

A Commentary on the Qur'an

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Preface: on the translations and sources

For this study, I used the classic 1955 translation by A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*¹. Arberry seems to have made a bona fide effort to capture the poetical quality of the text. The only problem here is that in the middle of the twentieth century, religious poetry meant King James Version English; thus one must sometimes work through archaic constructions before one can even figure out what Arberry's interpretation of the Koran means.

Moreover, further study confirms that even while Arberry turns the Arabic into reasonably good, if archaic, English poetry, his meaning is often closer to the original Arabic than translations made by Muslims.² As best I can determine this is because "Muslim" translations tend to incorporate later commentarial traditions, without alerting the reader to the difference between the underlying Arabic, and the meaning or paraphrase ascribed to the text by later commentators. One ready source for that commentarial tradition is *Tafhim al-Qur'an* ("The Meaning of the Qur'an"), by Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi.³

A number of translations can be found at Quran.com (I prefer the layout of <http://legacy.quran.com>), and "[Internet Sacred Text Archive](#);" an especially important text at the latter is the 1880 scholarly translation by E. H. Palmer, [Part I: Surahs 1–16](#) and [Part II: Surahs 17–end](#). Generally speaking, where Arberry and Palmer agree against the other translations, I assume, based on a number of cases that I have studied, that they are closest to original Arabic text; whereas the "Muslim" translations are following unidentified commentators in creating a paraphrase.

A note about verse references. Arberry only gives verse references in 5 verse sections; furthermore, especially in the earlier Surahs, he is sometimes varies from the traditional versification by 3 or 4 verse numerals. Therefore, to make it easy for people working from a variety of translations, I will refer to the text using traditional versification. The first number will be the "Surah" (something between a "book" and a "chapter" in the Jewish and Christian Bibles); the second number will be the traditional verse number. If Arberry significantly differs from this number, I will differentiate it with a "/ * A," where the asterisk represents the beginning of the 5-verse section in which the text is found in Arberry. **Thus: "2.23/20 A" means: Surah 2, v. 23 in the traditional versification, somewhere between v. 20 and v. 25 in Arberry.**

¹ George Allen & Unwin, 1955; Touchstone Edition, 1996.

² This is confirmed by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, in the introduction to his recent translation for Oxford World's Classics (2005) (in "A Short History of English Translations"): "His careful observation of Arabic sentence structure and phraseology makes his translation very close to the Arabic original in grammatical terms. To those unfamiliar with the text itself, this feature, along with the lack of any notes or comments, can make the text seem difficult to understand and confusingly unidiomatic (Kindle Locations 503-506)." I have not had time to incorporate this translation into my interpretation.

³ An English translation is available at <http://www.englishtafsir.com>, at which point one can select any Surah. This will be referred to as "Maududi."

Comments on Method

I am simply interested in reading the Qur'an as a text. This is somewhat simplistic, but gets close to what I am trying to do: Imagine I go to an old bookstore, and pull what appears to be a classic text off the dusty shelves. I am curious and begin to read. I want to know where the text comes from, how it originated, and what it might mean. But the only resource for making these judgments is in the text itself.

Only when there are allusions to alleged fundamental events in the traditional history will I bring them to the reader's attention. E.g., there are numerous references to "those who emigrate." Islam refers this "emigration" to the movement of the first Muslims from Mecca to Medina. It would be unfair not to alert the reader of this belief. I will not assume that the traditional history bears on the text unless substantial evidence within the text itself suggests that it does so.

Furthermore, I begin with a methodological doubt of the traditional claim that the Qur'an can be divided into Meccan (early) and Medinan (late) surahs--since it remains to be seen whether the alleged Meccan and Medinan periods have any support from history. Therefore, and contrariwise, I assume that the only way to understand the Qur'an is to understand it in the order it is presented to us. In other words, the order as we have it has literary significance; if we understand that significance, we will gain deeper insight into the meaning and origins of the Qur'an than if we interpret it in the "light" of a possibly fabricated "back-story."

1: "The Opening"

A religious invocation that summarizes most of the *religious* themes of the Qur'an:

- God (alone) is worthy of praise, and
- is "Master of the Day of Doom" (most translations read "Judgment")—he is the one who will decide a person's destiny; therefore...
- please may we (the pray-er) be among those are not chosen as objects of divine wrath.

2: "The Cow"

As the commentator [Maududi](#) observes, 2 begins by answering the prayer for guidance at the end of 1: "That is the Book,...a guidance for the godfearing...." Although the title of the work is "Qur'an" (in some work transliterated "Qur'an"), **the text sees itself primarily a "Book"** (Pickthall reads "Scripture"): *kitab*. "Qur'an" is literally "recitation." Surahs 2, 3, 7 refer to "kitab", 10 and 31 ("wise book"), 11 (a book with "verses clear"). Not until 12 do we have "qur'an." 15 has "qur'an," along with "signs" of a books. The opening of surahs 20, 27, 50, 55 refer to "qur'an."

Tradition of course says that the Qur'an begins with oral "recitations" only later collected into a book. But this terminology suggests that the Qur'an is from the beginning "a book"; only later does it become a text to be "recited" as a religious object. Surahs 12, 14, and 43, and 13.37, 16.105, and 20.112 specifically note that the text is in "Arabic". Some of these verses refer to "Arabic Qur'an," in which case Pickthall translates "an Arabic Lecture."

From the beginning, there were people who did not accept the authority of this "book." There must be some explanation for their obstinacy. There is: "**God** took away their light, and

left them in darkness (2.17). Whenever there is a setback, whenever the story does not develop as K (my identity of the authorial “voice” expects⁴), the explanation is always that God, who is all-powerful, has decided it should be that way.

At v. 40 (35 A) (*see my original posting for verse notation), K begins to call on Jews—“Children of Israel”—to accept the authority of this “book.” If they doubt, K reminds them of the previous times when they questioned God’s revelation. It uses the Talmudic story of God lifting up Mt. Sinai above the Israelites, threatening them with destruction. The tone is simultaneously desirous of approval and acceptance, even while it threatens (divine) aggression if the acceptance is not forthcoming.

And We gave to Moses the Book, and after him / sent succeeding Messengers; ... / ...and whensoever / there came you a Messenger with that our souls / had not desire for, did you become arrogant, / and some cry lies to, and some slay? / And they say, ‘Our hearts are uncircumcised.’ / Nay, but God has cursed them for their unbelief; / (2.87, 88/80 A)

Not only does this “book” claim to continue the revelations given to the Jews, it claims that it will settle the quarrels between the Jews and the Christians, who cannot agree between themselves. The “book” is the foundational text for a new, unified community, one that will transcend the confessional antagonisms of K’s community. K. leaps over the long history of the two religions to postulate a primal “faith” of Abraham.

And they say, ‘Be Jews or Christians and / you shall be guided.’ Say thou: ‘Nay, rather / the creed of Abraham, a man of pure faith; he was no idolater.’ / Say you: ‘We believe in god, and / in that which has been sent down on us / and sent down on Abraham, Ishmael, / Isaac and Jacob, and the Tribes, / and that which was given to Moses and Jesus / and the Prophets, of their Lord; we / make no division between any of them, and to Him we surrender.’ / ... but if / they turn away, then they are clearly in schism; /(2. 135-137/ 130 A)

Even as the “book” establishes a unified, central religious identity, it establishes a central “Mosque.” It is at this point in the text, that the famous “change in *qiblah*”—the direction of prayer—takes place (v. 142/135 A). At no point does the text mention the cities allegedly involved, nor does it say that where “the Holy Mosque” is. Some listeners complain about the arbitrary nature of these pronouncements—pray in this direction; oh no, pray in that direction; the text justifies it by saying that it wanted to distinguish “who followed the Messenger from him who turned on his heels (v. 143/135 A).” In other words, K. changes the direction to see who is willing to follow the “Messenger” (no “Muhammad” at this point), regardless of the justification—or lack thereof—that the Messenger offers.

At this point, we have the first expression of what I will call “proto-Shariah”: rudimentary legal codes (approximately equivalent to Jewish *halakha* or Christian “canon law”). It begins in response to other religionists who claim they must follow “such things as we found

⁴ In my original version of this commentary, I was speculating that the actual author was unknown. I changed my mind later in the development of the text. At this point, “K” simply means whoever was the author(s) of the text. I am leaving this nomenclature uncorrected so the reader can see the development of my thinking.

our fathers doing (v. 170/ 165 A).” I conclude K. is referring specifically to food laws, since he then says that believers can eat the “good things” God has provided, with the exception of carrion, blood, and pig-flesh.

K. follows with a summary of the “true piety”: belief in God, the “Last Day,” angels, “the Book,” prophets, and providing for one’s family, and the needy; prayer and alms (v. 177/ 170 A). He next gives rules on

- retaliation,
- inheritance,
- the fast in the month of Ramadan (including the propriety of sexual relations during the month),
- the new moons as times for pilgrimage (apparently partly in reaction to pagan practices) ,
- laws for war (190/ 185 A ff.; also 217/210 A)
- the pilgrimage (Mecca is not mentioned, although other place names are given: Arafat, and earlier, Safa and Marwa (vv. 178-200, see also 158)

Then we have:

- pleasure and games,
- marriage to unbelievers,
- sex during menstruation,
- oaths,
- divorce,
- usury, debts, and
- rules about giving witness (vv. 219-275)

At v. 246, K. begins a creative re-reading of the story of Saul:

Hast thou not regarded the Council / of the Children of Israel, after Moses, / when they said to a Prophet of theirs, / ‘Raise up for a king, and we will fight / in God’s way.’”

In the biblical story, the problem was that Samuel wanted to Israelites to fight under the direct authority of YHWH (as mediated by Samuel himself), while the Israelites wanted a king to guide them. But K subtly shifts the problem: now people in his community *don’t want to fight*. K. then combines with the Saul story the stories of David (the coming of the Ark of the Covenant with the “Shechina,”) and that of Gideon, (differentiating among the fighters on the basis of how they drink from a river).

K. seems to be saying: God has chosen for you **a book, a mosque, and a king**; “so fight in God’s way (v. 244/ 245 A).” This unification of the community under common book, mosque and king is then connected to the unity of God: “God / there is no god but He, the . Living, the Everlasting. / ... Who is there that shall intercede with Him / save by His leave (v. 255)?” There are no powers beside God just as—because—there are no religious authorities, social traditions, or earthly powers to which the competing communities (Jews, Christians, pagans) can appeal. Therefore:

No Compulsion in religion

No compulsion is there is religion. / Rectitude has become clear from error. / So whosoever disbelieves in idols / and believes in God, has laid hold of the most firm handle, unbreaking; God is All-hearing, All-knowing. (v. 256)

Other versions:

YUSUFALI: Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things.

PICKTHAL: There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is henceforth distinct from error. And he who rejecteth false deities and believeth in Allah hath grasped a firm handhold which will never break. Allah is Hearer, Knower.

SHAKIR: There is no compulsion in religion; truly the right way has become clearly distinct from error; therefore, whoever disbelieves in the Shaitan and believes in Allah he indeed has laid hold on the firmest handle, which shall not break off, and Allah is Hearing, Knowing.

Muslims read this text to prove the tolerance of Islam. Whatever one might think on that point, it seems to me the clear meaning of the text is exactly the opposite: “no compulsion” does not refer to the religion of “the book,” but to the competing religious traditions that “the book” is trying to supplant. To paraphrase: your religions may try to compel you to try to stay within your traditions. They cannot do so. No one and no thing can compete with his power; no earthly or spiritual force can “intercede” with him, can mediate between him and those who submit to this “book.”

The surah ends with an eloquent prayer for forgiveness as the new community attempts to be faithful to its task:

Our Lord, / take us not to task / is we forget, or make mistake. / Our Lord, / charge us not with a load such / as Thou didst lay upon those before us. / Our Lord, / do Thou not burden us / beyond what we have the strength to bear. / And pardon us, / and forgive us, / and have mercy on us; / Thou art our Protector. / And help us against the people / of the unbelievers.

Note two themes: the concept of “protector” (= “patron” in the analysis of *Crossroads to Islam*) and the concern for aid in the continuing struggle against the “unbelievers.”

3

Now that the key claims to authority have been made, K must answer those who question that authority. In 3, this becomes a *critique of the People of the Book*. Muslim tradition identifies this group as primarily Jews and Christians (although in later statecraft, other groups were included). The People of the Book have been pointing to ambiguities (many translations render it “allegories”) in the “book,” using them (in the mind of K) to create “dissension” K points to no standard by which the ambiguities can be resolved, since “none knows the interpretation; only God.” In any case, K believes, “those firmly rooted in / knowledge say, ‘We believe in it;...(v. 7).’” So here knowledge is simply faith and belief—some might say *blind* belief in the divine origin of text that is —by its own account—at least partially unintelligible.

K answers with a sign of victory in battle over a superior force (v. 13). This theme of signs is important, and I will return to it when the text allows me to more fully develop it. After

an appropriation of the Mary and Jesus story that tries to claim Jesus as supporting the message, K expresses the fundamental rejection of “associationism”:

Say: ‘People of the Book! Come now to a word / common between us and you, that we serve / none but God, and that we associate not / aught with Him, and do not some of us take / others as Lords, apart from God.’ And if / they turn their backs, say: ‘Bear witness that we are Muslims [i.e., those who surrender/submit].’ (emphasis added) (3. 64/ 55 A)

Note the bolded phrase: as stated in my comments on 2, I regard the rejection of associating anything with God is firstly political, and only secondarily theological. K wants the people of the Book to agree they will not allow any competing authorities (“do not...take others as Lords”). The one-ness of God is therefore primarily a political assertion of the unity of the Muslim community under its religious and political authorities; belief in this God is expressed through moral, legal, and spiritual submission.

For the next 50-60 verses, K criticizes the People of the Book for holding onto their revelations, while rejecting this revelation. They refuse to heed God’s “signs”. What are these signs?

How shall God guide a people who have disbelieved / after they believed, and bore witness that he / Messenger is true, and the clear signs came to them? (v. 86/ 80 A)

The first House established for the people / was that at Bekka, a place holy, and a guidance to all beings. / Therein are clear signs—the station of Abraham (vv. 96-97/ 90 A).

Be not as those who scattered and fell into variance / after the clear signs came to them; those where awaits a mighty chastisement, / the day when some faces are blackened, some faces whitened. ... These are the signs of God We recite to thee in truth,... (vv. 105-108 / 100 A).”

The “fact” of the “book” is the sign, the apparent gift of putative revelation. No wonder the Jews and Christians did not accept it: why should the simple assertion of revelation overrule their own communal sense of God’s manifestation?

At v. 120, K returns to the theme of the religious meaning of the caprices of battle. (Here it mentions “Badr,” supposedly the first triumph of the Medinan Muslims over the Meccans. But it gives no further details by which to determine the historicity of the recollection.) Even “Muhammad” (one of the few mentions of him in the Qur’an) is killed other prophets have died before him (v. 144/ 135 A). Death is inevitable, why not die for the reward of “the other world” (148 / 140 A)?

It is against the problem of death in combat that we have the first Qur’anic “theodicy”:

They that day were nearer to unbelief than to belief, / ...who said of their brothers (and they themselves held / back), ‘Had they obeyed us, they would not have been / slain.’ Say: “Then avert death from yourselves, if you you speak truly.’ / Count not those who were slain in God’s way / as dead, but rather living with their Lord, by Him provided (v. 168-9/ 160 A).

How do we explain the death of our brothers in battle? Why didn't they listen to us, when we told them not to go. Because K says, they are "living with their Lord". God provides. Note that K does not respond with a explicit concept of resurrection here, which is where one would expect it. I will explore the implications of this fact later.

As in 2, there is a closing prayer for forgiveness and a fervent request to "give us what Thou hast promised us"—is the community uncertain of the ultimate outcome of their struggle (v. 194)? The final verse responds with the promise: "O believers, be patient, and vie you in / patience; be steadfast; fear God; haply so you will prosper (200)." Continue in the struggle—*maybe* you will be among the victorious. (Palmer agrees with the "perhaps," against Yusufali, Pickthal, and Shakir.)

4, "Women"

...is aptly named, since it primarily deals with relationships with women in a number of social-legal contexts. The first 45 verses are proto-Shariah,, legislating on the following social problems:

- orphans, including female orphans (the famous text that legislates no more than 4 wives is here),
- dowries for women (presumably esp. the female orphans
- what we would call "trusts" for orphans, managing the property of someone underage
- **inheritance**, specifically by both men and women, and division of inheritance among one's children and wives
- "indecenty" committed by women (appears to mean female homosexuality, since it mentions "two of you")
- **forbidden degrees of relations for marriage**, including limitations on the inheritance of women, presumably as wives or concubines
- general **warnings against covetousness** of others' wealth
- final guidelines for dealing with disputes between husbands and wives.
- after the intervening material noted below, **purification before prayer** (v. 43/ 45 A).

Some of these problems receive renewed attention later in the Surah, e.g., trusts (v. 58/60 A), female orphans (v. 127), and inheritance (end of Surah), what happens if man dies without children.

At v. 36 (40 A) K begins with "Serve God, / and associate naught with Him," which again I am interpreting as: do not permit competing religious loyalties, any other religious law, or spiritual authority to hinder your complete surrender to the legislation of this "book."

K follows directly with a extensive list of those to whom a person ought to "**Be kind**...

... to parents, and the near kinsman, / and to orphans, and to the needy, / and the neighbour who is of kin, / and to the neighbour who is a stranger, / and to the companion at your side, / and to the traveller, and to that your / right hands own [slaves?]. Surely God loves not / the proud and and boastful / such as are niggardly, and bid other men / to be niggardly, and themselves conceal / the bounty that God has given them (vv. 36-37/40 A).

Be free with the wealth God has provided; The first obligations are to kinsmen—note how far down spouses are on the list!.

At v. 46 (45 A), K returns to criticism of the Jews. They apparently are giving lip service to “the book,” while not obeying its summons to K’s satisfaction. An earlier version of the same criticism can found in 2. 104 (95 A). The exact grounds for K’s objections are forever obscure; some translations do not even attempt to translate all the terms:

YUSUFALI: Of the Jews there are those who displace words from their (right) places, and say: “We hear and we disobey”; and “Hear what is not Heard”; and “Ra’ina”; with a twist of their tongues and a slander to Faith. If only they had said: “What hear and we obey”; and “Do hear”; and “Do look at us”; it would have been better for them, and more proper; but Allah hath cursed them for their Unbelief; and but few of them will believe.

PICKTHAL: Some of those who are Jews change words from their context and say: “We hear and disobey; hear thou as one who heareth not” and “Listen to us!” distorting with their tongues and slandering religion. If they had said: “We hear and we obey: hear thou, and look at us” it had been better for them, and more upright. But Allah hath cursed them for their disbelief, so they believe not, save a few.

SHAKIR: Of those who are Jews (there are those who) alter words from their places and say: We have heard and we disobey and: Hear, may you not be made to hear! and: Raina, distorting (the word) with their tongues and taunting about religion; and if they had said (instead): We have heard and we obey, and hearken, and *unzurna* it would have been better for them and more upright; but Allah has cursed them on account of their unbelief, so they do not believe but a little.

By now, K’s attitude towards the People of the Book, especially the Jews, is beginning to harden:

You who have been given the Book, believe / in what We have sent down, confirming / what is with you, before We obliterate / faces, and turn them upon their backs, or / curse them as We cursed the Sabbath-men, and / God’s command is done. / God forgives not that aught should be with Him / associated ; ... (vv. 47, 48 / 50 A).

I have emphasized the last sentence to underscore my earlier claim that the critique of “associationism” is first a political critique. Those who do not accept the authority of what “We have sent down” do so because they still “associating” some other religious or legal power with God. The curse on the “Sabbath-men” is obscure; most translations assume that that curse is on those who *break* the Sabbath; but that appears to be an paraphrase not based on the text. (Palmer agrees with Arberry here.)

Vv. 71-153 (65- 145 A) give a renewed call to close ranks with those fighting: “So let them fight in the way of God who / sell the present life for the world to come; / and whosoever fights in the way of God and is slain, or conquers, We shall bring him a mighty wage (v. 74/ 75 A).”

After v. 153, K. returns to the opposition of the People of the Book, this time with more specific attention to the Christians. He rejects the Christian belief in the crucifixion of Jesus (v. 147-8/ 155 A) and his divinity in a triune godhead (v. 171/ 165 A):

People of the Book, *go not beyond the bounds* / in your religion, and say not as to God / but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, / was only the Messenger of God, / and His Word that He committed to Mary, / and a Spirit from / Him.God suffices for a guardian. / The Messiah will not disdain to be a servant of God, Whosoever disdains to serve Him, and waxes / proud, ... He will chastise with a painful chastisement, ... (vv. 171, 172, 173/ 165-175 A)

Again, I find a double meaning: don't exceed the proper limits on the authority one ascribes to past prophets, but also, don't exceed the bounds of what other religious communities are permitted to say within the new community formed by this book. Just as the Messiah is willing to serve God, *you Christians* must be willing to serve the community that "submits" (does *islam*) to this God. The "chastisement" is most certainly double: both in the world to come, and in the present order, guided by the community that submits.

One other point: the revelation upon which this new community is based, is above all a *Book*:

O believers, believe in God and His Messenger / and the Book He has sent down on His Messenger / and the Book which He sent down before (v. 136).

In contrast, one could argue that in Judaism and Christianity, the sacred text comes *after* the community is formed, and emerges out of the life of the community. The entire texture of communal life, liturgical action, religious experience, and moral discipline *creates* the "Book." But the "believers" here *begin with* the Book.

5: "Table," Al-Maeda

5, "The Table" (or "Table-spread") opens with another set of Proto-Shariah, the second in a row to do so. Here the issues are:

- pilgrimage, specifically, the rules for hunting while on pilgrimage
- responding to those (unnamed) who "barred you from the Holy Mosque (again, location unidentified)
- rules for taking wives from People of the Book
- forbidden foods (repeating what was said earlier), prohibition of idolatrous sacrifices and divination arrows (the rules here are very similar to those established in earliest Christianity, according to Acts 15 and 21).
- marriage to believing women and women from the People of the Book, and prohibition of sexual relations "in licence, or as taking lovers (v. 5)"
- washing before prayer (in Islam known as the (lesser) ablution—*wudu*)
- be just or equitable, even to those who opposed the believers in the past.

As in previous surahs, the Qur'an revisits and expands some of these rulings later in the surah:

- hunting on pilgrimage, vv. 94-96
- the appointment of Kaaba for pilgrimage, v. 97
- sacrifices to idols, v. 103
- divination, along with wine and gambling (v. 90)
- oaths (v. 89) at the determination of a will (v. 106).

This phenomenon of repetition and elaboration requires some explanation. Of course, it is too early in this project to propose a definite explanation; but I posit the following as a hypothesis to be evaluated:

“The Book” claims to be the source for a new community. K, the putative author of this Book, must do two things: 1. create laws for the community; 2. explain *by what authority* he promulgates these laws, i.e., he must propose some *authorization*. These two tasks are unstable in relation to each other. In simple terms, if K focuses on one or the other, he can “lose the attention” of his listeners. If he only focuses on legal promulgation, then the listeners begin to wonder, (in the American cliché) “who died and left you boss”? If he only focuses on authorization—who *did* die?!—the listeners urgently need to know, “okay, what do you want us to *do*?” So K must move back and forth between promulgation and authorization rapidly.

This hypothesis has the further merit of explaining the order of the material we have read to this point:

- 2.1-170: authorization: This is “a book,” and Jews ought to accept it;
- promulgation: 2.170-275: first proto-Shariah;
- 2.244: **authorization**: fight in God’s way; 2.245ff., consider King Saul (who I propose was the biblical authority model for an unknown Muslim king; **entirety of 3** (a critique of the People of the Book);
- promulgation: second proto-Shariah: 4.1-43, with further development at vv. 58, 127, and the end;
- authorization: stronger critique of the Jews, followed by (4.71-153) a long summons to “fight in God’s way”, concluded at vv. 153 ff. another critique of the People of the Book, particularly the Christians;
- promulgation: third proto-Shariah: 5.1-8[/], with the further development noted above, followed by another long section of **authorization** as my exposition that follows:

The remainder of the is devoted to the People of the Book, particularly to Christians. It is strange to read [Maududi](#) say: “this name [“Table”] has no special relation to the subject of the Surah.” A significant portion (vv. 75-87, 110-end) is devoted to a continuing critique of Christianity’s belief that Jesus is co-divine. As we have seen, the previous has critiqued the theological underpinnings of this claim; the present now reinterprets the liturgical corollary. The belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ is embedded in the Eucharistic (communion) celebration: the bread and wine *is* the body and blood of Christ, a supernatural, divine power. The traditional understanding of the Eucharistic presence of Christ, and the dogmatic affirmation of the divinity of Christ are co-related and interdependent. Each requires the other: The doctrinal claim is “realized” in the liturgical act; the act requires the doctrine to explain it.

The locus of this celebration is “the table”. Here is what the Qur’an says:

‘And when I / [presumably, Allah] inspired the Apostles: / “Believe in Me and My / Messenger”; they said, / “We believe; witness / Thou our submissions.”’ / And when the Apostles / said, ‘O Jesus son of / Mary, is thy Lord able / to send down on us a / Table out of heaven?’ He said, ‘Fear you God, / if you are believers.’ / They said, ‘We desire / that we should eat of it / and our hearts be at rest; / and that we may know that / thou hast spoken true to / us, and that we may be / among its witnesses.’ / Said God, Our Lord, send / down upon us a Table / out of heaven, that shall / be for us a festival, the / first and last of us, / and a sign from Thee. / And provide for us; Thou / art the best of providers.’ /

God said, ‘Verily I / do send it down on you; / whoso of you hereafter / disbelieves,
verily I / shall chastise him with a / chastisement wherewith I / chastise no other being
(vv. 111-115).’

