having grass,\(^{29}\) trees\(^{30}\) and being a place where grapes grew.\(^{31}\)

Mecca lies in a hot desert and is one of the most arid cities on earth. It does have a spring but this is incapable of supporting fields of grass, suitable for grazing goats and sheep, still less trees and vineyards. It appears self-evident that Mecca could not possibly be the place described in these accounts.

\(^{29}\) Sahih Bukhari 9.337:

“Narrated Aisha: One night the Prophet... was unable to sleep and said, “Would that a righteous man from my companions guarded me tonight.” Suddenly we heard the clatter of arms, whereupon the Prophet... said, “Who is it?” It was said, “I am Sa`d, O Allah’s Messenger...! I have come to guard you.” The Prophet... then slept so soundly that we heard him snoring.

Abu `Abdullah said: “Aisha said: Bilal said, "Would that I but stayed overnight in a valley with Idhkhir and Jalil (two kinds of grass) around me (i.e., in Mecca)." Then I told that to the Prophet”.

\(^{30}\) Ibn Ishaq (72)

“The sons of Ishmael and the sons of Nabit were with their grandfather Mudad bin Amr [al Jurhumi] and their maternal uncles of Jurham - Jurham and Qatura who were cousins being at that time the people of Mecca. They had come forth from Yemen and travelled together and Mudad was over Jurhum and Samyda, one of their men over Qatura. When they left Yemen they refused to go unless they had a king to order their affairs. When they came to Mecca they saw a town blessed with water and trees and delighted with it, they settled there.”

Also: Jami al Timidhi (3626)

“Once when I was with the Prophet in Mecca and we went out into one of its districts in the neighbourhood, not a mountain or tree which confronted him failed to say, “Peace be upon you, Messenger of Allah.”

\(^{31}\) Sahih Bukhari (4.281)

“Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah’s Messenger sent... ten men as spies under the leadership of Asim bin Thabit al-Ansari, the grandfather of Asim bin `Umar Al-Khattab... , when the infidels captured them, they undid the strings of their bows and tied them... They took Khubaib and Ibn Dathina with them and sold them (as slaves) in Mecca (and all that took place) after the battle of Badr. Khubaib was bought by the sons of Al-Harith bin Amir bin Naufal bin Abd Manaf. It was Khubaib who had killed Al-Harith bin Amir on the day of the battle of Badr. So, Khubaib remained a prisoner with those people.

Narrated Az-Zuhri: ... By Allah, I never saw a prisoner better than Khubaib. By Allah, one day I saw him eating of a bunch of grapes in his hand while he was chained in irons, and there was no fruit at that time in Mecca.” The daughter of Al-Harith used to say, “It was a boon Allah bestowed upon Khubaib.”
'The pillar of salt'

The Qur’an contains a reference to the listeners passing by a place associated with the destruction of Sodom daily.

**Surah 37 ‘Those Ranged in Ranks’**

133. “And truly Lot is among the message bearers.

134. Behold! We saved him and his family all together save for an old woman who was among those who lagged behind.

136. Then we destroyed the others.

137. And truly you pass by them in the morning and at night.

Do you not understand?”

In the biblical story, Lot lived in the region of Sodom, which was destroyed, along with neighbouring Gomorrah for the sinfulness of its inhabitants. Lot and his family are enabled to escape, although as they fled Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt for having contravened God’s instruction not to look back. Presumably the account of Lot’s wife is the origin of the rather terse reference to the ‘old woman who was among those who lagged behind’ in the Quranic version.

Genesis locates Sodom on the plain beyond the River Jordan:

13.10 “Lot looked about and saw how well watered the whole Jordan Plain was as far as Zoar, Like the Lord’s own garden, or like Egypt. This was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

11 Lot therefore chose for himself the whole Jordan Plain and set out eastward. Thus they separated from each other.

12 Abram stayed in the lad of Canaan while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain, pitching his tents near Sodom.”

The Quranic reference to its first recipients ‘passing by them’ is somewhat cryptic in that it does not indicate clearly what ‘them’ means. In *The Shadow of the Sword* Tom Holland identified this with the ruins of Safi in Jordan, which overlooks salt flats by the southern tip of the dead Sea and boasts a pillar-like rocky outcrop known locally as ‘Lot’s Wife’. Other

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32 19.24-25
similar geographical features are located at Mount Sodom/Jebel Usdum and at ruins identified as Jericho.

Whatever the precise locus that the Qur’an is referencing it seems overwhelmingly likely to be in the Transjordan area, and there is no proposed site for it associated with Arabia.

‘The Byzantines have been defeated in a land nearby’

Finally, the Surah 30 of the Qur’an begins:

\[\text{Surah 30 ‘The Byzantines’}\]


Yet after being defeated they will prevail [4] within a few years. Unto God belongs the affair, before and after, and on that day the believers will rejoice [5] in God’s Help …”

The Byzantine defeat is generally interpreted as a reference to the ousting of Byzantine forces from Damascus in 613 and Jerusalem in 614, by the Sassanian Empire which ousted it.

‘Nearby’ is, of course, a relative term, but it is doubtful that a resident of Mecca in the early seventh century would regard Damascus, still less, Jerusalem as ‘a place nearby’.

The verse is also curious since it presents a future recovery of Byzantium as occurring ‘with God’s help such that the believers rejoice’: suggesting that within the context of this verse at least, belief in the divinity of Jesus and in the Holy Trinity was regarded as likely to gain God’s favour, despite later verses condemning these beliefs in severe terms.

All the above circumstances support a suggestion that the references in the Qur’an to (i) Abraham’s house at Bakkah, (ii) the ‘Mother of Cities’, (iii) the ‘masjid haram’ and/or (iv) signs of the destruction of Sodom, are inconsistent with the traditional Islamic narrative that all the major events associated with the announcement of the Qur’an occurred in Arabia, in and around Mecca and Medina.
8. There is a strong case for holding that parts of the Qur’an, that according to the traditional Islamic narrative relate to Mecca, in fact refer to somewhere else.

Some allusions (‘the pillar of salt’, ‘the Byzantines defeated in a place nearby’) specifically indicate a location in the Jordan plain.

Such a location away from Mecca would be consistent with the authors of the Qur’an having ready access to Jewish and Syriac Christian non-canonical source material and preaching to a population familiar with biblical stories.
VI The orientation of early mosques

*Quranic Geography* by Dan Gibson

In 2011 a dramatic new claims were made in *Quranic Geography* by Dan Gibson which potentially directly rebut the traditional narrative in its entirely.

Gibson investigated the *qibla*: the direction in which Muslims face when they pray and towards which, consequently mosques are orientated.

By way of Quranic background, {2.115} states:

> “To God belong the East and West wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. God is All encompassing, Knowing.”

The clear implication of this verse is that there is no religious significance in any direction, as God is omnipresent. However in {2.145-50} the Qur’an, whilst using the same formula that appears in {2.155} - ‘To God belong the East and West’ - appears to contradict the purpose of that verse by attaching religious significance to a specific direction and changes that direction away from a location that is not identified in the Qur’an (traditionally held to have been towards Jerusalem) towards the location of the Masjid al Haram (believed by Muslims to be towards the Kaaba in Mecca).

Gibson examined the original orientation of the twelve earliest mosques for which that orientation could be determined, visiting those where to do so was possible, with sophisticated GPS equipment. His results showed that all these mosques did indeed face towards a single place, but that this place was not Mecca. Instead all twelve pointed towards the now-ruined city of Petra in southern Jordan.
Earliest Mosques for which Gibson claimed the original qibla could be determined, all said by Gibson to have been originally orientated towards Petra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mosque Name</th>
<th>Year Reportedly Built</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Huasheng Mosque / Gt Mosque of Canton / 'Lighthouse Mosque’ Guangzhou, China</td>
<td>‘627’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosque of Amr ibn al-As, Fustat, Egypt</td>
<td>641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruins of the Umayyad Palace, Jordan</td>
<td>c.700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruined mosque in Baalbeck, Lebanon</td>
<td>701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Amaan Citadel mosque, Jordan</td>
<td>701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Mosque of Sana’a, Yemen</td>
<td>705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khirbat al-Minya, Gallilee</td>
<td>706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasit Mosque, Iraq</td>
<td>706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Aqsa Mosque, Temple Mount, Jerusalem</td>
<td>706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khirbat al Mafjar, Jericho, West Bank</td>
<td>724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anjar Mosque, near Beirut</td>
<td>724</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dan Gibson proceeds to assert that mosques built between 724 to 754 face a variety of directions. Gibson refers to this as a ‘time of confusion’. However, within this period he discerns a pattern in that:

1. Mosques in northern Palestine and Syria tend to face a point located between Petra and Mecca
2. Mosques in Spain and North Africa tend to face parallel with the line between Petra and Mecca
3. After 731 some mosques face Mecca, the earliest being the Banbhore Mosque, Pakistan, built that year.
Gibson reports that all mosques built after the success of the Abbasid Revolution (750) and the establishment of the Abbasid capital at Baghdad are constructed facing towards Mecca. Gibson’s claims are startling and have yet to be independently endorsed. However, neither have they been reliably challenged.

Gibson supports his claims that Petra, rather than Mecca, is the birthplace of Islam by observing that Petra fits all of the geographical features of the Haram al masjid as described in the Islamic sources:

- It is located within a narrow, steep sided valley, with an upper and lower valley entrance, and adjacent to a parallel valley;
- It has a prominent man-made water channel running from one side of the valley to another, such as Ibn Umar was said to have followed;
- It has trees and fields in the surrounding area consistent with the traditional accounts;
- It boasts spectacular rock hewn buildings that might reasonably earn it a soubriquet such as ‘mother of cities’;
- There are caves in the surrounding hills that show signs, such as devotional carvings, of having been used for religious contemplation, such as that described as having been undertaken by Mohammed; and
- It lies about sixty kilometres from the Dead Sea and features associated with Lot’s Wife and the destruction of Sodom.

9. Gibson’s assertions that all the early mosques point towards Petra, appear credible and are potentially hugely significant to the account of the origins of Islam, but have not been independently certified.

Even setting aside the issue of the early mosque orientations, his analysis of Petra as matching the criteria for the setting of the events traditionally described as occurring in Mecca is potentially significant.
Petra

Narrow entrance to Petra

Caves, some apparently used for religious contemplation.

Watercourse

Two parallel valleys
VII Early ‘Islamic’ Inscriptions

(i) Pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian inscriptions referencing Rahman – and a Zabur Bismillah

Each surah of the Qur’an, other than for Surah 9, begins with the Bismillah:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحิْمِ

‘Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim’.

(In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.)

Both of the attributes associated with God, that are here translated as ‘the Compassionate’ and ‘the Merciful’) derive from the same root ‘r-h-m’. the Qur’an describes God as ‘al-Rahman’ fifty seven times in addition to the Bismillahs.

A number of engravings in rocks in South Arabia, dated to pre-Islamic times, use the term ‘r-h-m’ in this section rendered as ‘Rahman’ as an epithet for God. In all these, the context shows the term ‘rahman’ within a monotheist context, sometimes explicitly Jewish or Christian, including:

“By the Merciful, Lord of the Jews”

“... For their Lord, the Merciful, Master of Heaven, so that he grant to him and his spouses and to his children, the Merciful, to live a life of justice, and to die a death of justice. And that the Merciful grant to him children who are healthy who will fight for the name of the Merciful”

“May the name of the Merciful, who is Heaven be blessed and praised, and Yisrā’il, and their God, the Lord of the Jews, who helped his servant Shahrump.”

Two plausible theories have been proposed for the Bismillah’s absence from Surah 9. This surah to have been the last full surah to have been composed and one theory is that the absence of the words may be a sign that it had not gone through some final finishing editorial process prior to the Qur’an being canonized, possibly related to Mohammed’s death. Alternatively, since 9 includes references to episodes in Mohammed’s later military campaigns, whilst his earlier campaigns such as the Battle of Badr are addressed in Surah 8, it is possible that 8 and 9 both once formed a single surah which would have been the longest in the Qur’an and was later divided for convenience.

