

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Rise of Monotheism in Arabia

Holger Zellentin

Introduction

If it were not for the endurance of Islam, it should be pointed out right away, scholars would hardly be trying as hard to reconstruct the history of Arabia, let alone of Arabian religions, in Late Antiquity—not because of a lack of interest, but because of the absence of reliable detailed information. The scarcity of primary Arabian sources predating the eighth century CE, even by the modest standards of late antique historiography, remains the first and foremost obstacle to writing a history that must content itself with the evidence provided by scholarly inference based on a few inscriptions, on secondary reports about Arabia—often stemming from earlier later periods or distant lands—and on cultural comparison with neighboring regions. (“Late Antiquity” is here used as roughly the period from the first to the seventh century CE, cf. Cameron 2011.) The problem arising from the use of such information is not so much that we would be left with pure speculation: over the past century, we have gained a rather coherent, if tentative picture of some key aspects of Arabian history, such as that of the Himyarite kingdom or of the Christian community of Najrān (to which we shall return). Rather, the problem is one of scarcity of primary data coupled with an overabundance of pertinent, yet often only vaguely related or tendentious comparative data. Arabia bordered the Roman empire in the northwest, the Persian

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empire in the northeast, and, divided merely by a few miles across the island-dotted “Gate of Tears” (*Bāb al-Mandab*), the Aksumite empire in the southwest. Arabia also lay on important sea routes used for Indian and Far Eastern trade. The religious and political history of Arabia, moreover, was the focus of much of traditional Islamic and parts of Christian hagiography and historiography, providing detailed accounts that are impossible both to dismiss in their entirety and to verify in any specific detail. A proper understanding of both Arabia’s internal dynamics and of its rich intercultural exchange with its evolving neighbors thus necessitates a careful negotiation of the cultures of the three empires bordering Islam, of traditional Islamic, Christian, and Jewish sources, and of the results provided by the rapidly evolving field of Qur’ānic studies.

When approaching the history of pre-Islamic Arabia, prioritizing one set of evidence over another inexorably leads to dramatically different results. Choosing, say, an entirely endemic Arabian or even strictly “Meccan” and “Medinan” cultural context in order to tether the nascent Muslim community to a specific time and place, as has been the preferred method of traditional Islamic scholarship, results in a picture starkly contrasting to the one that emerges when placing the same community in the broader discourse of late antique Judaism and Christianity, as has been the method of choice for much of western scholarship. The same holds true for Arabia as a whole: the dearth of local information led some scholars to reduce Arabia to an allegedly entirely pagan backwater, untouched by the great cultural and religious debates of Late Antiquity; the same dearth of sources has led others to conceive of Arabia merely as an epigone appendix to the surrounding empires in which these very same debates were present, yet supposedly rehashed in a bastardized and syncretistic way. As Neuwirth and others have amply illustrated, both approaches are inadequate (see e.g. Neuwirth 2010), yet how are we to retrieve the unique Arabian voices that were committed to local tradition at the same time as eagerly responding to the major trends of Roman, Persian, and Aksumite culture?

The best approach to the history of Arabian culture that contemporary scholarship may have to offer is based on a renewed focus on the Qur’ān as our key source to be read along other epigraphic, archeological, and pre- and post-Qur’ānic secondary sources. Only the Qur’ān, in its increasingly secure dating before the seventh century and in its wealth of information about its intended audience, allows for a genuine glimpse into late antique Arabia. Regardless of its religious significance, and based solely on its historical value, we should thus take the Qur’ān, along with the epigraphy, as touchstones in order to evaluate which parts of the traditional Muslim and Christian historiographies may be more accurate, and which parts may reflect different circumstances. Likewise,

we should use the same primary Arabian evidence in order to evaluate which aspects of late antique imperial or religious culture had indeed found fertile ground in Arabia, and which aspects are less relevant. The main hermeneutical quality of this re-reading of Arabian history must, even more than in other fields of late ancient history, remain scholarly humility and the acknowledgment of the ultimate unknowability of much of pre-Islamic Arabic culture, religion, and thereby of monotheism. The little that can be known with some amount of certainty about Arabia, hence, we do know from the intersection of the Qurʾān, of epigraphy, and of secondary sources, to which we will turn after a few initial remarks on the category of monotheism and on its history from the Hebrew Bible, throughout late antique Judaism and Christianity, and right up to one of its historical acmes in the Qurʾān.

Biblical Monotheism

“Monotheism,” not unlike “religion,” is an idealized abstraction about God’s absolute uniqueness and unity, a discourse at home in the abstractions of theology much more than in the religious practices of the past and even of the present. The perceived self-evidence of monotheism, and especially of the imagined monotheistic nature of the so-called “Abrahamic” religions, in present discourse has been long in the making (see e.g. Levenson 2012 and Hendel 2005). Only after “religion” became a definable “set of beliefs,” a process shaped by reformation and enlightenment thought, did monotheism become a perceivable and intelligible category—even if the term’s coinage by the seventeenth-century theologian and philosopher Henry More was originally also used negatively to describe “pagan” pantheism (see MacDonald 2004). Yet religions, in the view of cultural anthropologists, function not as sets of beliefs but as systems of symbols that shape human lives as much as they are shaped by them. The relationship of such symbols to one another is in turn shaped by narratives (see e.g. Smith 2003), and the religious narratives themselves hardly ever fit philosophical theories. Even from the inside of religious traditions, debates such as the one about God’s absolute transcendence illustrate that the very richness of religious traditions stands in tension with philosophical rigor. Maimonides, to give but one example, may have accused his “corporalist” contemporaries of heresy, yet it seems that they had long accused him of violating biblical teachings (see e.g. Stroumsa 2009: 38–52).