The Christian Eucharist is always a festival celebration (Sundays do not count towards the Lenten fast); “first and last” has been a central title for Jesus ever since the Book of Revelation (“I am the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end”).

But the Qur’an—deliberately, one must assume—separates “the Table” from its origins in the life and final events of Jesus. In the Christian Gospels, Jesus sets the pattern of the Eucharist through his actions and words: “take and eat; this is my body...drink...this is my blood (Matthew 26: 26-27).” Furthermore, this “Last Supper” occurs “on the night before he was betrayed.” The Qur’an denies the continuity of the Christian salvation-history, since it denies that Jesus the Messiah was ever crucified. If that was true, then Jesus’ proclamation in the Last Supper becomes null and void: there is no broken body or shed blood.

The Qur’an solves this apparent contradiction by having the Table sent down directly from heaven. The Table comes from God, *deus ex machina*, not out of the liturgical action of the church, in response to the saving history of Jesus’ life, death, and purported resurrection.

Revelation in Qur’an, Judaism, Christianity

Here we have the first clear expression of the central problem of the purported Qur’anic revelation in relation to Judaism and Christianity. The Qur’an presents revelation as a direct and immediate event, not as an event that develops in the spiritual life of community and people. Readers of this forum should be familiar with the proximate source of this interpretation: Franz Rosenzweig:

Here in Islam, revelation is not a living event between God and man, an occurrence into which God himself enters even unto his own complete self-negation, his divine sacrifice. Rather it is a freely offered gift which God places into the hands of man. As if to signalize this, revelation in Islam is from the beginning that which in belief, it only becomes gradually even for its own consciousness and then never completely: a book (*The Star of Redemption*, trans. Hallo, Notre Dame Press, p. 166).

Of course, Rosenzweig was interpreting a religion; this project is simply attempting to understand the development of a text, even if the text is believed to the source and divine origin of the religion.

Judaism and Christianity *end* with the consciousness that revelation is found in “a book,” even though their respective scriptures do not exhaust their experience of this revelation. But as we saw from the beginning, the Qur’an presents itself a “a book”: a text claiming legal and religious and martial authority in the community to which it is presented.

For Catholic and Orthodox Christians, (and some, but not all, Protestants) the significance of Jesus Christ is found in the liturgical action of the community, surrounded by the entirety of scripture, dogma, moral instruction, and, in the outermost ring, canon law. It is through the liturgical action that the remainder of communal activity gains reality—that it’s truth is “realized.”

But in the text we are examining, the Qur'an has cut off "the Table" from this existential matrix, this holistic, unified structure of action, thought, and "praxis." It isolates the Table and expropriates it for its own purposes. It comes from God alone (not "Jesus Christ," the entire action of his life and words), and gains whatever authority it has from "the book" that proclaims this God. To have access to *this* Table, the Christian must submit to community of the believers in "the book".

6: "Cattle," Al-Anaam

In Surahs 2 and 3, K is appealing to Jews and Christians to recognize the religious and legislative authority of his "book." Surahs 4 and 5 reflect a hardening attitude of K towards the People of the Book as he realizes that they are not about to surrender (!) their spiritual and moral guidelines. By the end of 5, K's frustration has turned to invective: for refusing to believe the Messenger, Jews will receive "degradation / in this world; and in the world to come awaits them a mighty chastisement (5.41/ 45 A)"; and Christians who continue to insist that "God is the Messiah, Mary's son," are condemned as "unbelievers" (5.17; Yusufali translates "n blasphemy").

Now that K has turned his back on the Jews and Christians, only the pagans remain as potential recruits of the new community. 6 is primarily an extended critique of paganism. Against the multiplicity of divine powers or energies that a pagan experiences in the world, K attempts to show that all power, all the manifestations of energy and force and life are properly ascribed to a single deity. The critique of Jewish and Christian "associationism"—which, I have argued, is in Surahs 2 through 5 primarily a political critique—now becomes truly theological: i.e., K tries to say something about the *nature or character* of this "one God."

Say: 'Shall we call, apart from God, / on that which neither profits nor hurts us, / and shall we be turned back on our heels / after that God has guided us? —Like one / lured to bewilderment in the earth / by Satans, though he has friends who / call him to guidance, "Come to us!"; / Say: 'God's guidance is the true guidance,/ and we are commanded to surrender to the Lord of all Being, / ... / It is He who created the heavens and the earth/ in truth; and the day He says 'Be', and it is; / His saying is true, and His is the kingdom / the day the Trumpet is blown; He is Knower / of the Unseen and the visible; he is/ the All-wise, the All-aware (6. 71-73)

K also more fully develops the idea of the "signs" of God. Paganism finds religious truth in the immediacy of human experience. The hot sun, the thirst-quenching rain, the quiet splendors of the morning sky, sexual passion, human creativity, maternal care, the fecund earth—all this and much more besides are divine, are gods. However, if K claims that all that is has its ground in a single divine being, how does he know that? Jews and Christians did not need to be convinced of *that*. In the previous surahs, "signs" are primarily revelations, past and present (2. 87, 98-99, 159, 185; 3. 49, 184).

In 6, "Cattle," "signs" are simply the reality of nature itself, to which K ascribes a single divine source.

It is God who splits the grain and the date-stone, / brings forth the living from the dead; He / brings forth the dead too from the living. / So that then is God; then how are you perverted? / He splits the sky into dawn, / and has made the night for a response, / and the

sun and moon for a reckoning. / That is the ordaining of the All-mighty, the All-knowing. / It is He who has appointed for you the stars, that / by them you might be guided in / the shadows of land and sea. / We have distinguished the signs for a people who know. / It is He who produced you from one living soul, / and then a lodging place, / and then a repository. / We have distinguished the signs for a people who understand. / It is He who sent down out of heaven water, and / thereby We have brought forth / the shoot of every plant, / and then We have brought forth the green leaf of it, / bringing forth from it / close-compounded grain, / and out of the palm-tree, from the spathe of it, / dates thick-clustered, / ready to the hand, and / gardens of vines, / olives, pomegranates, / like each to each, and / each unlike to each. / Look upon their fruits when they fructify and ripen! / Surely, in all this are signs for a people who do believe. (vv. 95-99)

But how are day and night, the fructifying rain, the stars signs[?]. Every pagan knew that day followed night, that dates and grain could be broken to yield food, that the stars followed a regular pattern. How were those things *signs* of the unitary deity K was proclaiming?

Signs and the trajectory of revelation

The key to this puzzle is the analysis of Franz Rosenzweig: reality begins with world, man, and God. Paganism knows of these 3 elements, the *Vorwelt*. But paganism cannot unite the 3 elements, since pagan divinities are concealed. Revelation gives pagan divinity fullness and content in the particular experience of the revelation of God. Redemption completes the paths (German *Bahn*, variously translated “vectors” or “trajectories”) of creation and revelation by eschatologically transforming creation.

The problem with Islam, Rosenzweig argued, was that it *knows about* creation, revelation, redemption, but it does not know how to connect them together. To rephrase, since we are here talking about a text, and not a religion: K finds the “signs” of God directly in the created order. In Judaism and Christianity, there must be *revelation* to show that *creation* has meaning and telos, that it is directed towards an (supernaturally) intelligible end. But in the Qur’an, creation itself is a sign of the one God. Rosenzweig draws the conclusion that “the miracle of revelation” in the Qur’an “is not a ‘sign,’” but was nothing more than “a miracle in itself, and thus a magical miracle. It claims legitimacy as a miracle not for having been predicted but for being inexplicable (*Star of Redemption*, trans. Hallo, p 116).”

This analysis again indicates that K is addressing himself to pagans, to people who lack a concept of revelation. Indeed, while he *announces* the signs, he refuses to discuss them, which suggest that he intuitively understands their inability to grasp the meaning of a revelational sign:

Behold how We turn about the signs; haply they will understand. / Thy people have cried it lies; yet it is / the truth. Say: ‘I am not a guardian over / you. Every tiding has its time appointed; you will surely know.’ / When thou seest those who plunge [*or*, “meddle”] into Our / signs, turn away from them until they plunge / into some other talk;... (6.65 end-68)

(See also v. 80 on K’s refusal to debate with “his people.”)

They have cried it lies.

Another important theme is suggested in the last quote: “they have cried it lies.” There are a minimum of 8 uses of this phrase in 6 (see esp. vv. 25-34). I can find no examples in the

previous Surahs. Jews and Christians did not accuse the Messenger (again, the usual title) of *lying*, they simply didn't believe that his message could replace their own revealed traditions. But the pagans could not dismiss the message so easily, since they had nothing like it—no revelation, no message giving guidance and moral order in a disordered world. Their only defense was to say that the Messenger was making it up.

One final thing, with the exception of another list of general moral injunctions in 151-152, there is no proto-Shariah in 6. Up through 24, there is only one more case of proto-Shariah, on a specific issue. This suggests that the K has completed his legislative work, and will now move on to other topics and problems. And indeed, I interpret 6 as being more complex theologically, which is only possible once the basic task of community-creation (“promulgation” and “authorization”) has reached a “critical mass.”

There is another interpretation, based on both the Traditional Account, and the critical attempt to historically locate this by Noeldeke, this originated in Mecca, not Medina. So perhaps 6 *has not even reached* the point of legislating. (The Traditional Account claims the only began at Medina, where Surahs 2-5 ostensibly originated.) Locating 6 in Mecca is certainly consistent with the polemic against paganism, and the view of the Traditional Account that for the most part, the Messenger was not believed. But it is *not* consistent with the following data:

- K has developed a theologically more complex interpretation of associationism
- K no longer appeals to Jews and Christian—this cannot be explained by a claim that he doesn't know about them, since he has a putative episode from the life of Abraham, and a list of worthies from both religions (vv. 75-85)—he is *no longer* interested in them as potential believers
- K has a by-now well-developed list of moral obligations, beg. v. 151, again implying that this is *later* in the religio-legal development of the community
- the entire is religiously and morally more complex, there is a deeper development of ideas and religious perceptions.

7, “**Battlements,**” (“**Heights**”), **Al-Araf**

The battlements in question are the high walls that separate Paradise from the Fire. There were people on the walls that could communicate to both those in Paradise and the Fire. They welcomed those who entered Paradise (7.46/ 40 A), and reminded the inhabitants of the Fire that they amassed wealth, were proud (v. 48), and denied that the others would receive God's mercy (v. 49). This seems an allusion to Jews and Christians, who, in this reading of the development of the Qur'an , have alienated themselves from the community who believes “the book.”

But the martial overtone is hinted at again early in the surah: “How many a city We have destroyed! Our might came / upon it at night, or while they took their ease / in the noontide,... (7.4)” The speaker here is the divine voice, and the later context implies that the destruction is divine judgment. Even so, given what we already know from the previous surahs, the overtones are ominous: is K thinking about the cities he has (or will) destroy, in the process of spreading belief in “the book?”

Next the addresses communal moral issues, specifically that of “decency” and clothing. It does so by reference to the primal story of Adam, and the self-knowledge of their “shameful parts” (v. 20/ 15 A) that followed their fall. A generic monotheism requires a generic ethic:

Children of Adam! Take your adornment / at every place of worship; and eat / and drink, but be you not prodigal; He loves not the prodigal. / Say: **‘Who has forbidden** the ornament of God/ which He brought forth for His servants, and / the good things of His providing’ / ... / Say, ‘My Lord has only forbidden indecencies, / the inward and the outward, and sin, / and unjust insolence, and that you associate / with God that for which He sent down never / authority, and that you say concerning God such as you know not (7.31-33/25-30 A).’

“Who has forbidden” would appear to be directed against traditional restrictions by Jews or Christians. (It could be directed at pagan restrictions, but that wouldn’t explain “**only** forbidden indecencies,” since pagans were generally considered less restrictive in matters of dress and adornment than the various monotheists. Beyond that we have the following basic prohibitions:

- external indecency;
- “inward” indecencies, presumably thoughts and attitudes, possibly lust (? = Jesus “lust in one’s heart);
- “insolence” (Shakir translates “rebellion without justice”; Pickthal says “wrongful oppression”; if Arberry and Shakir are right, then we already have a developed Muslim state here, demanding submission to its authority;
- associating other beings with God; attributing things to God which a person doesn’t know about (? which these teachings do not authorize).

Judgment Stories

7 is primarily a sequence of **judgment stories**. Here we have what becomes a steady theme later in the Qur’an: God sends messengers to a city, which refuses the message, and is therefore destroyed. These stories are very repetitious, usually only with a change of name in the messenger and the city. The basic structure is:

- a call to “serve God;”
- the council of the city rejects the call;
- the prophet responds: “I am a messenger,” as if that is self-sufficient authorization for the message;
- the city, usually led by its council, denounces the prophet as a liar;
- it is destroyed, and
- the prophet/messenger is delivered.

Beyond that, the prophecies lack content, i.e., it is not stated *what* the city is doing wrong, or how it is violating God’s will (the story of Lot is an exception here, where the city is condemned for its homosexuality: 7. 81) . It is instructive to contrast these judgment stories with the judgment proclamations in the *Nevi’im* (the prophets of the Tanak/Old Testament). Judgment is not so much a declaration of God’s sovereign action in history, as it is an explanation of the normal ebb and flow of success and decline.

We have sent no Prophet to a city / but that We seized its people with misery / and hardship, that haply they might be humble; / then We gave them in the place of evil / good, till they multiplied, and said, ‘Hardship / and happiness visited our fathers.’ So we seized them suddenly, unawares. Yet had the peoples of the cities believed / and been godfearing, We would have opened / upon them blessings from heaven and earth; / but they cried lies, and so We seized them for what they earned (7.94-96)

So on one hand, the divine voice claims that it sent “hardship” to make the city humble, then gave it goodness, which they took for granted; yet on the other hand, “blessings” would have come upon it had it been “godfearing.” Therefore, there is no correlation between the prosperity and the obedience. They were judged for not recognizing a divine revelation, which up to that point, had not been given to them.

To be sure, K. would have replied: but you should have recognized the true source of your prosperity and well-being. You were judged for not doing so. But K. seems to hold a historical determinism in which the pattern of history is itself God’s judgment: “To every nation a term; when their term comes / they shall not put it back by a single hour nor put it forward (7.34; see also vv. 135, 185).”

8, “The Spoils”, Al-Anfal

8 returns to the problem of conquest. It begins in the question of “the spoils,” the booty of war: they “belong to God and the Messenger (8.1).” (More detailed directives are found in v. 41.) Near the close of the surah, we read the admonition that “it is not for any [!] Prophet to have prisoners / until he make wide slaughter in the lands (8.67)”: kill them first, and worry about the booty later.

At the risk of being flippant, that is pretty much the sum of some 75 odd verses: blood-lust prettified by talk of submission to God’s will, and working for the goods of eternity.

You desire the chance goods of the present world, / and God desires the world to come;
and God is All-mighty, All-wise (8.67)

Apparently the community of believers had gotten carried away by going after wealth that could be gained through conquest, rather than the slaughter that God (K?) had intended for them. But God/K forgives them, since there was a “prior prescription,” some previous directive permitting the taking of loot. This previous directive might have been the very rulings we find elsewhere in this surah. The God of battle can’t decide what he is more interested in—his minions getting “the goodies,” or the slaughter of the deity’s enemies.

From the standpoint of comparative religion, we have here a phenomenon very similar to ancient Hebrew concept of *herem*, “devoted to the Lord”. A city was to be given over to “the Lord.” Sometimes the people were killed and the precious objects given to the priestly treasury (e.g., Joshua 6:21), sometimes they were to kill everything (note the consequences of Saul’s failure in the destruction of the Amalekites, 1 Samuel 15). Also observe the similarity of the capriciousness of YHWH (poor Saul didn’t have a chance) and that of God in 8.

Deity as Daemon

I suggest we have here (in both traditions) deity **as daemon**. The deity here is pre-moral. It is not “good,” it simply *is*. (Thus, Plato had to ask the question, “is god good, because he is god; or is god, god, because he is good”? That question only makes sense against the background of a daemonic view of deity.) The daemonic is the manifestation of the raw power of life, for good and for ill. In this sense, most of the Graeco-Roman deities were daemons (in fact, that was the earlier term for divine beings, as in Socrates’ *daemonic* sign). Daemonic power is the energy we experience in the destructive forces of nature, as well as the inevitable cycles of social and cultural destruction and transformation that Spengler calls to our attention. (Hinduism has a

number of deities in its traditions who play a similar role to this day: esp. Shiva as the male, and Kali as the female. In the Rig Veda, we have the older form of Rudra.)

Of course, the ancient Israelite tradition eventually worked its way out of this understanding of daemonic energy; but the Qur'an failed to incorporate the pre-existing correctives. This is another evidence that the "God" of the Qur'an is not identical to the God of the Jewish and Christian traditions. We might say that the God of the Bible "grew in office." :-)

8 introduces a new theme of rebuking of those who are interfering in the "Holy Mosque (8.30-37)." The unbelievers challenge K.: if your message is true, then why doesn't God send "stones from heaven"? K's response is pragmatic: "God would never chastise them, with thee / among them; God would never chastise them as they begged forgiveness (8.33)." It's not clear what K means by the latter phrase, since the unbelievers appear to still be unrepentant.

This also does not seem to fit the traditional story of the Meccan town leaders who kept Muhammad from the Kaaba. Mecca and Medina are a significant distance apart, certainly a catastrophe falling from the skies could fall on Mecca without falling on Medina.

The traditional story is also at odds with the closing admonitions to "those who have emigrated" from their homelands "in the way of God (8.72ff.)." According to the traditional story, all "Muslims are not in Medina, beginning their war against Mecca. ([Maududi](#) places this after the Battle of Badr.) Yet according to the end of 8, there are some "who believe, but have not emigrated." K is told he has no "duty of friendship towards them till they emigrate." Again, the Qur'an is concerned that the new community of believers consolidates its resources, rather than trying to protect people outside of its political and military sphere of influence.

9, "Repentance," "Al-Tawba"

9, "Repentance," (or, "Dispensation") Al-Tawba begins with a single piece of "proto-Shariah": a four-month truce with "idolaters," after which the Messenger is to "slay" them "wherever you find them (9.5)." These idolaters are competing with the Messenger for the "places of worship" (9. 17, 18) (Pickthal translates "Allah's sanctuaries;" it's not clear if there is some nuance in the Arabic *masajida Allahi* to justify not translating it with the traditional "'mosques of Allah," (Yusufali and Shakir)) We cannot know what these "mosques" are.

Tradition says that Muhammad was now firmly in power in Medina, so there should have been no competition there. It can hardly refer to the Kaaba, since the plural implies places of worship in a generic sense. The skeptical standpoint would lead to the conclusion that the Messenger was still in competition with "idolaters" who wanted to keep their (? traditional) places of worship, while the Messenger claimed they (? now) belonged to his God. Was this part of a process by which the new religion of "the Book" coopted ancient holy places and sites (much like Christianity built basilicas and and other sacred sites on ancient pagan holy places)?

By this surah, K would no longer tolerate the religious counter-authorities of the Jews and Christians:

The Jews say, 'Ezra is the Son of God'; / the Christians say, 'The Messiah is the Son of God.' / That is the utterance of their mouths, conforming / with the unbelievers before them. God assail them! / How they are perverted! / ***They have taken their rabbis and the monks as lords /***

apart from God, and the Messiah, Mary's son— / and they were commanded to serve but One God ; / there is no god but He; glory be to Him above / that they associate—... (9.30-31)

The rabbis and monks were threats to the Messenger's power, of course, because they gave guidance and judicial direction that competed with the judicial authority that the Messenger intended to exercise. Furthermore, Jews have never given anything remotely like divine status to Ezra; but K must draw the contrasts starkly if he is to destroy the competition, even if that requires some misrepresentation.

There follows another long section on jihad in vv. 38-57; the intensifying militarization of the message becomes clear when K says:

God has bought from the believers their selves / and their possessions against the gift of Paradise; / they fight in the way of God; they kill, and are / killed; that is a promise binding upon God / in the Torah, and the Gospel, and the Koran;... (9.111).

God has purchased the lives and wealth of the believers; in exchange he will give them Paradise. Therefore: **fight**; believers are to give of their lives in the normal exchange of warfare, while God has promised an ultimate reward.

Note also K's reinterpretation of the Torah and Gospel in support of his martial imperative. Certainly the Gospel never taught that believers were to "kill and be killed" in order to gain God's kingdom. On the other hand, the (written) Torah certainly called the Israel to fight for their land of milk and honey, but it was an earthly kingdom promised by the Torah, not a heavenly one.

The also documents an intensifying emphasis on the authority of the Messenger:

They swear to you by God, to please you; but God and His / Messenger—more right is it they should please Him, / if they are believers. / Do they not know that whosoever opposes God / and His Messenger—for him awaits the fire / of Gehenna;... (9.62-63).

So now it was no longer enough to invoke God in one's oaths, one had to also include the Messenger. Note that this can be viewed as corroborating the reading of *Crossroads to Islam*: first a generic monotheism, then a recognition of a prophet known as Muhammad (whether that is a proper name or title), and then a "Muslim" religion that rejects a *sarik* ("associate" to God), and views God as patron.

Sure enough, the concept of "God as patron" is stated 50 verses later: "...you have not, apart from God, either protector or helper (9.116)." "Patron," of course, is a very old institution in many societies; many of the great artists of the western culture were able to pursue their creative work through the assistance of a patron. A patron is a powerful and wealthy person who supported another and made his success possible. So K is again making a political claim: attach yourself directly to God and his Messenger, do not accept any intermediary powers that may distract you from your allegiance. For other examples, see 2. 286; 3. 150, 173 (although some of these verses do not appear, within my very limited knowledge, to use the same Arabic word).

The last issue of note is the emergence of a possible distinction between city-dwellers and desert-dwellers: "It is not for the people of the City / and for the Bedouins who dwell around them / to stay behind God's Messenger, and to prefer / their lives to his; ... (9. 120)." This could be viewed as supporting the Traditional Account, since by now Muhammad is supposed to have

gained at least some of the Bedouins as allies. But the skeptical version would suggest that it suggests that the community of the believers is now not simply based in the cities and towns, that the Bedouins are beginning to be drawn into the larger community.

Other translations read “Medina” for the “City.” And indeed the Arabic has *Ma kana li-ahli almadeenati*. But “Medina” is simply a shorten version of *Mad_nat al-Nab_*, meaning, “City of the Prophet”. So the context does not show the specific name is intended, or if this is generic for “city-dwellers.”

We have finally completed the long “front-loaded” “Medinan” surahs. We can now immerse ourselves in the presumed “Meccan,” i.e., “religious” surahs. He raises the important question of why this “front-loading” exists. It is possible that it reflects the interests of those who collected it or put it together, especially some growing “Muslim” political authority. It is possible that it reflects the historical and chronological development of the text. Maybe a group of scholars were genuinely trying to create a canon that would express the spiritual content of their tradition, as they understood it. It is possible that someone put fragments in a pot, and drew them out at random. (Well, I admit that last sentence was at least partly facetious.) We can’t even begin to try to answer those questions until we follow the text.

10, “Jonah”

10, “Jonah,” *Yunus* begins by describing itself as a “wise Book”; the other that describes itself so is 31—both considered “Meccan” works. As we have seen, the Qur’an has always been aware of its *textuality*, a written text, even more than its sense of being a *qur’an*, a recitation (a account to be repeated again and again). This is odd under the Traditional Account: why should a prophet spouting off bits and pieces of oracular wisdom self-consciously be thinking of his words as being a *book*? (Psychologically, a prophet is not self-conscious at all; that is what makes his words prophetic rather than rational.) The textuality came significantly later in the development of the tradition as the oracular proclamations were written and then passed down *as a text*. But it makes perfect sense *under the skeptical account*: the legislative codes and martial call to arms came first as “official” proclamations, *texts* distributed through organs of state propaganda; the religious poetry and oracular proclamations were then assimilated to this pre-existing textual material, no longer viewed as the products of immediate revelation, but a reflective body of texts.

Furthermore, “wisdom” literature is always a late phenomena in any cultural tradition (note the place of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in the Tanak/Old Testament, as well as Confucius & the *Daodejing* in China). The fact that 10 sees itself as dispensing “wisdom” suggests a late text, not an early one. Only once the warring, the community-creation, and legislation is done, can the tradition afford the intellectual luxury of being “wise.”

And what is the wisdom of this book?

Was it a wonder to the people / that We revealed to a man from among them: / ‘Warn the people, and give thou good tidings / to the believers that they have a sure footing with their Lord’ (10.2)?

Note the past tense: “we revealed.” Presumably the Messenger is in the early years of prophetic ecstasy. Why is K already thinking of the oracles as past? After the blood-lust of 9,

“good tidings” sounds good indeed. Do we have here an early pre-jihad echo of the joyful Christian *euangelion*, “good news”? Alas, it is not that simple, since the previous also begins: “And give thou **good tidings** to the unbelievers of a painful chastisement, (9.3)” hardly the good news suggested by *euangelion*.

(Of the other translations available to me, only [Palmer](#) agrees with the translation of the adjective “good” or “glad.” Are “Muslim” translations omitting some nuance?)

