Apocalypse, empire, and universal mission at the end of antiquity: world religions at the crossroads

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Islam's non-Supersessionist Origins: From Ethno-Religion to Universalist Dispensation

For reasons that are beyond the purview of the present query, there is a tendency in modern European-language scholarship on premodern Islam to eschew the language of supersessionism when talking about Islam's position vis-à-vis Judaism and Christianity, although theologians, whether opposed or in favour, have shown little qualms in employing it.[1] By supersessionism, as discussed in the introduction, here I simply mean a religious tradition that claims to have superseded its antecedents, even though those antecedents may be thought to have been true religions in their own right. This claim has given rise to complex discussions whereby Muslim theologians feel obliged to offer an explication as to why God would send a religion, only to later abrogate it. But the crux of the claim is simple: in order to attain salvation, it is incumbent upon all human beings to search for and acquaint themselves with truth, and to abandon other forms of religiosity in favour of Islam. It is this very demand that I call Islamic supersessionism, which is as omnipresent in Islam as it is in Christianity. To be sure, unlike in scholarship in European languages, the term used in classical Islamic texts composed in Arabic to refer to Islam's supersession of its antecedents is the same as the term used in Christian Arabic writings in reference to Christianity's supersession of Judaism, and indeed the same term is upon occasion employed to compare the manner in which Islam has superseded Christianity and Judaism to Christianity's supersession of Judaism. In his *al-Ḥāwī al-kabīr*, for instance, the celebrated theologian and jurist al-Māwardī opines that,

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[1] E.g., Abdulaziz Sachedina, 'Political Implications of the Islamic Notion of "Supersession" as Reflected in Islamic Jurisprudence', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996): 159-68; Tim Winter, 'The Last Trump Card: Islam and the Supersession of Other Faiths', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 9 (1999): 133-55; Muḥammad Legenhausen, *Islam and Religious Pluralism* (London 1999), 147-8; Mun'im Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qurʾān and Other Religions* (Oxford 2014), 57-63 *et passim*; Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (Oxford 2012), 27, 29, 49, 52, 58, 59, 75-6, 143, 145, and 160, n. 87; A. Kevin Reinhart, 'Failures of Practice or Failures of Faith: Are non-Muslims Subject to the Sharia?' in Mohammad Hassan Khalil (ed.), *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others* (Oxford 2013), 13-34, 18; Reza Shah-Kazemi, 'Beyond Polemics and Pluralism: The Universal Message of the Qur'an', in Khalil, *Between Heaven and Hell*, 87-108, 94; Tim Winter, 'Realism and the Real: Islamic Theology and the Problem of Alternative Expressions of God', in Khalil, *Between Heaven and Hell*, 122-50; Farid Esack, 'The Portrayal of Jews and the Possibilities for Their Salvation in the Qur'an', in Khalil, *Between Heaven and Hell*, 207-33, 210, 217, 223, 229.

> both scriptures [the Torah and the Gospel] are the words of God (*kalām allāh*) and sent down by him (*munzal min ʿindihi*)... however, both scriptures and religions have been superseded (*nusikha*): the Gospel has been superseded (*mansūkh*) by the Quran as Christianity has been superseded (*mansūkha*) by Islamic doctrine. But our authorities have disagreed as to what has superseded the Torah and the Jewish religion and have offered two opinions: the first is that the Torah has been superseded (*mansūkha*) by the Gospel and Judaism by Christianity, whilst the Quran later superseded (*nasakha*) the Gospel as Islam did Christianity. This is the sounder interpretation, for Jesus, peace be upon him, called the Jews to his religion, proffering the Gospel to them. If their religion and scripture had not been superseded (*lam yunsakh*) by his religion and scripture, he would have left them alone and evangelised to others. The second is that the Torah has been superseded (*mansūkha*) by the Quran and Judaism by Islam... Based on the first opinion, anyone converting to Judaism after the coming of Jesus is misguided whilst based on the second opinion he is following truth so long as he does not belong to the group who changed and tampered with [the original message of the Torah]. But after the coming of Islam converts to both Judaism and Christianity are misguided (*ʿalā bāṭil*). Once our statement with regard to the Jews and Christians, who constitute the people of the book, having been adherents of a rightful religion which has been superseded (*nusikha*) has been established, it follows that they should be allowed to continue practicing their religions on the payment of a poll tax out of respect for their scriptures.[2]

Thus anyone practising Judaism or Christianity after the coming of Islam is astray and will be condemned to eternal damnation in the hereafter. Similar statements abound in classical Islamic texts, of which perhaps the most salient is Ibn Taymiyya's eloquent treatise, *The Perfect Counter to Those Who Changed Christ's Religion* (*al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ*), where he states that 'anyone wishing to live by Jesus's religion (*sharīʿa*) after its supersession (*baʿd al-naskh*) is like the Jews whose religion (*sharʿ*) God abrogated (*nasakha*)... and He did the same to the Christians when He raised Muhammad as a prophet'.[3] This, I feel, gives one leave to employ the

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[2] al-Māwardī, *al-Ḥāwī al-kabīr*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwaḍ and ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd (Beirut 1414/1994), vol. 9, 220-21.

[3] Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ*, ed. ʿAlī ibn Ḥasan ibn Nāṣir, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Ibrāhīm al-ʿAskar, and Ḥamdān ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥamdān (Riyadh 1419/1999), vol. 3, 142. For more on Ibn Taymiyya's supersessionist rhetoric, consult Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 74-102.

term supersession to characterise classical Islam's positioning of itself in respect of the earlier incarnations of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Another way in which Muslim theologians and polemicists have argued for the supersession of Christianity and Judaism has been through the articulation of the doctrine of *taḥrīf*, or the falsification of previous scriptures, the Torah and the Gospel. This doctrine has quranic roots, to which we shall turn in due course, but its developed, classical form considers them adulterated by non-divine elements that these texts have accrued to themselves in the course of time, thereby rendering them unworthy of veneration and superseded.[4] The idea that the Torah and the Gospel deserve no respect because of having been tampered with is so entrenched that a widely attested tradition enjoins Muslims to efface the contents of any copies of the Torah or the Gospel they may come into possession of in a military raid, and put the parchments to some other use. 'These books', the tradition asserts, 'do not merit respect (*lā ḥurmatan lahā*) because they are tampered with' (*mubaddala*).[5]

This confrontational approach to other forms of religiosity belies a desire, at least at an abstract level, for Islam to supplant rival religious traditions and, at a more pragmatic level, for the political enterprise that represents (or claims to represent) it to extend the ambit of its authority all across the globe. It was only natural for those jurists who expressed such opinions as above to think about the world in such terms, for it was God's will and promise for Islam to triumph and usher in the consummation of human history, or so it was felt at the time. In the words of a second/eighth-century apologist:

> God commanded us, in Muhammad's words, to wage war against those who indulge in associationism, disavow Him, and worship beings other than Him, until they turn to worshipping the One Lord and the One God, and [adhere to] the One Religion... Thus, out of belief and trust in him [i.e., Muhammad], we set out for war alongside him against... the people of Persia and Rome... We find in what God has revealed to our prophet that,

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[4] See, e.g., Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden 1996), 192-222; Gordon Nickel, *Narratives of Tampering in the Earliest Commentaries on the Qurʾān* (Leiden 2011), 15-21; cf. John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford 1978), 109-10.

[5] al-Shīrāzī, *al-Muhadhdhab fī fiqh al-imām al-Shāfiʿī* (Beirut 1416/1995), vol. 3, 290; cited by M. J. Kister, '"Do not Assimilate Yourselves..."': *lā tashabbahū*', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 12 (1989): 321-71, 331.

> 'He sent His messenger with guidance and the true religion so as to make it triumphant over all other religion' [Quran 9:33, 48:28, and 61:9]. Thus, out of belief and trust in him [viz., Muhammad], we set out for war alongside him... against the greatest of nations... the people of Persia and Rome... God granted us victory in their face, handed their territories to us, and settled us in their lands... And we desire that God continues to shower all of these on us so long as we do not desist from obeying His commands, upholding His testament, and living in His obedience ... We find in what God has revealed to our prophet that, 'He sent His messenger with guidance and the true religion so as to make it triumphant over all other religion'[6] [Quran 9:33, 48:28, and 61:9].

Political hegemony and religious truth, then, went hand in hand, and they both had to be spread all across the world. One might say that Islam was branding itself not merely as a (supersessionist) world religion, but also the religion of a world imperium, an empire with aspirations of global domination. The early Islamic empire was thus to be on perpetual war-footing, in what one modern commentator has termed a 'jihad state'.[7] This jihad would eventually culminate in the takeover of the whole world, the elimination of all non-Muslim political entities, and the supersession of all other forms of belief by Islam, at which point God's dominion (*amr allāh*) would be established over the whole earth.[8]

Early Abbasid (and, as shall be demonstrated in the following chapters, late-Umayyad) Islam's universalist and supersessionist aspirations occasionally sit rather uncomfortably with the rich idiom of ethno-religious diversity that one finds amply operative in the founding document of Islam, the Quran, where allowance is made for the coexistence of multiple scriptures and the legal traditions deriving from them. According to the Quran, its message is a

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[6] The translation follows Shaddel, 'Periodisation and the *futūḥ*', 110-11. Text in: Dominique Sourdel, 'Un pamphlet musulman anonyme d'époque ʿabbāside contre les chrétiens', *Revue des études islamiques* 34 (1966): 1-33, 33. A (somewhat liberal) English translation of the whole pamphlet may be found in Jean-Marie Gaudeul, 'The Correspondence between Leo and ʿUmar: ʿUmar's Letter Re-discovered?' *Islamochristiana* 10 (1984): 109-57, with the above quotation on pp. 155-6.

[7] Khalid Yahya Blankinship, *The End of the jihâd State: The Reign of Hishām ibn ʿAbd al-Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads* (Albany, NY, 1994). The relationship between political power and the Islamic doctrine of supersessionism has been noted by Sachedina, 'Political Implications', but without attempting to demonstrate that pre-conquest Islam was indeed non-supersessionist.

[8] The evidence for this assertion will be examined in Chapter 3.

confirmation of the earlier message of the Torah and the 'Gospel'[9] (Quran 3:3) and the people of the book (*ahl al-kitāb*) are told that they, 'are wrongheaded (*lastum ʿalā shayʾin*) so long as you do not uphold the Torah and the Gospel—that which was sent down to you from your Lord' (Quran 5:68). What is more, factions of Jews, Christians, or the *ahl al-kitāb* in general are referred to as righteous by the Quran (e.g., Quran 2:62, 3:199, 5:48, 5:69, 7:159) who have nothing to fear in the hereafter. To the attentive observer, this is all a tell-tale sign of the ocean of difference separating emergent Islam and the proto-classical tradition that emerged in late-Umayyad Syria and early-Abbasid Iraq and the Hijaz. It is, then, a sine qua non of any attempt to reconstruct the early history of Islam to interrogate the nature of the beliefs and thought-world of the community in its formative days and the dynamics that occasioned its eventual transformation, after its imperial moment, to classical Islam as we know it, and that is what we are concerned with in this and the following two chapters.