Given the difficulties of reconciling the modern and early modern concept of monotheism with the history of religions, recent scholarly treatments of monotheism tend to emphasize not so much the theological or philosophical

claims to God's uniqueness, but the "translatability" of divinities: the openness of some but not other traditions to perceive of the religious Other in terms of what is sacred to itself. One further way to bridge the gap between the vividness of religious narratives and the sterility of philosophical monotheism has been to substitute the study of the memory of certain traditions for the study of the traditions themselves. The Egyptologist Jan Assmann, for example, somewhat peculiarly following Freud's *Der Mann Moses und die Monotheistische Religion*, sees in monotheism the "remembered" untranslatability, and even the denial of religion itself (see e.g. Assmann 1997; for a biblically more informed view see Hendel 2005). Yet others, such as Mark Smith, rightly countered that the very concept of the intercultural "translatability" of divine epithets has always remained part of monotheistic religions, and that monotheism thereby remains a construct, in theological narrative as much as in human practice (see Smith 2008, esp. 38–43, and Schäfer 2005). What we can learn from these debates, for the present purpose, is that we may not be able to study monotheism, but that we can identify strands of traditions that place a greater dual emphasis than others on the oneness of God and on the increasingly categorical denial of the very existence of other divinities.

In Arabia and its environs, we can trace much of Late Ancient thought on the uniqueness and on the unity of God to the Hebrew Bible, in the sense that the local Arabian discourse evolved in an increasingly intense and distinctive dialogue with the biblical traditions of Late Antiquity. A few preliminary notes on biblical monotheism and its Jewish and Christian adaptations will thus set the stage for a look at the Arabian sources, that is, the Qur'ān and the epigraphy, and the secondary ones, that is, the cultural context and the ancient historiography. It hardly needs repeating that some strands of the Hebrew Bible are quite open to the translatability of the divine, recasting Canaanite deities in terms of the Israelite God, at the same time as denying the powers—yet hardly ever the existence—of these very same deities (see e.g. Smith 2001). What we should note in this context, however, is that the Hebrew Bible, in addition to unifying various Canaanite gods and their epithets into one single Israelite God and rejecting all others, simultaneously emphasizes this God's unity. "You shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the peoples that are round about you," we learn in Deuteronomy 6:14, just after the text implements the Shema Israel in Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." For the rabbis (whose substitution of "the Lord" for the ineffable Tetragrammaton is here followed), the Shema became a central daily prayer, and the unity of God thereby became an object of daily contemplation (see e.g. Mishna *Berakhot* 1 and 2) or even of martyrological fulfillment (see e.g. *Berakhot* 61b) throughout Jewish Late

Antiquity. The type of ancient monotheism that can be found in the Israelite, as well as in the Jewish tradition, is thus a dual concept that indeed combines uniqueness of God, the rejection of other deities—their posited non-translatability after their actual translation—with the unity of God.

This biblical type of monotheism, and even its liturgical expression in the Shema, remained the center of much debate throughout Late Antiquity. The Shema is explicitly highlighted in the Gospels (see e.g. Mark 12:29, Galatians 3:20, and James 2:19), and the Church Fathers often invoked its testimony to the unity of God the Father in their rejection of other gods or of Christian “heresies” (see e.g. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.2.2 and 5.22.1; Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lord’s Prayer* (Treatise IV) 28; Athanasius, *Letter* 11.3 (*Festal Letter* for 339 CE); Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 15.3). It is thus no surprise that an echo of the Shema can be clearly heard when the Christological debates of the first Christian centuries found one of their seminal expressions in the formulation of the Nicene Creed, through which the unity of God became the central rallying point for—and, in various forms, equally an essential part of the liturgy of—Christians throughout the three empires surrounding Arabia. While many churches of the fourth century may have stood quite close to what Athanasius labeled as Arianism (cf. Hanson 1988; Berndt and Steinacher 2014), many Christians in the Latin, Greek, Syriac, and, possibly, Arabic speaking world would eventually agree to an approximation of the Nicene Creed (according to Kelly 2006: 216–217):

We believe in one God, the Father, almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God, begotten from the Father, the only-begotten; that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth...

While the Nicene Creed emphasizes the unity of God and thereby clearly evokes the Shema Israel, the debates about the precise nature and relationship of the divine and the human in Christ soon tore Christendom apart. The Nicene Creed’s original version had contained a clear condemnation of those who believed in the createdness of the son, and after the council of Chalcedon in the fifth century, the Church of the Byzantine empire split its ways with most eastern churches in the Sasanian and Aksumite empires. Most Christians in Arabia, we can thus surmise, followed the Nicene Creed in non-Chalcedonian ways, and their liturgies and scriptures were not Greek or Latin but Ethiopic, Syriac, or even various forms of Arabic (see Griffith 2013: 7–53; Arabian Jews likely used Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic, see e.g. Newby 1988).

Regardless of the internal schisms, with the rise of Christianity in the Roman world, the unity and uniqueness of God became more and more commonplace; even Julian the Apostate was as much a “monotheist” as his Christian opponents (on pagan monotheism see now e.g. Mitchell and van Nuffelen 2010a, 2010b). By the sixth century CE, therefore, the thrust of religious denial of the Other had changed: for Christians in the Byzantine and Aksumite empire as well as under Sassanian rule, it consisted of denying Judaism and even more so the Christological outlook of other Christian confessions; for Jews, in turn, it consisted of the denial of non-rabbinic Jews or of Christians (see e.g. Oppenheimer 1997 and Zellentin 2011 as well as Schäfer 2009). The denial of the truth claims of the monotheistic Other was often expressed through accusations of paganism, which, in the light of the non-existence of the heathen gods, was often recast as demon-worship (see e.g. Kim 2016 and Iricinschi and Zellentin 2007).

Outside the Roman empire, pre- and post-Islamic Zoroastrian sources, despite their dualist view of the creation, professed the unity of *Abura Mazda*, likewise rejected polytheism, and equally tended to cast the practices of Jews and Christians—along with that of the Mandeans or the Zoroastrians, and later, the Muslims—in terms of the worship of evil powers (see de Jong 2004 and Daryaei 1999: 69–98; note that rabbis living under the Zoroastrian Sassanians did not conceive of their rulers as idolatrous per se, see Secunda 2014: 34–63). By the end of Late Antiquity, hence, after the Christianization of the Roman and the Aksumite empire, the denial of the powers of the gods had been more or less fully replaced by debates on the names and the qualities of the one deity—a state of affairs equally prevailing, *mutatis mutandis*, in the Sasanian Persian empire. Arabia, by the seventh century CE, was thus surrounded by three empires whose elites and whose populations by and large were monotheists, many if not most of them standing in a biblical tradition, all professing the unity of God and rejecting other gods, and all united in their fierce rejection of the ways in which their monotheist opponents constructed the nature of God and the quality of his epithets. How then did monotheism evolve in Arabia?