So how do we account for this promiscuous use of “good/glad tidings”? Either a genuinely “good news” of an earlier prophet was appropriated by a militaristic regime—a plausible scenario—or else the “good news” idiom of Christianity has been appropriated by K, and then used in both negative and positive contexts.

“Jonah” then goes into a series of “signs,” to respond to the demand for evidence as to the validity of these proclamations.

It is He who made the sun a radiance, / and the moon a light, / and determined it by stations, that you / might know the number of the years / and the reckoning. / God created that not save with the truth, / distinguishing the signs / to a people who know. / In the alternation of night and day, and / what God has created in the heavens and / the earth—surely there are signs for a godfearing people (10.5-6).

Signs and Terms

(I refer the reader to my commentary on 6 on the theme of “sign,” and my use of Rosenzweig’s analysis of the problem.)

For the Qur’an **signs** are *in* the wonders of the created order. Unlike Christianity, where signs are supra-natural, a new order breaking into this present existence, the “signs” of this “book” are simply the things all people everywhere see all the time—the sun, moon, stars, seasons. But the “wise book” does not explain why its readers should see something more than what is simply there: the puissance and self-persistence of nature. Pagans have always known that. The “wise book” does not explain why they should know the “something more” claimed in the Jewish and Christian revelations. It simply assumes that one sees revelational signs in the pattern of ordinary existence, or one does not.

A second major theme is that every nation has a term.

Every nation has its Messenger; then, / when their Messenger comes, justly / the issue is decided between them, and / they are not wronged. / They say, ‘When will this promise [of the decision] be, / if you speak truly?’ / Say: ‘I have no power to profit / for myself, or hurt, but as God will. / To every nation a term; when their term comes / they shall not put it back by a single hour / nor put it forward (10.47-49).’

K sees the ebb and flow of greatness, the rise and fall of nations, and sees in it a pattern of divine action. This could possibly be an element of the “Muhammad’s” (pre-Medinan) prophetic insight; after all, it was central to the Hebrew prophets. But there is a fundamental difference between the Hebrew prophets, and Muhammad in a prophetic role according to the Traditional Account. The Hebrew prophets were already speaking and acting in a theocratic context. If the Tanak is at all accurate, prophets had been advisers to the Israelite and Judahite kings since the beginning of kingship, and were *the* primary theocratic actors before then.

But in the Traditional Account of Muhammad, he is a prophet in Mecca without theocratic aspirations. It is not clear why or how such a figure would have already developed a spiritual perception of the rise and fall of nations as indicative of a deeper moral process of revelation, rejection, and judgment. As just quoted, K claims that every nation has been given a Messenger; furthermore, with the exception of Jonah, no city has ever believed (10.98). This means, in the eyes of K, that all nations have eventually fallen, and this destruction is a result of its rejection of revelation. (Ninevah eventually fell also, although it had repented.)

But nations fall *anyway*, whether or not they hear from a messenger. And one could make a case that K is simply mistaken in claiming that every nation has received a messenger, at least in the sense understood in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Once again, K takes a process that is understood “supra-naturally” in Judaism and Christianity, as a process of sign and fulfillment, and makes it part of the natural order of things. That is, if the rise and fall of nations is simply part of the order of things, then why do we need divine action to account for it?

In my judgment (with all necessary reservations of “at this point in the analysis”), this theme rather suggests a religious re-reading of the *already accomplished* conquest and the recreation of a new community, now organized around “the book” and guided by the (Muslim) believers. In other words, the most intelligible way to understand this theme is to see religious leaders, observing the process by which the older authorities (Byzantine, Persian) have been destroyed and replaced by “Muslim” authorities, interpreting that process as part of a divinely-ordained pattern of judgment. In the end, K washes his hands of the matter:

Say: ‘O men, the truth has come to you / from your Lord. Whosoever is guided / is guided only to his own gain, / and whosoever goes astray, it is only / to his own loss. I am not a guardian / over you (10.108).’

So even though the Messenger claims to delivering an oracle explaining God’s way to “gain,” yet refuses to be held accountable for the results. Whatever happens is the result of inscrutable divine judgment: “And follow thou what is revealed to thee; / and be thou patient / until God shall judge; and He is / the best of judges (10.109).”

11, Hood (Hud)

11 is largely another rendition of judgment stories. For the third in a row, K. says he is bring “good tidings” (11.2). But he immediately follows that with warnings of “the chastisement / of a mighty day (11.3).”

“Chastisement” message”

- K is not reflecting on events that *have happened* to a community, but is announcing (“warning”) of some great event that *will happen* in some future;
- K does not seem to be responding to events in *his own* community; he is responding to the reaction of *some “other”* community to his message; furthermore,...
- this community does not even seem to recognize the message (presumably the solution to its problems) in the first place; it is that attitude that elicits K’s warnings (in 11.29/30 A, K says: ““But I see you are / an ignorant people,” see also v. 46)
- in spite of the promise of “good tidings,” K does not come with a message of forgiveness or divine aid. Rather, the message of one of “retribution” (Pickthal) or “penalty” (Yusufali). If

a prophet is responding to social or economic distress, would not the retribution have already occurred?

- In at least one case, the city is described as “prospering” (11.84/ 85 A), not suffering.

In sum, the message is one of *impending judgment* on a community that will not accept the message, not a message of salvation to a struggling or needy people. These are some of the themes that must be accounted for in any explanation of the text (let me again be clear: at least at this stage, I do not pretend to have one).

The judgment stories uniformly begin with the warning to “serve you none but God (vv. 26, 50, 61, 84, as well as at the beginning and end of the surah: 2 and 123).” (The judgment stories in 7 share this opening warning.) A new motif is that the prophet says he does “not ask of you wealth for this; my wage falls only / upon God. (11.29/30 A; also v. 51). Apparently the community thinks K is in it for the money.

This is consistent with the Traditional Account of a Meccan prophet who comes simply giving a message without concern for worldly success or gain. The prophet Shuaib is called weak and threatened with stoning; a situation attributed to Muhammad in the traditional account; like Muhammad, Shuaib is given a reprieve due to his family’s position (11.91). Finally, if the communities represented in judgment stories are any indication, the community K is speaking to is almost certainly polytheistic and “pagan”.

12, “Joseph” (*Yusuf*)

Those are the signs of the Manifest Book. / We have sent it down as an Arabic Koran [“recitation”]; / haply you will understand.

We will relate to thee the fairest of stories / in that We have revealed to thee this Koran,... (12.2-3)

Remember the tradition says that 12 is one of the Meccan surahs, although Maududi says that “it was revealed during the last stage of the Holy Prophet’s residence at Makkah. ([Maudadi 12](#))” Yet already there is a high level “textuality”: K sees himself as giving a “Manifest [=that which makes plain] Book”; it is a recitation in Arabic—not in Hebrew, Syriac, or any of the other competing religious languages. All of this does *not* refute the Traditional Account, but it does indicate a already-developed awareness that that recitations are part of a larger text, which to my ears, at least, suggests a much later stage in the the development of the Qur’an than the Traditional Account permits.

Furthermore, the text sees itself as a body of *stories* described in purely aesthetic categories: “fairest” (Yusufali reads “most beautiful”). As Collingwood has pointed out, a classical Muslim argument for the “truth” of the Qur’an is its beauty. I am not here assuming the validity of that argument, have already stated my objections to it. I am simply observing that that is how the text itself asks to be assessed. But beauty or eloquence cannot verify historical accuracy or consistency, or thematic integrity, which are two criteria that I am using in this investigation. The Qur’an—at least in these putatively “Meccan” surahs—claims to be a collection of “beautiful stories,” and we ought to take it at its word.

(I do not intend to say that the reader must agree with the text that the story is indeed beautiful. Quite to the contrary, at least as a reinterpretation of the biblical story, 12 is silly, for

reasons I will attempt to explain. But at least we must attempt to interpret the text in categories it applies to itself.)

This is almost entirely a retelling of the biblical story of Joseph (Genesis 37).

K must have found the Joseph story attractive and personally meaningful; it is the most thoroughly and completely retold story of all the biblical stories. The outline of the plot is identical to the biblical version, but K makes important and significant changes. The most important change is the relationship between Joseph and his Egyptian master's wife. In the Bible, the wife tries to seduce Joseph, he refuses, she accuses him to her husband, and Joseph goes to jail.

In the Qur'an, the plot is much more ornate, and loses its dramatic tension. As the wife chases after Joseph, she catches his shirt from behind and tears it off. Just then, the master (unnamed in the Qur'an) comes through the door. She accuses him of attempted seduction, Joseph responds that seduction began with her, a witness points out that the shirt has been torn from behind. In good cop-movie fashion, the master recognizes that Joseph is innocent.

(K seems to have a problem with names. He does not identify Potiphar, and instead of referring to Benjamin, Joseph's beloved younger full brother, refers to him as "a certain brother of yours / from your father (12.59).")

That should be the end of the story; but Joseph has to be put in jail somehow. Women in the community begin a whispering campaign against the master's wife. She prepares a banquet, and gives the women knives. She commands Joseph to "attend to them." In astonishment at his beauty, they all cut their hands. The unintelligibility of this anecdote is manifested in the fact that the later tradition must invent still *other* reasons for this act:

<http://www.angelfire.com/on/ummiby1/yusuf1.html>

One unsourced contemporary retelling claims that the women had been given fruit, and were cutting it when Joseph came it. Astonished by his beauty, they kept cutting—right into their hands! But the Qur'an is clear that the wife *gave* them knives (12.31), implying that she expected the emotional response and intended the reaction. There may be some obscure pagan custom or ritual behind the anecdote, but the little commentary I have read gives no indication of what it may have been.

From the point the wife's attempted seduction is discovered, to the end of the banquet scene, the Qur'an's retelling does nothing to advance the story: Now all the women agree that the wife was justified in being attracted to Joseph; everyone knows that Joseph is innocent, but Joseph must go to jail: "Yes, I solicited him, but / he abstained. Yet if he will not do what I / command him, he shall be imprisoned, and be / one of the humbled (12.32)."

The problem is compounded when the king seeks to release Joseph from prison in order to explain his dreams. The plot is doubly confused: first Joseph is commanded to explain the dreams (12.46), then Joseph is *given the explanation* in the text (the text does not have *Joseph* explaining the dreams) (12.47-49), only *then* does the king seek to have Joseph released from prison (12.50).

Joseph says, not so fast, what about the women who cut their hands? The text gives no hint as to why this was important enough for Joseph to hesitate to agree to a release. Now it is

the women who cut their hands who are accused of trickery, not the master's wife. The women protest they have no accusation against Joseph. Finally, the master's wife exonerates Joseph: "Now the truth / is at last discovered;... (12.51)"; although we have known of "the truth" ever since v. 29.

Clearly, Qur'anic aesthetics are different from western ones. Apparently, it is the *individual component* of the story that is beautiful or elegant, not the story as a whole. In my judgment, the Qur'an takes a taut and dramatic story and turns it into a poetic mishmash.

The lack of concern with the whole story is confirmed by [a comment that precedes "the hanged poems,"](#) a set of pre-Islamic poems that are said to have hung on the Kaaba, even after it was "Islamicized":

It is common to note that the *definite unit of such poem is the line*. Each line was polished to perfection, with *overall poetic structure less important*. The result is commonly described as a "string of pearls". Whether such an approach is correct is open to question, but it certainly impacts our reading of the Qur'an, a text which also seems to lack any overall organizational principle, but which *is full of highly polished lines* (emphasis added).

This suggests that any effort to develop either a coherent historical narrative, or an integrated theology, out of the Qur'an is flawed in its premises. The Qur'an does not intend to provide either a narrative or a theology. It is only a "string of pearls," exquisite moments of transcendent beauty. Just having gone through Fourth of July brings the metaphor of fireworks to mind: they may dazzle as long as they flash, but once gone they cannot touch the heart or nourish the soul. No wonder Muslim culture needed to a complex "back story" to explain and connect the "pearls." Put another way: Muslim culture gives reason and context—an "excuse," so to speak—to "set off" the Qur'anic fireworks.

(I struggled mightily in writing that last sentence. If you need clarification or explanation, ask. Also, if there are readers who are qualified in the reading and criticism of literary texts, feel free to comment on my own effort.)

In the telling, there are details that reflect the underlying ideological interests of K. In 12.38, K uses the story of Joseph and his fellow prisoners to repeat his critique of associationism, although there is no evidence in the biblical story of monotheism.

There are hints that the story has something to do K's preoccupation with his (? his community's) authority: during the goblet-in-the-sack episode, K opines: "So We contrived / for Joseph's sake; ... Whomsoever We will, We / raise in rank; over every man of knowledge / is One who knows (12.76)." So authority is always given by divine power; rank is accorded by an act of arbitrary will.

At the end of the Joseph story, K has Joseph saying: "O my Lord, Thou has given me to rule, / and Thou has taught me the interpretation of tales (12.101)." Remember that K is here interpreting the Joseph-"tale"; so he must be saying something his perception of his own authoritative role.

The translation of this verse varies widely:

Arberry: "given me to rule"/ "interpretation of tales"

YUSUFALI: “bestowed on me some power”/ “interpretation of dreams and events”

PICKTHAL: “given me (something) of sovereignty / “interpretation of events”

SHAKIR: “given me of the kingdom/ “interpretation of sayings.”

K must be located in an urban community, since revelations have always come to Messengers “living / in the cities (12.109);” Pickthal says “townships” and Shakir reads “towns”.

K is confident of his knowledge:

Say: ‘This is my way. / I call to God with sure knowledge, / I and whoever follows after me./ To God be glory! And I am not / among the idolaters (12.108).

He concludes by insisting that “it is not a tale / forged (12.111).” I get the feeling that this is a case of “protesting too much.” Clearly, much in this *is* “invented” (Yusufali and Pickthal) —if in no other sense, uttered under a spiritual pressure to match the poetic aesthetic of K, or of the community to which he is speaking.

13, Thunder, Al-Rad

“Thunder” is a book of signs, as it says at the very beginning: “Those are the signs of the Book;....” The signs include:

- sun and moon (v. 2)
- the ordering of time
- the structure of the earth (v. 3), and the...
- crops it provides (v. 4)
- the female womb, and its ability to give birth (v. 8)
- secret things and manifested things (vv. 8, 9)
- lighting and thunder (12-13)
- water, rain, and flood (v. 17).

The unbelievers ask for “a sign” (vv. 7, 27), but K refuses to give one. For him, the wonders and powers of nature are sufficient. As noted, this does not address the problem, since polytheism has always known of the mysterious powers of nature and the daemonic energies that sustain life, even while it brings death.

Daemonic Nature of Life

And K *does* know the daemonic nature of life: “He shows you the lightning, for *fear* and hope (v. 12);” “He looses the thunderbolts, and smites with them / whomsoever he will (v. 13);” “it is as a man who stretches out his hands to water / ... / and *it reaches it not* (v. 14).”

There is an extended metaphor in v. 17: “the torrent carries a *swelling scum*; / and out of that over which they kindle / fire, being desirous of ornament or ware, / out of that *rises a scum the like of it*. / So God strikes *both the truth and false*. / As for the scum, *it vanishes* as jetsam, / and what profits men abides in the earth. / Even so God strikes His similitudes.”

That is a complicated image (one of the most complex I’ve read so far); its meaning seems to be as follows. As a flood rips out the earth, it carries a scum that craftsmen use to make ornaments. It is not clear if the scum carries the wood used to make the fire, or the raw ore that is melted to make the ornaments. Just as there is a scum on the water, there is a scum on melted

ore. Both disappear, as do the wealth that humans hope to create. Just as the craftsman “strikes” the melted ore, so God “strikes” away at the “true and false” of life; and he also “strikes” away at the raw material of life to create his parables. This is not a *good* God, but an all-powerful God: one who uses the “scum” of life to create what he wills, who uses the powers of nature to do what he wills.

This again confirms the reading of Rosenzweig: the God of the Qur’an is not the God of the Bible, a being who calls a people and saves them. The God of the Qur’an is the totality of the powers of life and death, the powers that the pagans already knew, but now asserted to be a single, unified power—a monistic paganism.

The answer to the request for a sign is nothing but: believe if you will believe. God vouchsafes no promise, no hope, no sign of his future grace: “‘God leads astray whomsoever He will, / and He guides to Him all who are penitent (13.27).’” (Other translations read the second phrase: “God guides all who turn,” implying more of a divine initiative, in the turning *to* God, as in the *turning away from* God.) The “turning” *is* the hope: “in God’s remembrance / are at rest the hearts of those who believe / and do righteous deeds; theirs is blessedness / and a fair resort (13.28).”

K attempts retroactively to deny that any of the previous Messengers were permitted to bring signs: “And we sent Messengers before thee, and We / assigned to them wives [!], and seed; and it was / not for any Messengers to bring a sign, but / by God’s leave (13.38).” The message has no content, but for the proclamation that divinity has been unified: “Say: ‘I have only been commanded / to serve God, and not to associate / aught with Him (13.36).’”

14, “Abraham”, Ibrahim

A derivative surah. K summarizes the Messengers that came to the communities of Noah, Ad, and Thamud (Ad and Thamud are the communities, not the messengers); see 11 (Hood/Hud) for previous discussion. One motif that I had not noticed before is of the call to seek forgiveness: “Their Messengers said, ‘Is there any doubt / regarding God, the Originator of the / heavens and the earth, who calls you so / that He may forgive you to a term stated (14.10; see 11.52, 11.61; K speaks for himself in 11.3, 11.11, 11.90)?’”

Recall that according to *Crossroads to Islam*, the prayer for forgiveness is one of the essential elements of the earliest strata of Arabic “monotheism,” the “generic” phase. So it is not self-evident that this motif originates in the “Mohammedan” tradition (see CTI); it may be taken over from some pre-existing Abrahamic piety. Of course, it is interesting that this motif “pops out” in a entitled “Abraham,” and includes a prayer, purportedly by Abraham:

...’My Lord, / make this land secure, and turn me / and my sons away from serving idols; / ... / Then whoso follows me belongs to me; / and whoso revels against me, surely Thou / are All-forgiving, All-compassionate. / Our Lord, I have made some of my seed to dwell in a valley where is no sown land / by Thy Holy House; Our Lord, let them / perform the prayer, and make hearts of / men yearn towards them, and provide them / with fruits; haply they will be thankful. Our Lord, / forgive Thou me and my parents, and the believers, upon the day when / the reckoning shall come to pass (14.35-37, 41).’

Observe, as before, how K retrojects his concerns back on earlier Messengers: there is no other evidence that the biblical Abraham was concerned either with “turning...away from...idols,” or “perform[ing] the prayer.” K experiences his own prophetic message and assumes that all previous messengers share his particular burdens. Now compare this inscription from CTI, p. 397:

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful / Allah! forgive ! Hasan bn Maysarah / and his two parents and their offspring / Amen Lord of Muhammad and Ibrahim . CTI dates this to 735, and considers it “Mohammadan.” It continues: “Allah! consider my deeds of great exertion (*jihad*) / and accept my compassion as martyrdom in Your cause....”

Obviously, one inscription does not make an argument; but the similarity suggests that the theological core of this can be as late as 730. (Based on other evidence in CTI, I am assuming, all else being equal, that official theology came before popular religion. If that was not the case, then the date becomes later—750 or later.)

This also reflects on the instability of life:

The likeness of those who disbelieve in their Lord: / their works are as ashes, / whereon the wind blows strong / upon a tempestuous day; / they have no power over that they have earned— / that is the far error! / Hast thou not seen that God created / the heavens and the earth in truth? / If He will, He can put you away / and bring a new creation; that / is surely no great-matter for God.

Of course, the fact of creation is no evidence for the power of re-creation: K simply assumes that an all-powerful God can, if he so choose, bring life where there is none.

The insecurity of life, the inability of anyone to finally protect our resources against the predation of nature (the daemonic quality of life, as previously discussed), is the ultimate result (Yusufali says: “the straying far, far...”), of unbelief. Again, this answer does not seem entirely satisfactory: *all* suffer from the predation of nature; belief may aid the believer is his psychological apprehension of reality, but it does not change reality. However, other translations emphasize that this is a “parable” (Shakir and Yusufali) or “similitude” (Pickthall): so the destruction all suffer in this world is *like* the spiritual destruction that all disbelievers will suffer— ? eschatologically.

A key component of unbelief in K’s mind seems to be a refusal to be thankful: “Hast thou not seen those who exchanged the bounty of God with unthankfulness, and caused their people to dwell in the abode of ruin (14.28/30 A)?—.” So ruin is a result of ungratitude. “If you count God’s blessing, you will never number it; surely man is sinful, unthankful (14. 34/35 A)!”

(One is here reminded of Paul’s words in Romans 1: “21 For although they knew God, **they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him**, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and **exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images** made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” Indeed, a comparative reading of Romans 1-2 and this is useful in understanding both the *literary* and *spiritual* difference between the New Testament and the Qur’an.)

K's answer to this instability is God's word: "God confirms those who believe with / the firm word, in the present life / and in the world to come;" however, the arbitrariness of K's deity reasserts itself: "...and God leads astray the evildoers; / and God does what He will (14.27/ 30 A)." So beyond the proclamation of a God who promises well-being to those who repent, one must trust in a deity will still do whatever he desires.

One other theme that I will point out at this juncture (it also is not unique to this surah) is the idea of "defer[al] of a term (14.10, 44)." K believes God has "deferred" judgment to some future "term"; this would appear to be related to K's belief that "every nation has a term". I interpret this as follows: nations come and go, every nation has a set period for success and well-being, and then judgment comes. K believes that the community he is speaking will sooner or later experience this judgment. Does he need to explain why it has not yet happened? There seems to be some similarity to the Pauline answer: God delays judgment to permit his mercy to call people to repentance (e.g., Romans 2: 2). But still, whether a nation experiences success or destruction, K's answer seems to be, God wills.

15, El-Hijr, "Stone-land" or "Rock City"

K begins by warning the "unbelievers" that they should "take their joy" now, for "certainly / they will soon know" destruction (15.2-3). They wanted K to "bring the angels unto us," to verify the truth of the purported revelation (15.7). K replies, that if the angels had been sent down, "they would not have been respited (15.8)," I take this to mean: had the angels been sent down, as the unbelievers had wanted, then judgment would have come down on them. So *not* sending the angels down was in fact an act of mercy, then judgment and destruction has been delayed until the believers reach their "term" (see. v. 5).

Rather than angels, all that is given are the "signs of the Book," "a manifest Koran" ("recitation") (15.1) and "the Remembrance" (Pickthal and Shakir, "Reminder") (15.9).

These two motifs are two of the major themes of this surah: "respite" from destruction or judgment, and the refusal to support the book with miracles. (As always, I do not claim these are the *only* major themes; you are reading with me, I am telling you what *I* found important.) The remainder of my comments will be primarily directed towards these themes.

The book as revelation

There is a deep need for miracles in the religious consciousness of humanity. We want a sense of supernatural powers breaking into and transforming this world. Judaism and Christianity both gave witness to the ostensible experience of such power in their history. For Jews, it was their entire experience as a people, struggling for a place in the sun, finding, losing, and regaining their "promised land,"—Exodus, King David, Captivity and return, the Maccabees, the destruction of the second temple, the rabbinical re-envisioning of sanctification in everyday life, Shoah, return to Israel. For Christians, it was the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the purported experience of signs and wonders in the life of the church, continuing down to (so it is claimed) the present day.

The Qur'an, the message of K, has always rejected this path. For K, the coming of the "the book" is miracle enough. He thinks that revelation begins with a book, the powerful, creative words he, or some transcendent power manifesting itself through him, speaks. All K gives is a *kitab*, a text that claims to be miraculous by virtue of its superlative emotive impact—an

impact doubtless on himself, but also, by all accounts, on generations of later “reciters” and listeners.

A note on how this differs from Judaism and Christianity: for the former, “the book” is at the end of the process, both chronologically and existentially. The accumulated accounts, the entire pattern of God’s presumed activity in history, constitutes “the book.” In contrast, for K, “the book” is at *the beginning* of the believing community. This raises the following question: if the Qur’an in Islam is equivalent to “God’s saving acts” in Judaism/Christianity, then what is the Muslim equivalent of Tanak/New Testament? What acts or spiritual manifestations in Islam embody the “collection” of the *communal response* to the Qur’an? Hint: Spengler has argued for its sacramental status in Islam.

“Respite,” the delay of judgment

K claims that God’s judgment is coming. In Judaism and Christianity, judgment is part of God’s pattern of “God’s saving acts.” This saving activity in history takes the dialectical structure of “even now” and “not yet.” “Even now” something of God, his character, his attachment to his people is manifested. But the revelation of God is “not yet” complete, there is an “eschatological reservation,” some element of his divine activity that is not yet consummated.

But in “the book,” there is no “even now.” The judgment is always “deferred,” (see comments on previous 14) put off to some infinite future. K expects God to act—but it doesn’t happen. The messenger is getting frustrated with God’s non-action, and must explain it. Of course, *eventually* judgment does occur—but only in the form of exertion against the enemies of the believers. This is what we call in Christian theology “realized eschatology”: the divine future has been fully realized in the day-to-day experience in present realm. So either God’s action is infinitely distant, or the community itself acts to bring it into reality. But in realized eschatology, there is not future left to be realized or experienced, since it has been absorbed into the limits of human action, the mundane efforts to make the world “better.” So the kingdom never comes, for sin, suffering, and struggle continue.