34 From ‘LH RHMN To AL-RAHMĀN: The Source Of A Divine Epithet, J. C. Greenfield in Judaism And Islam: Boundaries, Communication And Interaction - Essays In Honor Of William M. Brinner
“By the power of the Merciful One and His Messiah, the king Abraha... So Abraha returned from Haliban by the power of the Merciful One.”

By the power and favour of the Merciful and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit. They have written the inscription: Behold Abraha who has been exalted, the king, the descendent of men of Ge’ez, the ramaijis, Za Bayman, king of Saba’ and Dhu Raydan and Hadramaut and Yamanat and of ‘their’ Arabs on the plateau and in Tihamat

“In the name of the Merciful and, his son Christ, the victorious.”

The word (in pre-Arabic Arabian script) that is rendered ‘Rahman’ / ‘the merciful’ is clearly derived from the Hebrew word raham/rahamim that is used as an epithet for God several times in the Hebrew Bible, with a range of meanings including: ‘womb’, ‘kinship’, ‘relationship’, ‘loving-kindness’, ‘mercy’, ‘compassion’, and ‘nourishing-tenderness’.

It will be noted that two of the inscriptions refer to Abraha. Abraha was a general sent by the King of Aksum in North East Africa (c.525) to defeat the Jewish kingdom of Himyar in Yemen. The Christian kingdom that he established lasted until about the time of the reported birth of Mohammed in 570. Abraha features (although not named) in Surah 105 of the Qur’an, where a supposed assault of Mecca by Abraha was destroyed by God’s wrath, the Meccan defenders being led by Mohammed’s grandfather.

In 2018 it came to light that a further rock inscription had been discovered to include a version of the Bismillah written in a pre-Islamic script (Zabur) and from surrounding evidence has been dated to the sixth century. It has been suggested that this carving may be evidence that the form of the Bismillah predates the year of Mohammed’s first announcement of the Qur’an (traditionally said to be 610).

‘Bism rhmn rhmn’

‘In the name of God, the Merciful the Merciful’


C. Greenfield, see above.

Al’ibar Journal, International scientific periodical journal deals with historical and archaeological studies, 2018 (2)
(ii) Zuhayr and the death of Umar

Incredibly given the reported extent the Arab conquests and the religious zeal that drove them, only a handful of inscriptions have been discovered from the supposed early years of Islamic empire building.

The third oldest piece of evidence of Islam⁴⁰, besides the Qur’an itself, consists of a carving upon a rock in northern Arabia.

> ‘In the name of God
> I, Zuhayr, wrote [this] at the time
> Umar died in the year four and twenty’

Also, separately, nearby:

> ‘I am Zuhayr, mawla of Ibnat Shayba’

Assuming that the inscription is genuine, it corroborates the traditional Muslim date for the death of Umar ibn Al-Khattab, the second caliph, who is said to have been assassinated in the final days of the Islamic year 23.

The inscription invokes God, but gives no further information, concerning the nature and extent of Umar or Zuhayr’s religious beliefs.

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⁴⁰ After the Receipt of Herakleopolis (642), part V and the coin dated year 17 (below).
(iii) The baths of Hammat Gader (662) and the Ta’if Dam (680)

The earliest two relate to Muawiyah, who is remembered as the grandson of Abu Bakr, who deposed Mohammed’s son in law, Ali, and established the Umayyad dynasty. He is, with the possible exception of Mohammed, the first individual from the traditional Islamic narrative to have his existence substantiated by contemporary evidence.

Oddly, the earliest monumental inscription of a purported Muslim incorporates a prominent and unmistakably Christian cross. Written in Greek, it exists on a bathhouse in the ruined Samaritan city of Gadara.

“A.I. In the days of the servant of God Mu’awiya, Amir al-mu’mnin, the hot baths of the people there were saved and rebuilt by ‘Abd Allāh son of Abū Hāshim, the governor, on the fifth of the month of December, on the second day (of the week), in the 6th year of the indiction, in the year 726 of the colony, according to the Arabs, the 42nd year,

for the healing of the sick, under the care of Ioannes, the official of Gadara.”

A second inscription, this time in Arabic, appears on a dam in Tai’f, in Southern Arabia.

“This dam belongs to the servant of God Mu’awiya, Amir al-mu’minin. Abdullah ibn Sakhr built it with God’s leave in the year fifty eight. O God forgive the servant of God Mu’awiya, Amir al-muminin, strengthen him and held him and let the believers profit by him. Amr Habbab wrote this.”

41 Ohlig and G Puin in The Hidden Origins of Islam explain the complex dating system as the Byzantine tax year ‘the sixth year of the indiction’ followed by the ‘era of the city’ (’726’) and finally the year ‘according to the Arabs’, presumably the year following the Islamic Hijah calendar that dates an event in terms of how many series of twelve lunar months have elapsed since Mohammed’s migration to Medina in the spring of 622. Ohlig and Puin calculate this as AD 662/663.

42 Mohammed is said to have had sought to establish himself in Ta’if as an alternative base to Mecca but was chased away pelted with rocks. A decade later, as conqueror of Mecca he besieged Ta’if unsuccessfully, although Ta’if voluntarily surrendered to his authority shortly afterwards.
In addition to the cross, the other significant religious feature of these inscriptions is the reference to Mu’awiya on each, not by the title ‘caliph’ (meaning successor) by which the early Muslim rulers are known today, but as ‘Amir al-mumini’n: the emir of the believers/faithful. The title ‘emir’ has a militaristic connotation and is often translated as ‘commander’ or occasionally ‘prince’ (for example when used in relation to the ruler of an emirate).

Section conclusion from VII Early ‘Islamic’ Inscriptions

10. The Zubur Bismillah suggests that this classic Islamic invocation in fact predates Islam.

11. Umar died in the date allotted to his death in the traditional Islamic narrative.

12 The lack of monuments, architecture and inscriptions from the years of the supposed Rashidun caliphate (632-662) and the rarity of these in the supposed eastern Umayyad caliphate (662-750) suggests that the early Arab conquests did not result in a centrally controlled empire as is often imagined.

[See coins of the Arab conquests below]

13. The juxtaposition of ‘Muawiyah, commander of the faithful’’s name with a cross on the Gadarene bathhouse inscription, suggests that he wished to be projected as a Christian ruler.
VIII The Dome of the Rock

Inscription on outer octagon.

Inscription on inner octagon.

The Temple Mount today

The Al Aqsa ('Furthest') Mosque

Remains of the Second Temple

Artists impression of early Jerusalem and the First Temple built by Solomon.

It is speculated that the 'rock' is the highest natural point of Mount Moriah, selected by Solomon as the site of the Holy of Holies within the First Temple complex.
The fourth earliest inscription from the Arab conquerors is of a markedly different quality to the first three and appears on one of the world’s most recognisable buildings: The internal and external decoration of the Dome of the Rock, an octagonal domed building erected in 692 upon Temple Mount in Jerusalem on the orders of the Muawiya’s son Abd al-Malik.

These inscriptions begin with the Bismillah (see Pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian inscriptions referencing Rahman – and a Zabur Bismillah above) and a variation of the Shahada, normally rendered as:

“In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. There is no god except God alone. He has no partner. Sovereignty belongs to Him and praise belongs to Him. He brings life and He takes life away and He is powerful over every thing.

Mohammed is God’s servant and His apostle. Verily God and His angels bless the prophet…”

The inscription proceeds to include passages of the Qur’an, referring to Jesus and Mary three times in the context of rejecting the doctrine of his divine nature.

“O people of the Book, Do not exaggerate in your religion and speak of God only the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was only the apostle of God and His word which he cast unto Mary and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His apostles and do not say ‘three’...

O God, bless your apostle and your servant, Jesus son of Mary, may peace be upon him on the day he was born and the day he will die and the day he will be resurrected alive.

Thus is Jesus, son of Mary, a statement of the truth that they doubt, It was not for God to take a son, glory be to Him.”

The inscription on the inside of the octagon ends with the first use of ‘Islam’ as a religious designation:

“Verily religion with God is Islam. Those who received the book only differed after knowledge had come to them, due to envy among them Whoever denies the signs of God, God is swift of reckoning”
‘Mohammed’ = ‘He who should be praised’ = Jesus?

In A New Interpretation of the Arabic inscription in Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock, Christoph Luxenberg points out that the Arabic root of the name Mohammed, ‘h-m-d’ (محمد) means ‘to praise’ or ‘to bless’ and the gerundive form of the verb, ‘muhammad’, means ‘may he be blessed’ and proposes the following radical theory:

“The text [on the Dome of the Rock description] begins with the doxology that is called the bismillah in Arabic. This doxology is traditionally understood thus:

‘In the name of the gracious and merciful God’

In the sequence that follows one can see that the second portion of the Shahada, the Islamic creed, so to speak, but only if one takes the gerundive ‘muhammadun’ – ‘the one who should be praised’ – as a personal name. In this context it reads:

‘Muhammad(un) ‘abd(u) iilh(i) wa-rasuluh(u).’

According to the traditional conception one can understand this sentence only thus:

‘Muhammad is the servant of God and His Messenger’

However, when connected with the preceding doxology...the gerundive participle, ‘muhammadub(un)’ which is connected thereunto should be read as:

‘Praised be the servant of God and his messenger.’

Therefore, the text here is not speaking of a person named Muhammad which was made only later metaphorically into a personal name attributed analogically to the prophet of Islam.”

Luxenberg draws a connection with the line from Psalm 118 (most familiar to Christians through its incorporation in the Sanctus of the mass):

‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.’

Luxenberg argues that all six of the apparent references to Mohammed in the Dome of the Rock may be similarly interpreted, and points out that ‘Muhammed/blessed be the servant of God and his messenger’ uses the same words ‘abd’ (‘servant’) and ‘rasul’ (‘messenger’) that are elsewhere on the inscription applied to Jesus (see above).

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44 Normally rendered ‘Ahmad’. The prefix ‘mu’ converts a verb to an actor, as in the familiar examples: ‘s-l-m’ = Salam (peace) or Islam (submission) preceded by an ‘m’ to give Muslim; ‘j-h-d’ = Jihad (struggle) preceded by an ‘m’ to give mujihad or Mujihadin.
The location of the Dome of the Rock

Luxenberg also draws attention to the highly significant location of the building.

Temple Mount is believed by Jews to be the site of the First Temple built by King Solomon, and there is no doubt that it is the site of the Second temple built after the end of the Babylonian captivity, and still visible in the Western wall.

Muslims today believe that the building was erected to mark the spot from which Mohammed ascended to heaven in the miraculous Isra (‘night journey’) described in the Qur’an (17.1):

Surah 17 ‘Al Isra’

1. Glory be to Him Who carried His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the farthest Mosque, whose precincts We have blessed, that we might show him some of Our Sights.

Truly He is the Seer, Hearer.’

According to orthodox Muslim belief, Mohammed travelled to Jerusalem on a supernatural winged horse and from Temple Mount ascended to heaven there to talk to several prophets and God. However, as can be seen the Qur’an reference is extremely brief for such a momentous event, and fails to specify the terrestrial location Mohammed visited as Jerusalem. In fact, setting aside the lack of purpose in God bringing Mohammed to Jerusalem merely to use as a departure point for heaven, Jerusalem makes little sense as the location for the ‘furthest mosque’ (al majid al aqsa’) since there was no worship place on Temple Mount at that time, and there is no category of place for which the adjective ‘furthest’ would be suitable. Indeed, Jerusalem was regarded as the religious focal point of Judeo-Christian world, to which, the traditional Islamic narrative states that Mohammed initially directed his followers to pray towards, making ‘the farthest (place)’ a particularly unlikely way for the Qur’an to have described it.