With these caveats, I should like to turn to the main topic of the present chapter. Whilst it is commonly taken for granted that the absolute majority, if not all, varieties of classical Islam are supersessionist, the question of its original standpoint vis-à-vis other religious traditions has been handled differently. Here, too, the majority of commentators have taken it for granted that Islam arose as a supersessionist religion, but very few scholars have made an attempt to make a case for this contention. Conversely, there have been those who have alleged that Islam originated as a non-supersessionist movement, even if they have not used the language of supersessionism, with the majority qualifying it as, at least initially, the 'religion of the Arabs'. Why modern scholars have eschewed the use of this language, which, as already seen, is very present in classical Islamic literature, is not our concern here, but this latter group have reconstructed Islamic origins in ways that make it out to be incompatible with supersessionism.

An early and rather noteworthy attempt to make a case for the universality of Muhammad's message was made by the British orientalist Thomas Walker Arnold, who, in a fleeting digression in his *Preaching of Islam*, cited a number of quranic verses to that effect, whilst also emphasising the quranic assertion that Muhammad's was no new message, but a mere

[9] To the Quran, the 'Gospel' is a rarified scripture that God gave to Jesus, rather than the narratives of his life; Sidney Griffith, 'Gospel', in Jane Dammen McAuliffe et al (eds), *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, vol. 2 (Leiden 2002), 342-3.

repetition of the mission with which all previous divine messengers had been entrusted,[10] thus reducing formative Islam to a global and yet non-supersessionist creed.[11] The first modern scholar to dedicate an extended study to the remit of Muhammad's mission was the Dane Frants Buhl, who, much ahead of his time, concluded, in a since-then overlooked article published in 1926, that Muhammad was more likely interested in proselytising to the people of his immediate environs, the denizens of the Arabian peninsula, whom he equated with the Arabs.[12] Exhibiting remarkable lucidity and precocity, Buhl first questioned the veracity of the accounts of Muhammad's despatch of messengers to the sovereigns of neighbouring empires to summon them to Islam, before going on to argue, correctly, that, once read against their context, quranic verses that use the expression 'for the world' (*li-l-ʿālamīn*) almost never evince the universality of the Quran's message.[13] But these two positions are irreconcilable with each other, and neither Buhl nor Arnold was able to offer an explanation for the passages quoted by the other that would be in concord with his own thesis, nor did either of them account for the many other parts of the Quran—to be discussed in due course—that complicate the picture.

Perhaps the most controversial of the non-universalist understandings of Islamic origins has been Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's 1977 book, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, in which the authors asserted that Muhammad's message was of a 'Judaeo-Hagarene' persuasion, as part of which an alliance of Arabs, who identified as descendants of Ishmael and Hagar, and Jews set out to conquer the Holy Land, which they claimed was their ancestral inheritance by

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[10] Part based on a misconstrual of Quran 46:9, which in fact appears to state that there are precedents for divine messengers.

[11] T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (London 1913), 28-30.

[12] Fr. Buhl, 'Fasste Muḥammed seine Verkündigung als eine universelle, auch für Nichtaraber bestimmte Religion auf?', *Islamica* 2 (1926): 135-49.

[13] Mohsen Goudarzi, 'The Ascent of Ishmael: Genealogy, Covenant, and Identity in Early Islam', *Arabica* 66 (2019): 415-484, 481-2, attempts to account for the prima facie dissonance between such passages as 81:27, where the Quran is described as 'a reminder for the world' and its more ethnic-oriented language by postulating that the Quran may have had an ultimately universal worldview inasmuch as it would have Abraham's descendants serve as exemplars to the rest of the world, which is not too dissimilar to how ancient Judaism thought of itself vis-à-vis the gentiles. I, on the other hand, believe that these verses are of a mere rhetorical nature, and that they do not belong to the Quran's universalist strata. But even if that is not the case, one could argue that they reflect the quranic movement's later universalist turn.

dint of their common descent from Abraham.[14] In so claiming, the authors based themselves on the evidence of the non-Muslim sources, such as Michael the Syrian and Armenian chronicle falsely attributed to Sebeos—discussed below—who claimed that the conquests had materialised through an alliance of Jews and 'Ishmaelite' Arabs. The very title of the book, *Hagarism*, was a nod to non-Muslim sources from the post-conquest period that referred to the conquerors as *mhaggrāyē* in Syriac and similar cognates in other languages, which the authors apparently took to mean 'Hagariser'.[15] But both authors distanced themselves from this understanding of the term in their later publications,[16] and most non-Syriacists, who take an expansive view of the source material and factor the cognate terms in other languages into the equation, believe it to be a reflex of the Arabic *muhājirūn*.[17] Most importantly, Crone and Cook by and large discarded the evidence of the Quran, arguing that the text was codified in a later period in Iraq.[18] This assertion, however, is no longer sustainable in the light of half a century of critical scholarship

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[14] Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge 1977).

[15] Although they vocalise it as *mahgrāyē*, which seemingly reflects a later shift; Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton 1997), 116, n. 1. It must be noted, however, that while most Syriacists take *mhaggrāyā* to be related to the name of Hagar, they habitually translate it as 'Hagarene', which does not quite capture the sense of the term. This seems to owe a lot to the authority that Sidney Griffith commands within the field. Griffith, who has conceded that the term may very well be related to Arabic *muhājir*, still renders it by 'Hagarene' in English. See Sidney H. Griffith, 'The Prophet Muḥammad, His Scripture and His Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century', in Toufic Fahd (ed.), *La vie du prophète Mahomet: Colloque de Strasbourg (octobre 1980)* (Paris 1983), 99-146, 122-3; Sidney H. Griffith, *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam* (Kerala 1995), 9-14.

[16] Patricia Crone, 'The First-Century Concept of *hiğra*', *Arabica* 41 (1994): 352-87, 359, 360, 361. Although citing *Hagarism*, Michael Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma: A Source-Critical Study* (Cambridge 1981), 101-2 and 202, n. 127, does not appear to understand *hijra* in this sense anymore.

[17] See the compelling rejoinder by Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 180, n. 25. On the significance of the term, see Chapter 2 infra. Admittedly, though, Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 8-9, took the term to be polysemous.

[18] Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 17-18. They also maintained that the literary character of the Quran does not lend itself to attempting a reconstruction of how Islam emerged, but, regardless of their degree of success, all the works that have embarked on such an enterprise, including the present contribution, invalidate this assertion.

on the textual history of the Quran,[19] and, what is more, it also fails to take into account the possibility that, even if codified outside Arabia and in a later time-period, it might contain earlier materials that originate in Muhammad's activities in Arabia.[20]

Hagarism's thesis, a thought experiment in many respects, was met with strident opposition from mainstream academia at the time, but it did have a great impact in that, ultimately, it normalised the use of so-called non-Muslim sources, alongside Arabo-Islamic source material, in writing the history of early Islam. But the part of its argument that had to do with the ethnic nature of Muhammad's preaching was by and large ignored and eventually forgotten, and only in recent decades has the ambit of the original message of the Quran attracted renewed attention to itself. In a series of recent studies, Fred Donner has proposed, in what has come to be a much more successful reconstruction in terms of its reception, that Muhammad originally preached a catch-all message that emphasised monotheism and the imminence of the eschaton, and sought to establish a united Judaeo-Islamo-Christian oecumene.[21] Donner's argument is largely based on the Quran and the so-called Constitution of Medina, a document that according to the tradition was drawn up by Muhammad between his various followers and allies (and perhaps also some non-allied groups who wished to establish an accommodation with him) upon arrival in Medina, and which most scholars concede to be very archaic, if not a largely faithful memorialisation of an original.[22] In the process, Donner also

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[19] See the introduction.

[20] Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Cambridge 1987), 247-50, posited that Islam arose as a nativist 'Jewish-Arab' or Judaeo-Ishmaelite movement against foreign occupation by the Byzantines and the Persians, citing pseudo-Sebeos and other evidence culled in *Hagarism*.

[21] First in Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton 1998); followed by a pilot article, Fred M. Donner, 'From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community', *al-Abhath* 50-51 (2002-2003): 9-53; and culminating in Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

[22] In addition to these, Donner at times adduces the presence of non-Muslims in Muslim armies or administration and their peaceful coexistence in the early Islamic empire as a telltale sign of the oecumenical nature of the early community, but it goes without saying that the realities of running an empire are very different from the dogmatic requirements of faith, a point already made by Robert Hoyland, 'Review of Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44 (2012): 573-6; cf. also Amikam Elad,

attempts to play down the importance of anti-Trinitarian verses in the Quran,[23] but the fact remains that even without these verses the text is rife with anti-Christian and anti-Jewish polemic, and that Donner reads the Quran through the prism of the Constitution of Medina—an admittedly obscure text which has occasioned differing interpretations.[24] The other problem with this thesis, which I have not seen anyone comment on, is that it fails to account for the problem of the Quran's associators (*mushrikūn*). If the *mushrikūn* were not fellow 'monotheists'[25] whose monotheism was deemed less than satisfactory, as Gerald Hawting and Patricia Crone have argued in a series of persuasive studies,[26] then one is left with no option but to revert back to the traditional understanding of them as adherents of primitive polytheistic cults, an image

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'Community of Believers of "Holy Men" and "Saints" or Community of Muslims? The Rise and Development of Early Muslim Historiography', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 47 (2002): 241-308.

[23] Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 212-14.

[24] Ilkka Lindstedt, '"One Community to the Exclusion of Other People": A Superordinate Identity in the Medinan Community', in Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen et al (eds), *The Study of Islamic Origins: New Perspectives and Contexts* (Berlin 2021), 326-76.

[25] For pragmatic purposes, I uncritically apply the term 'monotheist' to the three Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It goes, however, without saying that the concept is far from reified and may not have been how practitioners of these traditions, at least prior to the rise of Islam, thought of themselves. Indeed, the uncritical use of the concept may explain why it has taken modern scholarship such a long time to come to terms with the likelihood that the Quran's *mushrikūn* may have been adherents of some form of Judaism or Christianity rather than literal idolaters.