This interpretation predicts two things: that “respite” would occur in “late Meccan” surahs, when K was getting frustrated with the failure of God’s judgment to appear, and when it occurs in “Medinan” surahs (once “jihad” has begun), it has a different connotation. And that is exactly what we find. Positive references to “respite” occur in the following texts, all considered “late Meccan”: 6.8; 7.14, 15, 183; 10.11; 12.110; 13.32; 14.10, 42, 44. In “Medinan” surahs we have statements that *no* respite will be given (2.162; 3.88); one case says that respite is given so that unbelievers may “grow in iniquity” (3.178). There are other cases, where “respite” from judgment is not at issue. In checking backwards (in canonical order) from the end (presumably the “earliest” surahs), the first to have “respite” is 86.17: “So give a respite to the disbelievers. **Deal thou gently** with them for a while. “As we have seen, K will get harsher with them as time goes on.

“Later” examples, in reverse order are 73.11; 71.4; 68.45; 63.10-11; 47.25; 44.29 [negative]; 38.79-80 [Iblis]; 35.45; 32.29; it is usually related, either in the text, or in tradition, to opposition, or failure to convince unbelievers. (The list above covers all surahs from 32 to 114; I have dropped several cases where respite doesn’t refer to judgment, such as respite from war.)

16, “The Bee”, An-Nahl

16 begins with a vigorous reaffirmation of the God’s uniqueness: “[God] Give[s] you warning / there there is no God but I; / so fear you Me (16.2)!” It then goes into another litany of the creative works of God (see comments on 6 and 10).

At v. 24, it begins a critique of idolaters:

- They don’t believe in a “world to come”
- they are proud
- they worship other beings alongside of God
- they are secure in the present life, imagining that nothing will happen to them
- and again, God is the source of all: “We say to it ‘Be,’ / and it is (16.40)”
- They are ungrateful, and attribute to other beings what comes from God. The remainder of the is given to general codes of conduct:

Surely God bids to justice and good-doing / and giving to kinsmen; and He forbids / indecency, dishonour, and insolence,... (16.90).” Yusufali and Shakir translate “insolence” as “rebellion,” implying that Muhammad is again reacting against those who refuse his authoritative proclamation. Religious proclamation is transmuting itself into political control.

One reason for nascent rebellion is that the supposed revelation keeps changing: “We exchange a verse in the place of another verse...(16.101),” and the hearers accuse Muhammad of making it up; his response is, in modern English, “you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He gives a list of forbidden foods (16.115, see 5), and feels it necessary to attack other traditions’ versions:

And do not say, as to what your tongues / falsely describe, ‘This is lawful, and / this forbidden,’ so that you may / forge against God falsehood;.... ... And those of Jewry —We have forbidden / them what we related to thee before, / and We wronged them not, but they / wronged themselves (16.116, 119).

As with food laws, so with the Sabbath: it “was only appointed for those / who were at variance thereon (16.124)”; it is not clear what “thereon” refers to. The previous verse refers to “the creed of Abraham”; so that context suggests the Jews were differing from Muhammad’s version of what this creed requires. Pickthal reads “was appointed only for those who differed concerning it,” which makes the phrase tautological: of course the Jews claimed they were to keep the Sabbath, that is what made them different (? from Muhammad). But why was it appointed for the Jews, and why did Muhammad claim the authority to annul it?

The ends with a call, apparently directed to Muhammad to “chastise / even as you have been chastised,” even though it hastens to say, “better it is for those patient (16.126).” The surrounding community continues to resist Muhammad’s proclamation.

Let me slog through another for today, and hopefully get to that wonderful stuff that Collingwood has promised me at the end.....

17, Night Journey Al-Isra

Muhammad picks up where he left off in the previous Surah, with a critique of the Jews. He interprets the two-fold destruction of the Jewish as further evidence of God's judgment:

Then, when / the promise of the second came to pass, / We sent against you Our servants
/ to discountenance you, and to enter the / Temple, as they entered it the first time, / and
to destroy utterly that which they ascended to (17.7).

Not in the Jewish Scriptures can one find certain guidance, but "Surely this Koran guides to the way that is straightest... (17.9)."

17 also continues 16's theme that **God guides and orders all**: day and night, a man's destiny, a city's destiny.

And every man—We have fastened to him / his bird of omen upon neck;.... ... And when
We desire to destroy a city, We / command it men who live at ease, and they / commit
ungodliness therein, then the Word / is realized against it, and We destroy / it utterly
(17.13, 16).

The "bird of omen" metaphor seems unique to Arberry; most translations read "augury".

So a man ought to seek after ("strive") "the world to come," (17.19), take care of his parents (17.23), spend his wealth on "the kinsman...the needy, and the traveller" (17.26), but do not "squander", don't kill one's children for fear that one cannot care for them, don't commit fornication, and don't kill another except to avenge the death of a kinsman (17. 31, 32, 33). Finally, don't steal from orphans (17.34) and "fulfil the covenant" (most translations seem to understand this as economic exchange: 17.35).

The command to pray seems to think only of dawn and evening, from sunset to night (the tradition requires prayer 5 distinct times during the day) (17.78).

This shows little development; Muhammad seems to run out of inspiration, like a preacher drawing on his pet topics and old sermons. When asked about the Spirit, he has nothing to say: in effect, it is whatever God wants it to be, and we really don't know anything about it (17.85). The following verse seems to put this in the context of Muhammad's own presumed divine inspiration.

18, The Cave, "Al-Kahf"

18 constructs its oratory around 3 legends: the "men [or, youths] in the cave," Moses and his "page" (or, attendant), and "Dhool Karnain".

But it begins with a two-fold agenda of warning and good news:

to warn of great violence / from Him [God], and to give good tidings / unto the believers,
who do righteous deeds, / that theirs shall be a goodly wage / therein to abide for / ever, / and to
warn those who say, 'God has taken to Himself a son';... (18.2-4).

18 is purportedly Meccan, yet is already beginning to respond to Christian dogma about the divine sonship of Jesus Christ.

More generic references to pagan “polytheism” are referenced by some version of the phrase: “God has no associates....” See the example in 18.26: “They have no protector, apart from Him, / and He associates in His government / no one.” Recall my argument in the very first surahs that during the *Medinan* surahs, the argument “God has no associates” was first a *political* argument: there can be no powers alongside of God and the religion of the believers to compete with his political and military authority. This verse makes that argument explicit, for what may be the first time (chronologically speaking); again, it is notably in *Meccan* surah.

The outline of the story of the “men in the cave” is a middle eastern version of the story that Americans know as “Rip Van Winkle”: a group of men fall asleep in a cave for many years, waking up to a changed world. There is general agreement that the legend is based on “the seven sleepers of Ephesus,” (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05496a.htm>) a apocryphal Christian story that developed sometime after the fifth century. In the Christian version, 7 almost-martyrs fled to a cave during the Decian persecution, and being discovered when asleep, were buried alive. They awoke maybe 150 years later, when someone wanted to use the cave as a cattle-shed. The *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia* implies that the legend developed as a way to defend the Christian teaching on the resurrection of the body.

I would speculate that the likely conduit to the Qur’an was the Syriac story by James of Sarug, who d. 521 (see above link). That gives about a century for the story to make its way to Arabian societies. Muhammad uses it to teach: (1) only God knows the mysteries of life (18.26), and (2) when making plans for one’s day, always say: “If God wills” (18.23-24).

But more importantly, Muhammad begins the story with “Or dost thou think the Men of the Cave / and Er-Rakeem were among our signs a / wonder (18.9)?” So how is the story a “sign”? Does it prove the truth of the words of this surah, or of the “recitations” in general? Note the opening words, which seem to have the meaning: “Also, what do you think about...,” tying this story to the opening verses. As noted, Muhammad begins with a critique of the Christology (the Christian belief that Jesus Christ is God’s son), and this story is a version of a *Christian* legend used to support Christian belief. Once again, Muhammad appears to believe that he can appropriate the traditions and beliefs of the pre-existing monotheistic religions, alienate those traditions from their grounding in the praxis of the respective religions, and thus claim the traditions as “Muslim.”

There may be another reason Muhammad sees it as a sign: my impression is that Muhammad is enamored with the sound of his own voice. There is widespread agreement that the meaning of the text is not in its content, but in the rhythm, the poetic energy and patterns (see the Preface to Volume II of Arberry, pp. 8-9). (That is why Muslims believe that the sacred text cannot be truly translated.) Please note that this argument assumes nothing about the origins of the “sound, whether it be Muhammad’s own poetic invention, or a manifestation of some trans-natural consciousness. The “sign” is the sound; Muhammad’s retelling of a Christian myth in Arabic is itself (he believes) the evidence for the truth of his “recitations.”

Moses, the page, and the fish

The second legend is that of Moses and his “servant” (“page” or “attendant”) (18.60-18.82). Some efforts have been made to link this story to the next legend of Dhool Karnain, which in turn has been traditionally tied to Alexander the Great, but these efforts have not yielded a scholarly consensus. I think it is problematic to assume that every Qur’anic story has a

“source”; since as just stated, an important element of the Qur’an’s claim to authority is the inventiveness of its poetic ecstasy.

Moses and his servant want to find the meeting of the 2 seas. They forget their fish—apparently intended for food—and when Moses asks for food, the servant responds:

‘What thinkest thou? When we / took refuge in the rock, then I /forgot the fish—and it was Satan / himself that made me forget / so that I should not remember it— / and so it took its way into the sea in manner marvellous.’ Said he, “This is what we were / seeking!’ And so they returned / upon their tracks, retracing them. / Then they found one of our servants... (18.63-65).

This servant then will have the central role in the remainder of the story. But what I observe here is the utter irrelevance of this anecdote to the larger story. It in no way advances the story or enables the plot. It is told, apparently, for the sheer joy of the telling. One must hope that when recited in the original Arabic it has some poetic beauty, since when read in translation it is quite literally laughably trite. Like the fish, the point of the story seems to be that it is mahhvelous!

Moses wants to follow God’s servant, but the servant warns that Moses will not be able to bear his teaching. So the servant agrees to accompany Moses, on the condition Moses not question anything he does. On the journey then, the servant makes a hole in the ship they are riding in, kills a lad met on the way, and fixes a broken-down wall without taking a wage. Each time Moses questions the servant, each time the servant reminds Moses of their agreement. After Moses breaks the agreement for the third time, the servant says they must part ways, but first the servant explains the reasons behind his mysterious actions (he wanted to keep the ship out of the hands of an evil king who was seizing the ships of the poor; the lad’s parents were believers, and the servant was “afraid he would impose on them insolence and unbelief (18.80)”; there was treasure under the wall that belonged to orphans and the servant wanted to preserve it for them).

The “moral” of the story is, of course, that believers should never question what God does; there is always some purpose or reason. But the logic of the stories is quite thin: why protect ships of the poor by putting holes in them? Why kill a person who *might* rebel against his believing parents? This supports my earlier conclusion: the stories have no logical or narrative structure. Their structure is aesthetic and poetic, and is experienced only in the telling, the “reciting”.

The final legend is that of Dhool Karnain (variously transliterated “Zul-qarnain” or “Dhu’l-Qarneyn”). Dhool is apparently a warlord. In the course of the story—again filled with details without clear connection to the plot—Dhool creates a wall to protect a “people scarcely able to /understand speech” against “Gog and Magog (18.93-94).”

Gog and Magog are the “people of the north” that the biblical prophet Ezekial saw as threatening Israel. Ezekial expected Gog and Magog to come down on Israel, only to be destroyed by God. (Evangelical literalists have in the past interpreted Gog and Magog to be some combination of the Soviet Union—now, Russia—and the Muslim lands to the northwest of Israel—now, Iraq and Iran!!)

The final long saying is a warning against “Those who striving goes astray / in the present life, while they think / that they are working good deeds. / Those are they that disbelieve

in the / signs of their Lord and the encounter / with Him; their works have failed, /... (18.103-105).” While other texts imply that anyone who does right (serving God, treating the needy properly) is really a believer, here Muhammad rejects the good works of anyone that fails to accept the authority of his prophetic /poetic words. He concludes with another warning against those who want to recognize other spiritual/political authorities alongside of the Qur’an: ““So let him, who hopes for / the encounter with his Lord, / work righteousness, and not associate with his Lord’s service anyone (18.110).””

What is this “encounter”? The final judgment? The judgment that arrives when one either accepts or rejects the Qur’anic word? In either case, the exclusiveness of the Qur’anic authority is beginning to emerge in the text and in Muhammad’s prophetic mission.

19, “Mary” (Maryam)

Maryam and *Ta Ha* (these words, apparently, have no translation) are indeed closely connected in theme.

That theme is set with the repetition in 19 of “**mention**”. Muhammad is commanded to “mention” or “talk about” the classic characters of the tradition, all but one biblical:

- Zachariah and the birth of John (the Baptist) (19.2)
- Mary and the birth of Jesus (19.16)
- Abraham (19.41)
- Moses and Aaron (19.51)
- Ishmael (19.54)
- Idris (19.56) As in the past, there are some inventive details: Mary gives birth under a palm tree, and the ground opens up to quench her thirst, and the mother of Jesus is confused with the sister of Aaron.

A parenthetical question: Could the the ground opening up to quench Mary’s thirst be the basis for the Muslim version of Hagar? As far as I can determine, the name Hagar (also spelled “Hajar”) is *not* found in the Qur’an; the story that is generally told—Hagar dying of thirst, the opening of Zam-zam...—is based *entirely on Hadith*.

19 is also concerned with the problem of arrogance and rebelliousness: John (the Baptist) was “a little child, / and a tenderness from Us, / and purity; and he was godfearing, and cherishing / his parents, not arrogant, / rebellious (19.14)”; Jesus, still in the cradle, says, “He (God) has not made me arrogant, unprosperous (19.32)”; Abraham says, “...haply I shall not be, in calling / upon my Lord, unprosperous (19.48).” Why is Muhammad concerned about arrogance? Is he calling believers not to be arrogant in their own attitudes, to develop a state of submissiveness to God and God’s messenger, or is he implicitly attacking the unbelievers who arrogantly refuse the messages? And what is the tie to prosperity? Is the messenger concerned about *his own* prosperity even if he continues to spend himself on this religious mission?

If we accept that reading, then the most consistent reading would be that the messenger is idealizing previous messengers, and admonishing himself to be like them: don’t rebel (against God? the voice? the requirements of the mission?) and trust that God will enable you to prosper.

20, Ta Ha

Unlike most surahs, which gain their titles from some significant episode in the surah, this title is nothing but the mysterious syllables that preface its contents; all surahs have them, and no one knows what they means, although Muslim scholars have spilt much ink trying to figure them out.

The is primarily a more detailed retelling of the story of Moses and Aaron. It is also connected to the previous by a reiteration of the messenger's concern with prosperity, "We have not sent down the Koran upon thee / for thee to be unprosperous, but only / as a reminder to / him who fears, a / revelation from / Him who created the earth and the high heavens;... (20.1-4)." This confirms our interpretation at the end of 19: its characters are idealized versions of what divine messengers are to be—submissive, accepting of the task, trusting in God for prosperity and success.

In the retelling of the Moses and Aaron story, 2 motifs seem significant:

- Moses is sent to Pharaoh because of the latter's "insolence" (20.24, 43, 45; although other translations render v. 24 with "exceeded" or "transgressed" and v. 43 with "transgressed" or "inordinate");
- When Pharaoh wants to know who Moses' God is, Moses teaches that he is the creator, who has provided the earth, roads (!), water, plants and cattle to eat—"signs for men possessing reason (20.53-54)"; There is also a retelling of the "Golden Calf" story, where the enemies of the Israelites are called "Samaritan"—another of a long list of Qur'anic confusion or conflation of the biblical accounts.

With "Maryam" and "Ta Ha," one is almost convinced that the spiritual power behind the Qur'an is the same divine being who presumably speaks through the Bible. Muhammad has heard the "former scrolls (20.132)," and he is grasped by the power of the books. "So We relate to thee stories of what / has gone before, and We have given thee a remembrance from Us (20.99)." Now he believes that the same voice is speaking to him directly. By prophetic insight, he fears a "dreadful day" (19.39)—of resurrection, after which all will be summoned to reflect on their lives. Are you ready? Have you lived "righteous" (19.60) lives?

But the resentful conceit that dominates later in the "book" is already manifesting itself. "Conceit" because the messenger wants to use his message to claim unique authority; "resentful" because the message of divine compassion and forgiveness is quickly transformed into angry at all who do not accept this authority. "Even so We have sent it down / as an Arabic Koran, and We / have turned about in it something of threats, that haply they may be / godfearing, (20.113)..." The warning of divine judgment—of an eschatological horizon of eternal justice against which all will be measure—morphs (warps?) into angry tirades against those who doubt the messenger's own peculiar role in conveying this message.

Muhammad imagines that a "voice" is enough; he fails to understand that revelation comes in community, in a traditioned gathering of those who hear the voice.

21, "The Prophets", Al-Anbiya

"The Prophets":

- responds to the continued claims that Muhammad is a “poet” giving expression to “A hotchpotch of nightmares” (21.5]
- every city that has been judged was provided with a prophet, ordinary men with mortal bodies (21.6-8]
- the world was created for serious moral effort (21.16-18]
- there are no other gods, only God is eternal and cannot be questioned; God does not have a son, and all spiritual powers are at his command (21.18-29)
- the signs of the heaven, earth, and the heavenly bodies (21.20-33)
- all will die and face judgment (2.34-35)
- previous messengers have been mocked, as Muhammad is being mocked; but “We shall set up the just balances / for the Resurrection Day (21.36-47)
- At v. 48, there begins a list of the major messengers that came before Muhammad, with longer stories of Abraham (21.51-72) and David and Solomon (78-82)
- a contrast between the cities that become “fuel for Gehenna” and those cities that have already received their “reward most fair” (21.95-104)

A notable motif is that of “the Remembrance” (“renewed Message” or “reminder”).

- v. 2: men are heedless of the Remembrance God sends
- v. 7: “the People of the Remembrance” (=“People of the Book”)
- v.10: “We have sent down to you a Book wherein / is your Remembrance”
- v. 24: “This is the Remembrance / of him [God] who is with me, and the Remembrance / of those [prophets] before me.”
- v. 36: Mockers of Muhammad’s message “in the Remembrance of the All-merciful / are unbelievers.” The meaning here is not clear, perhaps: those who doubt in God are viewed by all the stories as unbelievers; or, God views such mockers as unbelievers
- v. 48: “We gave Moses and Aaron...a Remembrance / for the godfearing.”
- v. 50: “And this is a blessed Remembrance / that we have sent down...”
- v. 84: God gave the people of Job “mercy from Us, and a Reminder / to those who serve.”
- v. 105: “For We have written in the Pslams, after the / Remembrance, ‘The earth shall be the inheritance / of My righteous servants (perhaps a paraphrase of Ps. 25: 13 or 39:9).”

Muhammad **remembers** God speaking, both past and (he believes) present; he sees himself as part of a long story of revelation (21.45). But he struggles to make the memory, the recollection, present in the experience of the community he is addressing: “Man was created of haste. Assuredly / I shall show you My signs; so demand not / that I make haste. / They say, ‘And when shall the promise come to pass, / if you speak truly (21.37-38]?’” The listeners want the divine fulfillment of Muhammad’s words; it appears that Muhammad himself is getting impatient. God says to wait; Muhammad can only reply “the Fire” is coming to his listeners “dumbfounding them (21. 39, 40).” He does say at the end that “I know not [? why the fulfillment of the revelation does not take place]; haply it is a trial for you / and an enjoyment for a time (21.111).” He seems to be saying that all this is a test as his listeners enjoy their present life.

But in the meantime, the only content of the revelation is that there is only one deity, and the listeners ought to submit/surrender: “Say, ‘It is revealed unto me *only that / your God is One God* ; do you then surrender (21.108]?’” When Muhammad says, “your God,” does he mean the polytheistic deities, purportedly of Mecca? The God of Judaism and Christianity? Is he trying to

personalize it for his listeners? Is his point the absolute unity of the competing theisms of the middle east?

In any case, all that Muhammad knows is that there is only one divine power in the cosmos. Unfortunately, his listeners wanted to know the *content*—his nature, characteristics—of this diety, which Muhammad apparently could not provide. He could “recite” the past stories eloquently—presumably under the pressure of poetic/prophetic ecstasy—but that ecstasy could not guide him in the creation of a new community.

22, “Pilgrimage” Al-Hajj

Al-Hajj begins with a vivid image of “the earthquake of the Hour” (22.1), in words reminiscent of the Gospel apocalypse: it is “a mighty thing; / on the day when you behold it, every suckling woman shall neglect the child she has suckled, and every pregnant woman / shall deposit her burden, and thou shalt see mankind drunk,... (22.2)”; see Mark 13.5 and Matthew 24:19. This may represent a shift to the apocalyptic language for which the later surahs (canonically speaking) are known. Before this in the canon, Muhammad refers to the final day in a variety of ways, but he has rarely, if ever, described it.

We then have a “**litany of disputers**”: “And among men there is such a one that disputes...” (vv. 3, 8, 19; see also v. 67): “the one that follows every rebel Satan,” “the one without guidance,” the one who serves God only in good times (v. 11), and those who dispute between themselves (v. 19). Clearly we have a community where there are multiple religious divisions, even within the purported believers. The answers are by-not standard: the wonders of new life and birth; other gods cannot help, but will only harm (against those following other gods); and, of course, God will sort it out: “for the unbelievers, / for them garments of fire shall be cut, / and there shall be poured over their heads / boiling water... (22.19).”

One apparent dispute is over the “Holy Mosque.” Tradition of course views this as the Ka’bah at Mecca; but I am not convinced from the language that it is any single place; one specific reason for this judgment will be noted below. One group is trying to keep another group away from the Holy Mosque (v. 25). Supposedly “those who disbelieve” are the Meccans. But at this point in the Traditional Account, “Muslims” (in Medina) are not able to get into Mecca at all. However, the text doesn’t imply that the opposing party is completely in control of the Holy Mosque, but only that there is continued, on-going conflict over who can get into the Mosque. Furthermore, the text specifically says that the mosque is to open “*alike*” to “him who cleaves to it [i.e., lives by it in the city or town] and the tent-dweller.” In contrast, the alleged conflict between the Meccans and Medinans is not a conflict between city-dwellers and tent-dwellers (Bedouins), but between the dwellers of two cities, both whom want to control a sacred shrine. Furthermore, the Bedouins have not even begun to convert to Islam yet, according to the Traditional Account.

The conflict documented in the text, therefore, must be at a much later point in the development of Islam: there is a city-based religion, with a shrine in the city, and tent-dwellers who are giving their allegiance to the religion are being excluded from the use of the shrine, possibly on social or economic grounds. If we follow the traditional account, a more likely candidate for a social Sitz-im-Leben is the conflict between the Umayyads and Abbasids; Muslim history implies that the Abbasidian power base was among converts and lower-class people who supposedly were being excluded from full participation in the Muslim community.

The other primary topic of the is, as one might guess from the title, the Pilgrimage. There is no evidence of location. It is claimed that the “House” (not “Mosque”) was “settled for Abraham (2.26).” Recall that the “change of qiblah” took place in 2.142; the Traditional Account holds that this is a *later* text than the present Surah. Although I have not settled in my own mind the chronological sequence of the surahs, it stands to reason that *if* the “House” in this is a single location, then it must be Jerusalem, not Mecca.

Furthermore, the primary act that takes place at this “House” is not the circumambulation of the Ka’bah (the latter is not mentioned; there *may* be a reference to the former in vv. 26 and 28: “those that shall go about it”); the focus of the pilgrimage is animal sacrifice (vv. 28, 30, 34-37). Furthermore, sacrifice here is not viewed as a ritual that feeds God, but to feed the poor (28, 36). This general theme, of course, is close to the teachings of the Hebrew prophets, e.g., Micah 6:6-8; Amos 5:21-24. The fact that the pilgrimage is primarily a means for economic redistribution suggests that it originated as a much more frequent ritual than today’s once-a-year trek to a distant land. The poor can hardly be satisfied with one repast a year; and it had to be close at hand to the primary settlements.

Apparently the community is not only experiencing internal conflict, but external threat. In v. 39, they are given permission to fight (The traditional account sees this as the “declaration of war” against the Meccans ([Maududi 22](#))). Again, the text immediately raises questions about this interpretation, since the permission goes to those who were “expelled from their habitations,” (v. 40) not those who were being kept from worship at the Ka’bah. Furthermore, the conflict is taking place where there are Christians: “Had God not driven back / the people, some by the means of others, / there had been destroyed cloisters and churches, / oratories and mosques, wherein God’s Name is much mentioned (v. 40).” Most translations render “synagogues” in the place of “oratories,” (an oratory is usually defined as a small chapel for private worship) although Pickthall agrees with Arberry. But that does not materially change the problem. Collingwood has been quite emphatic that there were no Christians in Mecca; while the traditional account places Jews in Medina, it does not refer to Christians. This text simply cannot refer to the Hijaz; its locale must be Palestine and/or Syria.

Who were the people driven back? Who drove them back? It doesn’t appear they were part of the “believers” in either case. Groups of people were rampaging through Palestine/Syria, other groups had some success in resisting them, thereby preserving religious buildings, but the situation was unstable enough that the messenger was giving permission to fight, implying that up to this point they had *not* resisted the invaders. Was this the beginning of “jihad”?

The messenger uses the occasion to continue to warn of judgment, although he reminds his listeners not to “hasten” God’s “chastisement (22.47).” The promised judgment will come; he uses a variation of the “day is like a thousand years with God” trope.