The Qur’ān and Arabian Monotheism

Locating the history of monotheisms, biblical or other, in Arabia, as mentioned above, is a difficult affair. While there are numerous antecedents to monotheistic discourse already in pre-Islamic sources and of course in the “Meccan” layers of the Qur’ān, the first full dogmatic formulation of monotheism in Arabia may be found in a “Medinan” surah. While some scholars

have rightfully questioned the all-too-circular preciseness with which some scholars claim to be able to determine the Qur'ān's putative sequentiality (see Reynolds 2011), the clear distinction between "Meccan" and "Medinan" materials in the Qur'ān can hardly be dismissed (see Sinai 2010). The distinction between the layers, along with the ongoing re-evaluation of the manuscript evidence, moreover, allows us more firmly to date the Qur'ān as a document whose Medinan parts were completed by the mid-seventh century at the very latest (see Déroche 2014), and whose Meccan origins should be placed after the emergence, in the late fifth and early sixth centuries CE, of those aspects of Syriac Christian culture which it presupposes (see e.g. Griffith 2011). While a slightly earlier dating of Muhammad's career may thus not yet be fully excluded, critical scholarship, by and large, seems to move toward a confirmation of the plausibility at least of the chronological bedrock of the traditional Muslim historiography, which had always dated the activities of the Qur'ān's prophet to the late sixth and early seventh century CE. This, of course, does not allow us to determine the geographical location of the Qur'ān's "Mecca" and of its "Medina." Likely as the identity of the ancient and the contemporary Saudi Arabian cities may be, especially in the case of Medina, the remaining inaccessibility of conclusive archeological evidence will, in the following, be indicated by the continued implied use of parentheses for these places.

It is in the Qur'ān's final Medinan layer that we can most securely determine a cultural context to Arabian monotheism; this will prove a more solid starting point for the consideration of the earlier intellectual history. *Sūrat Al-ʿIhlās*, the 112th surah of the Qur'ān, here given in a modified form of the translation of Qura'i (2003; the translation used in modified forms throughout this chapter), formulates the unity of God in clear rejection of God as a Father or as a son, echoing both the Shema and, in its dismissal of it, the Nicene Creed's Christology:

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| 1. <i>qul huwa llāhu 'aḥad</i> | Say, He is God, One. |
| 2. <i>Allāhu al-ṣamad</i> | God, the all-embracing. |
| 3. <i>lam yalid wa-lam yūlad</i> | He neither begat, nor was begotten, |
| 4. <i>wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan 'aḥad</i> | And there is, to him equal, not one. |

The Qur'ān, to be sure, "cites" its antecedents as little as the Nicene Creed "cites" the Shema Israel. Yet the voice of the religious adversary becomes nearly palpable when reading the surah as a prophetic dialogue addressed to a multi-confessional audience. As Neuwirth has illustrated, the surah, in its emphasis on the unity of God and especially in its distinct use of the Arabic term *'aḥad*—instead of the more common adjective

wāhid in such a grammatical construction—echoes the first line of the Shema and even its Hebrew emphasis on “one,” on *ehad*, the key symbol in the daily life of any practicing rabbinic Jew (see Neuwirth 2010: 762; note also that all Syriac and Aramaic versions of the Shema use the distinct Aramaic term *had* for “one,” thus highlighting the affinity between the Hebrew and the Arabic even more). Yet rather than addressing Israel alone and speaking of “our” God, as the Shema does, the surah, in line with the Medinan Qur’ān’s general criticism of Jewish and Christian “Israelite” particularism (see e.g. Zellentin 2013: 163–164), rereads the Shema in a universalist way. The Qur’ān’s affinity with its antecedents should, as always, not be used to identify non-Islamic “influences,” but as a springboard to explore its Islamic difference, for that difference was at the core of the message to the well versed audience whom the Qur’ān was meant to address.

The surah’s second verse then describes God as *al-ṣamad*, an adjective that, regardless of the riveting richness of the post-Qur’ānic Muslim and Christian interpretations of the term—echoed in the Qarai’s translation as “all-embracing”—most likely originally described God as “the highest authority” (see Rubin 1984 and Griffith 1997: 262). This unique epithet of all-might echoes and again implicitly modifies the Christian “almighty,” excising the concept of God’s fatherhood (explicitly dismissed throughout the Qur’ān, see e.g. Q2:116 and Q6:101) and thereby introducing the surah’s almost direct negation of further aspects of the Nicene Creed, which widely circulated among Syriac speaking Christians especially in liturgical form (see e.g. Bruns 2000 and Jansma 1964). God has no son and God is no son, the surah tersely continues in its wholesale rejection of the belief in the son of God and of the Nicene Creed’s double- and triple-barreled specification of “begotten.” In response to the Christian emphasis on Christ’s divine essence, the focus of so much debate throughout Late Antiquity, the surah introduces yet another unique term, *kufu*, translated approximately as “equal,” to dismiss any such equality with God (see Neuwirth 2010: 763; the term *kufu* appears in Arabic matrimonial arrangements, meaning that God also has no spouse; see Rubin 1984: 210 and compare Q72:3). The specific negation of God as the Father and God as the son, and the dismissal of any being’s equality to Him, hence, constitutes the Qur’ān’s full entry into the discursive realm not only of late antique Judaism, but also that of Christianity.

The Medinan Qur’ān, in this surah as well as in several others, thus evokes the Christian beliefs of parts of its audience, just as it does when rejecting trinitarian beliefs in Q7:73. In its statement that “they are certainly faithless who say, ‘God is third of three,’ while there is no god except the One God

(*'illā 'ilāhun wāḥidun*),” the Qur’ān leaves little doubt as to the Christian identity of some of the unbelievers (see Griffith 2007). To the Jewish, Christian, and gentile denizens of Arabia, the Medinan Qur’ān thus presents a rejuvenated form of monotheism that dismisses the Nicene Creed, or a credal confession very close to it, in a reformulation of the biblical Shema. In its rejection of Jesus’ divinity and reformulation of the Shema, the Qur’ān is not unprecedented: some strands of late antique thought, such as expressed in the Clementine Homilies, combine a similar emphasis on the Hebrew Bible and cite the Shema in preparation for an implicit allusion to the Nicene Creed and an explicit rejection of Jesus’ divinity. The passage in question, likely once circulating in Syriac or other Semitic languages albeit preserved in Greek alone, equally expresses the uniqueness of God in ways similar to the Qur’ān and may thereby provide us with a further piece of information what the Muslim scripture shared with its contemporaries, and what is distinctive to itself.