[26] G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge 1999); Patricia Crone, 'The Religion of the Qurʾānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities', *Arabica* 57 (2010): 151-200; Patricia Crone, 'The Quranic *mushrikūn* and the Resurrection', part I: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 75 (2012): 445-72; part II: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 76 (2013): 1-20; Patricia Crone, 'Pagan Arabs as God-fearers', in Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (eds), *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an* (Oxford 2017), 140-64. I have suggested elsewhere that the Quran's dietary polemics indicate that some of its opponents were gentile followers of Jewish food laws: Mehdy Shaddel, 'Qurʾānic *ummī*: Genealogy, Ethnicity, and the Foundation of a New Community', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 43 (2016): 1-60, 36-41.

that is very difficult to sustain in the light of recent epigraphic discoveries from the region of Mecca and Late Antique Arabia at large.[27]

But by far the largest problem with Donner's thesis is that he does not expound on his use of the term 'oecumenical': is it meant in the modern of sense of interreligious dialogue and attempts to find and underline common ground between various faith traditions, or does it invoke premodern 'oecumenical' church councils that sought to reach a compromise on contested doctrinal issues such as the many Christological controversies that plagued the early church? If the first is the case, the singular reference to a 'common word' between the Quran and its Jewish and Christian opponents in Quran 3:64 is merely a gambit on the part of the text: that 'common word' is said to be the understanding that neither party should associate other beings with God (*allā... nushrika bihi shayʾan*), an obvious jibe at Trinitarianism. If the latter is the case, the Quran does not seek a compromise either. If a compromise was reached in certain

[27] Christian Robin, 'Les "filles de Dieu" de Saba' à la Mecque: réflexions sur l'agencement des panthéons dans l'Arabie ancienne', *Semitica* 50 (2000): 113-92; Christian Robin, 'À propos des "filles de Dieu"': Complément à l'article publié dans *Semitica*, 50, 2001, pp. 113-192', *Semitica* 52-3 (2002-7): 139-48; Christian Julien Robin, 'Quel Judaïsme en Arabie?', in Christian Julien Robin (ed.), *Le Judaïsme de l'Arabie antique: Actes du colloque de Jérusalem (Février 2006)* (Turnhout 2015), 15-295; Laïla Nehmé, 'The Religious Landscape of Northwest Arabia as Reflected in the Nabataean, Nabataeo-Arabic, and pre-Islamic Arabic Inscriptions', in Fred M. Donner and Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee (eds), *Scripts and Scripture: Writing and Religion in Arabia circa 500-700 CE* (Chicago 2022), 43-86; Ahmad Al-Jallad, 'The "One" God in a Safaitic Inscription', *Eretz-Israel* 34 (2021): 37-48; Ahmad Al-Jallad, 'On the Origins of the God Ruḍaw and Some Remarks on the pre-Islamic North Arabian Pantheon', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31 (2021): 559-71; Ahmad Al-Jallad, 'A pre-Islamic *basmala*: Reflections on Its First Epigraphic Attestation and Its Original Significance', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 52 (2022): 1-28; Ahmad Al-Jallad and Hythem Sidky, 'A Paleo-Arabic Inscription on a Route North of Ṭāʾif', *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 33 (2022): 202-15; Ahmad Al-Jallad and Hythem Sidky, 'A Paleo-Arabic Inscription of a Companion of Muhammad?', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 83 (2024): 1-14. It must be noted that although the goddesses al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt are attested in the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions collected by Nehmé, this does not indicate that they were still worshipped as independent deities in their own right, but, as art-historical evidence culled by Robin suggests, they were minor intercessory beings. This, as noted by Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry*, 54-5; and Crone, 'Religion of the Qurʾānic Pagans', 188-9, is also what we have in the Quran: angelic daughters of God whose intercession was deemed desirable.

quarters or instances, it would have solely been a matter of political expedience, not one of a theological change of heart.

A recent proposal put forward by Mohsen Goudarzi views the Quran's message as largely ethno-centric and directed towards descendants of Ishmael, from whose ranks Muhammad has hailed.[28] This study has much to recommend its interrogation of the Quran's ethnic-oriented discourse, but does not address the question why does the text bother to take issue, and at such great length at that, with Judaism and Christianity if Muhammad's was indeed a biblically inspired mission directed at non-Christian and non-Jewish Ishmaelites?[29] Admittedly, Goudarzi does concede that the Quran at times seems to address itself to Jews and Christians by referring to such verses as Quran 7:158 that promise salvation to those Jews and Christians who would believe in Muhammad, but he goes on to remark that such individuals were not considered part of one and the same community as Muhammad's Ishmaelite followers, nor could they even be considered his followers 'in the proper sense of the term'.[30] What is left unexplored here is how one could be a believer in Muhammad without being his follower? And how are modern scholars supposed to characterise Muhammad's mission and the message of the Quran if the Quran does demand of Jews and Christians to believe in Muhammad, but does not require them to become his followers? What is more, Goudarzi's somewhat vague portrayal of the nature of the Quran's self-understanding with respect to Judaism and Christianity does not take into account the supersession of the Old Covenant with Israel, and that the only way Jews can now redeem themselves is by believing in and joining Muhammad's community.[31]

Be that as it may, the most significant implication of Donner's and Goudarzi's views, even if they do not state it explicitly, is that Jewish and Christian scriptures remain valid for the Quran,

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[28] Goudarzi, 'Ascent of Ishmael'.

[29] It must also be added that he mostly expends his efforts on discussing the centrality of universalism in secondary literature on the Quran and (much) less on making a waterproof case that the Quran is indeed an ethno-centric scripture.

[30] Goudarzi, 'Ascent of Ishmael', 434-5. In the conclusion to his essay (ibid., 481), he does contemplate a universal horizon for the Quran, but one in which Abraham's descendants take centre stage, and form some sort of higher caste. Elsewhere, he denies the universality of the Quran's message on the grounds that it is addressed to Ishmaelites (*ummīs*), Jews, and Christians alone; Mohsen Goudarzi, *The Second Coming of the Book: Rethinking Qur'anic Scripturology and Prophetology* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2018), 335-8.

[31] See infra.

in spite of allegations of scriptural falsification (*taḥrīf*): insofar as Christians and Jews are concerned, the Quran has been sent to confirm the 'Torah' and the 'Gospel' (Quran 3:3). Goudarzi's idea presumes a non-supersessionist Quran inasmuch as the Quran would have addressed itself to Jews and Christians too (and, pace Goudarzi, address them it does) if it had considered their scriptures to be abrogated, and it is likewise an integral component of Donner's reconstruction as in an oecumenical setting we would not expect one of the parties to object to the authenticity of the scriptural foundations of the others' beliefs. This presents us with multiple dilemmas: Judaeo-Christian scriptures have been tampered with and remain valid, both at once; Jews and Christians are misguided and yet are invited to adhere to a 'common ground', intimating that they do not need to turn away from Judaism and Christianity; and the message of the Quran, as Goudarzi has shown, appears to be ethno-centric while it is also addressed to Jews and Christians: Quran 7:157-8 explicitly calls on Jews and Christians to believe in Muhammad and avers that he is 'God's messenger to you all'.

What follows is, then, a first attempt to address these fundamental questions. In so doing, I will argue that Goudarzi is right about ethno-centric elements in the Quran, only that an ethno-centric mindset does not permeate the whole text, and that it eventually becomes universal. The only way to account for this observation, I contend, is to posit a chronological development within the quranic corpus, whereby the quranic movement starts out as an ethno-religion but eventually takes a turn for the universal. I also argue that the Quran considers the majority, if not all, of the Jews and Christians in its environment misguided, but, as a fellow heir to the biblical tradition, it attributes their 'heterodox' beliefs and practices to aberrations that have taken hold of Judaism and Christianity in the course of time. As a consequence, the Quran takes a stand against contemporary Jews and Christians and demands that they follow what it claims to be the 'true' and 'original' form of their own religions, which makes it message neither ethno-centric nor oecumenical. But it does not consider either Judaism and Christianity or their scriptures to be abrogated either, and thus it cannot be labelled supersessionist in this limited sense. As regards the question of *taḥrīf*, the Quran, I will argue, does not view tampering with the Torah and the Gospel to have rendered them obsolescent, but only uses this claim to specifically rail against what seems to be passages that its Jewish and Christian opponents produced as scriptural prooftexts for their perceived malpractices (such as the doctrine of the Trinity). Once these limited interpolations of a non-divine nature are isolated and abandoned, the core of the two scriptures remains valid and binding. I will conclude by asserting that the Quran does indeed consider the covenant with Israel to have been nullified on account of the

Israelites' many sins, with individual Jews only able to attain salvation by joining Muhammad's movement, which is where I part ways with Vahid Mahdavi Mehr's maximalist view of the Quran's non-supersessionism.[32]

In the interest of brevity, I will not deal here with extra-quranic material, most of which either stems from a period when the supersessionist orthodoxy had taken root or is otherwise difficult to interpret on its own. An exception to this rule is the Constitution of Medina, which I will not deal with here either—suffice it to say that the document is, at the very least, non-supersessionist.[33] Nor will I go through all the quranic verses that are of help in vindicating each of my contentions, but will confine myself to citing a handful of examples in each case and will only deal in more detail with problematic verses. Save for a discussion of the transition to supersessionism in the following two chapters, I will also leave aside the issue of the implications of my reconstruction for our understanding of the background, and the factors that contributed, to the rise and differentiation of a new religious movement in early seventh-century central-western Arabia and its afterlife. I will not concern myself with the reception of the Quran's message in its surroundings either: this is not the place to dwell on how, for instance, a Christian who joined Muhammad's movement thought of his or her actions in, say, giving up Trinitarian doctrine, consumption of wine, and so on and so forth. Whether they thought that they were breaking up with Christianity is none of the Quran's concern, nor it will be mine for the present purposes. Nor will I reflect on how such an individual's erstwhile community perceived of their actions: were they still considered a fellow Christian or Jew, or something totally different? Finally, did all of Muhammad's followers consider such an individual as still a Christian or Jew who had returned to the 'true', 'original' form of their own religion, or a convert to a new cause? These are the three perspectives that one can take towards a change of beliefs on the part of a believer (namely, the believer's own view of their actions, the view of the former community, and the perspective of the new community), but it is conceivable that there were people amongst all three groups that considered such individuals to have crossed a boundary and become something new, just as there would have been individuals who still counted them as part of the old fold, or something in between. A Christian who followed Muhammad and abstained from drinking wine and gave up belief in the Trinity may have very well continued to attend church without any hindrance and may have still been reckoned as a member of the community by

[32] Vahid Mahdavi Mehr, *Is the Quran Supersessionist? Toward Identifying the Quran's Theological Framework of Engagement with Earlier Abrahamic Traditions* (Leiden 2023).