On the other hand, Luxenberg draws attention to a sixth century Syriac Christian text The Cave of Treasures that places several significant religious events at the location of Temple Mount, which it refers to as Mount Yabos.

“At this location the cross of the Messiah was erected. There grew a tree which bore the lamb that saved Isaac. This point is the centre point of the earth. The grave of Adam, the altar of Melchizadek, Golgotha, the ‘Place of the Skull’ [the scene of the crucifixion of Jesus] and Gabbatha [where Pontius Pilate sentenced Jesus to death]. There David saw the angel with the fiery sword. There Abraham presented his son Isaac as a burnt offering, there he saw the Messiah and the cross and the salvation of our lord, Adam.”
There is an obvious problem with the thesis that Luxenberg’s thesis that the Dome was built over the supposed site of Jesus’ crucifixion, namely that its focus is a slab of bare rock, which would be an impractical place to erect a cross for a crucifixion.

However, it seems more likely that the rock was the original highest point of Mount Moriah, which would present a suitably prominent location to commemorate the near sacrifice of Isaac, and mark as the location of the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the Jewish temples.

It is suggested that the more likely significance of the rock to the builders of the Dome of the Rock is that proposed by his research colleague Karl Heinz Ohlig in ‘From Muhammad Jesus to Prophet of the Arabs, The Personification of a Christological Epithet’:

According to the Apocalypse literature, in the Last Days everything will be concentrated on Jerusalem. After all, it is the Anti-Christ who is ruling there, before he is killed by an angel. The eschatological epiphany of God will happen on Mount Zion. Then Christ comes as a powerful warrior who brings peace to the world. Afterwards all nations go on a pilgrimage to Mount Zion. This tradition remained in force for centuries. The interest in Jerusalem, at that time the religious centre of the world [culminated in the building of the Dome of the Rock].

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45 Published in Early Islam, A Critical Reconstruction Based on Contemporary Sources, ed. K-H Ohlig.
46 In particular, Ohlig refers to the Syriac Apocalypse of Daniel (4th-5th Century)
It will be recalled that the Quran’s accounts of the birth of Jesus are drawn from the apocryphal gospel *The Protevangelium of James* and the story of the miracles of the appearance of the spring and the trees offering Mary their fruit, which derives from a different apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Matthew*.

In *Christmas in the Qur’an: The Quranic Account of Jesus’ Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition* Stephen J. Shoemaker reveals that both these apocryphal stories came together by chance in the history of a pre-Islamic Church of the Kathisma, the ruins of which, half way between Jerusalem and Bethlehem were discovered and excavated in the 1990s.

He points out that these ruins, which reveal the church to have been an octagonal structure centred around an unhewn rock (upon which Mary is said to have rested on her way to Bethlehem), are strikingly similar to the design of the later Dome of the Rock, the earliest surviving building from the Arab conquests. This raises the intriguing prospect that the Quranic accounts of the birth of Jesus and the design of the Dome of the Rock may both derive in some unknown way from this ancient church.

![The Church of the Kathisma](image-url)
Comment

The author is not competent to assess Luxenberg’s technical arguments as to how the word ‘mohammed’ should be interpreted within the Dome of the Rock inscription, but the literal meaning of the word ‘mohammed’ is well attested, and the context of each use of the word within the Dome of the Rock inscription certainly seems consistent with his theory.

The thesis that the Dome of the Rock was constructed as a shrine to Jesus, probably to welcome his return at the Apocalypse, is, it is suggested, strengthened by:

- the remarkable coincidence that a character with Mohammed’s reputed life should have been named “blessed” or ‘he who should be praised’;

- the fact that the inscription mentions Jesus (and Mary) three times each, and Mohammed six times whilst making no mention of:

  - any of the many Hebrew Bible/Old Testament prophets named in the Qur’an, as one might have expected for a monument built upon the site of the Second Temple – the site of the First Temple built by Solomon but has, other than for the claim in Cave of Treasures, no strong connection to Jesus; nor of

  - the ‘isra’ night journey, that is now proposed as the event that the building was raised to commemorate;

- the significance of Temple Mount as the likely place where Jesus will return at the Apocalypse (Jesus’ return to herald the Last Day being attested to in the Qur’an at \(\text{43.61}\)).

- The illogicality of Temple Mount as the location of the ‘Furthest Mosque’ of \(\text{17.1}\).
The Mosque at Nuba

A monumental inscription has recently been discovered in a mosque in the village of Nuba, 16 miles south of Jerusalem, attesting its foundation to Umar, described, like Muawiyah, as *Amir al-mu’minin* (commander of the faithful).

‘In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,
this territory, Nuba, and all its boundaries
and its entire area, is an endowment to
the Rock of Bayt al-Maqdis and the al-Aqsa
Mosque, as it was dedicated by the
Commander of the Faithful,
Umar ibn al-Khattab, for the glory of Allah.

‘*Bayt al Maqdis*’ may be translated as ‘*holy temple*’ and, juxtaposed with reference to the Al-Aqsa Mosque may be taken to refer to the structure known as the Dome of the Rock.

Obviously this inscription was made after the construction of the Al-Aqsa Mosque (to which it refers) in 705. Some see in the inscription evidence that in the eyes of the Arab conquerors, the Dome of the Rock was perceived as a ‘Third Temple’ on the foundations of the Second Temple built by the Jews following their liberation from the Babylonian Captivity in the sixth century BC, itself reputedly built on the site of the First Temple, long previously, erected by King Solomon.47

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47 Andreas Kaplony, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Jerusalem’s Sacred Esplanade.*
14. The first sign of a distinctive Islamic identity, such as the honouring (but denial of the divinity) of Jesus, are first seen in the 690s in the decoration of the Dome of the Rock inscription. However, the Dome is a shrine focussed on Jesus rather than prophets such as Abraham, Isaac and Solomon, whom one may have expected to have a greater association with the location on Temple Mount, or to a recent Arabian prophet.

It is possible, if not likely, that the word ‘muhamad’ used in the inscriptions is an honorific title, possibly referencing Jesus.
IX Coins of the Arab Conquest

Coins are amongst the most durable and reliable evidence to the past. Unlike written accounts which may be susceptible to inaccuracies and distortion, or monuments which may be lost through natural, or manmade processes, coins are made to serve a purpose and, dropped through holes in the floor, used as votive offerings in sacred springs, or ending up in buried hoards, they will tend to survive any effort by subsequent generations to erase history. With coins, the rulers who minted them speak to us across the centuries unhindered.

Coins minted during the supposed Rashidun caliphate (632-662)

In *Arab Byzantine Coins*, Clive Foss reviews the collections of coins struck in the Middle East following the Arab conquests of in the 630s and 40s, held by the collection of the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine-specialist museum and research centre near Washington DC.

He demonstrates that for the decades following the conquests, coins continued to be minted using Christian and Byzantine imperial iconography. These were produced in former Byzantine mints that appear to have operated in the same way as they had previously; some new mints that were making poor quality imitations on bronze that became progressively smaller, thinner, more irregularly shaped and less detailed; and a few mints that were printing new patterns onto coins, but in a style derived from the Byzantium mints.

Early (638-647) post-Arab conquest coins

The diminishing dimensions and quality of these coins indicate that these were produced after the ousting of the Byzantine emperors. All however continue to display Christian crosses. The ‘M’ indicates the currency value (40 nummia).
From this it seems reasonable to conclude that the traditional narrative of the Arab Conquests of the mid-seventh century as the establishment of a vast empire under the central control of rulers motivated by the zealous propagation of a new faith that rejected Christianity is incorrect. Rather the coins suggest that de-facto authorities in the area are fragmentary and weak, but still associating themselves with the religion and familiar political model of Christendom.

Within this collection, two coins stand out as being of remarkable interest.

The first sign of Islam on a coin occurs in a date, calculated in accordance with Muslim practice by the number of ‘years’ (each Islamic ‘year’ comprising twelve lunar months - slightly less than the revolution of the earth around the sun used for Gregorian years) since the Hijrah in 622.

**Coin with cross and Islamic date**

Obverse: Christian ruler with two crosses

Reverse: ‘M’.

“Above appears the monogram of emperor Heraclius [575-641]; to the right ‘17’, the number of the year according to the era of the Arabians (639) and below ‘DAM’ (Damascus) the name of the mint.”

Another coin from this period even seems to reference the name (or word) ‘Mohammed’.

**‘Muhammad type’ coin**

Obverse: Crude standing figure with cross in right hand and orb and cross (globus cruciger) in left hand.

Reverse: ‘M’ and, apparently ‘Muh’ indicating Muhammad.

At the very least the ‘Muhammad type’ coin shows that even after Arab writing was appearing on coins, the crosses remain. However this tiny scrap of bronze may be far more significant than that.

As Foss writes:

“The identity of ‘Muhammad’ has not been established. If the figure were intended to represent the Prophet of Islam, it would offer a real iconographic anomaly for it is portrayed holding a cross. In the present state of uncertainty about early Islam though, almost anything seems possible.”

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48 Popp, V, page 42.
Muawiyah I

Muawiyah, the governor of Damascus is said to have been the son of Abu Sufyan, Mohammed’s former nemesis as leader of the Meccans, who had converted to Islam as he surrendered Mecca to Mohammed, and also cousin of the third caliph, Uthman. Uthman had, according to the traditional narrative been murdered in 656 and Ali faced a rebellion for failing to avenge his death.

The rebellion ended in 661 with Ali defeated and killed, and Muawiyah establishing his control over Arab lands. It will be recalled that Muawiyah is the first figure from the history of Islam to be commemorated with contemporary formal inscriptions, found on the Gaderene bath complex and Ta’if dam, in the former of which his name appears next to a prominent cross. He is also the first ‘Islamic’ figure after Mohammed to be mentioned in non-Muslim sources.

After 661 the quality of Arab coinage improves. Some of Muawiyah’s coins continue to show crosses and other Christian symbols. In some he appears to presents himself as the guardian of the shrine of John the Baptist in Damascus – symbolised by the depiction of the relic of John’s severed head.

Muawiyah and the head of John the Baptist

However, a contemporary chronicle reports:

*In ... [Byzantine Emperor] Constans’ 18th year, many Arabs gathered at Jerusalem and made Muawiya king...*

*He also minted gold and silver, but it was not accepted, because it had no cross on it.*

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49 The Seventh Century in the West Syrian Chronicles, Palmer, p.31; cited in Arab Byzantine Coins, Foss, p39.
In Muawiya’s reign the coins support images that seem designed as compromised non-crosses, supporting the thesis that the symbol of the cross had become an issue of contention that could neither be produced unambiguously nor entirely foregone.

**Muawiyah’s pseudo-crosses**

Obverse: *Three standing imperial figures holding globes with no inscription.*

Reverse: *Transformed cross (resembling a ‘T’ on steps. VICTORIA AUGYA CONOB.*

Another type of coin issued by Muawiyya has a cross topped with a crescent: an apparent attempt to combine the two religious symbols.

Presumably there was tension between Christians and the new religion, but the fact that Muawiya thought that his composite cross-crescent might provide a compromise perhaps shows that he did not consider the two faiths to be entirely irreconcilable.

Meanwhile in the eastern Arab territories, that has been seized from the collapsed Sassanian empire a similar process of adoption of existing coinage had occurred.
Islamic coins

When Muawiyah died a second civil war broke out in which an Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr, grandson of Abu Bakr, came to lead the challenge to the Umayyads, seizing, so it is said, Medina and Mecca. During this insurgency, in 66/685-6. Abd al-Malik ibn ‘Abd Allāh, one of ibn al-Zubayr’s governors in Persia struck the first coin, and indeed the earliest item of any type other than the Qur’an itself, to record the words of the Shahada: ‘There is no god but God and Muhammed is (or possibly ‘blessed be’) His messenger’

The first shahada

The coin followed a Sassanian model that had hardly changed in centuries:
Obverse: A Zoroastrian priest,
Reverse: A fire alter

However Abd al-Malik had – rather incongruously – added the words of the Shahada around the Zoroastrian priest.