At the end, there are suggestions of the emerging conflict over confessional differences. Muhammad seems to justify his particular mission with the explanation that “We have appointed for every nation / a holy rite that they shall perform,” so continue to preach as you (Muhammad) have been doing (22.67). Muhammad finally identifies this religion:

He has chosen you [believers], and has laid on you / no impediment in your religion, / being the creed of Abraham; He / named you Muslims (22.78]

Is it a coincidence that the that introduces “Muslim” also apparently introduces jihad? (Arberry’s index only gives one other text with “Muslim,” in Surah 3.)

23, “Believers,” Al-Mumenoon

...begins with a basic moral code:

- be humble at prayers
- give alms
- ”guard their private parts” (except for wives and slaves—”what their right hands own”)
- keep trusts and covenants
- prayer, again.

This is followed by another exposition on the power of God to create and re-create (in resurrection). In 23-42, we have more messenger accounts, with the structure previously described.

Apparently Muhammad is thinking about the economic possibilities of his position: “Or dost thou ask them tribute? Yet the / tribute of thy Lord is better, and He is the / best of providers (23.72).”

The returns to the theme of creation and resurrection, with a final long stanza on “when the Trumpet is blown,” beginning at v. 101. I’ve noticed that Arberry always translates eschatological passages in long, “winding” lines. Muhammad contrasts between those who endure in belief and those who did not.

24, “Light”, Al-Noor

“Light” is primarily devoted to the issues of sexual immorality, privacy and the need for women not to display themselves. So the larger part of this qualifies as “proto-Shariah.” Arberry translates the act in question as “fornication,” Yusufali reads “adultery or fornication,” Pickthal says “adulter[y].” Any person guilty of fornication is to be beaten 100 times; he or she can then only marry another fornicator or idolater. An accusation against a woman (it makes no mention of men) must be supported by 4 witnesses; an accuser who cannot do so is to be beaten 80 times. A man who accuses his wife of sexual misconduct must swear 4 times to be truthful, and a 5th time he is to invoke God’s curse if lying. The woman in return must swear 4 times the husband is lying, and the 5th time invoking God’s curse if he is not.

It then deals with an unidentified “slander,” although one can speculate it was directed at one of Muhammad’s wives, (as is indeed asserted by the Traditional Account) since much of the remainder of the deals with the conduct of women in their homes, and how men are to relate to women. Muhammad’s response is that it shouldn’t have been spread; but is inconsistent with the spirit, if not the letter, of the rules set forth. He seems to be saying, “let’s not hang out the dirty laundry.”

Later in the surah, Muhammad returns to this theme with a reiteration of God’s curse on those who falsely accuse married women. Apparently the situation was created when someone entered the (Muhammad’s ?) house unexpectedly. People are not to enter houses without permission, although they are permitted to enter “uninhabited” houses, although it is not clear what such houses may be: Shakir seems to suggest that they are storehouses (v. 29). He returns to the problem in v. 61: after a long list of the houses of permitted relations, “there is no fault in

you / that you all eat together, or in groups / separately. / But when you enter houses, greet one another”

There are special rules at the end of the for the house of the “Messenger (v. 62).” People cannot leave his presence without his permission. Muhammad formalizes his authority, and insists visiting his home is fundamentally different from the visiting they were allowed to do among each other. He is very insistent here: people who break these guidelines will have “a trial befall them, or... / a painful chastisement (v. 63).”

The community is apparently going through some fundamental social change, although it is probably impossible to reconstruct what rules for interaction existed prior to this surah. Apparently, people moved in and out of houses freely, without introducing themselves. Had they come from a culture that lacked a sense of private space? In any case, this was causing apparent improprieties. People may have even begun talk about their leader’s wives—a fundamental threat to his authority, and ability to maintain a claim of moral and spiritual leadership.

In other rules on modesty, believers are to “cast down” their eyes and “guard their private parts”; then Muhammad qualifies this with a list of relations that are permitted to see a woman’s “adornment” (is this a euphemism?), this list includes “brothers, brothers’ sons, or sisters’ sons (v. 31).” The community is directed to find spouses for the unmarried, and not force slavegirls into prostitution.

Finally, near the conclusion of the surah, it discusses three periods of “nakedness”—before the dawn prayer, at noon, and after evening. It is apparently giving rules for who can ask permission to come into the room when the adults are in this state: slaves, and prepubescent children. The confusion lies in the fact that it later states that pubescent children are to “ask leave [also?], as those before them asked leave (v. 59).” But if both prepubescent and pubescent are to ask leave, then it is not clear what is the difference in their social states, as it relates to seeing the “nakedness” of the adults. (I want to be clear it is not self-evident what “nakedness” means here.)

Also included in is a reminder to continue providing resources for “kinsmen / and the poor and those who emigrate (v. 22).” This is purportedly Medinan. Why the last group, the emigrant? Is not *everyone* in the Medinan Muslim community an emigrant, from Mecca? Why then are they singled out as a group which needs the continued contributions of the community?

This does not feel Medinan. Clearly, there is a close-knit community of believers; Muhammad needs to correct some inappropriate familiarity among the house-holds. But there is nothing about exertion, no sign of conflict with, other than a promise that God “will surely / make you successors in the land, even as He made those who were before them successors.” There is some uncertainty on the part of the community, but Muhammad promises that God “will surely establish their religion for them that He has approved for them , / and will give them in exchange, after / their fear, security:... (24.55).” This does not sound like a community in armed struggle, but a community that wants to get settled and live out their religion in peace.

25, “Salvation”, Al-Furqan

Most translations translate al-furqan as “criterion” or “standard.” The word is also found in the first verse: “Blessed be He / who has sent down the Salvation [*al-furqana*] upon / His

servant, that he may be a warner / to all beings.” Shakir does not translate it, suggesting that the meaning of the word is obscure.

Accusations of forgery

Muhammad is once again forced to respond to those who accuse him of “forgery.” But this version has some interesting details: “ They say, ‘Fairy-tales of the ancients / that he has had written down, so that / they are recited to him at the dawn / and in the evening (v. 5).” Remember that Muhammad is supposed to be illiterate. However, the text does not specifically say “he wrote them down,” but “he *has had* written down,” which can (but does not have to be) interpreted as “he had someone else write them down.” (Here of course, the original Arabic is crucial, although all translations use a construction similar to this.)

However, even apart from that, the claim being made is that some one is writing (or has already written) the stories down, and then Muhammad is repeating them in a performance. Note also that dawn and evening refer to the two prayer times that have previously been mentioned. Now the Traditional Account claims that pre-Muslim Arabs already were aware of poetic ecstasy as a mode of creation; why then do not the critics ascribe Muhammad’s recitations to such ecstasy? Why do *they* perceive it as a written creation?

Call for destruction: They also wonder why he eats like any other human being. Muhammad claims supernatural powers, yet the only evidence he has is his words of warning: the “Hour” (v. 11) will come, and when it does, the unbelievers will plead for destruction (vv. 12-13). Muhammad responds: “‘Call not out today for one destruction, but call for many (v. 14)!” Is Muhammad mocking the unbelievers—“you want destruction, you will get many destructions”—or God’s direction to Muhammad—“keep proclaiming destruction”?

In either case, it is important to realize **the central “religious insight”** (if that is what it is) of Muhammad is impending destruction. If we accept in the most general outline the claim that the surahs that are canonically later are chronologically earlier, then when the destruction does not come, Muhammad modifies his message. When he does so, the messages become more traditionally religious, until we get to the latest surahs (canonically at the beginning), where *he* becomes the destroyer, as the leader of military struggle. It remains to be seen if we can determine from surahs at the end of the canon what events or scenario initiated this revelation of doom and judgment.

“The Muster of the Associates”: Next Muhammad uses a metaphor he has previously used in criticizing “association”: the peoples and their gods are viewed as a army that is “mustered” (“gathered together”) at the judgment (v. 17). God will ask the beings who have been associated with him, if they are responsible for leading the unbelievers astray. The believers will disavow their followers and claim it was the “enjoyment of day” that led the unbelievers to forget “the Remembrance (v. 18). Even the associates are powerless to help their followers at the judgment, and hence are revealed as not truly divine.

The All-Merciful: The problem here is that Muhammad cannot explain how *he* is the one with the true message of the one divine power in the world. He can only reply that it is the unbeliever who is a “partisan against his Lord (v. 55).” What is this one true being (v. 60)? He is the “All-merciful.” Muhammad cannot answer the question directly, other than generalities about the creator of the heavens, its lights, and day and night. He can only respond with moral direction: followers of the All-merciful will behave in the following way (vv. 63-74):

- modesty and humility
- prayer
- awareness of impending judgment
- spend right amount (on others?), neither too much nor too little
- don't kill unjustly
- don't fornicate
- don't give false witness or engage in idle talk
- respond to God's signs
- ask for "refreshment" (Arberry) or "comfort" (Yusufali and Pickthal) from one's wives and children.

At the end, Muhammad reminds the community, because they have doubted the revelation, the only reason "My Lord esteems you" is "for your prayer (v. 77)." Apparently the community is trying to go along with Muhammad's call to prayer, but not giving him the intensity or certainty of allegiance he desires.

26, "The Poets", Al-Shuara

Supposedly, this gets its title from a reference in v. 224: "And the poets—the perverse follow them." The irony is that, so far in the canon, this is the most clearly *poetic* in the Qur'an. There is a refrain that occurs (if I've counted right) eight times (vv. 8-9, 68-69, 103-4, 121-2, 139-40, 158-9, 174-5, 190-1):

Surely in that is a sign, / yet most of them are not unbelievers. / Surely thy Lord, He is / The All-mighty, the All-compassionate."

So this is a formally structured recitation of the "signs" of the truth of Muhammad's message. What are those signs (the statement of the signs occurs prior to the above verse citations):

- the vast variety of things growing in the earth
- Moses, Pharaoh, and the drowning of Pharaoh's army
- Abraham's profession of one "Lord of all Being (v. 77) and the acknowledgment by those who served other beings that they were deceived
- the deliverance of Noah and the destruction of those who did not believe
- the rejection of the message of Hood (Hud) by Ad, and the destruction of Ad
- the destruction of Thamood (Thamud), after it hamstringed the "she-camel" (vv. 155-7)
- the deliverance of Lot and the destruction of the "old woman" who "tarried" (170-1)
- the "chastisement of the Day of Shadow," upon the "men of the Thicket," who rejected the message of Shuaib (vv. 176-189)

In what sense are these signs. The refrain recognizes the hearers were largely unbelievers. They did not participate in either of the traditional monotheistic communities, where some of these stories had the authority of scripture. The Traditional Account tells us that they were used to poetic descriptions of events, so they were used to experiencing the world through poetic ecstasy. And the fact that communities come and go was the most essential reality of the pagan self-consciousness: they lived for the moment (both existential and historical) and then they died.

This is precisely what the Qur'an means when it refers to "the term". Every nation is given its term, and then it disappears. So the Qur'an itself is clearly thinking within the pagan

view of history. All this recitation does is to give a poetic expression of the pagan consciousness of history. And the fact that it tries to use (partly) biblical stories to express its vision of the world's existence does not change this reality. Indeed, 3 of the 8 stories are not biblical (the communities of Ad, Thamood, and the "men of the Thicket"), suggesting that the use of the biblical stories are accidental to the consciousness of the poet-prophet. He uses whatever is at hand, the myths of his pagan upbringing, and the stories he knows from Judaism (there are no Christian stories here).

But in the biblical view of history, nations may come and go, but a new *kind* of community is developing in the midst of that *seculum* (the present age, the present *term*) and simultaneously is emerging *out of it*. Whether that is the reign of the *mashiach*, the divinely appointed deliverer-king, Jesus' and Paul's "kingdom of God," or Revelation's "new heaven and new earth," there is something genuinely new coming, a transformation of the present age into a fundamentally different sort of community.

But the poet-prophet knows what? The drowning of a great army (v. 67); the utter loss of a people with "no intercessors, / no loyal friend" (vv. 100-101)—think of the terrible fate of a Sunni Iraqi, for some reason trapped among Shia soldiers (or vice-versa); the destruction or "chastisement" of Ad, Thamood, and the "Men of the Thicket"; destruction...destruction...destruction.

However, it would be unfair to deny those hints of Muhammad's struggle towards a better vision of life. Here, for example, is his eloquent homage (put on the lips of Abraham) to

...the / Lord of all Being / who created me, and Himself guides me, / and, whenever I am sick, heals me, / who makes me to die, then gives me life, / and who I am eager shall forgive me / my offence on the Day of Doom (vv. 77-82).

He wants to believe that there is a unified power that brings together all the diversity of human experience. He hopes that the power behind/underneath his embryonic morality—his belief in a final judgment which will hold him accountable, is finally the power that both made him, and grants him delight and direction in the present.

But still, the difference remains: there is collapse of eschatology, only life, death, and "the Day of Doom." Abraham has no *reason* to *expect* forgiveness, he can only "ardently hope" (Pickthal) that the Lord who created him will also pardon him his sins. (Recall the importance of prayers for forgiveness in the "generic monotheism," as reconstructed in *Crossroads to Islam*.) There is neither the rabbinic call to sanctified life and community, guided by G-d's mitzvot that promise and prepare Israel for the messianic kingdom, nor the Spirit of Jesus Christ, transforming the believer into the "likeness" of God's Son, and thus preparing him for the light of God's eschatological presence.

27, "Ant," Al-Naml

27 begins with several messenger stories, including Moses, Thamood, and Lot. The most significant story is the story of Solomon, the "hoopoe bird," and the Queen of Sheba. Solomon gathers his "hosts," including "jinn, men, and birds (v. 17)." But the hoopoe bird is absent. Solomon threatens to kill it, but it buys its life in exchange for knowledge of the Queen of Sheba. Solomon sends her a letter, calling for her surrender; Sheba tries to buy her independence with a

gift, which Solomon scorns. He asks for a jinn who will bring him her throne, which is disguised. The Queen comes to Solomon—it is not clear why she would come—recognizes her throne, and enters a pavilion of crystal. Thinking it water, she lifts her dress and exposes her legs. Solomon, apparently trying to spare her modesty, quickly tells her the floor is crystal.

In many ways, the story is fanciful, if not bizarre. The is named after the ants; when Solomon's army gathers in the valley, one ant warns his community to hide lest it be crushed (v. 18). The anecdote contributes nothing to the story. How does the letter get to the Queen (yes, the bird takes it, but given the description in the text, it might as well have magically appeared)? Solomon is alternately playful and hostile. He wants to amuse himself, and then threatens other actors with dire consequences. How does the throne get to Solomon (same problem as with the letter: the jinn brought it, but how? by what powers?)? Why isn't the Queen surprised when it disappears? How does she know Solomon took it? Why is it disguised? No point of the plot turns on her recognition of it: "'Is thy / throne like this? ' She said, 'It seems / the same (v. 42).'" Then why ask her?

I reacted to the story with a mixture of childish amusement and puzzlement. What is the point? The point seems to be that **Muhammad can tell the story**. One can understand later Arabic literature (e.g., *The Arabian Nights*): the same untrammelled fantasy, events spinning themselves out in baroque weave, without concern for logic or plot or narrative detail.

In fairness to Muhammad, it must be said that he may not have to take the blame—or credit—for this story. It is a detailed repetition of a version in the "II Targum of Esther." <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=894&letter=S#2951> Here is a version in Jewish Encyclopedia here is a longer version: <http://answering-islam.org/Index/S/solomon.html>. This site details the literary parallels between the two versions (http://www.lightshinesindarkness.com/sources_koran_1.htm). (Scroll to the end.) This text is traditionally known as the *Targum Sheni*.

There are several oddities here: firstly, a Targum is a Syriac translation of the Tanak. However this particular Targum is more of midrash—biblical commentary—than a straight translation. Secondly, we should not assume that the Qur'anic account is based on the Targum. This site, from the perspective of Muslim apologetics presents evidence from reputable Jewish sources that the "II Targum of Esther" was finalized in the late seventh or early eighth century: <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Sources/BBsheba.html>. Of course, the Muslim apologete claims this is proof that the Targum text comes *after* the Qur'an, since in his mind the Qur'an was inspired by 632. Based on a quick review of the evidence, it does seem certain that the first datable manuscripts of the *Targum Sheni* come *after* the Qur'an.

But since this exercise does not share the assumption of the Muslim apologete, we can think more creatively. How do we explain a story, told in remarkably similar ways, finding its ways both into an Arabic religious text and a Syriac Jewish text? The short answer seems to be that they were based upon a earlier source—in *Syria*. I will call this presumed common source the ur-Sheni. That means at a minimum we can be pretty sure that the author of this had extensive exposure to Syriac Jewish traditions.

General statements about the orality in tradition do not explain the mechanism by which the Qur'anic author was able to repeat details first stated in a presumed ur-Sheni. It is one thing to assert that Muhammad heard the familiar stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses and Pharaoh,

Joseph, and Solomon, and retold (? rewrote) them in creative ways. That explanation is consistent with the (lack of) detail in the Qur'an's retellings of those stories.

But the similarity here is detailed and specific. Even granting that Muhammad retold the story to incorporate his own metaphors and theology ("mustered," "there is no god but he," "In the Name of God," "surrender"), the plot similarity cannot be explained by oral memory. Consider the Mishnah: the seminal text of rabbinical Judaism; the word means "to repeat." It developed into the Talmud through generations of repetition, memorization, elaboration and commentary (= "Gemara"; any page of the Talmud includes *a mishnah* and the *gemara* upon that mishnah). But that process required rabbinical schools where the memorization and elaboration took place. For Muhammad to have memorized this story, he needed extended exposure to Jewish religious or scholarly life.

I can think of two likely explanations: (1) Muhammad regularly attended a Jewish synagogue, or school in a major center of Jewish learning, and heard this ur-Sheni read on a regular basis (this explanation preserves his purported illiteracy—he memorized it); (2) He had access to a major Jewish library, where the ur-Sheni might have first been stored; but this requires him to have been a reader.

The location of this within a Jewish community is supported by vv. 76-78:

Surely this Koran relates to the Children / of Israel most of that concerning which / they are at variance; / it is a guidance, and a mercy / unto the believers. / Surely thy Lord will decide between them / by His Judgment;

But the Traditional Account knows of no significant Jewish community at Mecca; and the conflict at Medina was between the Muslims and Meccans, with the Bedouins being drawn into the conflict.

Where is it then? Jerusalem and Palestine, perhaps in the political context of a greater Syria: "I have only been commanded / to serve the Lord of this territory / **which He has made sacred** ; / to Him belongs everything (v. 91)." That statement is only intelligible with respect to the "Holy Land." The war between Mecca and Medina over who would control the pilgrimage center at the Kab'ah was in the future (according to the Traditional Account); there is no indication that either city, or the Hijaz in general, was being given sacral status. Shakir and Yusufali call it a "city;" but Palmer and Pickthal agree with Arberry in calling it a "country" or "land."

28, "The Story," "Al-Qasas"

28 is a detailed restatement of the Moses story, including the following elements:

- Pharaoh's killing of the sons of "one party" "in the land" (v. 4)
- Moses is "cast...into the sea," to be discovered by Pharaoh's "wife" (vv. 7, 9) (all other translations say "river")
- Moses killing of one of "his enemies" in a fight with one of his own "party" (v. 15) and his flight from Egypt (v. 21)
- his aid to two women shepherds at well, and marriage to one of them
- the fire and God's voice
- the signs to Moses of his call

- Moses asks for God to allow Aaron to help him
- Pharaoh's rejection of the message

There are, as usual odd differences:

- No where does the story refer to "Israelites" or "Hebrews". Is Muhammad turning against them already? Does the name not fit in with the poetic phrasing?
- The killing of the Hebrew boys is interpreted as a conflict between two segments of the community. Pharaoh "divided its inhabitants into sects (v. 4)." Is Muhammad here thinking of his own community?
- Assisting Pharaoh is "Haman," (v. 6) who is asked to make a "tower" so Pharaoh can "mount up to Moses' god" to determine if Moses is telling the truth (v. 38). This of course, seems a three-fold confusion: Muhammad seems to be conflating the stories of Exodus, Esther (in which the evil Persian prime minister is called "Haman", and the Tower of Babel. (Of course Muslim apologists have contested this reading: (<http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Contrad/External/haman.html>) and anti-Muslim polemicists have answered: <http://www.answering-islam.de/Main/Responses/Saifullah/haman.htm>. But such arguments really do not get to the point, since both sides think they are arguing "what really happened." I am rather interested in how the text developed. Even if we stipulate that the Hebrew stories are legend (and Esther is certainly to some degree a historical fiction); it is certainly important to see how the Qur'an uses those stories.
- The fire is not in the tree but "on the side of the Mount (v. 29)." The "tree" then is the source of the divine voice (v. 30).
- The contest of sorcery between Pharaoh's magicians is applied to Muhammad's own situation.

Thou was not upon the western side / when We decreed to Moses the commandment, /
 Yet when the truth came to them / from Ourselves, they said, 'Why / has he not
 been given the like of / that Moses was given?' But they, / did they not disbelieve also in
 what Moses was given aforetime? / They said, 'A pair of sorceries / mutually supporting
 each other (vv. 44, 48).'

Let's explore this last theme.

A Pair of Sorceries

Muhammad was always impressed with magic evidenced in Moses' conflict with Pharaoh (see. e.g., 27.13; 26.34-49). This is not surprising; Muhammad's listeners demand "signs," and Muhammad recognizes that they seem to be an integral component of the biblical revelation, but he, or his God, has firmly refused to produce them. Muhammad preaches the resurrection (as basis for the judgment, by which even pagans will be held accountable); they respond, it is sorcery (see 11.7). He produces his ostensibly inspired recitations, but the pagan listeners reject them as forgeries and sorceries (34.43). Muhammad responds by saying, you try to produce a Book with "better guidance" (28.49).

Muhammad seems to be trying to prove that his poetic-prophecies are not "forgeries," but I think he misses the point of the pagan complaint on two grounds. As we (most of us thinking in a monotheistic or post-monotheistic spiritual world) hear "sorcery," we assume that the pagans are complaining that Muhammad is just making it up; it is nothing but "mumbo-jumbo." But in *the pagan spiritual world*, the charge of sorcery would not have been a negative evaluation. It

was simply a way of identifying the spiritual structure out of which Muhammad's proclamations came. In accusing Muhammad of sorcery, the pagans are simply saying: so what? been there, done that; this is nothing that we can't do. Don't forget, there is no evidence that Muhammad ever converted the Arabic pagans, prior to the use of *jihad*.

When Muhammad "recited" the stories of Moses, and *then* supported the moral of those stories (judgment at hand, repent) by *his own* poetic-prophecies, the pagans simply said: you are supporting sorcery by sorcery. What Moses did was simply magic, and you (Muhammad) claiming it was a revelation of a new deity is nothing but more sorcery: "A pair of sorceries/ mutually supporting each other (v. 28.48)."

The Qur'an simply wasn't persuasive for a pagan, for poetic stories were, apparently, part of pagan Arabic culture. Revelation assumes a fundamental transformation of life and spiritual consciousness, a new horizon surrounding and changing a taken-for-granted world. So the world under revelation is no longer taken-for-granted, since there is the always new, the unexpected act of a power not held within the limits or boundaries of this world.

Muhammad seems to have had genuine understanding of "ethical monotheism," (one divine power, the ethical standard by which all will be judged, and therefore a being that is both all-good and all-great) but his mistake seems to have been the failure to express that understanding in *revelational form* that was also new. He did not create a new horizon for the pagans, he did not communicate the awareness that one *ought* to live a new *kind* of life, because there is a new world *coming*. There was simply the "recitation," which the pagans already knew, and they recognized it as "sorcery," as arising out of the mystical and magical chthonic powers from which their own poetic ecstasy emerged.

29, "Spider", "Al-Ankaboot"

Maududi places this in a time of persecution, supposedly just before the emigration by some of the first Muslims to Ethiopia. Although I am not inclined to support the Traditional Account in its details, Maududi is correct in general ([Maududi 29](#)).

Do the people reckon that they will be left to say / 'We believe,' and will not be tried? / We certainly tried those that were before them, / Some men there are who say, 'We believe / in God,' but when such a man is hurt / in God's cause, he makes the persecution / of men as it were God's chastisement; ... (29.2-3, 10).

There is the odd, apparent, contradiction between the 3a and 10b: first Muhammad says that God tries the faith of the believers; then he criticizes those who mistake human persecution with God's chastisement.

Another notable comment is v. 8:

We have charged man, that he be kind to his / parents; but if they strive with thee / to make thee associate with Me that whereof thou has no knowledge , then do not obey them,....

Now "thee" is the archaic biblical construction that implies "you singular," as in the German *Du*: hence, you, Muhammad. Tradition says that Muhammad was an orphan, so who were the "parents" here? As an adult, he was supposedly protected by his uncle Abu Talib, until

the latter's death shortly before the Hijra (emigration to Yathrib). So either, (1) Muhammad in fact was not an orphan, or (2) this is being revealed to someone else.

This is confirmed by 26.85-6, in the story of Abraham: "Make me one of the inheritors of the / Garden of Bliss. / and forgive my father, for he is one / of those astray." Now Muhammad makes Abraham speak these words, but as we have seen, Muhammad identifies with the prophets, and reimagines their lives in terms of his own. Separately, this detail would not be convincing, but together, these two surahs (closely related in content and style) containing a similar detail, suggest an alternative reading of the background is required.

Another such detail is v. 46:

Dispute not with the People of the Book / save in the fairer manner, except for / those of them that do wrong; and say, / 'We believe in what has been sent down / to us, and what has been sent down to you; / our God and your God is One, and to Him / we have surrendered.'