In *Clementine Homilies* 16.7.9, the Apostle Peter summarizes the biblical teachings on the unity of God, and including the Shema, in a manner that in some way prefigures the Qur’ān’s formulation of the unity of God:

But also somewhere else the Scripture says, “As I live, says the Lord” (cf. Isaiah 45:23), “there is no other God but me” (cf. Isaiah 45:5). “I am the first, I am after this; except me there is no God” (cf. Isaiah 45:6). And again: “You shall fear the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve” (Deuteronomy 10:20). And again: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord” (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4). And many passages besides seal with an oath that God is one, and that except Him there is no God (ὅτι εἷς ἔστιν ὁ θεὸς καὶ πλὴν αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν θεός). (ANF08, 314.)

As has been noted by previous scholars (see Stroumsa 2015: 82), the Homilies’ formulation that “except Him there is no God” is quite reminiscent of the Qur’ān’s own phrasing of God’s unity, as for example in the Medinan passage Q2 *Sūrat al-Baqarah* 163:

Your God is the One God (*wa-’ilāhukum ’ilāhun wāḥid*),
There is no god except Him (*lā ’ilāha ’illā huwa*),
The Beneficent, the Merciful (*al-rahmānu al-rahīm*).

Similar statements can of course be found throughout the Qur’ān, for example in the Meccan passage Q38 *Sūrat Ṣād* 65:

Say: “I am just a warner,
And there is no god except God (*wa-mā min ’ilāhin ’illa llāh*)
the One, the All-paramount (*al-wāḥidu al-qabḥār*).”

The similarity of discourse between the Clementine Homilies and the Qur'ān—the combination of a rhetorical emphasis on God's unity and God's uniqueness—is remarkable, even if somewhat mitigated by the fact that we are, after all, dealing with a combination of statements well attested in the Hebrew Bible. More intriguingly yet, however, may be the fact that the Clementine Homilies, in the intermediate sequel of the passage cited, in 16.15–16, like the Qur'ān, equally dismiss Jesus' divinity, and that they do so equally in a way that also evokes the Nicene Creed in order to reject it:

Our Lord neither asserted that there were gods except the Creator of all (παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα τὰ πάντα), nor did He proclaim Himself to be God, but He with reason pronounced blessed the person who called Him the Son of that God who has arranged the universe (τὰ πάντα διακοσμήσαντος)... In addition to this, it is the peculiarity of the Father not to have been begotten, but of the Son to have been begotten; but what is begotten cannot be compared with that which is unbegotten or self-begotten. (ANF08, 314.)

While style, language, and religious sensitivity of this passage vary in many ways from the Medinan Qur'ān, the Clementine Homilies nevertheless constitute the closest extant testimony to the Qur'ān's phrase that "there is no god except God," to its combination of the Shema combined with a dismissive allusion to the Nicene Creed, in the context of a theologically informed dismissal of Jesus' divinity. The same holds true for the Homilies' endorsement of a legal code and culture very similar to the Qur'ān, yet equally expressed in starkly different ways (see Zellentin 2013). The Medinan Qur'ān is thus certainly not "dependent" on the Clementine Homilies in any way. It is true that the transmission history of the Clementine literature into Syriac, Ethiopic, and Arabic remains difficult to assess in its entirety, adding the difficulty of having to compare a Greek with an Arabic tradition. There can, however, be little doubt that the text at least partially attests to an oral discourse—likely located within rather than without mainstream Christian groups—with great affinity to the formative Muslim community. And again, the punctual affinity of the two texts serves best to highlight their differences: in stark contrast even to the Clementine Homilies, the Qur'ān's main point in *Sūrat Al-'Iblāṣ* is of course to deny not only Jesus' divinity, as the Homilies also do, but also his sonship, which is affirmed in the Homilies. The Qur'ān can thus be determined to affirm some of the teachings shared with the Clementine Homilies as much as rejecting others, which makes it more than likely that at least part of the audience was aware of traditions with affinity to the Clementine Homilies. The Qur'ān saw this audience as being both open to and in need of its corrective instruction. The partial

overlap of the Qur'ān and the previous traditions thereby offers us a glimpse into the plausible religious world of pre-Islamic Arabia, and into the question of which type of discourse seems to have prepared the ground for its unprecedented success in reshaping Arabian monotheism.

The reason why so many citizens of Medina seem to have found the Qur'ān's message persuasive cannot yet, and perhaps never will be fully understood. Yet the simple and straightforward formulation of its universalist monotheistic creed—rejecting perceived Israelite particularism and academicism both Jewish and Christian along with the necessarily complex abstractions inherent to mature Christian doctrine and Talmudic legal discourse—certainly contributed to the rise of Islamic monotheism. Instead of a multifariously elaborated discussion, the Qur'ān offers ongoing permutations of a simple message, not unlike the Christian monastic sources that swept through Syriac Christendom since the fifth century CE. And while the desert fathers already had managed to translate the study of scripture into the concrete realm of their ascetic lives (see Burton-Christie 1993: 1–106), the Qur'ān then combined spiritual simplicity with the constitution of a new scripture of the most alluring literary subtlety.