[33] Cf. Lindstedt, 'One Community'.

many other congregants. This situation may be helpfully compared to early Christianity, where Jesus-believing and other Jews attended synagogue together, or indeed the way many Christians today consider Unitarians fellow Christians, despite the latter's rejection of Trinitarianism. In sum, I cognise that what follows will probably raise as many questions as it answers, but what I am preoccupied with here is simply to show that the message of the Quran, at least on paper, is non-supersessionist.

An ethno-religious start

This section will attempt to show that there is an ethno-religious layer in the Quran which, when read against the universalist passages discussed in the following section, ought to be taken to be the earliest layer of the text.[34]

According to the Quran, humanity is divided into nations (*umam*; sing., *umma*), each of which receives its due share of prophets and divine communication: 'the people (*al-nās*) were one nation (*ummatun wāḥidatun*), then God sent prophets with tidings and warnings' (Quran 2:213). This is such an important principle of sacred history that it is emphasised and implied many times in the Quran: 'there is a messenger (*rasūl*) for each nation' (Quran 10:47); 'indeed, we have appointed to each nation a messenger'; (Quran 16:36); 'for indeed, before you we sent to nations' (6:42); 'every nation has strived to seize hold of its messenger' (40:5; which implies that every nation had a messenger of its own). Sometimes the ethnic terminology employed is different, but the upshot is the same: 'we then sent... messengers to their people (*qawmihim*)' (Quran 10:74); 'we sent messengers to their people before you' (30:47).[35] It even appears that history has a cyclical pattern, whereby nations and their messengers come in succession to each other: 'we thus sent you to a nation before which nations had passed' (Quran 13:30); 'do you not take heed how many a generation (*qarn*) we blotted out before you... on account of their sins and raised up another generation in their lieu?' (6:6); 'we then sent Our messengers in succession (*tatrā rusulanā*). Whenever a nation's messenger went to them, they rejected him' (23:44); 'we gave Moses the book, and We sent messengers one following the other (*qaffaynā*) after him' (Quran 2:87).

[34] The ramifications of such a diachronic stratification of the text of the Quran for its internal chronology have already been adumbrated in the introduction.

[35] Every nation is also supposed to have a different rite (*mansak*), as we are told in Quran 22:34 and 67.

It thus stands to reason that Muhammad would have been sent, and his message addressed, to a specific community too, and that is indeed what the Quran intimates:

> this is a scripture We sent down... [lest] you say: 'the scripture had only been sent to two groups (*ṭāʾifatayn*) before us and we were ignorant of their teachings', or that you might say: 'if the scripture had been sent to us we would have been better guided than them' (Quran 6:156-7).

Here the text suggests that the Quran has been sent to forestall any lame excuses, presumably in the hereafter, that the nonbelievers may offer for their actions. By the two groups, evidently, Jews and Christians are meant, therefore clarifying that the Quran is not intended for either party, although the term *ṭāʾifa* does not necessarily have ethnic connotations in the Quran. In another passage, the Quran again asserts that Muhammad has been sent to a people (*qawm*) who had not been warned before: 'you are one of the messengers, on a straight path... to warn a people whose ancestors were not warned and because of which they are unperturbed' (Quran 36:3-6).[36] In Quran 28:46 and 32:3, Muhammad is sent to a 'people (*qawm*) to whom no warner has come before you', and a similar statement, with a slightly altered wording, occurs in Quran 34:44.[37]

But if that is the case, which nation is Muhammad sent to? Quran 62:2 states that,

> He is the one who sent a messenger to the *ethnikoi* (*ummiyyūn*) from amongst themselves to read His signs to them and purify them and teach them the book and the wisdom, as well as to those who have yet to join them.

This verse exhibits close intertextuality with another quranic verse that occurs amidst the story of the building of the Kaaba by Abraham and Ishmael, where it is said that whilst raising its foundations, they prayed that,

> when Abraham was raising the foundations of the house, together with Ishmael: 'our Lord! Accept [this] from us, for You are the all-hearing, the all-knowing. Our Lord! Make us submitted to Yourself and from amongst our progeny (*min dhurriyyatinā*) an ethnos (*umma*) submitted... Our Lord! Appoint amongst them a messenger from amidst their own

[36] In addition to this verse, Goudarzi, 'Ascent of Ishmael', 434, also mentions Quran 43:44.

[37] Thus Buhl, 'Fasste Muḥammed?', 144, who also cites 28:46-7 and 32:3.

> ranks, so that he may recite Your signs to them and teach them the scripture and wisdom and purify them, for You are the all-mighty and the all-wise. (Q 2:127-9)

As may be seen, the part that has to do with the sending of a messenger in the former passage is a word-for-word repetition of the same part in the latter, with only the third-person references to God changed to the second person. The intertextuality between these two passages is not only self-evident but also deliberate, as it is meant to signal that the messenger sent referred to in the former, who is the Quran's own enunciator,[38] is the same person for whose appointment Abraham and Ishmael prayed. But more important is the word used to describe Muhammad's community in the first passage, *ummiyyūn*, which parallels the term *umma* that occurs in the latter. The term *ummī*, as I have argued elsewhere,[39] means 'gentile', and its parallelism with *umma* in these verses suggests that, despite the proliferation of mediaeval and modern etymologies for it, it actually derives from *umma*, in the literal sense of an individual member of an ethnos—a construction that resembles such terms as the rabbinic Hebrew for gentile, *goy*, that derives from its biblical usage as 'nation' or the Greek *ethnikos* (literally, an individual member of a nation) that derives from *ethnos* ('nation'). It thus appears that in this context the Quran is using the term 'gentiles' in the limited sense of the one gentile community that surrounded it and is the focus of this verse, namely the Ishmaelites.[40] Reading the two passages side-by-side, then, we can conclude that Muhammad's message was intended for consumption

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[38] Quran 2:152, which is a verbatim repetition of these two verses but in the second person, directly addresses its believers as those to whom its messenger has been sent, leaving no doubt as to the fact that all three passages are references to Muhammad.

[39] Shaddel, 'Qurʾānic *ummī*'.

[40] Goudarzi, *Second Coming of the Book*, 335-8, has argued, against me, that the term *ummī* originally meant 'Ishmaelite' as the Quran uses it in this sense alone, and that it only later acquired the broader sense of 'gentile', as the corpus of early Arabic material I drew on in my article is post-quranic. This contention, however, ignores the parallelism pointed out above. Moreover, the term's derivation from *umma*, which is the only logical etymology ever proposed for it—and is supported by the aforementioned parallelism—would dictate that in order for Goudarzi's contention to hold up, the term must have undergone a semantic shift from 'gentile' to 'Ishmaelite' by quranic times before undergoing another semantic shift back to meaning 'gentile' in post-quranic times, an unwarrantedly tortuous semantic history in my view. It is more likely that the term only meant 'gentile', with the Quran employing it to the only gentile community that surrounded it, the Ishmaelites—hence the illusory synonymity.

by Ishmaelites, and indeed elsewhere in the text his believers are called the followers of the 'faith (*milla*) of your father Abraham' (22:78).

It might, however, be asked why, if Ishmael was such an important personage to the Quran, he figures only eight times in the whole text? It must be said that, in and of himself, Ishmael is actually not a remarkable personage in the Quran, and that it is descent from Abraham that matters the most. If Ishmaelites can compete with Israelites for God's favour and, as shall be seen, their inheritance, it is because of their status as descendants of Abraham rather than Ishmael, which would explain why Abraham is appealed to so many times in the Quran (and probably also why Moses figures even more prominently in it).[41] Insofar as he is there, Ishmael only supplies the critical link to Abraham, without playing much of a prominent role on his own; even in the story of the foundation of the Kaaba he appears alongside Abraham, and indeed the only occasion in the Quran where the believers are referenced in genealogical terms, in 22:78, they are called the children of Abraham, with no mention of Ishmael. This Ishmaelite connexion to Abraham sets the stage for the entry of the Quran and the kin-community of its audience into the Judaeo-Christian scheme of human history, but the relationship between Israel and Ishmael is inevitably contentious, if not wholly acrimonious.[42]

Thus the Quran's concerns remain very parochial in the beginning. In *sūrat al-anʿām* (Quran 6), for instance, where two of the verses discussed above that delineate the remit of Muhammad's mission as ethno-national occur, we also read that the Quran has been merely sent to confirm 'that which preceded it' (i.e., earlier scriptures) and to warn the inhabitants of 'the metropolis (*umm al-qurā*)[43] and those in its environs' (6:92). In other terms, the Quran's worldview is even more parochial and merely concerns those who live in its immediate surroundings.[44] In 6:20, the opponents are also informed that 'those who have been given the

[41] Thus Goudarzi, 'Ascent of Ishmael', 437-8.

[42] I do not wish to offer a detailed discussion of early non-Muslim testimonies to the ethnic nature of Muhammad's preaching, as they are of a secondary nature. Interested parties are referred to Goudarzi, 'Ascent of Ishmael', 457-62. The evidence of pseudo-Sebeos, however, will be discussed below because of its unique nature and significance.

[43] To the best of my knowledge, this translation was first suggested by Arthur Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda 1938), 40.

[44] The idea that messengers are sent to individual settlements, rather than nations, is also present elsewhere in the Quran, such as in 7:94. The two ideas are by no means contradictory, however.

book (*alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb*) would recognise it [that is, the Quran] the way they recognise their own children', thereby intimating that the addressees are not Jews and Christians, and that if the Quran were to be presented to Jews and Christians they would readily accept it as the authentic words of God. This indicates that the Quran was not meant to be, or at least was not, presented to them, as the whole scenario is an imagined hypothetical. This is then followed by a discussion of the Jewish-inspired dietary practices of the addressees, who are explicitly said to be non-Jews themselves,[45] and, towards the end of the sura, the aforementioned passage on the Quran having been sent down to forestall the possibility of the opponents pleading ignorance in the hereafter, in contradistinction to the two groups (*ṭāʾifatayn*) of the Jews and Christians. Put differently, what appears to be the ethno-centric orientation of the message of the two verses is not a result of their decontextualisation; rather, there is nothing in the entirety of this long sura to suggest that it has a broader audience in mind. The only conclusion that can be drawn from this observation, then, is that it belongs to a period in the history of the *Urgemeinde* when it conceived of itself as nothing other than an ethno-religious movement.