The revolt was eventually crushed by Muawiyah’s grandson, Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, and from his time coins are all more clearly Islamic in style.

Abd al Malik’s coinage

Obverse: ‘Figure in Arab dress’ (Mohammed?) with text: ‘Muhammad rasul allah’ (‘Mohammed (or possibly ‘to be blessed) is the messenger of God’)

Reverse: M and ‘Iliya, Filistin (Jerusalem, Palestine) 50

Inscription: ‘There is no god but God, alone, He has no associate’, ‘Muhammed is the prophet of God. He sent him with guidance and the true religion to make it victorious over every religion’ [Qur’an 9.33]

Dated Year 79 [698-9].

50 Foss, page 70
However, even under Abd al-Maliki the mysterious ‘pseudo-crosses’ of Muawiyah I persist.

Section conclusion from *IX Coins of the Arab Conquests*

15. The poor quality of Byzantine-style coinage produced immediately after the Arab conquests strengthens the thesis that these conquests resulted, not in the immediate establishment of centrally controlled Islamic caliphate, as claimed by Islamic tradition, but a lawless and declining sub-Roman culture, analogous to the ‘dark age’ retreat of Roman civilisation in Europe in the fifth century.

16. The continued minting of coins with Christian (in the west) or Zoroastrian (in the east) iconography, albeit increasingly ambiguous, supports the thesis that what authority existed wished to be seen as continuing to be Christian or Zoroastrian.

Whether or not specifically religious zeal had in the recent past motivated Arab fighters, by the time that his movement spread out across the Middle East, North Africa and Persia, this enterprise was predominantly concerned with the mundane matters of the control of territory and the pursuit of plunder rather than proselytization to a new religion.
X Contemporary testimony

634-40: The Arab conquests

Receipt of Herakleopolis

Probably the oldest documentary witness to Islam, besides the Qur’an, is a:

‘Document concerning the delivery of sheep to the Magarites and other people who arrived, as a down-payment of the taxes of the first indiction,’$^{51}$

excavated at the ruins of Herakleopolis in Egypt.

The document begins with the Bismillah that precedes every verse in the Qur’an except one):

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

It proceeds to record the payment of sixty-five sheep by the city to Magarites (also referred to as Saracens), apparently as tribute.

Interestingly the document is dated: 22 or AD 632. The dates do not tally with the now standard Hijrah calendar that dates (AH) years from Mohammed’s migration from Mecca to Medina, traditionally dated to 622 (in which case 22 AH would be AD 644), but the reference to an alternative calendar originating in an event in the early seventh century is significant. 610 would be the time of Mohammed’s first alleged revelation, arguably a more significant event in Islam’s traditional narrative.

Thomas the Presbyter

The earliest source referring to Mohamed are report from those experiencing raids into Palestine.

Thomas the Presbyter writing in 640 concerning events that had taken place six years earlier:

“In [634] on Friday, 4th February at the ninth hour there was a battle between the Romans and the nomads of Muhammad [tayyaye d-Mhmt] in Palestine, twelve miles east of Gaza. The Romans fled leaving behind the patriarch Bryrdn, whom the tayyaye killed.

Some 4000 poor villagers of Palestine were killed there, Christians, Jews and Samaritans. The tayyaye ravaged the whole region”$^{52}$

$^{51}$ Held at the Erzherzog Rainer Papyrus Collection, Vienna

$^{52}$ From Seeing Islam As Others Saw It: A Survey And Evaluation Of Christian, Jewish And Zoroastrian Writings On Early Islam (1997), G Hoyland cited in Muhammad and the Believers, Donner.
Notes on the Battles of Gabatha and Yarmouk found on a Syriac Gospel of Mark

A Syrian manuscript of the Gospel of Mark held at the British Library has been found with the following notes written in the margin:

“In January [the people of Ḥomṣ took the word for their lives and many villages were ravaged by the killing of ... [the Arabs of?] Mūḥmd and many people were slain and ... prisoner from Galilee as far as Beth...

On the twenty-sixth of May the Saqilara went ... from the vicinity of Ḥomṣ and the Romans chased them...

On the tenth [of August?] the Romans fled from the vicinity of Damascus ... [and there were killed?] many ..., some ten thousand.

And at the turn [of the year] the Romans came. On the twentieth of August in the year ... seven there gathered in Gabitha ... the Romans, and many people ... were killed, some fifty thousand.”

From the details of dates and location, this note accords with Islamic histories of the Battles of Gabatha and Yarmouk. These describe the clashes in great but unreliable detail (Ahmed ibn Yahya Al-Baladhuri, d. c. 892, author of the most detailed account, putting the Byzantine army at two hundred thousand strong, whereas modern historians estimate the total number of troops available to the emperor across the Byzantine empire as just one hundred thousand). However the battle is not mentioned in contemporary Byzantine chronicles at all, with this scribbled note one of the few non-Muslim sources that any major fighting took place during the Muslim conquests.

St Sophronius

St Sophronius (d.639) described the two-year siege of Jerusalem by ‘Saracens’ leading to the city’s surrender and the subsequent desecration of Christian symbols and places of worship.

“Why do barbarian raids abound? Why are the troops of the Saracens attacking us? Why has there been so much destruction and plunder? Why are there incessant outpourings of human blood? Why are the birds of the sky devouring human bodies? Why have churches been pulled down? Why is the cross mocked? Why is Christ, who is the dispenser of all good things and the provider of this joyousness of ours, blasphemed by pagan mouths.”

He also provides the only contemporary description of the building of the Dome of the Rock

“The godless Saracens entered the holy city of Christ our Lord, Jerusalem, with the permission of God and in punishment for our negligence, which is considerable, and immediately proceeded in haste to the place which is called the Capitol. They took with them men, some by force, others by their own will, in order to clean that place and to build that cursed thing, intended for their prayer and which they call a mosque.”

It is notable that, despite his religious outlook, he does not use the terms ‘Islam’ or ‘Muslim’, refer to Mohammed or the Qur’an or say anything specific concerning the invaders’ faith.

53 Translation and suggested insertions of Hoyland (Seeing Islam... see previous footnote)
Edifying Tales of Anastasias of Sinai

In his *Edifying Tales*, (written sometime between 660 and 690) Anastasias of Sinai told the story of a Christian captured and taken to:

‘the place where they who hold us in slavery have the stone and the object of their worship’

and where they sacrifice:

‘innumerable myriads of sheep and camels’

whereupon, he reported, a she demon emerges from the earth to devour the animals’ carcases.

St John of Damascus

In the eighth century, St John of Damascus wrote a book for a Christian readership called: *Fount of Knowledge*. Part of this book addressed: *Heresies in Epitome: How They Began and Whence They Drew Their Origin*.

According to an unknown Arabic source of John’s life, translated into Greek by an Arab monk, Michael in 1084, John had been born in Damascus in the third quarter of the seventh century and died in Jerusalem in 749. As such, according to the traditional Islamic narrative, he would have lived his life entirely under the rule of the Umayyad Caliphate, which was, throughout John’s life, based in Damascus. He is said to have been an official in the court of the Damascus emir.

In his *Heresies...* John wrote of Mohammed:

“There is also the superstition of the Ishmaelites which to this day prevails and keeps people in error, being a forerunner of the Antichrist. They are descended from Ishmael, [who] was born to Abraham of Agar, and for this reason they are called both Agarenes and Ishmaelites. They are also called Saracens, which is derived from ... the destitute of Sara, because of what Agar said to the angel: ‘Sara hath sent me away destitute.’ These used to be idolaters and worshiped the morning star and Aphrodite, whom in their own language they called Khabár, which means great. And so down to the time of Heraclius they were very great idolaters.

From that time to the present a false prophet named Mohammed has appeared in their midst. This man, after having chanced upon the Old and New Testaments and likewise, it seems, having conversed with an Arian monk, devised his own heresy. Then, having insinuated himself into the good graces of the people by a show of seeming piety, he gave out that a certain book had been sent down to him from heaven. He had set down some ridiculous compositions in this book of his and he gave it to them as an object of veneration.

The full text appears in Appendix 1. The aspect that is of greatest interest for our purposes is John’s understanding of the content of Islamic scriptures.

54 Regarding the legend of Mohammed learning the Bible from a heretical monk.
As has been related, this Mohammed wrote many ridiculous books, to each one of which he set a title. For example, there is the book *On Woman*, in which he plainly makes legal provision for taking four wives and, if it be possible, a thousand concubines—as many as one can maintain, besides the four wives. He also made it legal to put away whichever wife one might wish, and, should one so wish, to take to oneself another in the same way...

Then there is the book of *The Camel of God*. [a now lost text that was not included within the Qur’an] About this camel he says that there was a camel from God and that she drank the whole river and could not pass through two mountains, because there was not room enough. There were people in that place, he says, and they used to drink the water on one day, while the camel would drink it on the next. Moreover, by drinking the water she furnished them with nourishment, because she supplied them with milk instead of water. Then, because these men were evil, they rose up, he says, and killed the camel. However, she had an offspring, a little camel, which, he says, when the mother had been done away with, called upon God and God took it to Himself....

... We plainly assure you that this wonderful camel of yours has preceded you into the souls of asses, where you, too, like beasts are destined to go. And there is the exterior darkness and everlasting punishment, roaring fire, sleepless worms, and hellish demons.’

Again, in the book of *The Table*, Mohammed says that the Christ asked God for a table and that it was given Him. For God, he says, said to Him: ‘I have given to thee and thine an incorruptible table.’

And again, in the book of *The Heifer*, he says some other stupid and ridiculous things, which, because of their great number, I think must be passed over. He made it a law that they be circumcised and the women, too, and he ordered them not to keep the Sabbath and not to be baptized.

It is interesting that John clearly knows something of the reported life of Mohammed, such as his marriage to Zeynab bint Jahsh. However:

- he does not, at any point, use the terms ‘Islam’, ‘Muslim’ or ‘Qur’an’;
- he treats the Mohammedan scriptures that he has read as separate books - three of which share titles with surahs of the Qur’an – *On Women* (surah 4), *The Table* (surah 5) and *The Heifer* (surah 2), offering no indication that the books he refers might form part of a canon;
- He mentions a fourth text, *The Camel of God*, that refers to the story of Thamud that is referenced several points in the Qur’an but particularly in [Surah 7: 73-78], but John has clearly read a much fuller account that includes many details that are not in the Qur’an;
- he exhibits no anxiety about deriding Islam and records discussions, that were presumably somewhat acrimonious, with believers in Mohammed, with no
indication that the ‘heresy’ he disputed was associated with any political power, still less the dominant ideology within the court that he was attached to.

Section conclusion from X Contemporary testimony

17. There was an Arabian warlord called Mohammed whose followers raided the area around Palestine in the first half of the seventh century.

The standard history of Arabic armies defeating Byzantium on the battlefield are surprisingly poorly corroborated.

18. However, as late as the first half of the eighth century, whilst there were some Quranic surahs in circulation, and tales of Mohammed were spreading:

- the Qur’an was circulating as individual surahs and was not yet associated with political power in Damascus.