A brief look at how, and how intensely, the Qur'ān repeats its central message of God's uniqueness, stretching from the Medinan to the Meccan surahs, illustrates how closely the text's monotheism is related to its literary style. "What! Is there a god besides God?," the Qur'ān rhetorically asks in Q27:60 and 61, and, as it were, answers the question in myriad ways: in addition to the formulation "there is no god but God," in Q38:65 as well as in Q3:62, Q37:35, and 47:19, which became the basis of the Islamic *Shahāda*, the Qur'ān instructs to "... worship God! You have no other God besides Him" in Q7:73 and in Q11:61; God Himself states that there is "no god but I" in Q16:2, Q20:14, and in Q21:25, and "the man of the fish" states "there is no god but you" in Q21:87. The most common formulation, however, is the simple statement, in line with Q2:163, that "there is no god but He," which can be found in Q2:163, Q3:2, 6, and 18, Q4:87, Q6:102 and 106, Q7:59, 65, 85, and 158, Q9:31 and 129, Q10:60, Q11:14 and 84, Q13:30, Q20:8 and 98, Q23:23, 32, and 116, Q27:26, Q28:70 and 88, Q35:3, Q40:3 and 62, Q44:8, Q64:13, and in Q73:9; it is echoed with the qualifier "besides whom there is no god" in Q2:255, and in Q59:22 and 23. While some of these passages occur in polemical contexts, others are simply general statements that set the Qur'ān's intense and universalist version of biblical monotheism apart even from its most closely related antecedents within the world of late antique Judaism and Christianity.

It is not impossible that the uniqueness of God in the Qur'ān is, at least partially, the product of a pre-Islamic process during which various deities were translated into one, akin to the process that can be illustrated to have taken place during the formation of the Hebrew Bible (see Al-Azmeh 2014: 164–357, and Chapter 16 in this volume). Yet the Qur'ān, as well as much of the epigraphic and historiographic evidence, rather points to a worldview that is shaped by a direct encounter with more mature concepts of biblical monotheism. One of the essential keys to reading at least the Medinan Qur'ān, we have already seen, is to understand its reformulation of biblical monotheism in direct challenge to the position it attributes to Jews and Christians. Informed about their practices and social arrangements, the Qur'ān accuses both groups of *širk*, of associating another deity, or at least another being, with God. “Do they ascribe partners (*'a-yušrikūna*) that create nothing and have been created themselves, and can neither help them, nor help themselves?” the Qur'ān, for example, asks in Q7 *Sūrat al-'A'rāf* 191–2. The idea of *širk*, literally “associationism,” denotes the association of God with another power and constitutes a concept unique to the Qur'ān. While Christian heresiology and the Jewish rejection of the trinity offer many partial overlaps with the idea, there is no single concept in the pre-Islamic tradition that would be comparable to that of *širk* in the Qur'ān. *Širk*, in other words, represents a culmination of both Jewish and Christian heresiology on the one hand, as well as constituting a distinctly Qur'ānic conception of religious aberration on the other, reintroducing the problem of polytheism in a new way into the very heart of the late antique monotheistic debate. All agreed that there are no other gods, yet the Qur'ān's overarching quest is to establish the purity of God's unity in the face of those monotheists whom it found guilty of blurring the lines between God and his creation.

The re-interpretation of Qur'ānic *širk* as focusing on rival monotheists, as decrying any association of another being with God—even and especially by monotheists—introduced a potent path of inquiry in Qur'ānic studies first formulated in the late nineteenth century and increasingly emphasized since in the late twentieth century (see Hawting 1999 and Crone 2016). The term *širk* and its derivatives, in the meaning of associating another being with God, occur well over 100 times in both the Meccan and the Medinan Qur'ān, numerically indicating its supreme relevance. Whereas *širk* tends to occur both in the Qur'ān's past and in its present, terms depicting actual idols or sacrificial stones, by contrast, such as *ašnām* in Q6:74, Q7:138, and Q14:35 or *awṭān* in Q22:30 and Q29:17 and 25, are far less frequent, and typically depict past worship or are used in general prohibitions. That is not to say that there were no objects in the time of Muḥammad that could not have been perceived as idols: in Q4:51, for example, a group of Jews or Christians

are portrayed as believing in *jibt*, which is usually understood as a venerated object. Yet the Qur’ān’s own testimony is hardly compatible with the reports in parts of traditional Muslim historiography of widespread “actual” idolatry or of traditional Middle Eastern polytheism in seventh-century Arabia (see already Crone 2016: 169–172). While we should be careful not to reject the traditional Islamic historiography wholesale and thus pour out the baby with the bathwater (see Al-Azmeh 2014), the Qur’ānic evidence in this case strongly suggests that we should take the traditional reports regarding the *ġāhiliyyah*, the conceived age of pagan ignorance, with a grain of salt (see also Hawting 2003, and cf. e.g. Q33:33). These late Islamic reports, it seems, do not sufficiently differentiate between the Qur’ān’s descriptive and polemical statements: not unlike many Jewish, Christian, and biblical sources, it leveled the charge of polytheism and demon-worship at fellow monotheists, yet unlike its precedents, it placed this concern at the very core of its discourse.

Understanding *širk* in this polemical way allows for a new evaluation of how the Qur’ān perceives its Medinan and its Meccan interlocutors, and, just as importantly, how they may have perceived themselves. The Medinan Qur’ān, to begin with, accuses both Jews and Christians of elevating humans to divine rank: not only the figure of Jesus, but also religious leaders (see Zellentin 2016). Throughout the Meccan and the Medinan Qur’ān, furthermore, we encounter a group called the *mušrikūn*, that is, those defined by committing *širk*, literally the “associaters.” While the Medinan Qur’ān formulates its biblical monotheism in a more pointed dialogue with Jews and especially with Christians, accusing them of *širk*, both the Meccan and the Medinan layers of the Qur’ān tend to differentiate between the “People of the Book” and the *mušrikūn*. The *mušrikūn*, like the People of the Book and the nascent Muslim community, believed in one biblical God, called by the same names used in the Qur’ān (such as *rabb*, *allāh*, and *raḥmān*), and, as Crone illustrates in some detail, they also shared many of biblical and post-biblical narratives with the Qur’ān, as well as with late antique Judaism and Christianity more generally (Crone 2016: 166–169 and 185). While the *mušrikūn* likely saw themselves as monotheists and rejected the religious accusation leveled against them (see e.g. Q6:22), Crone also argues that it is impossible to determine whether or not they would have seen themselves as Israelites: “It is hard to avoid the impression that both Jews and Judaising pagans are involved, but this is as far as one can go” (Crone 2016: 200). The Qur’ān’s distinction between the People of the Book and the *mušrikūn* already in Mecca and even more clearly in Medina makes it very unlikely that Jews would be ethnically “involved” with the *mušrikūn*. Still, their state of an undetermined Israelite ethnic self-identity—constructed as broader than

the Jewish one (see Zellentin 2013, 163–164)—may still allow us to determine a little more clearly the history of Arabian monotheism.