According to [this page](#), which gives excerpts from W. Montgomery Watt's *Companion to Qur'an*, "there were practically no Jews in Mecca." There were some Christians, who Watt identifies as "traders and slaves." They certainly don't sound like a settled community that a prophet would want to have a conversation with, and persuade to join his movement. So to what people was Muhammad talking? As we have seen, in these "middle" surahs, most of his dialogue is with Jews, not Christians. The biblical stories he alludes to are all Hebrew. Yet we have an early stage of Muhammad's mission, where he is convinced that "your God is my God," and that "the People of the Book" will join with him. All the internal evidence is that that "Book" is the Tanak, not the Christian Bible.

Another interesting text that follows shortly after (v. 49-51):

Not before this didst thou recite any / Book, or inscribe it with thy right hand, / for then those who follow falsehood / would have doubted. / Nay; rather it is signs, clear signs / in the breasts of those who have been given / knowledge; and none denies Our signs but / the evildoers. / They say, 'Why have signs not been sent / down upon him from Lord?' Say: / 'The signs are only with God, and I am only / a plain warner. / What, is it not sufficient for them that / We have sent down upon thee the Book that is recited to them?'"

I have quoted at length, since it expresses a number of important issues that I have been addressing:

1. The book itself is the sign of the reality of revelation;
2. it ought to be enough, but Muhammad recognizes it is not convincing, so...
3. the book is *not* the sign: "signs are only with God".
4. My book is like your (Jews?) book;
5. the proof that this Book is true is that Muhammad has neither recited nor written "*before this*";
6. thus, the simple fact he had this gift of being able to communicate in this way, that he did not possess before, is the sign.

The list recognizes several problems; let me expand them. Muhammad simply did not understand how scripture functioned in the two monotheistic religions. Scripture was not the

basis of the religions, but the *result*. Scripture was “authorized”—possessed its authority—precisely in and through the community in which it existed and through which it was interpreted. Tanak has its authority through the Jewish people, and its official interpreters, the rabbis; the Bible has its authority through the church, and the bishops who stand in apostolic succession from the apostles, the first messengers of Jesus Christ.

But Muhammad had no authoritative tradition here, no community of interpreters who authorized what the scripture meant. He only had a Book. But that could never have been enough for either Jews or Christians.

Then there is the peculiar phrasing at the beginning of the quote. Remember, Muhammad was supposed to have been illiterate. The text denies that he has either recited or written “before this.” But clearly, he is “reciting” now. It seems a logical corollary that he is *also writing now*—otherwise, the phrase, “or inscribe it with thy right hand” has no function in the text.

Lastly, Muhammad observes that someone “demand” that he “hasten / the chastisement (v. 53)!” (The immediate context suggest unbelievers, but it is not clear.) As I have already pointed out, the God of the Qur’an only acts in eschatological judgment; there is no middle ground between destruction and the vanity—“a diversion / and a sport”—of “[t]his present life (v. 64).” Muhammad needs a sign, but he cannot produce it, since there is “a stated term,” after which it will “come upon them suddenly (v. 53).”

30, Al Rum

The first 6 verses of deal with a defeat of Byzantines and a claim they will eventually be victorious, to the approval of community of believers.

In his confidence of future Byzantine victory, Muhammad enthuses, “The promise of God! God fails not his promise, ... (v. 6);” this launches him into a hymn of praise, thanksgiving, and admonition which becomes one of the better Qur’anic expressions—in clarity, eloquence, and structure—of its religious vision. But I will argue that it also reveals the critical differences between the Qur’an and the Judeo-Christian religious vision, which I will try to elaborate at the end.

The religious vision of the Qur’an

The present life ends; “journey in the land” (v. 42) and see how all the greatness of human power fails (vv. 7-9). God has sent his signs so mankind can recognize his will, but it refuses to answer to him (vv. 10, 47). It replaces God’s greatness with the power of the “associates,” but in “the Hour,” they will not be able to intercede on its behalf (12-16, 47). All the forces, the spiritual powers, it depend on to sustain its glory will fail. Why cannot it see the truth? God has revealed himself in the “signs” of creation (vv. 17-20, 22, 24, 25), human love and affection (v. 21), languages (v. 22) and sleep (24). (See also vv. 46, 48-49.) Moreover God has the power of re-creation (vv. 40, 50); “it is very easy for Him (v 27).” The same God who made the wonders of nature and human experience will remake them when they fail.

“So set thy face to the religion...God’s original / upon which He originated mankind (v. 30).” Finally the primal and true way of following God (vv. 30-32, 38-39, 43-5): faith, prayer, unity (don’t break up into separate communities—v. 32), care of kinsmen, the needy, and the traveler, and “tarry in the Book (v. 56).”

Islam as primal and final religion

As I showed in my comments on the previous surah, the Qur'an knows no spiritual development or history-of-tradition: the Book is enough. No other powers can make it possible for mankind to stand in "the Hour," before the judge: "no intercessors shall they have amongst their associates (v. 13)." This a direct denial of the Jewish and Christian claims that is through either Mashiach or Christos will be the intermediary by which the judgment will be decided. Paul states the Christian view:

Romans 2:5 But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. 6 God "will give to each person according to what he has done." 7 To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. 8 But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. 9 There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; 10 but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. 11 For God does not show favoritism.

12 All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. 13 For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. 14 (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, 15 since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) 16 This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

But for the Qur'an there is neither Torah (= Paul's "the law"), nor Christ, but only the original religion, which has existed from creation. "There is no changing God's creation. / That is the right religion,... (v. 30)." But how then can the Torah be the criterion, since it did not exist until (assuming traditional dates) circa 1300 BCE? (Jewish tradition recognizes a difference between the Noahide and the Mosaic covenants.) How can a Christian receive eschatological salvation through Jesus Christ?

Existence and Eschatology

Jews and Christians claim to know of the eschaton—the ultimate consummation of all things—because there is a pattern of divine action. The consistent, but only gradually manifested, sequence of events reveals God's character and identity; it seems to be moving in a particular direction. The pattern suggests both teleology (there is an end or goal) and intentionality (there is a power directing all the individual elements to this self-same goal).

We find dim anticipations of this goal in Torah and the Psalms: the hope for a community guided by G-d, under an eschatological king. The prophets continued to develop this vision of a transformed community. In the events that transpired from the Prophets to the rabbis, it became clear that this projected "kingdom of God" required not only a new community, but a new cosmos.

The vague aspirations towards personal resurrection in Job, Ezekial, and Deutero-Isaiah, find their proximate realization among the Jews of the Maccabean struggles. But in the next 2 centuries, one tiny sect of Jews comes to believe the eschaton has already been fulfilled in an actual human being, a Jewish preacher of this kingdom of God, Jesus of Nazareth. In one sense, these ancient Jewish aspirations were annulled in the crucifixion of this Jesus, only to be restated and realized at a more all-encompassing level: the new kingdom on earth became a new kingdom of the spirit.

Meanwhile, the Jews went through their own passion in the destruction of the temple. Their “carnal election” (Wyschogrod) was annulled, to be restated at the more all-encompassing level of sanctification. The task of holiness went from the temple to the home; Jews became “set apart” in every aspect of their communal lives. Sanctification was no longer merely a sacral state to be enacted occasionally (in the temple), but a never-ceasing task. Even as Christians hoped (and hope) for the return of Christ as “King of kings and Lord of lords,” even so Jews looked (and look) for their *Mashiach* who will take their particular sanctification and make it universal: a cosmic community of holiness.

The Qur’an knows nothing of this pattern. It is either all eschatology or all of-this-world. There is the creation, and the “Hour”, and nothing in between. Either judgment is coming, or judgment is the here-and-now in the struggle against the unbelievers. I have pointed out that Muhammad consistently refused to help unbelievers *believe*. Either they believed or not. He refused to judge—that was up to God—until he (or a later leader wearing his prophetic mantle) summoned the believers to themselves become the bearer this judgment.

There is nothing in a Qur’anically-lived existence that empowers and approaches the anticipated “Hour.” Yes, “tarry in the Book,” but how does a believer live it out? No “associates” enables the believer to move towards “the Hour,” to live both in trust and hope: hope the fulfillment of his eschatological aspirations will not be delayed forever; trust that his God will not fail him, but will empower him to live so that these aspirations will become a reality.

For example, Paul encouraged early Christians thus: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:13).”

31, Lokman (*Luqman*) and 32, Prostration (*As-Sajda*)

Along with 30 (“The Greeks,” Ar-Rum), these surahs express a relatively pure form of a “religious Muhammad.” Assuming for now that the Traditional Account is correct when it claims that canonically last surahs give voice to the “first” Muhammad, seized by an apocalyptic consciousness, here a “religious Muhammad” is trying to provide his believers with a model for how to live until that apocalypse occurs.

He is full of confidence that the “Day of Victory” (32.27, 28: also called “Decision” or “Judgment”) will come. On this day, God will show that the believers, not those who have scorned the message, chose correctly. He calls believers to patience: “And bear patiently whatever may befall / thee; surely that is true constancy (31.17).” Likewise the “Children of Israel / ... / endured patiently, and had sure faith / in our signs (32.24).”

Along with patient waiting on the final triumph that God will bring about, the believers are to be humble: “Turn not thy cheek away from men in / scorn, and walk not in the earth exultantly; / God loves not any man proud and boastful (31.18; see 32.15).” At this point in the message, Muhammad anticipates that God, not the believers, will give them the victory. They give up the comfort of the present world—”Their sides shun their couches as they call on their Lord in fear and hope (32.16),” other translations imply a reference to getting out of bed in order to pray!—but “ a comfort is laid up / for them secretly, as a recompense for that / they were doing (32.17).” This hope is called “Garden of Refuge” (32.19), “Gardens of Bliss” (31.8], “Resurrection Day” (32.25), and the already mentioned “Day of Victory.” After that day, no further “respite” will be given to the unbelievers, but until then, the believers are to “wait” (32.29, 30).

Generally, we find the same themes stated in Ar-Rum:

- God as the power that creates, sustains, and will re-create, all things
- no associates with God
- prayer
- live rightly, well, or decently (translations here widely vary: Arberry, “honor”; Yusufali, “just[ice]”; Pickthal, “kind[ness]”; Shakir, “good[ness]”; Palmer, be “reasonable”), 31.17
- the signs of God, primarily in creation
- Refuge for the believers and Gehenna or Fire for the unbelievers .

One other point: once again Muhammad reminds the believers that although they are to be kind to parents, they should not allow their parents to force to recognize any “associates” alongside of God (31.15). So obviously we are still in an early phase of religious development where believers are having to reject the traditional religious teachings of their parents.

33, “The Confederates” , Al-Ahzab

Al-Ahzab is variously translated “the clans,” “the coalition,” “the combined forces”.

From the serene surrender of the past several surahs, we are back in the fevered martial atmosphere of commander rallying his troops. In the meantime, this commander has decided that he wants to marry his adopted son’s wife. So he faces military, political, and domestic conflicts. Bear in mind again that both components of the entire story are told in highly elliptical language, and thus my narrative needs to be prefaced with “as best as we can tell.”

From the beginning of the surah, he confronts not one but two opponents: the unbelievers and the hypocrites. “Hypocrites; here is not a religious term (someone who professes a religious or moral belief that he does not practice) but refers to what the commander regards as military or political treachery.

Muhammad and Zaid’s wife

He then attempts to provide a legal underpinning for his domestic conquest of his adopted son’s wife. We must be careful of reading our morality back into the story. The difficulty that Muhammad responds to is not desire for another man’s wife (a form of property), and taking her by some degree of coercion (both as head of his family and as leader of the community). The issue is one of *incest*: sexual relations with one’s son’s mate is a prohibited degree of consanguinity.

Muhammad, however, has a handy loophole: his son is *adopted*. He therefore declares that incest rules do not apply to adopted children (vv. 4-6). The blood-line of an adopted child is determined by their parents; if biological parentage is unknown, then “they are your brothers in religion, and your clients (v. 5)” —and thus he can marry their wives (once divorce has taken place).

He compares the (now nullified) incest rules to the saying “Be as my mother’s back,” which was apparently used as a form of dismissal for a divorced wife (v. 4). Obviously calling a divorced wife “my mother’s back” does not make her one’s mother; so likewise (Muhammad reasoned), calling an adopted son one’s son does not *really* make him one’s son.

Muhammad is making an implicit attack on the conventions of social norms, and reinstates in its place the priority of blood relations: “Those who are / bound by blood are nearer to one another / in the Book of God than the believers and the / emigrants”; but he is quick to add that one should treat “your friends honourably”—a nice concession (v. 6).

*A Surah of the Bedchamber*⁵

But apparently even this legal reinterpretation didn’t quiet the storm of protest (a fact to which the Traditional Account, and the justificatory efforts of Muslim apologists, give witness). After the discussion of the Confederates, he first addresses his wives, who seem to be in an uproar over the new rival. If you want worldly happiness, then I will be happy to let you go. But if you remain faithful to me, then you will get a “mighty wage”. He is quick to attach this “wage” to the “Last Abode”—as if to say, you might not get your pleasure here, but you will get it in your afterlife (vv. 28-29). Then he warns them that any “flagrant indecency” will meet with a double punishment (v. 30). Their special position requires them to stay in their houses (v. 33).

After a poem of praise to ideal men and women (which appears quite contrary to his own behavior), he asserts his absolute authority: “It is not for any believer, man or / woman, when God and His Messenger / have decreed a matter, to have the choice / in the affair (v. 36).” The discussion is over with, although Muhammad defends his own behavior of failing to speak up sooner in his desire for his son’s wife: he was keeping it to himself, fearing what other people would think (!), until “Zaid” (the son) had “accomplished / what he would of her” (!), and then God authorized Muhammad to take her (vv. 37-38).

He also continues to address the interrelated questions of the behavior required of his own wives (e.g., v. 59), legislation to protect the privacy of the “Prophet”—don’t hang around for chit-chat—and his wives (v. 53), and permitted degrees of relations that the wives can have in their houses (v. 55). Oh, and, most importantly, no man is “to marry his wives after him [the Prophet], ever (v 53).”

I find the behavior of this Prophet deeply disturbing. Whatever might be the spiritual merits of his earlier teaching, his behavior here strongly suggests a sociopathic personality: someone who regards his own will as law and right. At least 4 characteristics, as identified on part 2 of [this posting](#), seem relevant to the qur’anic story line:

- a sociopath knows right from wrong, but is not bound by it

⁵ Thematically speaking, I suggest a “Book of the Bedchamber” consists of Surahs 33 (this surah), 49, maybe 58, and 66.

- lacking the ability to develop deep attachments to people, a sociopath “seeks to gain power ... by causing the suffering of others.” Recall the theme of destruction, which will, I believe become, the central theme of the “early” (as traditionally understood) Qur’an.
- A sociopath is “inordinately focused on sexuality”
- Other people are “disposable” to the sociopath; he has no “sense of obligation” (e.g., Muhammad’s evasion of the questions of his listeners, who presumably want to avoid judgment, but aren’t being told how they can do that)

The confederates

This word immediately brings to mind the *foederati* in *Crossroads to Islam*, the Arab soldiers that were paid by the Byzantines to provide order in Syria and Palestine. So the obvious question is, do we finally have a clear correlation between the Qur’an and history? At its core, this question requires linguistic expertise I do not possess. What is the Arabic equivalent of *foederati*? Is there any comparative evidence for what *al-ahzab* means, or how it was used?

In the meantime, we have the text, and that is what we will have to go on. What I will do here is simply retell the story—“as best as we can tell”—and see what we can infer from it.

The account begins with reference to a battle in which the believers experienced some sort of set back (vv. 9-11). The “hypocrites” began to question the value of the mission, and told the “people of Yahtrib” that they ought to “return” or “retreat” (vv. 12-13). According to the Traditional Account, Yahtrib was the pre-Muslim name of Medina. Is there independent historical attestation for such a city, specifically in the Hijaz? If so, then we have a clear connection to the Traditional Account. If not, unless we can independently show connections within the Qur’anic text to that Account, we must suspect that it fabricated a connection to this citation.

Other hypocrites complained that their homes “were exposed,” although Muhammad dismissed that as an excuse (v. 13). Now it was these hypocrites who thought that the Confederates “have not departed;” but Muhammad thought that if they *do* come, the hypocrites would have wanted to be in the desert, with the Bedouins (v. 20). This implies to me that (in Muhammad’s mind) the hypocrites wanted to follow the reports from a distance, but did not want to be actively involved. In any case, they would “fight but little”—which suggests that Muhammad did not care if they went or stayed.

So far, I conclude that the Confederates were *supporters* of the believers, while the hypocrites wanted to keep their distance, either because of fear of the support the Confederates would give Muhammad’s military plans, because of fear for their own safety, or because of their unwillingness to fully commit to Muhammad’s army. This conclusion is directly supported by v. 22: “When the believers saw the Confederates / they said, ‘This is what God and His Messenger / promised us,....’” Therefore, the Confederates were perceived by the believers as an answer to the divine promise—presumably for victory—and the hypocrites did not want to be a part of Muhammad’s campaign.

The end of the campaign is recorded in vv. 25-27:

- the unbelievers were “sent back,” apparently by what was perceived as divine intervention;
- the believers were “spared...of fighting”;
- the People of the Book who supported “them” (the unbelievers?) were “brought down...from their fortresses;

- the believers were given the houses, possessions of the People of the Book, and “a land you never trod.”

The above is my *prima facie* reconstruction, based on a direct reading of the text. The problem is, it is directly opposite of the traditional qur’anic interpretation, in which the Confederates are the *enemies* of the believers.

The Traditional Account relates this to the Battle of the Trench, and Muhammad’s attacks on the Jewish communities in Medina and elsewhere for alleged treason. In this account, the Confederates are Arabic tribes joining together to defeat the growing Muslim power in Medina (supposedly Yahtrib). Note that *it is possible* to interpret the key elements of the story to fit the Traditional Account:

1. The hypocrites thought that the confederates were still a danger (to Medina, which the hypocrites share with the believers);
2. if the confederates returned, the hypocrites didn’t want to be around
3. the coming of the confederates was a “answer,” not to the hopes of the believers, but to the divinely-sanctioned warnings by “his Messenger” of what was about to happen; in other words, Muhammad had predicted it, and now it was happening;
4. the believers defeated the People of the Book *who had supported the confederates* (not the unbelievers), in this case Jews, taking property and land, killing some and enslaving others.

However, there are still certain elements that don’t quite fit:

1. Why does the text distinguish between the confederates and the unbelievers? According to the Traditional Account, they are one and the same.
2. The *prima facie* significance of the confederates is that they are an answer to the hopes of the believers, even while they represent a discomfiting presence to the hypocrites. The Traditional Account inverts this reading.
3. The *prima facie* reading of the People of the Book is that they support the *unbelievers*, not the *confederates*. Is the traditional reading based on some linguistic or syntactical evidence (e.g., the case of the pronoun “them”)? Unless there some such evidence, the only reason for conflating the unbelievers and the confederates is the traditional account.
4. The text says that in giving over to the believers the property of the People of the Book, the believers were given “a land you never trod.” To my ears, that means the believers had never been in that “land” before. Are we to believe that the believers (presumably in Medina) had never been in the (presumably Jewish) communities they conquered? In my judgment, that is highly unlikely. It therefore must mean that they were conquering Jewish or Christian communities *outside of the Hijaz*.
5. Since a reader can make the account fit widely different scenarios, let me try to make it fit a revisionist history. I will assume that the “confederates” here are in fact *foederati*. The community is leaving the comfort of the Hijaz. Facing adversity, they are tempted to withdraw to their native land. But the confederates—Arabic *foederati*, originally attached to the Byzantines—come to their aid. They were able to disperse the unbelievers, presumptively pagan Arabs who did not share their communal or religious vision. They attacked the “fortresses” of the People of the Book, who could have been either Christian or Jewish settlements in the Syria/Palestine. Now, the believers have successfully taken

over communities in Syria/Palestine—”a land you never trod” before—with houses and goods.

Apart from independent historical or linguistic evidence, I do not think there is any way of knowing which of these stories is the “true” one.

34, Sheba, *Saba*

Either we are at the beginning or the end of the “religious” surahs. Either Muhammad is beginning to shape his religious themes (presumably in a state of inspiration), or it that inspiration is becoming routinized. The statement of those themes in these surahs lacks depth and power; we have already encountered spiritually richer statements. So I will simply itemize, and allow the reader the attach to the themes the content I have expressed earlier.

- 1-3: praise to God who knows all
- 4-5: people “strive against the signs,” “denying the Hour”
- 7-9: What about a man torn apart in death? God can do anything
- 10-20: stories about David, Solomon, and Sheba, again emphasized the mysterious and magical nature of the signs
- 22-27: intercession will not help
- 29-30: doubts about the promise...*it is coming*
- 34-37: warnings against those who depend on their own wealth; chastisement is coming
- 43-44: answers charges of forgery and sorcery; 46: Muhammad is not mad (which suggests he looked mad to his listeners);
- 50: “Say, ‘If I go astray, I go astray / only to my own loss; if I am guided, / it is only by what my Lord reveals to me.’” (Muhammad refused to take responsibility for what the message is saying to him.)

35, The Angels, *Fatir*

God is all-powerful. He can make angels with 2, 3, or *even* 4 wings. God is all-powerful. Really, really powerful. So: recite the Book of God, perform the prayer and expend for God (34.29).

36, Ya Sin

(named after the introductory syllables)

- A “similitude”: 3 envoys are rejected. A man “from the furthest part of the city” tells them to follow the Envoys (v. 20).
- They don’t ask a wage (a standard response of the Muhammad in these middle surahs) (v. 21) and
- the man, why should I seek intercessors who cannot help me (v. 23)
- signs (33-46)
- new life out of the dead land
- the sun and moon
- darkness and light
- ships (clearly Muhammad was impressed by ships running on the sea, and saw it a significant example of God’s power)

- “Fear what is before you / and what is behind you; haply you will find mercy’—... (45)”: live in constant awareness of the frailty of life
- Feed the needy, and don’t depend on God to do it (47)
- 48-57: warning of resurrection and judgment (resurrection here is not a hopeful reality; the dead rise reluctantly out of their graves : “Who roused us out of our sleeping-place?” (v. 52).”
- 69: God did not teach him (presumably Muhammad) poetry; he is only giving “a Remembrance / and a Clear Koran.”
- 70: This “Word “ is only a word of warning, that will be “realized against the unbelievers.”
- 77: God has created man from a “sperm-drop” (a central image of the presumptively early surahs); therefore...
- man is God’s “adversary” (is man God’s opponent simply by virtue of being created?) because he doubts that he can be “quicken[ed](v. 78].”

A concluding comment about the last two bullets: in the last 7 verses of 36, I find a profoundly pessimistic description of the human condition. God is eternal, man is mortal, and that fixes a great wall between these two classes of beings. In our mortality, we always doubt the ability of God to resurrect us, transform us, give new life to our mortal bodies. God made us mortal in the first place (from a “sperm-drop”—an image that we will read again and again in the last surahs), and he will “quicken the bones.” But there is nothing in-between.

This is a world away from Christianity, which in the resurrection of Jesus Christ finds the promise and anticipation of final and full resurrection. Furthermore, Christianity teaches that Jesus Christ is even now present, working in the believer and the community to prepare believers for this resurrection. Thus, according to St. Ignatius of Antioch, the Eucharist is the medicine of immortality. Or as Paul says “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Cor. 4:8-11).

In Christianity, there is a supernatural process in which the believer participates, yet which is truly the action of God, through Jesus Christ.

But in the Qur’an, both creation and recreation is God’s arbitrary action, totally dependent on his untrammelled will.

37, “The Rangers,” As-Saaffat

Following the canonical order, this is the first to begin with an oath that is not a reference to the Koran or Book.

By the rangers ranging, / and the scarers scaring/ and the reciters of a Remembrance, / surely your God is One, / ... (vv. 1-4).

These oaths invoke a variety of forces, some natural, some sociological. I have counted a total of 17 or 18 (one or two are disputable): 51, 53, 75, 77, 79, 82, 83 (?), 85, 86, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 95, 100, 101 (again, I am here *not* counting oaths that invoke the “Koran” or “the Book”). Sometimes the oaths seem to have the character of incantations, as here: “by the...”; sometimes they explicitly “swear by” some element of the prophet’s teaching or experience (90.1: “No, I

swear by this land,...”). Muhammad seems to think that these oaths/incantations give his message special power or verification.

The interpretation of “rangers ranging” varies from that of the image of angels drawn up in cosmic ranks (Palmer) to that of an army gathered in formation (Pickthal). “Scarers scaring” seems clearer: these are “drivers,” as in “beaters” driving the prey to those who will kill or capture them. (Some translations insist on moralizing the image: “And those who drive away (the wicked) with reproof [Pickthal, also Yusufali]”). So the twin image is a body of warriors or hunter seeking and hounding the prey—to what?

For it is only a single scaring, then behold, they are watching / and they say, ‘Woe, alas for us! This is the Day of Doom (vv. 19-20).’

(Other translations do not connect v. 1 and v. 19, using different words for “scaring”.) So humanity is being driven to its judgments, as a prey to capture or death.

The ensuing discussion (vv. 20-32) is a cross-questioning of the “mustered,” those gathered for judgment. They blame each other for their doom, and in turn recognize their responsibility. Muhammad wants to question them, ““Why help you not one another (v. 25)?”““Each side attacks the other: ““you were an insolent people (v. 30).”” So Muhammad projects his own frustration at the unwillingness of the people to listen: *I wanted to help you, but rejected my prophetic wisdom; so “go to hell”*: ““now certainly you shall be tasting the painful chastisement, (v. 38).””