- the knowledge of Islam by non-Muslims was so poor that John of Damascus treats it as a curiosity, and Anastasias of Sinai, even though he regards Muslims as holding his people in slavery, considers it’s focal point the worship of a stone and the sacrificing of animals to a she-demon.
### Review of section conclusions

The following is a list of all the conclusions reached above:

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<th>Conclusion</th>
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| 1 | At least a very substantial part of the Qur’an (probably most of it and possibly all of it) was in existence within the years in which Mohammed is traditionally said to have lived.  
The Qur’an was compiled as a book by 645 at the latest, about a decade earlier than the traditional date of the compiling of the Uthmanic recension in 653.  
Some parts of it may even date from the sixth rather than seventh century. |
| 2 | Although the content of the Qur’an may derive from various original sources, it appears that at least the final stage of its composition into Arabic rhyming verse was conducted by one person over a substantial period of time. |
| 3 | Some passages of the Qur’an were originally composed by a person, who was familiar not merely the Bible, but a wide range of non-canonical Jewish and Christian religious literature. |
| 4 | However, the Qur’an reflects numerous basic errors and gaps in the author’s knowledge of the biblical stories and the non-canonical sources. |
| 5 | Some passages of the Qur’an, in particular the *punishment narratives* and *(61.14)* clearly show deliberate changes to biblical stories, and their presentation alongside tales from Arabic folklore, in order to bolster the position of a prophet trying to manipulate his audience.  
Although interestingly, the Qur’an makes little use of biblical stories to support its calls for *jihad*. |
6. The Qur’an’s theology appears to stem from a Christian tradition, but one that:

- does not accept Jesus as in any way divine,
- and
- confirms the continued applicability of parts of the Mosaic law.

It seems to share this outlook with Jewish-Christian sects such as the Ebionites or Nazarenes, but too little is known of these groups to make a detailed comparison.

7. The Qur’an also appears to accommodate some beliefs that seem rooted in paganism, possibly in the context of an apparent concessions to early followers, rather than forming the core of its message.

8. There is a strong case for holding that parts of the Qur’an, that according to the traditional Islamic narrative relate to Mecca, in fact refer to somewhere else.

Some passages (‘the pillar of salt’, ‘the Byzantines defeated in a place nearby’) indicate a location in the Jordan plain.

Such a location away from Mecca would be consistent with the authors of the Qur’an having ready access to Jewish and Syriac Christian non-canonical source material and preaching to a population familiar with biblical stories.

9. Dan Gibson’s assertions that all the early mosques point towards Petra, appear credible and are potentially hugely significant to the account of the origins of Islam, but have not been independently certified.

Even setting aside the issue of the early mosque orientations, his analysis of Petra as matching the criteria for the setting of the events traditionally described as occurring in Mecca is potentially significant.

Geographical descriptions in the Qur’an, sira and hadith contrasted with the
- topography,
- vegetation,
- geographical features
- lack of historical or archaeological record of Mecca.
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<th>The Zubur Bismillah suggests that this classic Islamic invocation in fact predates Islam.</th>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Umar died in the date allotted to his death in the traditional Islamic narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>The lack of monuments, architecture and inscriptions from the years of the supposed Rashidun caliphate (632-662) and the rarity of these in the supposed eastern Umayyad caliphate (662-750) suggests that the early Arab conquests did not result in a centrally controlled empire as is often imagined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>The juxtaposition of ‘Muawiyah, commander of the faithful’ s name with a cross on the Gadarene bathhouse inscription, suggests that he wished to be projected as a Christian ruler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>The first sign of a distinctive Islamic identity, such as the honouring (but denial of the divinity) of Jesus, are first seen in the 690s in the decoration of the Dome of the Rock inscription. However, the Dome is a shrine focussed on Jesus rather than prophets such as Abraham, Isaac and Solomon, whom one may have expected to have a greater association with the location on Temple Mount, or to a recent Arabian prophet. It is possible, if not likely, that the word ‘mohammed’ used in the inscriptions is an honorific title, possibly referencing Jesus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>The poor quality of Byzantine-style coinage produced immediately after the Arab conquests strengthens the thesis that these conquests resulted, not in the immediate establishment of centrally controlled Islamic caliphate, as claimed by Islamic tradition, but a lawless and declining sub-Roman culture, analogous to the ‘dark age’ retreat of Roman civilisation in Europe in the fifth century.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The continued minting of coins with Christian (in the west) or Zoroastrian (in the east) iconography, albeit increasingly ambiguous, supports the thesis that what authority existed wished to be seen as continuing to be Christian or Zoroastrian. Whether or not specifically religious zeal had in the recent past motivated Arab fighters, by the time that his movement spread out across the Middle East, North Africa and Persia, this enterprise was predominantly concerned with the mundane matters of the control of territory and the pursuit of plunder rather than proselytization to a new religion.

There was an Arabian warlord called Mohammed whose followers raided the area around Palestine in the first half of the seventh century.

The standard history of Arabic armies defeating Byzantium on the battlefield are surprisingly poorly corroborated.

However, as late as the first half of the eighth century, whilst Quranic material was in circulation and tales of Mohammed were spreading, the Qur’an:

- was circulating in individual surahs
- and
- was not yet associated with political power in Damascus

whilst the knowledge of Islam by non-Muslims was so poor that Anastasias of Sinai, even though he regards Muslims as holding his people in slavery, considers it to centre around the worship of a stone and the sacrificing of animals to a she-demon.
Clearly the traditional Islamic narrative of Mohammed founding a community that progressed under the leadership of his companions and their successors to constitute an Islamic Empire in the second half of the seventh century and first half of the eight is incorrect.

All the evidence suggests that the Arab conquerors, in so far as they followed any religion, saw themselves as Christian, although with some Arab characteristics that later became associated with the new religion of Islam. This raises many questions, including:

Given the importance of biblical figures and non-canonical Jewish and Christian sources to the Qur’an what was the true relationship between its author and Judaism and Christianity?

For a religion that defines itself by its strict monotheism, how did Islam acquire apparently pagan elements: the jinn, sacred months, and focussing prayer and pilgrimage upon the shrine of a black rock?

If the Qur’an was effectively complete by c.645, why was it effectively unknown to the historical record until 750 and what was the cause of its sudden late adoption by the Abbasids?

How and why did events connected to the birth of Islam appear to have become translated from an unknown steep sided valley with vegetation and a water course running between two mountains (possibly Petra) to the barren plain of Mecca?
Three Theories

Muhammad and the Believers Fred M Donner

In Muhammad and the Believers Fred M Donner focusses upon the fact that the Qur’an addresses almost a thousand verses to ‘You who believe’ and consistently divides the world between believers and disbelievers. He defines the essential content of this belief as articles of faith that Islam shares with Judaism and Christianity and asserts:

“There is no reason to think that the Believers viewed themselves as a new or separate religious confession ... Indeed some passages make it clear that Muhammad’s message was the same as that brought by earlier apostles”

although Believers were encouraged to see themselves as new community under Muhammed’s ‘revelations’. Consequently, in Donner’s view Islam saw itself as a branch of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which, as it spread through Christian lands did not need to define itself as a distinct, new, religion.

Donner challenges the traditional assumption of Islam spreading by violence:

“The problem [with the ‘violent conquest model’] is that an increasing burden of archaeological evidence has turned up little or no trace of destruction, burnings or other violence in most localities, particularly in geographical Syria, which is the area most fully described by the literary sources... Instead, the archaeological record suggests that the area underwent a gradual process of social and cultural transformation that did not involve a violent and sudden destruction of urban or rural life at all. In town after town we find evidence of churches that are not destroyed – but rather continue in use for a century or more after the ‘conquest’ – or evidence that new churches (with dated mosaic floors) were being constructed.”

Donner takes a deferential view of Mohammed, describing him as an ‘inspired visionary’ and understating the militaristic and draconian component of the Mohammed story. In his understanding the accumulation of territory seemed almost incidental to Mohammed’s growth of stature as a political figure (emphasis added):

“Muhamad and his followers began to meet with significant political success following his conclusion of the Hudaybiyya agreement with the Quraysh ... Muhammad and his followers were able, shortly thereafter the conquer the northern oasis of Kaybar to launch numerous other raids to the north to bring numerous hitherto unaligned groups of pastoral nomads...”

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55 Page 107
into alliance with Medina. All these activities solidified Muhammad’s political and military situation. ... With the conquest of Mecca and Ta’if shortly thereafter.\textsuperscript{56}

Donner offers no firm conclusion as to the composition of the Qur’an but hints:

“The markedly different style and content of the diverse parts of the Qur’an may be evidence that the text as we now have it is a composite of originally separate texts hailing from different communities in Arabia. Some recent studies suggest that that the Qur’an text is not only aware of, but reacting to, the theological debates of Syriac speaking Christian communities of the Near East. Whether further work will vindicate the close connection of particular passages in the Qur’an with specific episodes in Mohamed’s life, as elaborated by both traditional Muslim and traditional Western scholarship still remains to be seen.

\textbf{Comment}

It is suggested that Donner’s sympathy for the notion that the Qur’an derives from multiple sources, is consistent with the variety of its content and style that is plain to any attentive and objective reader.

However, Donner’s conclusions concerning the Qur’an’s core message inclusivity and peaceful do not sufficiently accommodate the extraordinarily divisive, intolerant and militant language of the those Quranic verses traditionally called Medinan. These include instructions to wage war on ‘unbelievers’, take slaves as its spoils and ultimately kill all ‘associators’. These words were not written to promote peace and goodwill. The condemnation of unbelievers, who in at least some verses are unambiguously stated to include Jews and Christians, is one of the Qur’an’s most distinctive features and has in fact been estimated to occupy more than half of its words.

It will be suggested that the absence of traces of distinct Islamic religiosity or scorched earth during the Arab conquests may both have the same explanation: that the Arab conquerors were interested in land and wealth and not themselves particularly religious. It may even be that the Arab conquests introduced secular rule that was initially welcomed by the Syriac Christians as a respite from the bitter disputes over Christology within Byzantium. But the lack of Islam’s impression on the conquered territory in the early years of the Arab conquests indicates that this laissez faire social regime was more due to religious indifference than the zealous imitation of Mohammed.

\textsuperscript{56} Pages 92,93
**Quranic Geography** Dan Gibson

Dan Gibson offers an intriguing alternative scenario to the traditional narrative. He accepts the militaristic nature of Mohammed’s life, but with the major difference that he locates these events around Petra, not Mecca.

Thereafter:

- When Ibn Zubayr rebelled (683) against the Umayyads, who were based in Damascus, he did so in Petra not Mecca.

- Thereafter he took the black stone that had been set into the Kaaba and took it with him to establish a new base at modern Mecca, sufficiently remote from Damascus to be defended. Ibn Zubayr’s destruction of one Kaaba and construction of a new shrine during his rebellion was recorded by Al Tabari writing in the tenth century (although Tabari naturally placed both events in Mecca).

- For Gibson it is the portable ‘black stone’, now an incongruous part of the story of early Islam that explains the changing of the qibla. Mohammed’s followers initially prayed, not towards Jerusalem, Mecca nor any other location, but towards the black stone, and its movement led to a century long ‘time of confusion’ in mosque construction, with some mosques built facing Petra, the original home of the black stone, some Mecca where ibn Zubayr took it, some a midway point and yet others parallel with the line between the two.

- The time of confusion in eastern Islamic lands came to an end with the Abbasid revolution of 750 and the acceptance of Mecca as Islam’s new focus (although the Umayyad-held lands on the Iberian Peninsula took another hundred years to accept Mecca).

**Comment**

This is an ingenious solution, that accounts for two of the many oddities in the Islam story: the ‘black stone’ (which in orthodox Islam is unexplained and carries a distinctly pagan quality) and the changing of the qibla (also unsatisfactorily explained in the traditional narrative).

The later transposing of the entire Mohammed narrative from the Mediterranean world on to Mecca is a version hinted at in Tom Holland’s *Shadow of the Sword* (although Holland, writing so soon after the publication of Gibson’s *Quranic Geography*, skirts around the issue of the qiblas and avoids identifying Petra in particular as the locus of Islam’s birth). In the Channel 4 documentary, *Islam, the Untold Story*, based upon that book Holland, walking through the Arabian desert, uses the surrounding dunes as a metaphor for the absence of uncertainty of Islam’s origins, and suggests that Mecca was deliberately chosen for its lack of historical record.
“The Qur’an is full of characters from the Bible but if the book came out of the desert, how did these characters get there?...