The Meccan indeterminacy regarding the ethnic self-identity of the religious Others, to begin with, corresponds to the unclear ethnic status of the nascent Meccan Muslim community itself, yet it stands in contrast to the Medinan specificity regarding both. The Medinan Qur’ān defines the ideal believer as a non-Israelite and monotheist *ḥanīf*, as a “gentile” (see Q3:67), and defines the “People of the Book” as a separate group consisting of a Jewish and a Christian confession. The Meccan Qur’ān, by contrast, even if already employing the term *ḥanīf* (see e.g. Q6:79 and 161), does not clearly define the ethnicity of the nascent community or of the People of the Book in either such contrast or in such detail (see e.g. Zellentin 2013: 10–11 and 158–161). We can thus determine a clear shift, albeit not a break, that sets apart the Qur’ān’s Medinan from its Meccan discourse regarding both monotheism and ethnicity. Based on the Qur’ān and on an understanding of Arabia in dialogue with its monotheistic imperial neighbors (and their largest religious groups) it thus seems that the Qur’ān’s contemporaries were, by and large, monotheists (without excluding the possibility of occasional polytheism and idolatry). Among its monotheist contemporaries in Medina, Jews and Christians were prominent. Its *mušrikūn* adversaries in both Medina and Mecca were equally monotheists, and, although they clearly held biblical ideas, they equally failed the Qur’ān’s stringent standards of the uniqueness and the unity of God. Who were these *mušrikūn* monotheists, and whence came their faith? A reconsideration of the epigraphic and historiographic evidence in light of the Qur’ān’s portrayal of the *mušrikūn* allows us to formulate a tentative answer, thereby approaching the history of the rise of monotheism in Arabia as far as we can.

Monotheism in Pre-Islamic Arabia

Arabian culture, like much of the Near and Middle East, had for millennia been polytheistic, yet from early on, Arabia had also been visited by Christians and Jews (see e.g. Hoyland 2001: 139–166, cf. Wellhausen 1887: 215–224). The question is not so much whether Jews and Christians became part of Arabian culture and religion, but where they came from, when and where they went, and in how far Arabian culture and religion had accommodated their traditions. The presence of Christian missionaries, of monks, and of bishops throughout Arabia is attested from the late fourth century onwards; they managed to set up communities especially in southern and eastern Arabia and in select other locations such as the important oasis of Najrān (see

Hainthaler 2007). One of the key areas of missionary activity about which a slightly more detailed picture emerges is the southern kingdom of Himyar. This political entity, at the moment of its greatest extent (in the late fourth century CE), briefly ruled large swaths of Arabia, including the Hejaz, yet the kingdom came under increasing influence of the Aksumite empire, and the Himyarite kings after the fifth century were reduced to vassals. The previous conversions of these Himyarite kings to monotheism, as attested by historiographical and epigraphic sources, gives us one brief, if not undisputed, glimpse into the history of pre-Islamic monotheism and of Israelite ethnic discourse in Arabia that may shed some light on the monotheism of the Qur'ānic *muṣṣrikūn* as well.

The Byzantine Church historian Philostorgius, writing only a few generations after a purported event, claims that the king of the Himyarites had been converted by the missionary Theophilus the Indian, who had been sent by Constantius II in the fourth century CE (Philostorgius, *HE* 3.4). It is true that (non-Chalcedonian) Christendom, likely under the influence of the Aksumite empire, flourished in southern Arabia in the subsequent centuries (see Hainthaler 2007: 111–136). Yet the ninth-century Muslim historiographer Ibn Hishām, editing the work of his eighth-century predecessor Ibn Ishāq, attributes the conversion of the Himyarites not to Christian missionaries, but to Jews from Yathrib, the oasis traditionally identified with Medina (see Ibn Hishām 17). The provenance of the king's Jewish teachers, it is true, remains doubtful. The presence of Jews in the northern Hijaz, namely in Khaybar, Taymā', and Yathrib, as it is affirmed throughout much of traditional Muslim historiography, cannot be independently confirmed either by outside sources or by inscriptions, a fact that leads many scholars, including myself, to take a cautious position regarding the issue (see Hoyland 2001, but cf. Mazuz 2014 and Lecker 1998). Yet it seems that Ibn Hishām's version of what happened in Himyar is closer to the historical truth than that of the Byzantine historian. Philostorgius himself, somewhat suspiciously, mentions Jewish interference in the events, thereby confirming both Jewish presence and influence. We also have increasingly abundant evidence of the importance of Judaism in Himyar, constituted by a growing number of inscriptions discovered in southern Arabia and Palestine, by historiographic sources in Greek, Arabic, Syriac, and Ge'ez, and by archeological finds such as the necropolis of the Himyarites in Beth She'arīm, in Palestine (in modern-day Israel, see Robin 2003, 2004, 2014). The question if and whether the kings, and the population, of the Himyarite kingdom became Jewish, Christian, or monotheists of another confession illustrate the difficulties of determining the nature of southern Arabian religion. Yet this difficulty itself, especially in light of the similar difficulty encountered

by Crone when seeking to define the ethnicity of the Qur'ānic *muṣṣrikūn*, indicates, first, that the scholarly categories applied may need improvement, and, second, that the religion and ethnicity of the Himyarites and of the Meccans could elucidate each other. For the few incidental overlaps between the religion of the Himyarites and especially of the Meccan audience of the Qur'ān allow us to speculate that the identity of these distinct groups may shed light on each other despite their geographic and chronological distance.