A universal message

At some point in the early life of the *Urgemeinde*, however, the movement transitioned to universalism by appealing to the Jews and Christians to join it. How and why this happened is not as much of concern to us here as the fact that it did, which is what this section will attempt to demonstrate. Perhaps the most explicit appeal to Jews and Christians to believe in Muhammad occurs in Quran 7:157-8:

> Those who follow the gentile prophet (*al-nabī al-ummī*) whom they find mentioned with them in the Torah and the Gospel and who enjoins them to do right and forbids them from wrong, makes permissible (*yuḥillu*) for them the pure edibles (*ṭayyibāt*) and renders impermissible for them the impure things (*khabāʾith*), removes from them the burdens (*iṣr*) and shackles (*aghlāl*) which were on them. Those who believe in him, honour him, render aid to him, and follow the light that was sent down with him, they are the saved ones. Say: 'o people! I am God's messenger to you all (*innī rasūl allāh ilaykum jamīʿan*)... so believe in God and his messenger, the gentile prophet who believes in God and His words, and follow him, so that you may be guided.

[45] Shaddel, 'Qurʾānic *ummī*', 36-7.

The significance of this passage cannot be overstated. Muhammad is called the 'gentile prophet' who, in spite of his being a gentile, is to be believed in by Jews and Christians. Given how desperate the text sounds here, being gentile, it seems, was a major bone of contention between Muhammad's followers and his Jewish opponents: evidently, they were averse to the idea of having a non-Jew as a prophet, but the Quran merely doubles down by calling Muhammad a gentile and demands that they recognise him nonetheless.[46] It is unclear whether Christians, who certainly must have agreed that the Israelite prophets were all Jewish, were also opposed to believing in a gentile prophet or not, but it is possible that the Quran here is engaging with Jews alone, but arguing that both Jews and Christians have to believe in Muhammad. This impression is enforced by the discussion of the dietary laws that only apply to Jews, inasmuch as the Quran is legislating for Jews here.[47]

Goudarzi seems to maintain that such requirements do not evidence the universality of Muhammad's ministry, apparently holding it to be a mere demand from them to confirm that he is a divinely ordained messenger sent *to the Ishmaelites*.[48] But this is not the case, at least not in this passage, for in addition to asking for belief in Muhammad the text assigns certain functions to him in respect of Jews and their dietary laws. When the word *ṭayyib* occurs in the Quran in conjunction with notions of permissibility (*ḥalāl*) and impermissibility (*ḥarām*) and the radicals associated with them (*ḥ-l-l* and *ḥ-r-m*), it invariably refers to pure edibles,[49] which is why I have translated it as such. According to the Quran, certain foodstuffs that were pure and initially permissible to Israelites were later banned for them on account of their sins. Slightly later in the text, Quran 7:160 affirms that the Israelites were originally permitted all the *ṭayyibāt* before adding that 'but they did not wrong Us, surely they wronged themselves'.

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[46] For more on the quranic engagement with the Jewish (and Christian) refusal to recognise a gentile as prophet, see Shaddel, 'Qurʾānic *ummī*', 19-21.

[47] It must also be borne in mind that the Quran considers Christians an offshoot of the Israelites, as those of them who believed in Jesus; for a novel case in this vein consult Holger Zellentin, '*Banū isrāʾīl*, *ahl al-kitāb*, *al-yahūd wa-l-naṣārā*: The Qur'anic Community's Encounters with Jews and Christians', *Entangled Religions* 13.2 (2023). That is why the Quran portrays Jesus's ministry as directed to the Israelites, an issue to which we shall turn presently.

[48] Goudarzi, 'Ascent of Ishmael', 435.

[49] In 2:57, 168, 173, and 267; 4:160; 5:4, 5, 87, and 88; 7:32, and 160; and 8:69. Cf. also 8:26; 10:93; 16:72; 17:70; 20:81; 23:51; 40:64; and 45:16, where the *ṭayyib(āt)* are made sustenance (*rizq*) for various groups.

Elsewhere, the text informs us that the additional dietary restrictions that its (evidently non-Jewish) opponents follow are not meant for them (Quran 6:140-45), but only for Jews. The Jews were barred from consuming these foodstuffs as a punishment for their sins, for 'this is how We repaid them for their transgressions' (*bi-baghyihim*; 6:146). This is a somewhat recurrent theme in the Quran which is elaborated in great detail in this pericope, but it also reappears elsewhere, as in Quran 16:114-18, which concludes by reaffirming that such foodstuffs are only forbidden to the Jews and that 'We did not wrong them, rather it was them who wronged themselves'.[50] Here the Quran is playing on a well-known trope in Christian anti-Jewish polemic, whereby the stringent dietary restrictions of Judaism are branded a punishment for the Jews on account of their sinful behaviour that the Christians need not follow.[51] It seems that the Quran agrees with this view, and elsewhere seems to imply that the Jews would have been able to redeem themselves and have these burdensome punishments removed by believing in Jesus: in a passage that deals with Jesus and his mission, the Quran has the angel announcing his birth to his mother say:

> [he will be appointed] a messenger to the Israelites [saying]... 'I [have come] to confirm what is before me of the Torah and to render permissible (*li-uḥilla*) for you some of that which was made impermissible (*ḥurrima*) to you. I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, so fear God and obey me.' (Q 3:49-50)

The phraseology used of Jesus's salvific mission with regard to the Jews is the same as that used in Quran 7:157 of Muhammad, thereby indicating that those Jews who failed to recognise the Messiah in Jesus and believe in him have now been granted another opportunity to buy their salvation, this time by believing in Muhammad, who would remove the additional dietary restrictions that were imposed on them as retribution for their sins from them.[52]

All of this is to say that, at least in respect of Jews, Muhammad is supposed to fulfil some function. It is not sufficient for Jews to believe in Muhammad as a prophet sent to Ishmaelites,

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[50] For more on the Quran's reflections on Jewish dietary laws, consult Shaddel, 'Qurʾānic *ummī*', 36-41.

[51] This is a most prominent theme in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*: Holger M. Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's Legal Culture: Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen 2013), 140-54.

[52] Strangely, however, the passage has Jesus declare that he has come to 'render permissible for you some of (*baʿḍ*) that which was made impermissible to you', suggesting that the Jews were to be redeemed in two stages and needed to believe in both Jesus and Muhammad.

or to submit to his arbitration, as explicitly demanded by the Constitution of Medina,[53] after which they would be allowed to go free. The Quran has a specific view of the Israelite past that regards them as God's former favourites who, having committed many unforgivable sins and lacking gratefulness, later fell from grace and were subjected to punishment and humiliation, and now have to regain God's favour if they want to attain ultimate salvation. That, though, is only possible now by believing in and following Muhammad. This makes Muhammad an authoritative figure for the Jews too, and thus it cannot be said that his mission only concerns Ishmaelites by this stage of its development.

But the same cannot of course be said of Christianity, despite the fact that the Quran considers most forms of it, and most prominently Trinitarian Christianity, to be misguided. From the point of view of the Quran, Jesus's 'original' message was flawless and the same as Muhammad's, and those Christians who held on to it need not change their beliefs, whereas even upright Jews are expected to follow the full gamut of Jewish food laws that include the punitive restrictions until they can be redeemed by Muhammad.[54] The fact, however, remains that despite this the Quran gives the Christians similar treatment as the Jews in 7:157-8 by lumping them together, even though it does not give Muhammad a clear role to fulfil for them. It bears reminding though that as virtually all the world's Christians at this time were followers of doctrines unpalatable to the Quran, it does arrogate a de facto function to itself in respect of Christians, if not Christianity itself, too. This is most clear from 5:19, where the people of the book in general are informed that, 'Our messenger has come to you, after a cessation of messengers, to serve as an explicator to you, so that you may not say that "no one came to bring us tidings and warnings".[55] A bringer of tidings and warnings has now come to you'. Muhammad is, it appears, as much of a messenger to the Jews and Christians as he is to Ishmaelites. His original mission of proselytising to Abraham's forgotten offspring has now transformed to a pan-Abrahamic one.

But can this pan-Abrahamism be characterised as universalism? In another study, Goudarzi argues that it cannot, on the grounds that the word *ummī* in the Quran (he is

[53] Michael Lecker, *The 'Constitution of Medina': Muḥammad's First Legal Document* (Princeton 2004), 8 (Article 26), 20.

[54] Unless, of course, they had already converted to Christianity and won their redemption.

[55] Cf. also Quran 5:15, where Muhammad's duty is to explicate the parts of the scripture that the people of the book have kept hidden.

presumably thinking of 62:2) refers merely to Ishmaelites.[56] Whilst I do agree that the Quran applies the term *ummī* in the more constricted sense of 'Ishmaelite' than 'gentile',[57] I am of the opinion that the reason the text only concerns itself with Jews and Christians in its universalist strata is due to the fact that its cognitive horizon was almost entirely populated by these groups. Whenever it does break free of this otherwise limited *imaginaire*, however, it does exhibit a universalist tendency, for instance where it reckons (righteous) Zoroastrians and the mysterious Sabians amongst the saved (5:69, 22:17). To put it differently, it is the text's preoccupation with the Judaeo-Christian tradition and particularly the figure of Abraham that has obscured the truly universal thought world of its later layers.

A non-supersessionist Quran

It is not uncommon for universal ontologies, especially those of a religious brand, to be simultaneously supersessionist. After all, what is the point of devising a new philosophy of life or system of thought if there is another, equally legitimate one out there already? Yet the Quran, as it turns out, is decidedly non-supersessionist. In none of the proclamations addressed to Jews and Christians in the text does it assert that their belief systems, scriptures, or way of life are misguided or have been abrogated. The Quran has in fact been sent to 'confirm that which they already possess' (*muṣaddiqun li-mā maʿahum*), but 'when something they recognised [to wit, the Quran] came to them they refused to believe in it' (Quran 2:89). The Quran bitterly complains that when the Jews[58] are asked to believe in 'what God has sent down', namely the Quran, they counter that 'we believe in what was sent down to us' and

> they refuse to believe in anything other than it (*yakfurūna bi-mā warāʾahu*), while it [that is, the Quran] is the truth, confirming that which they possess. Ask them: 'if you do believe, why did you kill the prophets before?'[59] (Quran 2:91)

[56] Goudarzi, *Second Coming of the Book*, 335-8.

[57] But without wishing to concede that *ummī* ever meant 'Ishmaelite' exclusively, whether originally or at any other time in the course of its semantic history; see above.

[58] The text uses the word 'they' to describe the opponents, but the next two verses refer to Moses being sent to them, the episode of the golden calf, and the covenant at Mount Sinai.