Maybe that’s the point. We’re not supposed to unlock the tradition. God’s message comes from a prophet. The prophet lives in the desert. There is no room for anyone else ...

You begin by looking in the record and all you find is emptiness. And you end up in the desert and all you see is emptiness. But perhaps the emptiness is the answer. Maybe Mecca gave Islam what it most needed: a blank sheet where Muslims could put their prophet, beyond the reach of history.”

However, to invent a new narrative for an established and revered religious figure in this way would be a hugely ambitious lie for Abd al Malik, or anybody else, to have succeeded in telling, in a milieu that was deeply divided in its loyalties and when oral tradition was so important. One must doubt that – amongst the reputedly highly religious and warring Umayyads, Abassids, Sufis, kawajis, Shias (‘fivers’, ‘sixers’ and ‘twelvers’) and so on, he and his successors might have succeeded in eliminating any lingering tradition that Mecca was not Islam’s true birthplace – even amongst those who knew full well that their bitter quarrels had begun elsewhere.
The INARAH\textsuperscript{57} school

A group of revisionist German scholars (including Christoph Luxenberg, Karl-Heinz Ohlig, Gerd-R Puin and Volcker Popp) have constructed a complex narrative to describe how Islam developed from a Pre-Nicene Christian sect.

In Early Islam: A Critical Reconstruction Based on Contemporary Sources (2015) a series of essays sets out a proposed history of the Quranic religion. Summarising a very complex narrative, they argue:

- The earliest known use of the word ‘\textit{mḥmd}’ was found on a tablet in the ruins of Ugarit in northern Syria, where it was a term indicating the purest quality of gold.

- In the third century AD the predominantly Zoroastrian rulers of the Sassanian (Persian) Empire brought Arab Christians from captured areas of Syria to Persia as slaves. As this preceded the Council of Nicea in 325, these Christians held a concept of Jesus similar to that preached by Arius (256-336): namely that Jesus was created by and was distinct from God. At the Council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410, Syriac Christianity, leaving the pre-Nicean Arab Christians isolated from the mainstream of Christianity.

- In the sixth century, Kosrow I, the Sassanian King of kings fled to Byzantium with whose help he was restored to the Sassanian throne, but now with a new sympathy to his Christian subjects.

- In 622 the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius achieved a decisive victory over the Sassanians and established himself as the protector of all Christians in Sassanian territories. At this stage early parts of the Qur’an was written describing contemporary political events in biblical language. Heraclius was presented as Dhu’l Qarnayn (a new Alexander the Great) and through the character of Moses with the Sassanian king was cast in the role of Pharaoh.

- Christian Arabs began to date events from the time of Heraclius’ decisive victory, 622- the date traditionally given for Mohammed’s migration from Mecca to Medina;

- Within the Arab Christian community Jesus became known by various Arabic titles: ‘\textit{Muḥammad}’ (‘the Blessed One’), ‘Abd’\textit{Allah}’ (‘Servant of God’) and ‘\textit{Wali} Allah’ (‘Representative of God’). Quranic verses composed during this period, and the decoration of the Dome of the Rock shrine, referred to Jesus using these titles.

- Since the Syriac Christians rejected Jesus’s divinity, the centrality of his death was not as central to their faith as it was for Christians in the West. Furthermore an iconoclastic tradition in which the pictoral portrayal of prophets seems to have been discouraged, seems to have led to an abstraction and idealization of Jesus:

\textit{This gradual disappearance of Jesus behind his Christological predicates could also have had something to do with the fact that the Persian influence which also played a role at the beginning of the Quranic movement had meanwhile become stronger. … It seems that Persian Christianity was more theocratic and methodical than its Syrian counterpart that led to the weakening of the position of Jesus. As the Syrian}

\textsuperscript{57}INARAH: \textit{Institut zur Erforschung der Frühen Islamgeschichte und des Koran} (\textit{Institute for Research on Early Islamic history and the Qur’an}).
Later, the individual who seemed to be God’s interlocutor in Quranic verses was deemed to have been a Prophet of the Arabs, independent of Jesus.

Among the Quranic texts we can distinguish between three consecutive phases which overlap at the edges:

- the oldest is the phase in which a Syro-Arabic Christianity is represented and where an unnamed preacher is addressed who points to either Jesus or Moses;
- in the next phase the material remains Christian but is interpreted by the Qur’an ... so that a prophet of the Arabs appears as its source. the first stage of a historicization of epithet ‘muhammad’;
- in the last phase the movement sticks to the biblical salvation-historical concepts but sees the Qur’an as the final and ultimate revelation. In this stage the movement considers itself to be a new ‘religion’ and the Prophet of the Arabs as the promoter of a new revelation.

Luxenberg refers to the first two positions as ‘Mohammed I’ and ‘Mohammed II’. Ohlig suggests the third Mohammed, the familiar founder of Islam, be regarded as Mohammed III.

His existence as a flesh and blood prophet was inferred from the articulation of his religious doctrines, Ohlig suggests, in a similar way to Zarathustra in Zoroastrianism, Gautama Siddhartha (‘the Buddha’) in Buddhism and, probably some Old Testament figures such as Abraham and Moses in early Judaism.

Meanwhile the isolation of the Arab Christians of Persia from their memory of the old Arab kingdoms of the Jordan plan, led to them imagining Mohammed III as having lived in the remaining Arab heartland of the Arabian Peninsula.

- In the mid eighth century one sect, the originators of the Shia movement, attempted to claim this preacher as their ancestor, in the way that Zoroastrian rulers claimed descent from Zarathustra, and for their purposes the figures of Muhammad, his father Abd Allah and son in law Ali emerged from the three titles originally applied to Jesus.
- Thereafter, the story-tellers cam into their own filling out the rich life of Mohammed in implausible detail, and the Abbasids claiming their own descent from one of his uncles, conveniently written into the script.
Comment

It is not possible, here, to do justice to Early Islam’s weaving together of this narrative from coins and theological deductions, but parts of it are persuasive.

Its strongest theme is its proposed explanation of the contrast between the meticulous anchoring of the Qur’an in explicitly Judeo-Christian texts and the vehement rejection of what we now consider the fundamental Christian belief. The view of Islam as having evolved from the survival of a belief in Jesus as God’s servant, amongst those who saw the Trinitarians of Nicea as guilty of ‘associating’ Gods messenger with God Himself, seems more plausible than the view that the Quranic authors were a self-starting religious sect borrowing and bastardising the stories of religions that they did not themselves believe.

Some passages of the Qur’an adopt not only Christian names and stories but also theological concepts that are unlikely to have been taken up by a non-Christian community, such as the four references to the Holy Spirit and the description of ‘Mohammed’ as ‘the seal of the prophets’ (33.40) which fits more closely Jesus’s statement (Matthew 5.17) that he came ‘not to change the law but to fulfil it’ than Mohammed’ supposed role as the final prophet in a series of series of prophets.

Moreover its vision of the so-called ‘Arab conquests’ as, in fact, consisting of the withdrawal of Byzantium imperial power and the collapse of the Sassanian Empire, leaving two centuries of near-anarchy from which Islam emerged, fits the evidence and lack thereof better than the traditional narratives of the Rashidun and Umayyad periods.

However if the sparse references to God showing mercy to sinners can be attributed to ‘Mohammed I’, there is, as with Donner, little explanation for the distinctive Islamic verses: especially the unbiblical laws, the calls to jihad or the verses related to ‘Mohammed III’s own domestic convenience.

Also, there is the problem that textual analysis seems to show that the Qur’an’s text is in fact more structured and uniform than it was long assumed: obviously a problem for a thesis that the Qur’an was composed over centuries by authors with widely disparate outlooks and purposes.

58 \{2.87, 253, 5.110\} and \{16.102\}
Suggested elements of a new ‘four-source’ division

It is suggested that the fact that some verses of the Qur’an show great familiarity with a wide range of Jewish and Christian texts and support for some Christian theological ideas, whilst others display:

- basic errors concerning biblical characters (see above),
- biblical and Arab folk stories manipulated to inspire obedience (the ‘punishment narratives’ (see above);
- illogical and poorly expressed rules – some clearly expressed as attempts to clarify previous ambiguities,\(^{60}\)
- belligerent and harshly punitive verses;
- visions of heaven that shamelessly appeal to lust and visions of hell that are more terrifyingly graphic than any in the Old Testament; and
- verses clearly aimed at the author’s personal convenience.\(^{61}\)

shows a coming together of diverse sources.

It is further suggested that a successful late antiquity warlord is unlikely to have the character traits that would also lead them to spend the necessary time to acquire these references by poring assiduously over the exegeses and sermons of holy and learned men from foreign religious traditions. Indeed, it hardly makes sense that the same person might research ancient texts looking for little known biblical traditions to incorporate into some verses, whilst simultaneously making basic errors with biblical characters and feeling themselves at liberty to play fast and loose with the basic narrative of a biblical story in others.

\(^{60}\) For example (4.176) on inheritance or (65.4) on the divorce period on women who do not menstruate. See *The Qur’an as it was Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed 7. Inferior Inheritance Rights for Women* and 6. *Marriage to premenarchal girls* (both available on the Islam Research Group website) respectively.

\(^{61}\) *Surah 33*

53 “Enter not the dwellings of the prophet for a meal without waiting for its time to come, unless leave be granted you. But if you are invited, enter, and when you have eaten disperse. Linger not, seeking discourse. Truly that would affront the Prophet and he would shrink from telling you, but God shrinks not from the truth.

And when you ask anything of (his wives) ask them from behind a veil [sometimes translated as ‘screen’]. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts.

And you should never affront the Messenger of God, nor marry his wives after him. Truly that would be an enormity in the sight of God.”

or (33.37) in which God grants Mohammed permission to marry the wife of his adopted son, Zayd.
Yet other verses recount Arabic folklore that have little association with Christianity (such as the recurring prophets Hud, Saleh and Shuaib (occasionally linked to Jethro, described in the Book of Exodus as the Priests of the Midianites), the otherwise unknown Luqman and the story of the defeat of Abrahā’s army by birds dropping stones on him (Surah 105 The Elephant).

Finally, there are still some traits in Islam that look pagan (particularly the role of the poorly explained black stone’), and whilst the black stone is not mentioned in the Qur’an, some practices that have the appearance of hangovers from the Age of Ignorance do find fleeting references: for example the qibla (direction of prostration) verse, (2.144), and the occasional references to ‘sacred months’ (2.217) and (9.5), both of which incorporate into the Qur’an clearly non-Abrahamic tradition.

Consequently, it is proposed that there is a clear basis within the text of the Qur’an to identify two broad categories of verses, similar, but not identical to, the classical division between Meccan and Medinan surahs. It is suggested that the division is based not upon the time or place of composition but reflects verses’ quite different origins and purposes:

An Abrahamic (probably Jewish-Christian) corpus of verses, resulting from meticulous and wide reading, and appear to have been composed with a genuine and profound religious purpose. Some verses show Christian authorship, and the INARAH school makes a good case that these verses were composed by an Arab pre-Chalcedonian Christian community.

There may well have been a conscious intent to adapt the well-known stories of Judaism and Christianity to present them, alongside elements from Arabic folklore, to an Arab population in a manner avoids the complex and off-putting elements of the Israelites’ status as God’s chosen people and the divinity of Christ

and

A Mohammedan corpus of the verses where the biblical verses have been more or less crudely adopted or are entirely original, cynically used by a particular preacher, to serve his practical needs.

With two additional influences:

Arab folklore and

Residual adoption of pagan practices.
An analysis of some Judeo-Christian and Mohammedan verses in the seventh century manuscripts

In Appendix 1 two groups of verses are identified: one those verses that show especially clear signs of Christian authorship, the second ones that indicate authorship by a leader with reference to contemporary events or supporting the exercise of power in a manner that is not rooted in the Judeo-Christian scriptures.