The remainder of the is given to messenger stories, who are now called “Envoys” (as they are in the previous surah).

38, “Sad”

Continues with a variety of messenger stories, with a wider variety of messengers, including Job and Elisha. Is this earlier or later than the formulations found in Surahs 21-29? They seem simpler, “I know of so-and-so, and so-and-so,” without explaining (even in Muhammad’s formulaic and stereotyped way) how their message is relevant to his own. If they are earlier (as suggested by the Traditional Account), then why doesn’t he develop the theology of, say, Job and Elisha (who are arguably closer to his own than Abraham or Moses)? Or do we explain the undeveloped nature of the stories by saying that he is running out of inspiration, like a preacher touching on names familiar to his congregation, but too lazy to remind them of their significance—or assuming that they already know?

One hint of the primitive character of the is v. 65, 70: “Say, ‘I am only a warner. / there is not any god but God, / the One, the Omnipotent, / ... / This alone is revealed to me, that I am only a clear warner.’” So Muhammad is seized by a vision of Doom and judgment, and feels compelled to warn his community of the judgment that will be carried out by this One supreme power.

Some of the traditional accounts do set this early in Muhammad’s public ministry: see [Maududi’s commentary](#).

39, “the Companies”, Az-Zumar

Although a relatively long surah, its themes are diffuse. But several motifs are noticable:

The sending down of the Book is from God / the All-mighty, the All-wise. / We have sent down to thee the Book with the truth; / so worship God, making thy religion His sincerely. / Belongs not sincere religion to God (vv. 1-3)? Say: ‘I have been commanded to be serve God / making my religion His sincerely; and / I have been commanded to be the first of those that surrender.’ Say: ‘Truly I fear, if I should revel / against my Lord, the chastisement / of a dreadful day.’ / Say, ‘God I serve , making my religion / His sincerely; / so serve what you will apart from Him.’ / Say: ‘Surely the losers are they who / lose themselves and their families / on the Day of Resurrection; is not that the manifest loss? (vv. 11-15).’

Sincerely make one’s religion identical to the one revealed by Muhammad. This seems to say that people who share some element of Muhammad’s message (generic monotheists? People of the Book?) are being called to embrace Islam; they are being called to do it in reality. At least 3 other motifs support this interpretation:

- The religion seems to have reached a high level of self-definition, since v. 22 asks: “Is he whose breast God has expanded unto *Islam*, so he walks in a light / from his Lord... [sic]?” (All translations agree on rendering it with the name of the religion here.) So Islam has become a self-conscious religion.
- Christianity is within the speaker’s purview, since v. 4 uses the standard polemic against God having a son. Perhaps Muhammad is summoning Christians (in Syria?) to join this religion.
- There is a repeated focus on “the Book” and the “Arabic Koran” (vv. 1-2, 23, 27, 28, 41), suggesting that the “textuality” of the revelations has become central.

But otherwise the seems to be a standard early “judgment” text, with numerous warnings of “chastisement” (as seen in the above-quoted verses), calls to “surrender,” (vv. 12, 54) and it ends with a long poem on the “Day of Resurrection, the nature of the last judgment (v. 70: “Every soul shall be paid in full for what it has wrought...”), and the fate of those entering Gehenna and Paradise. It is difficult to place these different elements of the into a connected story-line. I can only venture a guess at this point: this is a imitating the qualities of a “judgment” text; perhaps it is a text addressing Jews and Christians just as Islam becomes a distinct profession, but before the unwillingness of the People of the Book to join Islam becomes clear. Is the warning in v. 15 against losing families saying: don’t lose your children to the new religion, while you stay behind?

40, “The Believers”, (or, the Forgiver) Al-Ghafir

40 continues the themes of 39: the centrality of the Book, and a warning to those who question it; a call to “sincerely” identify one’s own religion with God’s (v. 14); a restatement of some “signs”; several messenger stories, including an alternative Moses/Pharaoh account; two Gehenna accounts, in which judgment comes to those who reject the signs (vv. 46-52) and who proudly believe that their own gods will aid them (vv. 70-76). The clear connection between surahs 39 and 40 imply that my judgment at the end of my comments on 39 is invalid: both surahs come after the presumptively “early” warnings of doom, and contain what I tentatively

regard as primitive versions of messenger stories, accounts that will be developed in Surahs 21-29.

In the Moses/Pharaoh story (vv. 23-45), Muhammad does not identify himself with Moses, but with a “believer...that kept hidden” who comes forward to warn Pharaoh. Pharaoh threatened Moses with death because “he may change your religion (v. 26).” The “believer” responds

‘What, will you slay a man / because he says, “ My Lord is God,” / yet he has brought you the clear signs / from your Lord? If he is a liar, his lying is upon his own head; but / if he is truthful, somewhat of that he / promises you will smite you. Surely / God guides not him who is prodigal and a liar (v. 28).

Muhammad regularly represents himself a man expressing the religious vision (in words) that he has been given. “I am nothing but a warner” (e.g., 38.65); why are you attacking me? He gives a quasi-logical proof of the truth of his message: either I am telling the truth, in which case you ought to listen to my warnings of judgment-to-come, or I am lying, in which case the judgment will only come upon me. This masks the fact that *if* Muhammad is lying, *and* his listeners accept his message, then they will fundamentally change their life and society in order to avoid a judgment that would have never come. In other words, the disingenuous aspect of Muhammad’s is his claim that he is *not forcing his listeners to choose* (whereas, in fact, they must). (Furthermore, in the end we know, Muhammad’s predictions of imminent doom were never fulfilled—at least not until the armies of believers took it upon themselves to make them come true.)

And in the end, contrary to other readings of the past judgments, Muhammad seems to think at the conclusion of the that the choice of his listeners won’t make any difference in their fate:

What, have they not journeyed in the land and/ beheld how was the end of those before them? They were stronger than themselves in might /and left firmer traces in the earth; yet / that they earned did not avail them. / So, when their Messengers brought them / the clear signs, ... [and] ... they saw Our might, they said, / ‘We believe in God alone, and we disbelieve / in what we were associating with Him.’ But their belief when they saw Our might / did not profit them—the wont of God, as / in the past, touching His servants; then / the unbelievers shall be lost (vv. 82-85).

So the unbelievers in Muhammad’s message will suffer God’s might, and only then will they acknowledge the message’s truth. But how then can the listener know its truth, if they must wait for its fulfillment, in order to know that it is true? Then, however, it is too late; since the acknowledgment of God’s sovereign might will not earn forgiveness.

The implication is one I have argued before: there is no “in-between” in the qur’anic message. Either there is the recognition of God’s power in creation, or the submission before God’s power in the day of doom, but there is no *faith* in the present reality of God, making eschatological triumph present in the believer’s life and operative so as to prepare the believer for the final eschatological decision. One must decide “in the dark,” without any evidence that the creator is also the judge, other than the say-so of the messenger.

41, “Distinguished” *Fussilat*

Muhammad reacts to people who are not convinced by his recitations. He thinks they are being dishonest, but it seems clear that the message just doesn't communicate anything to them. He thinks his message is self-evident: “your God is one God” (v. 6), recognize that all comes from this God, believe in a coming judgment, and give alms to the needy. But why should they believe *their* (i.e., presumptively the pagan Arab) deity is singular? Nothing is less evident. Once again we see where Muhammad retrojects a monotheistic vision of the world back onto paganism, without realizing that he is combining two incommensurate worlds. He is asking for a fundamental “paradigm-shift,” without explaining how the new paradigm is worthy of acceptance, what evidence shows the unbelievers that they ought to embrace it.

Muhammad's recitations are a curiosity, something worthy of the *National Inquirer* of their day and place: “The unbelievers say, ‘Do not give ear / to this Koran, and talk idly about it; haply you will overcome (v. 26).’” Of course, it is really *Muhammad* who does not want them to “talk idly”; he wants them to hear, believe, and obey. As so often happens, Muhammad projects his own concerns on his opponents, and then is astonished when they do not respond as he expects.

One must empathize with his incredulous listeners, since the prophet cannot always get his own “facts” (in his self-enclosed prophetic world) straight. He has always said that the world was created in six days (7.54, 10.3, 11.7, 25.59, 32.4, 50.38, 57.4). But he says in 41.9 that God created the “earth” in “two days.” But he knows he's slipped, since he adds, “He ordained therein / its diverse sustenance in four day, equal to those who ask (41.10).” “Equal to those who ask” suggests he knows someone will inquire about the apparent inconsistency—“but didn't you say 6 days?”—to which Muhammad will respond: add 4 days for creating “sustenance” to the 2 days of creation. But he still has “2 days” in his prophetic stream of consciousness, since in v. 12 he adds that God “determined them as seven heavens / in two days....”

For the remainder, we have another messenger tale (Thamood this time), a Gehenna description, warnings about the failure to recognize and appreciate God's blessings, and more on the signs.

42, “Counsel” *Ash-Shura*

42 begins 4 surahs which are united by the repetition of the phrase (in 42.5; 43.82; 44.7; 45.36):

“Lord of the heavens and the earth”

I believe this is a deliberate echo of the Christian credal phrase: “I believe in God, creator of heaven and earth....” This phrase is also used in the presumptively later surahs; there is frequently an explicit connection to anti-Christian polemicizing:

- 13.16: the same verse goes on to ask, why do you take associates?;
- 17:102 is followed by a version of the Moses and Israel-in-the-promised-land story; v. 111 then denies that God has a son;
- in 18:14, the phrase is used to declare that “we” will never worship any other gods; the “youths in the cave” story (which we know to be Christian in origin begins in v. 16);
- 19.65: v. 34 denies that Allah has a son;

- 21.56: the phrase is used in a version of the Abraham story to attack the worship of other gods;
- 26:24 in the Moses story (it adds: “Lord *and Cherisher...*”);
- Some uses of the phrase are followed by the phrase “and all between,” which certainly is logically parallel to the next phrase in the Christian creed: “...and of all things visible and invisible”: see the examples in
- 5.17: another explicit polemic against the divine sonship of Christ, although it uses “Allah” in the place of “Lord”;
- 15.85; 21.16; 25.59; 30.8; 32.4 (“We created...”);
- 19.65, see above;
- 20.6 (“To all belongs...”); That is just a partial list.

This conceptual connection therefore allows us to postulate that these surahs are linked in time and space to a Christian context. Two details in this support this hypothesis:

1. v. 7: “And so We have revealed to thee an / Arabic Koran, that thou mayest warn/ the Mother of Cities and those who / dwell about it, and that thou mayest / warn of the Day of Gathering,....” What is the “mother of cities?” Even the traditional account says that Muhammad’s followers first prayed towards Jerusalem. “Mecca” is only named once in the Qur’an, in a I will review shortly (48.24, some translations paraphrase the text at other points to include “Mecca”), an explicitly militaristic surah, and thus presumably “late”. So this present is likely at an early stage of the “Muhammadan” mission to Syria/Palestine, while he still believes that Jews and Christians will listen to his message.

2. The text immediately begins to develop a call to unity.

Call to unity among the monotheistic religions:

If God had willed, He would have made them / one nation. ... And whatever you are at variance on, / the judgment thereof belongs to God. ... He has laid down for you as religion / that He charged Noah with, and that /We have revealed to thee, and that We / charged Abraham with, Moses and Jesus: ‘Perform the religion, and scatter not / regarding it.’ Very hateful is that for the idolaters, that thou callest them to. ... They scattered not, save after knowledge / had come to them, being insolent one to another; and but for a Word / that preceded from thy Lord until a stated term, it had been decided / between them. But those to whom the Book / has been given as an inheritance / after them, behold, they are in doubt of it disquieting. / Therefore call thou, and go straight as thou hast been commanded; do not follow / their caprices. And say: ‘I believe in whatever Book God has sent down; I / have been commanded to be just between / you. God is our Lord and your Lord. ... God shall bring us together, and unto Him is the homecoming (vv. 8, 10, 13, 14, 15).’

I read this text as follows: Muhammad believed that God could will decide about the validity of the differences among the monotheistic sects. He appealed to the heroes of both Jews and Christians, placing his own agenda for unity in their mouths. That it is religious unity he is referring to is clear from his claim that what they call idolaters to is hateful to them: i.e., worship only one true God. The separation of the monotheistic sects resulted from “insolence,” pride (improper in Muhammad’s mind) in the individual beliefs of each sect. V. 14’s meaning is uncertain, but other translations can be paraphrased: God would have judged the monotheistic sects, except that he had granted them a “term” of existence. All the divisions bring doubt and

uncertainty (about the Book? future judgment?). Muhammad was told not to follow their “caprices,” what he considers their arbitrary beliefs and practices. He was convinced that the Lord of Jews and Christians was his Lord, and all will be united in the eschatological future.

The text gives a possible answer to a question that has long puzzled me: why did Muhammad believe that the sailing of ships on the sea was a “sign” of God’s creative power? Here it says:

“And of His signs / are the ships that run on the sea like landmarks; / and if He wills, He stills the wind, and / they remain motionless on its back. ... Or He wrecks them for what they have earned; and He pardons much (vv. 33-34).”

Here the fate of ships becomes a metaphor for life: sometimes men move around, driven by some mysterious power; sometimes that power is mysteriously withdrawn; and sometimes they are “wrecked” in response for what they have done.

Vv. 37-43 provides a basic ethics:

- “avoid” “heinous sins and indecencies”;
- “when...angry forgive”;
- “perform the prayer”;
- consult with one another (“their affair being counsel between them”; see other translations)
- “expend,” i.e., use one’s resources, presumably in doing good, or for the sake of the believers’ community;
- take proper revenge against “insolence”, although...
- a person who pardons an offense (presumably an insult or “insolence”) will be rewarded by God.

At the end of the surah, the Qur’an what I take to be the normative doctrine of revelation: God does not speak directly, but only “by revelation, or from behind a veil, / or that He should send a messenger / and he reveal whatsoever He will, / by His leave; ... (v. 51).” So God speaks indirectly through the messengers, not directly.

But both Judaism and Christianity do not find revelation in the prophets per se, but in (1) decisive (Spengler would say, “unique”) events in history, (2) interpreted through a tradition of texts and “liturgical praxis. From a Jewish standpoint, the prophetic has been supplanted by the Oral Torah; in Christianity, it is has been replaced by the supernatural presence of Jesus Christ (for liturgical traditions, found primarily in the Eucharist; for evangelical traditions, in a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ”).

43, “Ornaments,” Az-Zukhruf

I have argued, based on the internal evidence that Surahs 42 through 45, and maybe 46, are linked together. I suggested that the common locus for these surahs is Muhammad’s appeal to Jews and Christians to join him in a unified monotheistic religion. This is confirmed at the beginning of this surah, where at least some of his interlocutors identify the creator as “the All-mighty, the All-knowing (v. 9),” implying their monotheism.

Before commenting further, I observe that [Maududi](#) also links these surahs together,, although based on different criteria. At the same time, he observes that the Traditional Account does not give any explanation for the context of these surahs. That indirectly supports my

argument that internal evidence locates these surahs outside of the Hijaz and after the pre-conquest timeline of the Traditional Account. In other words, since the Traditional Account gives no guidance on the matter, we can assume that is in part because the content of these surahs *cannot* be fit within the Traditional Account, either in place or in time.

- 43, Az-Zukhruf: “It could not be known from any authentic tradition, but a study of its subject matter shows that this also was sent down in the same period in which the Surahs Al-Mumin [= ? Al-Mu’minun] [23], As-Sajdah [32] and Ash-Shura [42], were sent down.”
- 44, Ad-Dukhan: “Its period of revelation also could not be determined from any authentic tradition, but the internal evidence of the subject matter shows that this too was sent down in the same period in which Zukhruf [43] and a few other earlier Surahs had been revealed.”
- 45, Al-Jathiyah: “The period of the revelation of this also has not been mentioned in any authentic tradition, but its subject matter clearly shows that it was revealed consecutively after Ad Dukhan [44].”

Returning to the present surah: it opens with a reference to a “Clear Book,” an “Arabic Koran [recitation],” “in the essence of the Book” (= ? “the most essential book”; *or*, “having the essence of what a book is”). (This phrase uses the infamous “Mother of all...,” idiom, used, or misused by Saddam Hussein.) Again, observe the advanced nature of its textuality: there is a recitation in Arabic, which is clear, and contains the essential nature and character of “book-ness.” I continue to believe that such language expresses an advanced stage of development of the qur’anic canon, since it assumes that “books” are essential to the community’s religious self-consciousness.

There are people Muhammad charges with worship of female angels (the presumed female deities of Arabic paganism); they excuse their religion by saying it is a result of God’s action (v. 20). Muhammad’s only answer is that “they are only conjecturing.” His problem is that his ahistorical view of revelation does not explain how the pagans fit into salvation history. The pagan question is: if God is “all-merciful,” then why didn’t he reveal himself to us, or our own fathers? Why did he allow us to remain in our presumed idolatry? That is, given the substance of Muhammad’s proclamation, is a reasonable question. All he knows is that the “All-merciful” has spoken to him; he has no way of explaining his earlier silence. So he has a “Book”? How does he know that his message “trumps” the traditions of the fathers? The other community (whoever they may be) says : ““We found our fathers / upon a community, and we are guided upon their traces (v. 22).”” Muhammad then attacks this traditionalism by saying that it is the excuse used by every community that had been visited by a “warner” (v. 23). But that does not answer the question: why should the community abandon its tradition, created through long years of use, for...”a book”?

The previous paragraph tentatively follows the Traditional Account by assuming the “female angels” were the supposed “trinity” of Arabic paganism (see “[Pre-Islamic Arabia: Religion](#)”); this trinity is mentioned in 53.19-20. However, there is nothing in this particular text that requires this interpretation. Muhammad has consistently re-interpreted the piety of other communities to fit his own biases and polemics; it is possible that he is here referring to some traditional angel veneration in either orthodox Christianity, or any number of Jewish or Christian sects, with unusually elevated views of angels. Perhaps he has conflated his views of the pagan Arabic cult with other expressions of “angel worship” he is confronting in Syria-Palestine.

If any of these interpretations have merit, then they bring to the fore the problem of tradition: Muhammad sets his “clear” “book,” his “Arabic recitations” against the supposed corruptions of tradition. He seems to think that the mere existence of a powerful, transparent text, is enough to refute the obscurities and uncertainties of tradition. Of course, the irony that eventually emerges is that the Muslim canon will also experience the same corruptions (so-called); indeed, no religious tradition exists without them.

The Christian cultural context is supported by references to Jesus in vv. 57 and 63: apparently Muhammad is appealing to Jesus in support of his ministry, the pagans respond: “‘What are our gods better, or he?’” V. 63 simply uses Jesus to support Muhammad’s own claim to the authoritative interpreter of God’s will:

‘I have / come to you with wisdom , and / that I may make clear to you / some of that whereon you are / at variance; so fear you God / and obey you me.’

Although the grammar says that the antecedent of “I” is Jesus, the rhetorical assertion is directed by Muhammad at the Christians, “God is my Lord and *your* Lord” (v. 64), so “obey *me*.”

He returns to attack the Christian belief in the divine sonship of Christ:

Say, ‘If the All-merciful has a son, / then I am the first to serve him. / Glory be to the Lord of the heavens / and the earth, the Lord of the Throne, / above that they describe.’ Then leave them alone to plunge [Yusafali: “babble”; Pickthall: “flounder”] and play, / until they encounter that day of theirs / which they are promised (vv. 81-83).

So Muhammad claims that *if* indeed Christ was God’s son, then he would have worshiped him; but since he does not, he cannot be God’s son; this assumes, of course, that Muhammad can self-confidently assert the rectitude of his own religious judgment and prophetic insight. Let them “babble”—reading the Christological controversies, one can understand what Muhammad might have meant here—; they will eventually face the final judgment they believe in.

At this point Muhammad come closest to theological self-understanding of Judaism and Christianity: the final truth is eschatological, only at the last judgment will God will fully known and his identity manifested in its utter clarity. I, as a Christian, would respond: exactly so. Let the eschaton reveal whose vision of God is the truth: the God revealed in the face and person of Jesus Christ, or the Allah of these “recitations.” Will Jesus Christ indeed have the “power of intercession” (v. 86) to “justify” those who “believe in his name” (John 1:12, 20:31; “justify” is a Paulinian rather than a Johannine term)? Or will that faith, that confident trust, prove to be an illusion? In the meantime, the differences of character are too stark to be easily resolved into a single, self-same entity.

Yet Muhammad has not yet lost his hope that Christians will join him: although someone (unidentified) is saying “‘My Lord, surely these are a people who believe not;’” Muhammad is commanded to “pardon them, and say ‘Peace!’ Soon they will believe (vv. 88-89).”

From this point forward, most of my comments will be brief. The surahs are getting consecutively shorter, and my notes are briefer yet—usually just a few sentences. I’ll try to capture as clearly as possible the rhetorical core of these ever more apocalyptic pronouncements

44, “Smoke”, Ad-Dukhan

44 evokes the mystery and awe of the coming of the messages:

We have sent it down in a blessed night / (We are ever warning) / therein everywise bidding determined / as a bidding from Us, / (We are ever sending) / as a mercy from thy Lord (vv. 3-6) .

(For some relief, these words immediately evoke the 4th act duet between Enee and Dido in Berlioz’ *Les Troyens*:

“Nuit d’ivresse et d’extase infinie! / Blonde Phoebe, grands astres de sa cour, / Versez sur nous votre lueur benie; Fleurs des cieux, souriez a l’immortel amour!”

The difference is that Muhammad is not in love with a woman, but with the divine voice that he believes is speaking through him.)

But the day of doom will come, “when the heaven shall bring a manifest smoke / covering the people (v. 10).” He ends the by describing the “food of the guilty,” which comes from “the Tree of Ez-Zakkoum”; he compares it to bubbling, molten copper (vv. 43-46). On the other hand, the “godfearing” will be “secure / among gardens and fountains,” and “We shall espouse them / to wide-eyed houris” and shall enjoy an eternity of “calling for every fruit. (vv. 51-55).”

45, “Hobbling,” (or, “Crouching”), Al-Jathiya

A book of “signs”: “Those are the signs of God that we recite to thee in truth; / in what manner of discourse then, after God and His signs, / will they believe (v. 6)?”

- heaven and earth, night and day (3-5);
- those who hear the signs and refuse them in pride and mockery (7-11);
- sea and ships (12);
- “We gave the Children of Israel / the Book, the Judgment, and the Prophethood,” and they did not differ (? from what we are saying) until knowledge made them “insolent” (16-17)
He then criticizes the unbelievers:
 - who falsely imagine that there is no difference between evil and good actions;
 - who are guided by their “caprice” (23);
 - who say this life is all there is. Those who took “God’s signs in mockery” and were “deluded” by “the present life” will have “Fire” for their “refuge”; but those who did “deeds of righteousness” will be received into the “Lord[’s]” “mercy, that is the manifest triumph (vv. 35, 34, 30).”

46, “The Sand-Dunes,” Al-Ahqaf

Muhammad continues the recitations of “signs,” but now focusing on the signification of his own revelations:

- Only God is creator, and can intercede for one at the “Day of Resurrection. No other powers can aid (vv. 3-5);
- The book is not forged, if it were, God would judge Muhammad (v. 8).

(This argument was disingenuous: if the prophecies were forged, then the power supposedly inspiring them would not exist, and if it did not exist, it would not be capable of judging either Muhammad—for faking them—or the unbelievers, for not believing in a non-existent entity. Muhammad’s claim to authority is self-referential. “I have this experience which obligates me to pronounce this warning, and you ought to accept the warning also.”)

But in the end, he disclaims any definite knowledge of what will happen to anyone (v. 9), all he knows is doom—judgment is coming! When? To whom? How? His message is only one of destruction, there is nothing positive in it.

- Another telling of the story of Ad (and the prophet Thamood, unnamed here);
- The ends with another command to patience. What Muhammad gives is not a constructive vision for a community guided by God’s will, but “A Message to be delivered! / And shall any be destroyed but the people of the ungodly (v. 35)?”

47, “Muhammad,”

I suspect there is some significance that the one explicitly invoking Muhammad’s authority (“believe in what is sent down to Muhammad,” [v. 2]), is a martial text. Among the motifs:

- don’t ask for a (revelation? instruction? is the community in need of constant guidance and authorization?) and then “faint” at the mention of “fighting” (v. 20);
- don’t turn back from the struggle;
- follow Muhammad all the way (v. 25-26);
- “expend in God’s way” (v. 38/ 40 A); pour out one’s life and material resources in the struggle for victory
- don’t faint and call for peace (v. 35);
- “the present life is naught but a sport and a diversion,” (v. 36) so one ought to be willing to fight, since God will give one his “wages” in the after-life.

However, not everyone understood Muhammad’s “recitations.” Apparently, they were powerful enough when one heard them, but when some left his presence, they would ask ““What said he just now (v. 16)?”” Certainly that would explain I find the Qur’an a text empty of spiritual power and vitality. The words roll on, but I am at a loss to understand what the “revelation” in the text is supposed to be.

We have another summary of Mohammedan religion (not necessarily “Muslim”: see *Crossroads to Islam*) at v. 19 (20 A): “Know thou therefore that / there is no god but God, / and ask forgiveness for thy sin, and for the believers, men and women. God / knows you going to and fro, and your lodging.”

48, “Victory,” Al-Fath

After a call to battle, it is only appropriate we have a celebration of victory. Supposedly this tells the story of the early Muslims’ effort to make pilgrimage to Mecca, the resistance of the

Meccans, and the treaty by which fighting was avoided (the “Treaty of Hudaibiyah”). The treaty said that the Muslims could make pilgrimage the following year. You can read Maududi’s version of the Traditional Account [here](#).