[59] On the quranic accusation of Jews as killers of the prophets and its background, consult Gabriel Said Reynolds, 'On the Qurʾān and the Theme of Jews as "Killers of the Prophets"', *al-Bayān* 10 (2012): 9-32.

Slightly later, we are again informed that Muhammad was sent by God to

> confirm that which they already possess, but a party of those who were granted the book [i.e., the so-called people of the book, the Jews and the Christians] left the book of God behind them, pretending not to know. (Quran 2:101)

Elsewhere, Muhammad is consoled for not being asked for arbitration by those Jews who feign belief in him:[60] 'how could they make you an arbiter whilst they have the Torah which contains God's decrees.[61] But they still turn away, they are not believers' (Quran 5:43). In other words, Muhammad should not expect them to ask for his judgment, because if they were interested in (divinely mandated) judgment they could have turned to the Torah which they already possess, but in which they show no interest. As may be seen, the Jews are not being castigated for failing to detach themselves from the Torah, but rather for not following the very rules (some of which are enumerated in the following verses) that it commands them to follow. The Torah is, then, a still binding source of law and the Quran has merely been sent to reaffirm its rulings, as is the Gospel: this verse is then followed by a statement on how Jesus and the Gospel were sent to confirm the Torah and that Muhammad should judge the Christians according to the stipulations of the Gospel (5:46-7), before once more averring that the Quran has been sent to confirm what preceded it of scripture (5:48). The pericope finally goes so far as to claim that the people of the book 'stand for nothing so long as you do not uphold the Torah and the Gospel' (Quran 5:68), which is perhaps the most explicit affirmation of the continued relevance of the two books in the whole of the Quran.

It thus appears that the Quran does not demand any act from Jews or Christians that would constitute a clear break from their religions, nor does it ask them to renounce their self-identity as Jews or Christians. They can remain Jewish and Christian and believe in Muhammad all the same. The Quran considers Jesus just another prophet in the Israelite tradition of prophecy, which is why he is mentioned as part of that sequence in 2:87 and is called a 'messenger to the Israelites' in 3:49 and 61:6. The Quran, it would seem, conceives of Muhammad in a similar fashion, at least insofar as the Jews are concerned, despite the fact that he is a gentile (7:157-8). The Quran maintains that just in the same way that believing in the Israelite prophets who succeeded Moses does not entail that the followers of the Mosaic religion abandon their

[60] The feigning of belief is adumbrated in Quran 5:41.

[61] Submitting to Muhammad's arbitration is also one of the terms of the Constitution of Medina; Lecker, *Constitution of Medina*, 8, 20.

ancestral faith and convert to something new, belief in Muhammad similarly does not constitute a break with Judaism on their part.[62]

Arguing against Donner's thesis of an oecumenical community, Sandra Keating has contended that the quranic doctrine of *taḥrīf*, or the falsification of the Torah and the Gospel, renders the Quran a supersessionist text.[63] In an illuminating article, Gabriel Said Reynolds has demonstrated that, in its scope and seriousness, the quranic charge of *taḥrīf* is not as strong as the classical Islamic tradition would have it, and that the Quran does not have as much of a negative view of its scriptural antecedents.[64] But, as Keating points out, there are two categories of *taḥrīf* in the Quran that are deliberate and very serious, where the text accuses Jews of having substituted words of their own for God's words, which to Keating is an 'essential element of a comprehensive and coherent theory of revelation and divine justice'.[65] This argument, while correct, does not consider the passages in question in their wider context, nor does it elucidate the Quran's view of the textual history of the Torah and the Gospel. Once one works out the Quran's understanding of this textual history, it becomes clear that it does not consider them superseded, but only containing some non-divine accretions that can easily be weeded out. Quran 7:162, for instance, accuses those of the Jews 'who indulged in corrupt acts (*ẓalamū*)' of having 'substituted [God's words for]... words other than those which they were told', continuing: 'therefore We sent down a chastisement against them from the heavens on account of their wrongful activities'. This accusation, it bears reminding, is part of the same passage that invites Jews and Christians to believe in the gentile prophet 'whom they find mentioned with them in the Torah and the Gospel' (7:157). To put it differently, if Jews and Christians fail to find any mention of Muhammad in their own scriptures, it is because they have tampered with those

[62] But this does not make the Quran, pace Donner, oecumenical, as it considers the majority of contemporary Jews and Christians misguided and doomed to eternal damnation. The Quran merely considers the purported 'original' forms of their beliefs still binding.

[63] Sandra Toenies Keating, 'Revisiting the Charge of *taḥrīf*: The Question of Supersessionism in Early Islam and the Qur'an', in Ian Christopher Levy, Rita George-Tvrtković, and Donald F. Duclow (eds), *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic and Dialogue in the Middle Ages* (Leiden 2014), 202-17.

[64] Gabriel Said Reynolds, 'On the Qur'anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*taḥrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130 (2010): 189-202.

[65] Keating, 'The Charge of *taḥrīf*', 215.

scriptures and erased his name from them, a position also held by classical Islamic exegetical tradition.[66]

The other verse identified by Keating as belonging to this category is 2:59, which is a near-verbatim repetition of the above-discussed verse. This verse is followed by the statement, later in the same pericope, that the believers should not be surprised if the Jews do not believe in them: 'are you eager for them to believe in you, while a party of them would hear God's word and would then, after having comprehended it, falsify it (*yuḥarrifūnahu*) deliberately (*wa-hum yaʿlamūna*)?' This long pericope then ups the ante by alleging that certain Jews 'write the scripture with their own hands and then claim that it is from God' (2:79). The latter two verses, which in addition to the previous two verses cited by Keating also impute premeditation to the Jews, are part of the same passage, discussed above, that demands that Jews believe in 'that which God has sent down' (2:91) and that this new scripture confirms the previous one and thus they should be able to recognise it as such (2:89).[67] This implies that here too, as in the previous case, what is at stake is their denial of Muhammad's prophethood, of which the Quran maintains they were already informed in their scriptures. That the Quran uses the allegation of the corruption of the previous scriptures for polemical purposes is also clear from another passage, where it accuses certain of the people of the book of twisting their tongues (*yalwūna alsinatahum*) when reciting the scripture to pretend it is part of the scripture (3:78), before going on to state that it does not behove a person to be granted a scripture, authority to adjudicate, and the gift of prophethood by God, only to require that people worship him rather than God, an obvious rejoinder to Trinitarian Christianity. In other words, if Christians are capable of offering scriptural testimonia for the doctrine of Trinity, it is because they have corrupted the scriptures and added these passages to them.

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[66] Nickel, *Narratives of Tampering*, 145-8, 182-5.

[67] As this consideration of the passage as a whole makes clear, it is indeed the corruption of the scripture that 2:79 is concerned with rather than forging 'false scriptural writings', as Reynolds, 'The Accusation of Scriptural Falsification', 193, maintains. 'The writing of the scripture' refers to the commitment to writing of the oral scripture adumbrated in 2:59 (which, according to both pseudo-Clementina and the Quran is when the corruption took place), and the allegation of falsification, to judge by the other parts of the passage, only relates to parts of the scripture, not all of it. Furthermore, the Quran itself calls the composition 'the scripture' (*al-kitāb*), implying that it does not take issue with its authenticity. In the Quran, the term *kitāb*, as Goudarzi, *Second Coming*, has shown, is reserved for the Quran and the Torah alone, not all forms of writing.

But how does this corruption of the earlier scriptures not render them irrelevant, and how could these statements be reconciled with the repeated assertions of their continued validity throughout the Quran? There is, after all, not a single hint in the whole text that, despite their falsification, the Torah and the Gospel are not to be adhered to. Unfortunately, the Quran is not very forthcoming with regard to its idea of what, exactly, the purported corruption of certain passages of previous scriptures entails, but after mentioning how Jews take the words of the scripture out of context, Quran 5:13-15 states they 'forgot' a portion of what they were bidden to remember, then levels the same accusation against Christians, before asserting that 'Our messenger', Muhammad, has been sent to explicate to the people of the book those parts of the scripture they have been suppressing. The upshot, then, is that, firstly, the people of the book have added certain passages to their scriptures; secondly, that they have also forgotten, apparently deliberately, some parts of them; thirdly, that Muhammad is to 'confirm' the revelations they have received; and, fourthly, that Muhammad is to remind them of the passages they have elected to 'forget'. This, I believe, is connected to a passage that is traditionally understood to be related to the (in)famous episode of the so-called Satanic verses, where the Quran states that 'Satan threw in his interjection (*umniyya*)[68] whenever a messenger or prophet We sent before you was reciting, but God abrogates (*yansakhu*) Satan's interjection, then God reaffirms (*yuḥkimu*) His verses' (Quran 22:52). Whilst the traditional exegetical and scholarly understanding of the verse holds it to be about passages introduced by Satan into the Quran itself, I am of the opinion that it is in fact about previous scriptures corrupted at the devil's instigation. This suggestion seems more plausible in the light of the reference to verses abrogated by God being replaced by better verses in Quran 2:106—in the same long passage discussed above that accuses the Jews of scriptural falsification—and the opposition of the opponents to certain verses being substituted (*baddalnā*) for others of apparently demonic provenance in Quran 16:98-102. If this were a reference to quranic verses being changed, one would not have expected to see opposition to it from nonbelievers, to whom the Quran did not

[68] The term *umniyya* in this verse is usually connected to its homograph that means 'to wish', but the image of someone throwing in their 'wish' into someone else's would be strange to say the least. I therefore believe it means to throw in here, which is connected with the word for sperm (*manī*), literally meaning 'ejaculation', in the Quran; Elsaid Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Leiden 2008), 900-901. Thus the root covers the same semantic field in Quranic Arabic that it does in English.

matter. If they are opposed to some verses being replaced by others, it would have certainly been biblical verses abrogated by the Quran.

If that is the case, then Muhammad and the Quran are also supposed to cleanse the previous scriptures of their Satanic accretions. This understanding of the textual history of the Judaeo-Christian holy texts and the role of Muhammad finds a parallel in the pseudo-Clementine literature, according to which Satan introduced interpolations into the text of the Torah in the course of its transmission, but holds the Torah to be a valid scripture nonetheless—only that these interpolations need to be identified and isolated through the twin safety checks of the oral tradition and the true prophets.[69] If the Quran is echoing a similar understanding of the textual history of the Torah (which it also extends to the Gospel), then Muhammad is to simply identify passages of demonic origin and have them removed, without any of this impinging upon the authority and validity of the texts in question in any measure.[70]

The quranic fall of Israel

The Quran's embrace of the notion of Israel election and God's covenant with it is well established and should require little elaboration.[71] I will, accordingly, touch upon this issue only briefly before going on to show that the Quran regards this covenant as annulled, and that Muhammad's believers, including any Jews who so choose as to follow him, are now His elect. In this sense, whilst Judaism as a way of life and ethno-religious identity remains valid and relevant, Israel as a whole is superseded as God's chosen people.[72]

As a matter of fact, the Quran holds that God has made covenants with different groups of peoples and followers of different messengers, as well as with humanity in general, but that

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[69] See the pithy study by Donald H. Carlson, *Jewish-Christian Interpretation of the Pentateuch in the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* (Minneapolis 2013). Harmony with the rest of the scripture is yet another safety check that seems to be absent in the Quran.