These verses are then colour coded if they appear on the three manuscripts radio-carbon dated to have originated in the seventh century or earlier.

The outcome of this exercise demonstrates that both specifically ‘Christian’ and ‘Mohammedan’ verses appear in all three of the early manuscripts.
Suggested five stage sequence leading to the development and adoption of the Qur’an

From the early manuscript and the stylometric research it would appear that the Judeo—Christian and Mohammedan traditions had coalesced prior to 645 (the latest date for BnF 328(c))

The reference to the Byzantine defeat in 614 would, probably place this coming together after that date, although the possibility that this verse was a later addition cannot be ruled out.

Attempting to construct a scenario as to how the coming together may have occurred from the confusing array of evidence is not straightforward, and it is suggested that there is no scenario that could reasonably held with any degree of certainty. However, the following five-stage structure is suggested as one possible scenario that appears to fit the physical evidence.

Stage 1: An Arab Pre-Chalcedonian Christian Community

Prior to the seventh century (and possibly as early as the third) a scholarly and pious but austere Arab non-Trinitarian Christian movement developed in the middle east, possibly in Palestine or the Jordan valley. Possibly, at some later stage this group had a base within the, by then, almost deserted and sublimely beautiful and inspiring ruined city of Petra.

In South Arabia, Jewish and Christian communities had long used the Bismillah and their kinsfolk in the north also adopted this terminology.

Alienated from mainstream of Christian by their rejection of the Holy Trinity, the Arab Christian group they felt a natural inclination to look for ‘true’ Christianity in non-canonical sources such as apocryphal gospels, pious traditions and Rabbinic commentaries.

This group wrote, mostly in Aramiaic, commentaries on the Judeo-Christian sources as hymns and adopts ‘Rahman’ (‘the Merciful’) as an epithet for God and ‘Mohammed’ (‘he who should be praised’) and ‘Abd Allah’ (‘servant of God’) as honorific titles for Jesus.
Stage 2: The new ‘Mohammed’

Amongst this group, a charismatic individual claimed the title ‘Muhammed’ for himself.

A power struggle between the new self-declared Muhammad and his peers took place (possibly around Petra), providing a factual foundation for the ‘holy citadel v city of exile’ struggle verses of the Qur’an.

Defeated and exiled, and in a search for a more receptive audience, ‘the Mohammed’ departed from the Arab non-trinitarian group and travelling south into Arabia.

As a stranger in a foreign land he adopted the stories and language of the group that he had left, converting them into rhyming Arabic, but without the scriptures to hand making occasional errors. By so doing he scratched a living as an itinerant prophet amongst the nomadic Arabs of central Arabia, who recognised something of Judeo-Christian culture but had never had access to it in formal tracts written in their own language, or had it preached to them so convincingly.

‘The Mohammed’s preaching threatened in lurid terms, God’s wrath now and in the hereafter for those who rejected his instructions - contrasted with promises of the satisfaction of lust, now and in the hereafter, for those who perform God’s will.

Stage 3 Holy War

As the self-declared prophet’s following grew, he used his devotees to form raiding parties, and later small ad-hoc armies. As his ministry turned to violence, and isolated from his original source of biblical knowledge, the Judeo-Christian tone of his revelations weakened in two ways:

- his reliance on biblical allusions waned and his ‘revelations’ become more innovative: addressing law, strategy, exhortations to war, and on occasions his own personal desires.
- his new religion accommodated pagan customs and Arab folklore that had no basis in Judeo-Christian tradition at all. He incorporating pagan sprites (jinn) into his cosmology and tolerating the bowing towards a particular geographical direction (a direction that his followers found more ‘pleasing’), veneration of a black stone and the recognition (but not observance) of ‘sacred months’ of truce.

Through a combination of ‘dark charisma’, brutality and the offering of profitable submission terms the warlord-prophet was surprisingly successful, establishing bases, including at Medina and Mecca.
His prayers were written down, and his people may have been forced to recite them. However, it is likely that by the end of his life, few people truly believed in the divine sources of the revelations that became increasingly obviously remote from piety, reactive to circumstances including queries from his confused audience and self-serving.

Stage 4. The Arab Conquests

‘The Mohammed’ died c. 630, and his inner circle immediately fell to brutal and bloody infighting.

However, the fighting force he had created broke out of Arabia to overwhelm the Middle East, North Africa and Persia, helped by the exhaustion of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires after their long wars. The Arab conquerors lacked central control and by now their motives were almost entirely mercenary. Their enterprise was less of an invasion than demands for tribute against the threat of slaughter and enslavement. As can sometimes occur with such schemes, some victims may have actually preferred the disinterest of Arab ‘protection’ to the religiously guided and strict Byzantine and Sassanid rule, laying the foundations for future apologists to assert Islam as having been religiously tolerant.

Arab leaders, such as Muawiyah and Abd al Malik were essentially agnostic, content to present themselves as a Christian, of a sort, to keep the original pseudo-Abrahamic school onside. To project his power Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock over the believed site of Jesus’ crucifixion, as a consciously Jesus-based rebuilding of the Temple, and shrine to the forthcoming apocalypse, carefully selecting verses from the religious community’s hymns (probably before the completion of the Qur’an) honouring Jesus as Muhammad, ‘servant and messenger of God’.

The memory of the great prophet and warlord who had made their conquests possible was retained, and there may have been some merging with Mohammed’s original community, which may have built places of worship facing its spiritual home in Petra, until the pagan tradition of facing the Black Stone in Mecca came to be dominant.

During this process, the full Qur’an received little attention. Eventually four surah’s of the Mohammedan corpus reached and attracted the derision of St John of Damascus.
Stage 5. The Abbasid adoption of Islam as a state religion

After the Abbasid Revolution of 750, the Abbasid caliphs realised the advantages to formally promoting the cult of Mohammed and mythologizing the memory of Arab leader who had carried that name, and whose ‘prophecies’ had laid the foundation for their empire.

Innumerable stories of the actions and sayings of Mohammed were produced, often to support legal cases. In order to gain some control of the narrative Ibn Ishaq was charged by the Abbasids with the task of reconstructing the life of Mohammed by weaving together the many stories concerning him into a consistent and edifying biography.

With Mohammed remembered as having emerged from Arabia, and with non-Trinitarian Christians of the north keen to brush over their conflict with them, all stories concerning Mohammed’s struggle with them were projected south onto Mecca.

Muslims, seeking to advance their public or private interests were not slow to build up stories based upon Mohammed. As each gained acceptance, especially in judicial proceedings, subsequent ones had to be composed to ‘fit’ into the existing narrative. The plot of Mohammed’s life quickly expands with a cast of hundreds of characters and incidents.

The Arab shrine to Jesus at the Dome of the Rock Dome was initially hard to explain, but the cryptic verse 17.1 was seized upon to construct the fantastical story of Mohammed’s Isra night journey to Jerusalem/heaven.

The stories of Mohammed – as man, prophet and warlord - invariably attracted a legendary quality, growing and embellished with many characters – akin to the knights of King Arthur or Robin Hood’s outlaw gang in English folklore. With individuals able to win or lose legal cases based upon recalled stories of Mohammed, the hadith proliferate. Some will have been based upon a memory of passed down truth, the more intriguing by their foundations being obscured below those shifting Arabian sands.
Diagram of the proposed 4-source/5 stage process

**Stage 1**
Preserved Jewish- (non-Trinitarian) Christian tradition in Jordan/Syria

**Stage 2**
Career of the warlord adopting the title ‘Mohammed’ on the Arabian Peninsula.
Mohammed began by translating what he remembered of the Jewish-Christian hymns into Arabic

**Stage 3**
Mohammed’s ‘revlations’ became less structured and more freestyle, blending Arab folklore and pagan influences of his followers.

**Stage 4**
After the death of Mohammed, his Qur’an received little attention as a book but:
influences the Arab conquerors’ expression of their identity with a predominantly Christian culture,
retains some adherence amongst the Bedouins.

**Stage 5**
A mix of Jewish/Christian/Quranic and Pagan ideas influence Arab culture in a period of tribalism until the Abbasids become dominant and declares a caliphate based upon the Qur’an after 750.

The Dome of the Rock

The Kaaba/
The Black Stone

The Qur’an
Appendix 1

An analysis of Judeo-Christian and Mohammedan verses in the seventh century manuscripts

In the following lists two groups of verses are identified. The first list identifies verses that show especially clear signs of Christian authorship, the second ones that indicate authorship by a leader with reference to contemporary events or supporting the exercise of power in a manner that is not rooted in the Judeo-Christian scriptures.

Those verses that have so far been identified in the lower text of the Sana’a manuscript appear in a brown font, and those that appear in the Birmingham/Paris 328(c) appear in a green font.

Those verses that appear in the Tubingen fragment, but do not appear in the surviving fragments of the Sana’a manuscript (DAM 01-27.01) or the ‘Birmingham/Paris’ manuscripts (BnF 328(c)) have been put in a blue font.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verses that show especially clear signs of an original Judeo-Christian source</th>
<th>Verses, that it is suggested indicate a ‘Mohammedan’ source:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>references to the virgin birth {66.12}</td>
<td>references to specific contemporary events (battles, treaties, hardships, victories etc)</td>
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<tr>
<td>references to figures such as Mary, Joseph the husband of Mary, John the Baptist and Zacharia, who have no real significance to a later final revelation of which Jesus was merely a forerunner: {3.34-47, 4.156, 171, 5.75, 6.85, 19.2-12, 16-36, 21.89-91, 23.50, 66.12}</td>
<td>• the cursing of Abu Lahab Surah 111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>references to the Holy Spirit {2.87, 2.253, 5.110} and {16.102}.</td>
<td>• ‘the Night Journey’ {17.1},</td>
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<tr>
<td>references to Jesus as the messiah {3.45, 4.171-2, 5.17, 4.72, 5.75} and {9.30-31},</td>
<td>• splitting of the moon {54.1-2},</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>references to Jesus returning at the end of days {43.61}, and</td>
<td>• first permissions to fight {22.39-41, 2.190-3},</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verses inspired by Christian devotional writings (see Appendix 3):</td>
<td>• fighting in the sacred months {2.216-8},</td>
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<td>• ‘the Battle of Badr’ {3.123, 8.1-17, 39-48, 54.45-47}</td>
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<td>• ‘the Battle of Uhud’ {3.121-126, 140-143, 146-148, 152-158 and 165-168},</td>
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<td>• ‘the Treaty of Hudaybiyah’ {3.26-27}</td>
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<td>• ‘the massacre of the Banu Qurayza’) {33.9-27}</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
(Joseph, son of Jacob) \{12.5, 8-10, 18, 26-28, 53, 65, 77 and 84\),

(Bowing of angels to Adam) \{2.34, 7.11, 15.31-32, 17.61, 18.50\} and \(38.74-75\),

(Sleepers in Cave) \{18.9-26\}

(Al Khidr) \{18.65-82\}.

- ‘the conquest of Mecca’ \{17.81-82\}
- ‘the Battle of Hunayn’ \{9.24-6\}
- ‘the Battle of Tabouk’ \{9.38-47 and 81-84\}
- ‘The Sword Verse’ \{9.5\}.

**general incitements to jihad**

\{2.178-179, 190-194 and 244, 3.169, 172-173 and 195, 4.71-72, 74-77, 84, 89-91, 94-95, 100-104 and 144, 5.33, 35 and 82, 8.57-60 and 65-75, 9.12-14, 16, 19-20, 29, 36, 52, 73, 86, 88, 92, 111, 120 and 122-123, 16, 110, 22, 58 and 78, 24.53-55, 25.52, 29.6 and 69, 33.50, 42.39, 47.4, 20 and 35, 49.15, 59.2, 5-8, 14, 60.9, 61.4 and 11-13, 63.4, 64.14, 66.9, 73.20 and 76.8\}.