The epigraphic evidence shows that polytheistic inscriptions in the Himyarite kingdom, relatively common in earlier periods, cease around 380 CE, and are supplanted by others that are non-confessionally monotheistic, Jewish, or, occasionally, Christian. The key inscriptions, conveniently collected by Christian Robin, seem to suggest that under the Himyarite kings Malkīkarib (who reigned around 375–400 CE) and his son Abīkarib (who reigned around 400–440 CE), a religious reorientation from polytheism toward monotheism and in some cases even Judaism can be illustrated both on the level of government and of private individuals. This shift is shown by official inscriptions invoking, “the Merciful One (*raḥmanān*),” and “God (*ilabān*), lord (*rab*) of heaven and earth,” and by private inscriptions of explicit Jewish nature both in naming and in pledging allegiance to “the people of Israel” (*šb Ysr'l*, see Robin 2014 and 2004: 844–858). One inscription employs Hebrew letters symbolically within a Sabean text; another key inscription is a lengthy Hebrew one, detailing the twenty-four priestly courses according to 1 Chronicle 24:16–18; another describes a mono-ethnic burial site for Jews alone, while a particularly important bilingual Palestinian inscription contains both a Jewish prayer in Aramaic and the invocation of *raḥmānām* in Sabean (see Robin 2014 and 2004: 882–892). A few private inscriptions in Himyar are apparently Christian, mentioning the son or the messiah of the Merciful One, yet most are either Jewish or non-confessionally “monotheistic.” According to Robin’s plausible explanation, these inscriptions show an ultimately failed attempt to unite Himyar under an Israelite ethnic self-identity. Then, at the beginning of the sixth century, Himyar increasingly falls under Aksumite influence, with an important interlude. Around 520, a king named Joseph takes power and, having converted to Judaism, attacks the Aksumite garrison in Zafār, destroys local churches, and apparently massacres the Christians in the oasis of Najrān. According to one of Robin’s more tentative claims, and in stark contrast to the Syriac martyrological tradition, Joseph’s aim is political rather than religious: his title as “king of all the peoples” (*mlk kl šb*) may indicate no further attempts at Judaizing the country (see Robin 2004: 873–875 and 2014). The ensuing successful Aksumite expedition then replaces Joseph with a Christian line of vassal kings (on these events see also Gajda 2009; Nebes 2008; and Beaucamp *et al.* 1999).

What does this information tell us about Arabian ethnicity and monotheism? As has long been noted, the most important names of God in the Qur'ān—used by the Muslims and by the *muṣrikūn*—are similar to those attested in Himyar. The Qur'ān uses *allāh*, and, in its Meccan surahs even more so even than in the Medinan ones, especially *rabb* and *rahmān* prominently in order to describe God, for example in Q17 *Sūrat al-Kahf* 110: “Say: ‘invoke God or invoke *al-rahmān*; whichever (name) you may invoke, to Him belong the best names.” The Qur'ān’s rejection of *ṣirk* would fit a society like that of Himyar in many ways: the Qur'ān’s rejection of the idea of God having taken a son, in the subsequent verse Q17:111, reminds us of the Himyarite inscription dedicated to the Merciful One along with his messiah and his son. Yet we should be careful not to build exclusively on the epigraphy. One intriguing suggestion that ignored the wider context, the so-called “Raḥmanism” hypothesis, stipulated that southern Arabia worshipped a God named “the Merciful One” in an independent manner; this suggestion has been widely rejected (see e.g. Rippin 1993). The presence and political power of Jews and Christians in Himyar suggests anything but a fully independent local tradition; as has been rightly remarked, “a merciful God (*el rahum*),” after all, is also a biblical name for God (see e.g. Deuteronomy 4:31 and Psalms 103:8). Aziz Al-Azmeh, in a recent study, is thus certainly correct in cautioning us against imagining a widespread conversion to Judaism throughout Arabia, suggesting instead that gentile henotheism may be a more accurate description of southern Arabian religion than monotheism (see Al-Azmeh 2014: 248–276). The differentiation between monotheism and henotheism, of course, as argued above, is in itself at home in a discourse of such complexity and subtlety that no argument at all should be made based purely on the extant inscriptions, or purely based on later historiography. Once again, I suggest weighing the entirety of evidence against the much more detailed—if no less difficult—discourse of the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān, and especially its Meccan surahs, in their affirmation and especially in their rejection of specific ethnic and religious proclivities, indeed show a remarkable affinity with the picture of the little we can know about Himyar. The reach, let me hasten to add, of this affinity is as limited by the scarcity of sources: we do, by contrast, know much more about rabbinic Judaism and about Syriac Christianity than about the Himyarite religions, and this evidence is far more central to contextualizing the Qur'ān’s narratives and worldview in general, both in the Meccan period and in the Medinan one (see e.g. Witztum 2011 and Zellentin 2013). It would thus be naive, and false, to speak about the affinities between the Qur'ān and Himyarite culture in any deterministic or one-directional way: a few hundred miles and,

in some cases a few centuries divides the Himyarite and the Qur'ānic evidence. Yet in a unique way, the case of Himyar lends external plausibility to an understanding of the Meccan *muṣṛikūn* as monotheists, and the Qur'ān's way of addressing its adversaries in turn corroborates our sense that biblical culture of Christian or Jewish confession or none at all was not clearly defined outside places such as Zafār, Najrān, and possibly Medinah. What can be compared is not specific communities, but select aspects of their shared discourse, in which the Qur'ān both participates and which it seeks to transcend as much as the Medinan Qur'ān will later seek to transcend Judaism and Christianity.

The picture that emerges can thus be summarized as follows: in addition to the overlap in some of God's names especially in the Meccan surahs and in the Himyarite inscriptions, a shared sense of ethnic and religious discourse emerges. Both in the Qur'ān's Hijaz and in Himyar, assuming or rejecting Israelite or gentile self-identity was apparently an urgent—and consequential—choice. On a level of ethnic discourse, the increasing emphasis on a gentile identity when moving from the Meccan to the Medinan Qur'ān corresponds to the various opposite turns in Himyarite history toward Judaism or Christianity. Especially in its ethnic indeterminacy regarding both its ethnic self-identity and that of its adversaries, the Meccan Qur'ān reflects the attitude of many of the non-confessional Himyarite inscriptions.