[70] Holger Zellentin and I are preparing a detailed study into this issue.

[71] Uri Rubin, 'Children of Israel', in Jane Dammen McAuliffe et al (eds), *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, vol. 1 (Leiden 2001), 303-7, 304-5; Andrew J. O'Connor, 'Qur'anic Covenants Reconsidered: *mīthāq* and *ʿahd* in Polemical Context', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 30 (2019): 1-22.

[72] This is where I part ways with Mahdavi Mehr, *Is the Quran Supersessionist*, who has a maximalist understanding of the nature of the Quran's non-supersessionism, whereby Israel still remains God's elect. The case he makes for the Quran's non-supersessionism also leaves much to be desired.

the covenant with Israel was of a special nature becomes apparent from two quranic verses where the notion of Israel's chosenness is explicitly cited. The first is Quran 44:32, where the reader is informed that 'We elected them (*ikhtarnāhum*), knowingly, over the world'. In Quran 45:16 it is stated that 'We gave Israel the scripture, [authority for] adjudication, and prophethood, and supplied sustenance to them out of all pure edibles (*al-ṭayyibāt*), and favoured them (*faḍḍalnāhum*) over the world'. Implicit in the latter is the idea of Israel's fall, for the reference to pure edibles having been made permissible to the Israelites has to be read alongside other quranic statements that some licit foodstuffs were later forbidden to them because of their sinfulness:

> We forbade to the Jews some pure edibles (*ṭayyibātin*) that were (initially) licit for them (*uḥillat lahum*) on account of their wrongful conduct (*ẓulm*) and for their repeated blocking of the way of God (*sabīl allāh*). (Quran 4:160)

Quran 6:140-46, discussed earlier, also indicates that the Jews were barred from consuming certain pure foodstuffs for their transgression (*baghy*).[73] The verse thus connects Israel's election to their being allowed all manner of pure edibles; if they have now been prohibited from the consumption of some of these pure culinary items, then they must have also fallen from their chosen status. Indeed, the other honours mentioned in the verse have also been rescinded: the Israelite line of prophecy has long petered out, for Quran 5:19 informs the people of the book that Muhammad has been sent after a hiatus (*fatra*) in the line of prophecy, and in 5:43 he is to act as their adjudicator, giving us to understand that the Jews have lost the right to adjudicate for themselves. What is left unstated in the verse but is equally significant is that Muhammad is supposed to remove the dietary restrictions from those Jews who believe in him (Quran 7:157-8, discussed supra), which would presumably make them part of God's new elect.

It further appears that Israel's election was not unqualified to begin with, and was conditioned on them acting uprightly. This promise they failed to keep, and now their Ishmaelite cousins have risen to claim their heritage in their stead, for God's 'covenant does not extend to the evil-doing party' (Quran 2:124). These are, to be sure, the words with which God answers Abraham's query concerning his descendants' share after God appoints him a leader (*imām*) for humanity in the Quran. Instead of God's covenant with Abraham, the lot of those who 'set up the

[73] For more on these additional dietary restrictions being acts of divine punishment meted out to the Jews, consult Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's Legal Culture*, 140-54; and Shaddel, 'Qurʾānic *ummī*', 36-41.

[golden] calf is rage from their Lord and lowliness in earthly life' (Quran 7:152). Not only have the Israelites lost the right to Abraham's spiritual patrimony, but also to his material heritage: elsewhere, the Quran bitterly reminds the Israelites of a pledge in the Torah and the Psalms that, 'indeed, We wrote in the Psalms after the [first] mention that the land (*al-arḍ*) shall be inherited by My righteous servants' (21:105). The exegetical tradition has occasionally identified 'the land' here with the whole earth and has, surprisingly, been followed in this by some modern scholars (and translators). In the light of the biblical citation, however, the land here evidently refers to the Holy Land, promised to the Israelites in Psalm 37:29. But, interestingly enough, the promise made in the Psalms is not conditional, and in fact the text promises the land to the Israelites in perpetuity; the requirement that only the righteous should inherit the land occurs in the Quran alone.[74] The Quran, then, is introducing a new 'clause' into the Israelites' agreement with God using which it can now deny the Holy Land to them, on account of their alleged sinfulness. From the Quran's point of view, then, the righteous are now its own community of believers, and hence they are to inherit the Holy Land along with the mantle of succession to Abraham. In another passage, the Quran reminds the Jews how they cowardly refused to fight for the possession of the Holy Land, even though God had promised it to them and assured them of divine help:

> when Moses told his people (*qawm*): 'my people! Remember God's bounty to you, when He appointed prophets in your midst, made you sovereigns, and gave you something which He had not given to anyone in the world. My people! Enter the Holy Land which God has made yours and do not fall on your backs, in which case you will be at a loss.' They said: 'Moses! There are a most powerful people there and we shall not enter it until they leave it, we will enter it only if they leave it'... They said: 'Moses! We will never enter it so long as they are there. You and your God go and fight them and we will be sitting here.' (Quran 5:20-24)

The impression one has from this somewhat caricaturesque presentation of the Israelite failure to make good on their claim to the Holy Land is that their right to it has now been forfeited. The same sentiments are voiced in an account preserved for us in one of the earliest and most remarkable witnesses to the rise of Islam, which we may call *testamentum Sebeum*. This account is found in an Armenian chronicle penned ca. 661 CE and falsely attributed, by nineteenth-century scholars, to Bishop Sebeos of Armenia. According to it,

[74] I am grateful to Gabriel Reynolds for alerting me to the absence of the conditional clause in the Psalms.

> he [scil., Muhammad] said: 'with an oath God promised this land to Abraham and his seed after him for ever. And he brought about as he promised during that time while he loved Israel. But now you are the sons of Abraham, and God is accomplishing his promise to Abraham and his seed for you. Love sincerely only the God of Abraham, and go and seize your land which God gave to your father Abraham. No one will be able to resist you in battle, because God is with you.'[75]

This account is then followed by a description of how Muhammad's followers, simmering with a newfound zeal and convinced that they are entitled to the Holy Land by virtue of their Abrahamic descent, set out for the conquest of Palestine.

As Robert Hoyland has demonstrated, this passage is bereft of the polemical and totalising intents that some scholars have read into it, and is accordingly worthy of serious attention.[76] It also bears reminding that all the statements and beliefs that pseudo-Sebeos attributes to Muslims have a precedent in the Quran. We have already seen how the Quran considers its messenger and his followers to be descendants of Ishmael, and the idea that no army, regardless of how mighty it may be, can overcome a group of believers convinced of divine sanction for their actions is, likewise, thoroughly quranic: 'how many a small band has overcome a large multitude by the will of God' (Quran 2:249). Furthermore, pseudo-Sebeos seems to insinuate that Muhammad considered the Holy Land to be the inheritance of all of Abraham's seed, and also adumbrates how he believed the Israelites to have fallen from divine grace and how, as a consequence, the Holy Land now belongs to the Ishmaelites alone, which we have already established from the Quran. Pseudo-Sebeos's presentation of Muhammadan kerygma is, then, in full keeping with quranic doctrines,[77] but its main value is that their most important elements appear side-by-side and in the form of a political platform, which makes the core of Muhammad's message in respect of Judaism and the Holy Land crystal-clear.

It is instructive in this context to examine one of the Quran's most didactic passages concerning Judaism and Israelite history, the opening verses of Quran 17, a sura which is known

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[75] R. W. Thomson, James Howard-Johnston, and Tim Greenwood, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos* (Liverpool 1999), 96.

[76] Robert G. Hoyland, 'Sebeos, the Jews and the Rise of Islam', in R. L. Nettler (ed.), *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations* (Luxembourg 1995), 89–102.

[77] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 131, adduces more examples of pseudo-Sebeos's correct citation of quranic teachings in his chronicle.

both as 'nightly journey' (*isrāʾ*)[78] and 'the Israelites' (*banū isrāʾīl*). It starts with the description of the initiatory journey of a human being ('servant', *ʿabd*) (Q 17:1) from the 'sacred place of prayer' (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*)—presumably the Kaaba in Mecca—to the 'furthest place of prayer' (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*)—presumably the Temple in Jerusalem[79]—so that he may be shown some of God's signs. The exegetical tradition holds this servant to have been none other than Muhammad himself, who was raised on high on a miraculous tour of the heavens.[80] But this reading of the verse

[78] For a discussion of this term, consult Nathaniel Miller, 'Yemeni Inscriptions, Iraqi Chronicles, Hijazi Poetry: A Reconstruction of the Meaning of *isrāʾ* in Qur'an 17:1', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31 (2021): 125-58.

[79] Modern scholars have expressed doubt with regard to the identification of *al-masjid al-aqṣā* with the Temple in Jerusalem, but Uri Rubin, Rudi Paret, Josef van Ess, and Angelika Neuwirth have marshalled inner-quranic parallels between the descriptions of *al-masjid al-aqṣā* and the Holy Land (such as 'whose surroundings We have blessed') to make a persuasive case for the traditional identification; Uri Rubin, 'Muḥammad's Night Journey (*isrāʾ*) to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā: Aspects of the Earliest Origins of the Islamic Sanctity of Jerusalem', *al-Qantara* 29 (2008): 147-64, 152; Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart 1980), 296; Josef van Ess, 'Vision and Ascension: *Sūrat al-najm* and Its Relationship with Muḥammad's *miʿrāj*', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1 (1999): 47-62, 48; Angelika Neuwirth, 'From the Sacred Mosque to the Remote Temple: *Sūrat al-isrāʾ* (Q. 17), between Text and Commentary', in Angelika Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community: Reading the Quran as a Literary Text* (Oxford 2014), 216-52, 225 and 234 (originally published in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Walfish, and Joseph Goering [eds], *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* [Oxford 2003], 376-407).