**References to the Messenger of God:**

- as ‘a beautiful example’ \{33.21, 24.63\}
- as ‘not the father of any man amongst you’ \{33.40\}

**Specific rules for one person** (and their household, \{33.28-33, 50, 53, 66.3-5\}

**Laws that appear neither recognisably Jewish or Christian:**

- prohibition of usury and women’s attestation of debt \{2.275-276 and 282\},
- marriage and divorce \{2.228-9, 4.3, 22-23, 34 and 65.4\},
- weaning/adoption \{2.233, 33.4-5\},
- inheritance \{2.180, 4.11-12 and 176\},
- homicide \{4.92-4\},
- ‘hudd’ punishments and punishment of causing corruption on the earth: \{4.15, 5.32-33, 38, 24.2-4, and 90-91\}. 

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verses presenting slavery as God’s blessing, and setting out circumstances for freeing slaves:

{5.89, 9.60, 16.71, 23.1-9, 24.33, 58.3-4, 70.19-35 and 90.13}

instruction to fast during Ramadan {2.183}

instructions to women to wear modest attire {24.31, 33.59},

and

the naming of Mecca, {48.24}, and Yathrib, {33.13}.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic Folklore</th>
<th>reference to Arab prophets</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Hud) 7.65-72, 11.50-60, 26.123-139, 46.21-26 and 54.18-21</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Saleh) 7.73-79, 11.61-68, 15.80-84, and 26.141-158</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Shwaib) 7.85-91, 11.84-94, 23.20,</td>
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<td>(Luqman) Surah 31</td>
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<tr>
<td>(The story of the elephant) (Surah 105)</td>
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It will be seen that both ‘Judeo-Christian’ and ‘Mohammedan’ verses appear in all three manuscripts, with the oldest (BnF) containing both specifically Christian and archetypally belligerent and context specific instructions.
Appendix 2

Full text or St John of Damascus’s comments on Islam in Heresies

There is also the superstition of the Ishmaelites which to this day prevails and keeps people in error, being a forerunner of the Antichrist. They are descended from Ishmael, [who] was born to Abraham of Agar, and for this reason they are called both Agarenes and Ishmaelites. They are also called Saracens, which is derived from Sarras kenoï, or destitute of Sara, because of what Agar said to the angel: ‘Sara hath sent me away destitute.’ [99] These used to be idolaters and worshiped the morning star and Aphrodite, whom in their own language they called Khabär, which means great. [100] And so down to the time of Heraclius they were very great idolaters. From that time to the present a false prophet named Mohammed has appeared in their midst. This man, after having chanced upon the Old and New Testaments and likewise, it seems, having conversed with an Arian monk, [101] devised his own heresy. Then, having insinuated himself into the good graces of the people by a show of seeming piety, he gave out that a certain book had been sent down to him from heaven. He had set down some ridiculous compositions in this book of his and he gave it to them as an object of veneration.

He says that there is one God, creator of all things, who has neither been begotten nor has begotten. [102] He says that the Christ is the Word of God and His Spirit, but a creature and a servant, and that He was begotten, without seed, of Mary the sister of Moses and Aaron. [103] For, he says, the Word and God and the Spirit entered into Mary and she brought forth Jesus, who was a prophet and servant of God. And he says that the Jews wanted to crucify Him in violation of the law, and that they seized His shadow and crucified this. But the Christ Himself was not crucified, he says, nor did He die, for God out of His love for Him took Him to Himself into heaven. [104] And he says this, that when the Christ had ascended into heaven God asked Him: ‘O Jesus, didst thou say: “I am the Son of God and God”?’ And Jesus, he says, answered: ‘Be merciful to me, Lord. Thou knowest that I did not say this and that I did not scorn to be thy servant. But sinful men have written that I did not say this statement, and they have lied about me and have fallen into error.’ And God answered and said to Him: ‘I know that thou didst not say this word.” [105] There are many other extraordinary and quite ridiculous things in this book which he boasts was sent down to him from God. But when we ask: ‘And who is there to testify that God gave him the book? And which of the prophets foretold that such a prophet would rise up?’—they are at a loss. And we remark that Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai, with God appearing in the sight of all the people in cloud, and fire, and darkness, and storm. And we say that all the Prophets from Moses on down foretold the coming of Christ and how Christ God (and incarnate Son of God) was to come to and to be crucified and die and rise again, and how He was to be the judge of the living and dead. Then, when we say: ‘How is it that this prophet of yours did not come in the same way, with others bearing witness to him? And how is it that God did not in your presence present this man with the book to which you refer, even as He gave the Law to Moses, with the people looking on and the mountain smoking, so that you, too, might have certainty?’—they answer that God does as He pleases. ‘This,’ we say, ‘We know, but we are asking how the book came down to your prophet.’ Then they reply that the book came down to him while he was asleep. Then we jokingly say to them that, as long as he received the book in his sleep and did not actually sense the operation, then the popular adage applies to him (which runs: You’re spinning me dreams.) [106]
When we ask again: ‘How is it that when he enjoined us in this book of yours not to do anything or receive anything without witnesses, you did not ask him: “First do you show us by witnesses that you are a prophet and that you have come from God, and show us just what Scriptures there are that testify about you”’—they are ashamed and remain silent. [Then we continue:] ‘Although you may not marry a wife without witnesses, or buy, or acquire property; although you neither receive an ass nor possess a beast of burden unwitnessed; and although you do possess both wives and property and asses and so on through witnesses, yet it is only your faith and your scriptures that you hold unsubstantiated by witnesses. For he who handed this down to you has no warranty from any source, nor is there anyone known who testified about him before he came. On the contrary, he received it while he was asleep.’

Moreover, they call us Hetaeriasts, or Associators, because, they say, we introduce an associate with God by declaring Christ to be the Son of God and God. We say to them in rejoinder: ‘The Prophets and the Scriptures have delivered this to us, and you, as you persistently maintain, accept the Prophets. So, if we wrongly declare Christ to be the Son of God, it is they who taught this and handed it on to us.’ But some of them say that it is by misinterpretation that we have represented the Prophets as saying such things, while others say that the Hebrews hated us and deceived us by writing in the name of the Prophets so that we might be lost. And again we say to them: ‘As long as you say that Christ is the Word of God and Spirit, why do you accuse us of being Hetaeriasts? For the word, and the spirit, is inseparable from that in which it naturally has existence. Therefore, if the Word of God is in God, then it is obvious that He is God. If, however, He is outside of God, then, according to you, God is without word and without spirit. Consequently, by avoiding the introduction of an associate with God you have mutilated Him. It would be far better for you to say that He has an associate than to mutilate Him, as if you were dealing with a stone or a piece of wood or some other inanimate object. Thus, you speak untruth when you call us Hetaeriasts; we retort by calling you Mutilators of God.’

They furthermore accuse us of being idolaters, because we venerate the cross, which they abominate. And we answer them: ‘How is it, then, that you rub yourselves against a stone in your Ka’ba [107] and kiss and embrace it?’ Then some of them say that Abraham had relations with Agar upon it, but others say that he tied the camel to it, when he was going to sacrifice Isaac. And we answer them: ‘Since Scripture says that the mountain was wooded and had trees from which Abraham cut wood for the holocaust and laid it upon Isaac, [108] and then he left the asses behind with the two young men, why talk nonsense? For in that place neither is it thick with trees nor is there passage for asses.’ And they are embarrassed, but they still assert that the stone is Abraham’s. Then we say: ‘Let it be Abraham’s, as you so foolishly say. Then, just because Abraham had relations with a woman on it or tied a camel to it, you are not ashamed to kiss it, yet you blame us for venerating the cross of Christ by which the power of the demons and the deceit of the Devil was destroyed.’ This stone that they talk about is a head of that Aphrodite whom they used to worship and whom they called Khabár. Even to the present day, traces of the carving are visible on it to careful observers.

As has been related, this Mohammed wrote many ridiculous books, to each one of which he set a title. For example, there is the book On Woman, [109] in which he plainly makes legal provision for taking four wives and, if it be possible, a thousand concubines—as many as one can maintain, besides the four wives. He also made it legal to put away whichever wife one might wish, and, should one so wish, to take to oneself another in the same way. Mohammed had a friend named Zeid. This man had a beautiful wife with whom Mohammed fell in love. Once, when they were sitting together,
Mohammed said: ‘Oh, by the way, God has commanded me to take your wife.’ The other answered: ‘You are an apostle. Do as God has told you and take my wife.’ Rather—to tell the story over from the beginning—he said to him: ‘God has given me the command that you put away your wife.’ And he put her away. Then several days later: ‘Now,’ he said, ‘God has commanded me to take her.’ Then, after he had taken her and committed adultery with her, he made this law: ‘Let him who will put away his wife. And if, after having put her away, he should return to her, let another marry her. For it is not lawful to take her unless she have been married by another. Furthermore, if a brother puts away his wife, let his brother marry her, should he so wish.’ [110] In the same book he gives such precepts as this: ‘Work the land which God hath given thee and beautify it. And do this, and do it in such a manner’ [111]—not to repeat all the obscene things that he did...

Then there is the book of The Camel of God. [112] About this camel he says that there was a camel from God and that she drank the whole river and could not pass through two mountains, because there was not room enough. There were people in that place, he says, and they used to drink the water on one day, while the camel would drink it on the next. Moreover, by drinking the water she furnished them with nourishment, because she supplied them with milk instead of water. Then, because these men were evil, they rose up, he says, and killed the camel. However, she had an offspring, a little camel, which, he says, when the mother had been done away with, called upon God and God took it to Himself.

Then we say to them: ‘Where did that camel come from?’ And they say that it was from God. Then we say: ‘Was there another camel coupled with this one?’ And they say: ‘No.’ ‘Then how,’ we say, ‘was it begotten?’ For we see that your camel is without father and without mother and without genealogy, and that the one that begot it suffered evil. Neither is it evident who bred her. And also, this little camel was taken up. So why did not your prophet, with whom, according to what you say, God spoke, find out about the camel—where it grazed, and who got milk by milking it? Or did she possibly, like her mother, meet with evil people and get destroyed? Or did she enter into paradise before you, so that you might have the river of milk that you so foolishly talk about?

For you say that you have three rivers flowing in paradise—one of water, one of wine, and one of milk. If your forerunner the camel is outside of paradise, it is obvious that she has dried up from hunger and thirst, or that others have the benefit of her milk—and so your prophet is boasting idly of having conversed with God, because God did not reveal to him the mystery of the camel. But if she is in paradise, she is drinking water still, and you for lack of water will dry up in the midst of the paradise of delight. And if, there being no water, because the camel will have drunk it all up, you thirst for wine from the river of wine that is flowing by, you will become intoxicated from drinking pure wine and collapse under the influence of the strong drink and fall asleep. Then, suffering from a heavy head after sleeping and being sick from the wine, you will miss the pleasures of paradise.

How, then, did it not enter into the mind of your prophet that this might happen to you in the paradise of delight? He never had any idea of what the camel is leading to now, yet you did not even ask him, when he held forth to you with his dreams on the subject of the three rivers. We plainly assure you that this wonderful camel of yours has preceded you into the souls of asses, where you, too, like beasts are destined to go. And there is the exterior darkness and everlasting punishment, roaring fire, sleepless worms, and hellish demons.’

Again, in the book of The Table, Mohammed says that the Christ asked God for a table and that it was given Him. For God, he says, said to Him: ‘I have given to thee and thine an incorruptible table.’
And again, in the book of The Heifer, [114] he says some other stupid and ridiculous things, which, because of their great number, I think must be passed over. He made it a law that they be circumcised and the women, too, and he ordered them not to keep the Sabbath and not to be baptized.

And, while he ordered them to eat some of the things forbidden by the Law, he ordered them to abstain from others. He furthermore absolutely forbade the drinking of wine.”

\(^1\) Sahih Bukhari, 1.1.3, also 4.55.605