One could hazard a conjecture in which the Himyarite context provides an illustration for the broad ethnic backdrop of a society comparable to the one which the Qur'ān's biblical discourse addresses. The Meccan surahs provide as many points of contact with Jewish narratives as they do with themes that would be uniquely Christian; without any facile equation of history and discourse or premature conclusions about the predominance of one or the other confession, we can identify a correlation between the (at times antagonistic) Jewish and Christian voices echoing in the Qur'ān and the struggle between these confessions in Najrān and in Himyar. At the same time, in line with the general ethnic indeterminacy of the Qur'ān's Meccan audience and of Himyar, it should be noted that the Meccan Qur'ān, while expecting its audience to be familiar with certain figures and broad outlines, sometimes presents the biblical details in a way in which knowledge of them conveys authority. Aspects of the biblical story of Noah, for example, as well as that of Joseph, are presented to the Meccan audience as “accounts from the unseen” (*min' anḅā' i l-ḡaibi*; see Q11:49 and Q12:102, cf. also Q3:44). The Medinan Qur'ān, by contrast, more often presupposes detailed knowledge of biblical narratives. The Meccan Qur'ān, in other words, addresses an audience that has partial knowledge of biblical traditions and holds them in esteem, neatly corresponding to what we can conjecture would have been the

case in Himyar as well. The extent of the contact between the populations of Mecca, Najrān, and Himyar, even if facilitated by well-established trade routes and a partially shared political history, remains hard to gauge, yet it may make sense to extrapolate the southern Arabian experience and learn from it when reconstructing the northwestern one—and vice versa.

One could continue the list of possible correspondences between the Qur'ān and Himyar (see Robin 2004: 877–878). In some cases, moreover, the Himyarite inscriptions may occasionally provide a context for some aspects of the Medinan Qur'ān as well. The Qur'ānic term *šū'ūbiyya* corresponds well to the Sabean term *'šb* that we have seen above; both designate “tribes” (see Robin 2004: 876–877). Perhaps even more consequentially, the use of Hebrew in some of the Himyarite inscriptions sheds light on the occasional relevance of Hebrew (rather than Aramaic, Syriac, or Ge'ez) for the understanding of a number of select passages in the Medinan Qur'ān (see e.g. Q112 above and Wheeler 2002: 1–6). What emerges, then, is not a picture in which these correspondences would allow us to reconstruct the Meccan, the Medinan, or the Himyarite religion with any precision. Rather, we must content ourselves with the far more elusive construct of plausibility in which the Qur'ān can be used to corroborate overlaps between itself and the epigraphic, historiographic, and other secondary evidence regarding Himyar. These overlaps, in a hermeneutic circle, then allow us to weigh our assumptions regarding the Qur'ān and its specific message to its Late Ancient Arabian audience, and thereby to complete our picture of the rise of monotheism in Arabia.

The overlap of the evidence points to an ongoing, yet undefined influx of monotheist ideas into Arabia, which may have first peaked with the Byzantine and Aksumite efforts of Christianizing the country that seem to have coincided with perhaps more successful Jewish ones. By all evidence, the Arab rulers as well as their subjects were open to these ideas, yet generally reluctant to become either Jews or Christians: while the turn to monotheism past the fourth century seems hard to deny, neither confession seems to have been embraced by large swaths of the population—with possible local exceptions such as in Medina, Najrān, and the Himyarite heartland once under Aksumite hegemony. The Meccans were monotheists that were generally open to biblical ideas without fully embracing or rejecting any specific form of Israelite self-identity. In Medina, finally, the early Muslim community began to formulate its monotheism in a particular Arabian form that rejected Christianity, Judaism, and the Meccan “*mušrikūn*” form of monotheism alike.

Monotheism, thus, can be conjectured to have reached Arabia in three stages. The first was an early stage that lasted from the biblical period to around 380 CE, in which individual Jews and Christians traveled to Arabia.

Little can be said about their success, with local exceptions. The second was the imperial stage, when Arabia was surrounded by monotheistic empires, during which Christian monks, bishops, and missionaries, as well as individual rabbis and other Jewish leaders likely managed to convert local communities. This stage lasted at least until the Meccan phase of the Qurʾān, and perhaps well into the early seventh century as the traditional historiography has it. It was during this stage that we see a more robust formulation of an endemic Arabian formulation of biblical monotheism, emphasizing both the uniqueness and the unity of God, and rejecting both the religion of the *mušrikūn* and many Christian ideas such as that of a son of God, routinely criticizing “the People of the Book” and “the sons of Israel.” The third stage begins when the early Muslim community increasingly cuts its political and religious ties with its Jewish and Christian contemporaries. In this stage, perhaps best called the Islamic one, we can see the formulation of a truly Arabian monotheism that rebuffs other deities and divine offspring at the same time as embracing and reinventing late antique heresiology. Turning heresiology against both Jews and Christians, the Medinan Qurʾān formulates a new gentile Muslim self-identity, and thereby laid the foundation for a new religion (and thereby new empires) that reformulated the Jewish and Christian tradition both in continuity with and in contrast to its predecessors—and in line with its focus on the concept of the unity and uniqueness of God. This third stage, needless to say, has proven the most durable.

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FURTHER READING

- The following works will give a broader picture of Late Antiquity, Arabia, and its religious developments.
- Al-Azmeh, Aziz. 2014. *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and His People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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- Neuwirth, Angelika. 2014. *Scripture, Poetry, and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zellentin, Holger. 2013. *The Qur'an's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. The broad overview by Cameron (2011) points to the dynamic development of Christianity throughout Late Antiquity, with a special focus on early Byzantium. For a comparable outline of the history and culture of the Sasanian empire, see Daryaee (2009). The volume edited by Fisher (2015) collects a number of highly pertinent case studies describing aspects especially of southern and Hejazi Arabian history before the coming of Islam. The number of studies dedicated to the relationship between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism has increased considerably over the past years. The collection of essays by Neuwirth (2014), on the one hand, details how the Qur'an deals with biblical and especially Christian materials, and on the other hand presents the inner-Qur'anic religious developments throughout the career of the prophet. Zellentin (2013) presents a case study of how the Qur'an relates to late antique Christian law. Al-Azmeh (2014), finally takes a very different approach to the emergence of Islam, and emphasizes the Arabian cultural context over the Qur'an's biblical heritage.