[80] For traditional accounts of Muhammad's ascension, see Heribert Busse, 'Jerusalem in the Story of Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 14 (1991): 1-40; Frederick S. Colby, *Narrating Muḥammad's Night Journey: Tracing the Development of the Ibn ʿAbbās Ascension Discourse* (Albany, NY, 2008). Some modern commentators have also considered this verse to be a later interpolation: Theodor Nöldeke and Friedrich Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. i: *Über den Ursprung des Qorāns* (Leipzig 1909), 136 (tr. Wolfgang Behn, *The History of the Qurʾān*, [Leiden 2013], 111-2); Josef Horovitz, 'Muhammeds Himmelfahrt', *Der Islam* 9 (1919), 159-183, 160; more explicitly so in A. A. Bevan, 'Mohammed's Ascension to Heaven', in Karl Marti (ed.), *Studien zur semitischen Philologie und Religionsgeschichte: Julius Wellhausen zum siebzigsten Geburtstag* (Giessen 1914), 51-61, 53; Heribert Busse, 'The Destruction of the Temple and Its Reconstruction in the Light of the Muslim Exegesis of *sūra* 17:2-8', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and*

completely sequesters it from the rest of the passage and renders it superfluous, and it goes without saying that it marks a later attempt to supply Muhammad with all the paraphernalia of prophetic legitimacy, including miraculous feats. Not unexpectedly, modern scholarship has long felt ill at ease with this traditional explanation. Considered together with the rest of the passage, however, the anonymous servant of this verse appears to be an apocalyptic seer taken on an initiatory journey, a common topos in Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic literature. The passage then states that *the* scripture (*al-kitāb*) was given to Moses so as to function as a source of guidance for the Israelites, so that they may not take any trustees besides God (Quran 17:2). It then goes on to state,

> We determined (*qaḍḍaynā*) for the Israelites in the scripture: 'you would commit transgression on earth twice and behave vaingloriously'. When the time for the first of the two lapsed, We despatched against you a group of Our servants, possessors of great might, who ransacked your dwellings. We then turned the tables in your favour and against them, helped you with possessions and children, and made you a most multitudinous lot. [We warned you that] if you do good, you do good to yourselves and if you commit wrongs it is against yourselves. And when the time for the latter lapsed [We despatched against you another group] to cause you distress, to defile the Temple [lit., 'place of prayer', *al-masjid*] the way they defiled it the first time, and to utterly destroy what they had ransacked. (Quran 17:4-7)

Given that the second cataclysmic event is an obvious reference to the destruction of the Second Temple during the Roman-Jewish war, the translation above is the only syntactically viable way of reading the verse, on the understanding that the lexical unit 'we despatched against you a group of servants, possessors of great might' (*baʿathnā ʿalaykum ʿibādan lanā ūlī baʾsin shadīdin*) which occurs earlier has been omitted to avoid repetition. This realisation would also solve the apparent problem of there being three dependent clauses in this sentence—'to cause you distress' (*li-yasūʾū wujūhakum*), 'to defile the Temple' (*li-yadkhulū al-masjida*), and 'and to destroy what they had ransacked' (*li-yutabbirū mā ʿalaw*), all in the subjunctive—without an independent clause.[81] The pericope, then, is a deterministic narrative of the two destructions of the Temple.

Islam 20 (1996): 1-17, 1-2; Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin 1981), 101.

[81] This textual problem has on occasion been overlooked in both the mediaeval exegetical tradition on and modern translations of the Quran and has resulted in arbitrary renderings of

The initiatory journey of the visionary, intended to prepare him to be made privy to divine mysteries, the deterministic presentation of history belied by the use of the verb *qaḍḍaynā*, the narrative of the two destructions of the Temple (by the Babylonians and Romans), and the prediction of this all in the scripture, make it clear that the reference here is to an apocalypse with an ex eventu narration of the Israelite past. As is common with this type of literature, this apocalyptic text would have likely adduced scriptural prooftexts from the Hebrew Bible (or more specifically the Torah) for the prediction of the two sacks of the Temple,[82] hence the allusion to the determination of the future in Moses's scripture, and the review of Israelite history that ensues (together with the reference to the initiatory journey of the apocalyptic seer) must be following the narrative of our hypothetical apocalypse. The sack of Jerusalem and destruction of its Temple by Titus's Roman legions in 70 CE engendered a plethora of apocalyptic writing bemoaning the two losses of the Temple,[83] of which many specimens are extant and probably a much larger body is lost for good, and it would therefore be hazardous to attempt to identify the apocalyptic composition behind this passage with any of them.[84]

The significance of the message of the pericope, though, can hardly be overstated: having missed both of their two chances, the Israelites have fallen from God's grace, as the text indicates in no unequivocal terms. But reading this pericope alongside other quranic passages on Israel's disgrace and especially Quran 21:105, where the Holy Land is promised to His righteous servants to the exclusion of others, it is clear that it is now Muhammad's followers, with whom God has

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the passage. The elliptical nature of the verse, however, was already noted by al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo 1422/2001), vol. xiv, 478-9; and Ibn Qutayba al-Dīnawarī, *Taʿwīl mushkil al-Qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Cairo 1393/1973), 218. Most modern translations have also been alive to this problem and its proper solution, such as Saheeh International, Arthur J. Arberry, Muhammad Asad, Rudi Paret, Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Muhsin Khan, Talal Itani, Abul Ala Maududi, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, etc. Cf. the commentary on this passage in Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven 2018), 433-4.

[82] Busse, 'Destruction of the Temple', 3, identifies Deuteronomy 31:16-17 as a potential referent of this verse, but what is clear is that the Quran is reading the events through the prism of an apocalypse, although the latter may have used the Deuteronomical passage as prooftext.

[83] See Kenneth R. Jones, *Jewish Reactions to the Destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70: Apocalypses and Related Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden 2011).

[84] For a more extended discussion of this passage, the reader is referred to Mehdy Shaddel, 'A Tale of Two Mosques: An Apocalyptic Reading of Quran 17:1-8', forthcoming.

established a new covenant (Quran 5:7), who are to inherit it.[85] What is also important here is the other reason for which the Quran goes out of its way to quote this passage, which is the longest quotation from another book in the text: in the next two verses, the reader is told, 'it is hoped that your Lord shall have mercy upon you. If you regress [to your previous mode of conduct] We shall regress too, and We made hell a dwelling place for the unbelievers. Truly this Quran guides to that which is proper and brings tidings for the believers who act righteously that a great recompense awaits them' (Q 17:8-9). Slightly later, the audience is reminded of how God first despatches messengers to warn people before raining down punishment on them (Q 17:15-17).

The message is clear: the Israelites have engaged in sinful conduct unbecoming of God's true servants because of which they have suffered terrible retribution in the past. Now, they are engaging in sinful acts again, and are being given yet another opportunity to redeem themselves, by believing in the Quran and its messenger, who has come to warn them of the impending divine chastisement. Indeed, one of the conditions set out in their covenant was that they should believe in God's messengers.[86] This is, in fact, the core of all of the Quran's extended litanies against Jews and Judaism, that they have committed sins and have suffered punishment at God's hands for it, and that they have now one last chance to redeem themselves, by believing in the Quran's messenger. That the quranic messenger is offering Israelites one last chance to atone for their sins and make up for the lost opportunities is also clear from the Quran's rather lengthy discussions of dietary laws, considered earlier. These passages, as noted, intimate that belief in Muhammad brings with it relaxation of the most stringent of Jewish food laws, which are of a punitive nature.

To recapitulate, Israel is no longer God's elect, but the proverbial door is not exactly slammed shut in the face of the individual Israelite. Israelites may still secure their salvation by belief in Muhammad, who is called, unapologetically, the 'gentile prophet'. With Israel's fall from elect status, it seems, the era of Israelite prophecy has also come to a close.

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[85] Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Philadelphia 2018), 156-7, identifies the land Muhammad's faithful 'have yet to inherit' in 33:27 as the Holy Land, but the ambiguity of the verse makes me feel less confident in this identification. For a rather helpful collection of secondary scholarship pertaining to the centrality of Jerusalem to emergent Islam, see Shoemaker, *Death of a Prophet*, 197-265.

[86] O'Connor, 'Qur'anic Covenants', 9-12.

It therefore appears that Islam originally arose as an ethno-religious movement proselytising to Abrahamites who traced their genealogy back to him through his first born, and were accordingly called 'Ishmaelites' by outsiders—who evidently did not contest their claim to descent from Abraham—though it appears that they preferred to be primarily known as children of Abraham.[87] Eventually, however, it extended its programme to Jews and Christians as well, effectively delimiting the remit of its prophet's ministry at the confines of the world. This made the Quran's a universal message, though one that was not meant to either be different from or supersede Judaism and Christianity, but merely to confirm them in their 'original' form, as the Quran apprehended it. In this respect, it can be characterised as non-supersessionist insofar as it does not view itself as having abrogated the Torah and the Gospel, although it takes the old covenant with Israel (as well as a covenant God had later made with Christians) null and void as Israelites had violated its terms so many times that they could no longer be forgiven.[88]

[87] As is apparent from Quran 22:78 and a monumental inscription, no longer extant, in *al-masjid al-ḥarām* in Mecca, erected on the orders of the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī, which refers to his rerouting of a creek to the course it followed 'at the time of his forefather Abraham' (*ʿalā ʿahd abīhi ibrāhīm*); Ibn Jubayr, *Riḥla (Iʿtibār al-nāsik fī dhikr al-āthār al-karīma wa-l-manāsik)*, ed. Ḥusayn Naṣṣār (Cairo 1375/1955), 86; cited by Hassan Mohammed El-Hawary, Gaston Wiet, and Nikita Elisséeff, *Matériaux pour un corpus inscriptionum arabicarum: Quatrième partie, Arabie* (Cairo 1985), 48.

[88] It goes without saying that the term *islām* in those quranic passages that refer to it as God's *dīn* or the one true *dīn*, such as Quran 9:33, 48:28, and 61:9, a hallmark of Umayyad and Abbasid imperial triumphalism, do not refer to a reified religious system called 'Islam', and therefore a discussion of those verses would be superfluous. On what the text may have intended by the words *islām* and *dīn*, see Ilkka Lindstedt, 'Reconsidering *islām* and *dīn* in the Qur'an', *al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 31 (2023): 77-95; Mohsen Goudarzi, 'Worship (*dīn*), Monotheism (*islām*), and the Qurʾān's Cultic Decalogue', *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 8 (2023): 30-71; Mohsen Goudarzi, 'Unearthing Abraham's Altar: The Cultic Dimensions of *dīn*, *islām*, and *ḥanīf* in the Qur'an', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 82 (2023): 77-102. As Goudarzi, 'Ascent of Ishmael', 436, perceptively notes, to the Quran, 'the operative forces of past and present are specific human communities, not abstract entities such as "religions"'.