The central text:

God has promised you many spoils / to take; these He has hastened to / you, and has restrained the hands of / men from you, and that it may be a / sign to the believers, and to guide you / on a straight path, / and other spoils you were not able / to take; God had encompassed / them already. God is powerful over everything. / If the unbelievers had fought you, they / would have turned their backs, and then found / neither protector nor helper; / the wont of God, as in the past before, and thou shalt never find any changing / the wont of God. / It is he who restrained their hands / from you, and your hands from them, in / the hollow of Mecca, after that He / made you victors over them. God sees the things you do. / They are the ones who disbelieved, / and barred you from the Holy Mosque / the offering, detained so as not to reach its place of sacrifice. / If it had not been for certain men / believers and certain women believers / who you know not, lest you should / trample them, and there befall you guilt unwittingly on their account / (that God may admit into His mercy / whom He will), had they been separated / clearly, then We would have chastised / the unbelievers among them with a painful chastisement (vv. 20-25/ 15-25 A).

As I have argued with other purportedly historical narratives, one *could* make it fit. But there are number of reasons to suspect the coherence between the and the Traditional Account:

1. Muhammad’s followers did *not* get the victory. Indeed, the Traditional Account claims that they were so despondent, that when Muhammad told them 3 times to proceed with the sacrifice, they could not bring themselves to do so. Of course, it is routine for religious texts to reinterpret predictions to fit outcomes. It may well be that Muhammad is announcing victory to make the ambiguous result palatable to his eager followers.
2. There were no spoils involved in Hudaibiyah. The qur’anic storyline is one of a confrontation yielding “victory,” and presumably some “goodies,” even though no physical combat took place.
3. vv. 11-16 are an extended rebuke to “Bedouins” (or, “desert Arabs”) who didn’t participate because they “were occupied / by our possessions and our families (v. 11)”. I can find no record of a role for these “desert Arabs” in the Traditional Account.
4. Is Hudaibiyah in the “hollow of Mecca”? Mecca is in a valley, constrained by mountains on all sides. Hudaibiyah supposedly was on the outskirts, in the south.
5. The Traditional Account offers no explanation for the “certain men believers and certain women believers,” unknown to the Muslim community, who somehow by their presence prevented hostilities. (Reading between the lines of the qur’anic version, it appears that there was another group of believers in the vicinity of the “Holy Mosque.” Muhammad would have taken military action, but it would have threatened the safety of this group, separate from his own followers.)
6. In 22, “Pilgrimage,” the location of the sacrifice is called the “House” built by Abraham, although it also talks about a “Holy Mosque” (vv. 25, 26). Here, the

sacrifice is connected to the “Holy Mosque.” See my comments on that surah. Although it is difficult to locate them here, there seem to be anachronisms somewhere.

7. At the end of this surah, Muhammad claims that the mark of prostration is also the “likeness/ in the Torah, and their likeness / in the Gospel;... (v. 29).” Why would Muhammad be drawing this parallel in the Hijaz, where there were few Jews, and almost no Christians? The Battle of the Trench had already occurred in the chronology of the Traditional Account, and Muhammad had (in that version of events) already turned decisively against the Jews. Yet here he is trying to try his message to the founding documents of the Jews and Christians.

All these facts suggests that this is (like 22) taking place in Palestine/Syria. The reluctant Bedouins are being called to join their Arab brothers in the battle for lands and booty. The “hollow of Mecca” may be an interpolation. An alternative interpretation would be that even as the Arab armies were moving on to Palestine, there is a separate struggle of power over the Hijazic homelands, and traditional religious centers of pilgrimage. Or, the text may be, deliberately or otherwise, confusing two distinct military confrontations.

49, “Apartments”, Al-Hujraat

49 has similar themes to 33 (The Confederates). There is reason to think that it generalizes and extends the instruction generated by the initial furor behind 33.

It begins with an instruction to the believers that they are not to speak up when the prophet is speaking, don’t be loud when they talk to him, and don’t call out to him from outside his “apartments” (vv. 2-5; see 33.53).

33 had to respond to the rumor mill that arose of the Zaid episode; here Muhammad is warned not to let news carried by an unbeliever to discourage the community. Muhammad is to “make clear” (v. 6). My reading is that Muhammad is to “clear the room,” although other translations read it to mean: verify the report (see Pickthal).

The incipient Muslim community has its share of relational issues: if a group of believers is “insolent” toward another, the community is to “fight” against them until justice is restored (v. 9). “Insolence” seems the generic qur’anic word for rebellion or individualistic assertion. It is constantly used to describe the rejection of the prophets, the willful insistence by the “Peoples of the Book” on keeping their communal traditions, and the attitude of those who failed to believe in a coming judgment (see the next surah, 50.27).

There are also warnings against “scoff[ing],” “suspicion” and “spy[ing]” (vv. 11-12).

In 33, there are a group of “hypocrites” who want to stay among the Bedouins (v. 20); here Muhammad rebukes Bedouins who profess belief, but apparently are not giving themselves wholeheartedly to the messenger’s commands (vv. 14-15).

50, “Qaf”

An rather long response to a simple question: what is the evidence that God will resurrect the dead. The answer is by now routine: the God is created heaven and earth can also recreate it. Once again, this is evidence of the qur’anic collapse of creation and redemption. All religions recognize the wonders of creation; but it does not follow that heaven and earth can be re-created in an eschatological future. That requires an additional revelation that the Qur’an does not possess or articulate.

Muhammad fortifies himself against the doubters by repeating that all previous prophets were doubted.

The fate of Gehenna is expressed by the image of a person being driven to his “chastisement.” He is accompanied by someone else who will produce a record of (his own?, the other person’s ?) life. He will claim that he is not responsible for his companion’s error and “insolence”. God orders him not to dispute the judgment, and asserts the justice of his decision. It is not clear if the person producing the record is *himself* cast into Gehenna (in spite of having asserted his own non-responsibility for the other person’s “insolence,”) or is rather an “attorney,” producing the evidence from the life of the person who is judged. (vv. 21-29; cf. 37.20ff.)

To avoid this fate, one must “fea[r] the All-merciful / in the Unseen, and approach God “with a / penitent heart (vv. 52-53).”

Muhammad himself is commanded to be “patient,” “proclaim thy Lord’s praise,” (v. 39), and continue with the “prostrations” (v. 40). He is to keep listening for the “Cry” of judgment, which will come (v. 41). It concludes (v. 45): “We know very well what they say; / thou art not a tyrant over them. / Therefore remind by the Koran him / who fears My threat.”

So on one hand, Muhammad is exonerated from any action by which the chastisement might be brought about, but the voice is clear, the threat of doom remains. Correct me if I’m misinterpreting my psychology, but this sounds like a form of “passive-aggressive” behavior. The prophet disclaims any personal responsibility, but through continued threatening announcements, supposedly generated by inspiration, resists the authority of the community.

The next three surahs have one unitary theme: “...the Doom is about the fall (51.6)!” Apparently they were composed soon after the initial impact of the early revelations, but Muhammad’s listeners were not convinced by the validity of the revelations

51, “The Scatterers,” Adh-Dhariyat

So those who doubt the coming of doom will experience it before they want it. Muhammad projects upon the doubters his own desire for imminent judgment: “This is that you were seeking to hasten’ (v. 14).” But the doubters don’t want to hasten the day of doom, they doubt Muhammad has knowledge of it or the authority to announce it—when is it coming? they keep asking. *He* wants to hasten the day, but it doesn’t come, and he can only damn those who doubt it, which can only undercut his own frail confidence in the truth of his message.

He then gives a series of messenger stories—Abraham, Moses, the communities of Ad and Thamood, Noah—to support his own authority. Every messenger has been accused of being

a “sorcerer, or a man possessed”; and so they doubt *me* (v. 52). “Nay but they are an insolent people”—rebelliously refusing to hear the message Muhammad claims he has (v. 53).

These “insolent” people will get what they have coming to them, so “let them not hasten Me (v. 59)!” It will come soon enough for them. They had better not try to make it come sooner, lest I (God) make it happen sooner than they would want.

52, “The Mount,” At-Tur

“...surely thy Lord’s chastisement is about to fall; / and there is none to avert it (v. 7).”

To the people who “cry lies” to the prophecies, “they shall be pitched into the fire of Gehenna: / ...Roast in it (vv. 11, 13, 16)!”

After a description of the destiny of the “godfearers” in “gardens and bliss” (v. 17), he responds again to the charge that the recitations are invented:

Or were they created out of nothing? / Or are they the creators? / Or did they create the heavens and the earth? / Nay, but they have not sure faith. / Or are thy Lord’s treasuries in their keeping? / Or are they the registrars? (vv. 35-37)

Muhammad seems to think that his revelations, and the self-certainty they engender are self-authenticating. If *I* have these evidences of a god’s voice, and no-one else does, then they must be true. Of course, that simply does not follow: it may simply be that *neither* the pagans nor Muhammad have any knowledge of the divine.

Again Muhammad is told to be patient and “proclaim the praise of thy Lord” (v. 48].

53, “The Star,” An-Najm

By the Star when it plunges, / your comrade is not astray, neither errs, / nor speaks he out of caprice. / This is naught but a revelation revealed, / taught him by one terrible in power, / very strong; he stood poised,will you dispute with him what he sees? (vv. 1-6, 12)

This confirms my reading of 52.35ff.; the revelation is self-authenticating: I know I saw it, so it must be true, and you are not in a position to question it.

He then critiques the pagan worship of the three goddesses, and says that paganism is based on a “surmise” (or “conjecture” or “guess”), v. 23. As noted, Muhammad thinks his own revelations are self-evident and self-authenticating: the sheer power and “given-ness” of the revelations verifies their truth.

Everyone is responsible for their own moral choices, as has already been said in the “scrolls of Moses, / and Abraham (vv. 36-37).” God brings everything: laughter, weeping, death, life, man and women, wealth, and destruction, as in the cities of Ad, Thamood, the community of Noah.

“This [message ?] is a warner, of the warners of old. / The Imminent is imminent (vv. 56-57);” the projected doom will be rapidly approaching.

One can begin to detect the evolution of Muhammad's prophetic consciousness. Assuming the very last surahs are the most dramatically apocalyptic of the Qur'an, these surahs express his attempt to ratify or verify the truth of his earlier claims of impending doom. He does so in 3 ways that are notable in these and the previous surahs: [list=1]

1. I know what I heard or saw. It must be real. "I felt it." The words of doom reverberated in his mind/prophetic consciousness. "You must (in both senses of the word: please do, and, you are obliged to) believe me."
2. These messages are identical to the messages of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets (unnamed here) who came to Ad and Thamood: doom is coming. The fact that other prophets delivered these messages before proves that mine are true and valid. At this point he expound nothings of the alleged content of those messages. He only claims that they exist, and their mere existence verifies his own messages.
3. Be patient, your Lord—the prophetic voice, presumably "in his head"—will bring about the promised doom.

54 "The Moon", Al-Qamar

"The moon is split (v. 1)"— there is some astronomical phenomenon, and Muhammad is eager to claim it as evidence that the anticipated destruction of the universe is at hand. Maududi says that traditional Muslim interpretation gives this as evidence that the natural order of the universe can be arbitrarily disrupted at any moment:
<http://englishtafsir.com/Quran/54/index.html>)

The then repeats a number of messenger stories. The common theme is that the community to which the messengers came "cried lies" (vv. 9, 14, 18, 24, 33, 42), and then judgment came. Note that judgment does not come because they refused the content of the message, but simply for doubting the message.

Muhammad's logic is: other messengers were rejected, I am being rejected, therefore I must be a true messenger.

The people hearing this Koran have no excuse, for "We have made the Koran easy for Remembrance (vv. 17, 22, 32, 40)."

Here we can see the first (chronologically) evidence that Muhammad is attempting to interpret his message within the framework of the past monotheistic scriptures: "We have destroyed the likes of you; / is there any that will remember? /

Everything that they have done / is in the Scrolls, / and everything, great and small, / is inscribed. (vv. 51-53).

55, "The All-Merciful", "Ar-Rahman"

A rhetorically developed poem. Maududi cannot give a clear explanation of it origins (<http://englishtafsir.com/Quran/55/index.html>). I believe that is because it is too overtly religious to be placed in Medina, but too rhetorically complex to be placed in Mecca. Yet it continues the theme of the Meccan surahs: "All that dwells upon the earth is perishing,..."—judgment is coming—" yet still / abide the Face of thy Lord, majestic, splendid. **O which of your Lord's**

bounties will you and you deny (vv. 26-28).” The bolded phrase is the refrain repeated after each line.

He describes the fate of the sinners. They do not have to confess their sins, since they “shall be known by their mark, / and they shall be seized by the forelocks and and their feet (v. 41).” This too is a “bounty” which none can “deny.” On the other hand are those admitted into the “two gardens” (v. 46). He describes the running water, vegetation, fruit, and the famed “houris,” carefully protected in “pavilions” (v. 72)—presumably for the pleasure of the righteous.

Initially, it seems to be a praise of the bounties of creation. But on closer inspection, the “bounty” is destruction of the “sinner” and satiation of the needs of the “righteous.”

One point I note, only to not be accused of overlooking the texts that can be interpreted against my own thesis. Collingwood has argued in recent postings that the surahs of judgment are designed in part to call people to change, to prevent destruction. Here are lines that might be interpreted in such a way:

The sun and the moon to a reckoning [sic], / and the stars and the trees bow themselves; / and heaven—He raised it up, and set the Balance. / (Transgress not in the Balance, / and weigh with justice, and skimp not in the Balance.) (vv. 5-9)

He begins by noting the regular order of the universe, but is careful to remind the reader that even the laws of the universe must submit to God—stars and trees “prostrate” (Yusufali, Pickthal, Shakir) themselves, as if in prayer. Nothing is free of the absolute submission due to God. God has “set the Balance,” which here seems to mean something like the Chinese concept of cosmic “harmony.” From the cosmic balance, his thoughts move to the balance used in trade. Certainly he wants people to act more justly in their economic exchange.

56, “The Terror”, al-Waqia

As if to confirm my most recent reading of Surahs 53-55—the priority of destruction in the prophetic consciousness of Muhammad—this begins:

When the Terror descends / (and none denies its descending) / abasing, exalting, / when the earth shall be rocked / and the mountains crumbled / and become a dust scattered, / and you shall be three bands—.... (vv. 1-7)

Most translations render “the Terror” as simply “Event,” although Palmer uses “the Inevitable”.

The “three bands” are “Companions of the Right,” who shall know a place of shade and water and fruit,, with “spotless virgins, / chastely amorous” (vv. 27-37), the “Companions of the Left, those who deny the resurrection and experience judgment, and “the Outstrippers” (*or*, “the Foremost”), who shall be closest to the “Throne” in “Gardens of Delight,” with “immortal youths” and “wide-eyed houris.” (vv. 10-23)

The evidence for resurrection is again recited: “have you considered...”:

- semen and the possibility of procreation;

- soil (with a reference to being “debt-loaded” from lack of good soil [v. 66], doubtless a reality in the economic constraints postulated by Collingwood);
- water;
- wood to burn. (vv. 58-73) Since his listeners cannot take credit for the good of nature, neither can they question the rebirth of the resurrection.

The speaker continues to defend this “noble Koran / in a hidden Book” and cannot understand how the listeners hold it “in disdain” (vv. 77-81).

57, “Iron”, al-Hadid

The first 6 verses are an eloquent but brief poem of how all that is brings honor and praise to God. One begins to suspect that this is much later than the surrounding material, a thought confirmed by v. 7, which calls on the hearers to “expend” the resources of “which He has made you successors.” Are these resources they inherited (Yusufali), or gained by conquest? Some of the listeners were happy to fight and share in the loot once victory had been attained; but the ones who had invested their lives and wealth before victory was certain will receive a greater reward. (v. 10)

He contrasts the believers and the hypocrites in a trope borrowed from the evangelical parable of the ten wise and foolish virgins (Matt 25:1-13). The believers shall find “Gardens underneath which rivers flow,” (v. 12), here presented in very much earthly terms: they are looking for water and green gardens in which they can know refreshment and prosperity. The hypocrites shall be tardy to the party, not confident enough in victory to participate in the risk of achieving it. They shall ask to borrow the lights of the believers, but be shut out by a wall that magically appears. Shut out from the “mercy,” they shall be judged by fire (vv. 13, 15).

With victory achieved and possessing the promised gardens and rivers, the believers are warned to remember God’s revelation, unlike those who received revelations (presumably Jews and Christians) and then “their hearts have become hard” (v. 16). But they are warned that “the present life is but a / sport and a diversion, an adornment / and a cause for boasting among you, / and a rivalry in wealth and children. (v. 20 / 15 A)” Like rain in a hot, dry summer, it gives temporary relief, but then the grass continues to die. Note again the moral schizophrenia: they fight for the goods of this life, but are told that what they have earned has no lasting value. God has prepared a garden for those who believe, but once achieved, the garden is not to be enjoyed. Then why fight? Because it is what God and his messenger want them to do.

The refers to “the Book and *the Balance*, so that men might uphold justice” (v. 25), a motif connecting it 55 (“The All-Merciful”), and suggesting that the latter is also late.

The ends with a denigration of Jews and Christians. They “have no power over anything / of God’s bounty” (v. 29). They do not control God’s goodness; in other words, you don’t need to become Jews or Christians to follow the one true God. (Yusufali and Shakir translate “grace of Allah”.) He gives his blessings to “whomsoever he will.” More specifically he criticizes the Christians. He recognizes that God gave those “who followed” “Jesus son of / Mary” “tenderness and mercy”; but complains that they “invented” “monasticism,” God “did not prescribe it for them” and “they observed it not as it should be / observed.” (v. 27)

He doesn’t say how monasticism *should* have been practiced, but simply doesn’t like it—perhaps put off by apparent hypocrisy and sinful behaviors among the monks he knew. But then

again, perhaps the abstemious life-style of the monks represented a threat to his own call for military efforts to achieve worldly well-being.

58, “The Disputer”, Al-Mujadila

The Disputer in this case is an unnamed woman, who is arguing with the messenger about “her husband.” Although unnamed, she is not unidentified. Immediately the text gives us another version of the messenger’s nullification of the “Be as my mother’s back” saying. You recall from 33 (“The Confederates”) that this saying was used by a man divorcing his wife. Muhammad rejected it in order to claim that an adopted son did not have the same status as a biological son (the equation of biological son and adoptive son being another human fabrication), and thus be free to take possession of the wife of Zaid, his adopted son. So the woman was almost certainly Zaid’s wife. She was understandably complaining about being turned over to a much older man, a man she perceived as her father-in-law.

Much of the rest of this has the same self-serving air as 33. People are talking together in secret—the messenger thinks about him or his authority (vv. 8-10). The messenger promises judgment. But conspiracy is fine if done “in piety and godfearing (v. 9),” and if the conspirators first give a “freewill offering” (a payoff to the Messenger ?) (v. 12).

Vv. 14 ff. warn believers against making friends with “those who oppose God and His Messenger (v. 20).

59, “The Mustering”, Al-Hashr

A military word, and as one would guess, a of war. One can read the Traditional Account of the history behind this [here](#).

The People of the Book would have stayed in their “fortresses,” but God “expelled from their habitations the unbelievers among” them (v. 2). They were accused a breaking a treaty with Muhammad.

The warriors are given permission to destroy palm trees as they see fit. They are then given instructions for the distribution of the loot from war: here, Muhammad gets to take whatever he wants (v. 7; 8.41 says one-fifth). Muhammad’s portion is to be used for the “poor emigrants” who joined the believers at some later stage after being expelled from their own homes (v. 7-9). He encourages the believers already in the community and the emigrants who have just joined them to bear with each other.

Apparently Muhammad believes that the “hypocrites” and unbelievers among the People of the Book have made a mutual defense treaty. If the PofB are expelled, the “hypocrites” promise to come to their aid. He tells the believers not to worry about the treaty, because “their hearts are scattered.” They are not truly united, and will only fight from behind fortified positions. (vv. 11-17)

It ends with a psalm of the unity and almightiness of God.

60, “The Woman Tested”, Al-Mumtahina

60 continues the end of 58: don’t make friends with those who have fought you. Apparently some of the believers were ready to make peace with those who had opposed them;

maybe “God will yet establish” “love” between the believers and their enemies, but that time is not yet (v. 7).

Female emigrants who join the community (presumably having left their unbelieving husbands) are to be tested. If they pass, they are not to be returned to unbelievers. (v. 10) (This is the qur’anic basis for the teaching that that Muslim women cannot be married to non-Muslims.) The unbelieving husbands are to be compensated, presumably, for the loss of the dowry. In turn, any believers who lose their wives to the unbelievers are likewise to be compensated.

61, “The Ranks”, As-Saf

61 admonishes the believers to be true to their promises to fight together: “God loves those who fight in His way in / ranks, as though they were a building / well-compacted.” (v. 4)

Muhammad continues to complain about those who question his authority; he uses Moses and Jesus to reinforce the validity of his messages. He claims Jesus came ““giving good tidings of / a Messenger who shall come after me, whose / name shall be Ahmad (v. 6).””

This expresses a very late concept of Islam as a developed religion: “It is He who has sent His Messenger with / the guidance and the religion of truth, that / he may uplift it above every religion,... (v. 9).” See *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 278, 294-5 on the meaning of al-din, religion.

He then tells the believers: if you want to be delivered from a “painful chastisement” (hell? earthly suffering?) you must do *jihad* (“struggle”) “with your possessions and your / selves (vv. 10, 11).” *That* is the Qur’an’s “good tidings” (v. 13)!

62, “The Congregation”, al-Jumua

Muhammad praises God, who “has raised up from among the common people / a Messenger from among them, to recite His signs to them and / to purify them, and to teach them the Book and the Wisdom,... (v. 2).” The translation of the all-important first phrase varies widely. Firstly, it is not clear if “common people” refers to the Messenger himself, or to the people “among” whom he has come. Secondly, Yusufali and Pickthal translate it “amongst the Unlettered,” which may imply that the Messenger was illiterate (traditional Muslim belief), *or* that the people he came to were illiterate. Shakir translates “the inhabitants of Mecca” and Palmer “the Gentiles.” What all these translations have in common is the idea that people who had not had a sacred book now have a book. So the literacy of Muhammad does not appear to be in view here.

He then talks about the Jews who he likens to “an ass / carrying books (v. 5).” The books of course are the books of the rabbinical tradition; they have the books but are simply carrying them around without making use of them or understanding them (see the paraphrase of Yusufali). Of course, the real burden of his complaint is that the Jews, who point with pride to their scriptures and traditions, do not accept *his* recitations.

He asks the Jews, if you are “friends of God” (Pickthal reads “favoured of Allah”), then why don’t you “long for death (v. 7).” This text is almost incomprehensible: why would longing for death be evidence of being God’s favorites? Maududi interprets it along the lines: why aren’t you willing to accept martyrdom? (<http://englishtafsir.com/Quran/62/index.html>), which I

suppose makes as much sense as anything. Apparently, he saw the Jews as cowards, unwilling to sacrifice for their religion in the same way he thought he was willing to sacrifice for his revelations. We cannot know to what degree his perception of the Jews was based on reality.

The ends with an admonition to believers to stop commerce and trade “when proclamation is made for prayer on / the Day of Congregation.” It does not seem that this meant an all-day rest, since “when the prayer is finished,.../ ...seek God’s bounty.” Apparently the community has not learned the discipline of public congregational prayer, since they have left the messenger “standing” at the time of prayer. (vv. 9-11)

63, “The Hypocrites”, Al-Munafiqoon

Muhammad complains about the wishy-washy among the community.

64, “Mutual Fraud”, At-Taghabun

A complaint about unbelievers. They denied the signs of revelation and the resurrection. Don’t let your families or wealth lead your astray. The “Day of Gathering” will also be the “Day of Mutual Fraud (v. 9).” Shakir says “day of loss and gain,” while Pickthal reads “day of mutual disillusion.” Palmer gives the clearest hint of meaning here: “day of cheating.” The idea seems to be that unbelievers are going to try to trick God into an acquittal, but it is God who will “defraud,” them i.e., disabuse them of their own illusions.

65, “Divorce”, At-Talaq

Rules about divorce:

- the only grounds for divorce are a “flagrant indecency” (v. 1)
- divorce them when they reach their period (presumably to verify that they are not pregnant with one’s child) (v. 1)
- for those not menstruating, “their period / shall be three months” (as best as I understand it, the tradition interprets this to mean that the husband is to declare the divorce three months in a row, after which she is “divorced”) (v. 4)
- a man is to divorce his pregnant wife only after giving birth (v. 4)
- once she has given birth, the husband can either hire her to breastfeed the child, or hire another (v. 6) . As one might guess, it is difficult the synchronize a literal rendering of these rules with the laws of *Talaq* as practiced in Shariah Islam.

Cities that rejected “in disdain...the commandment of its Lord and His Messengers” received a “horrible / chastisement” (vv. 8, 9). But believers have received “A Messenger reciting to / you the signs of God, clear signs, that / He may bring forth those who believe / and do righteous deeds from the shadows / into the light.” They will be “admit[ted]... to gardens underneath which rivers flow.” (v. 11) This seems to be the core image of the reward of the believers. The texts are ambiguous whether they are meant as a metaphor for spiritual reward, or a literal this-worldly paradise that will be granted to those who believe in and struggle beside God’s Messenger. (Here the text does add “fore ever and ever.”)

66, “The Forbidding”, At-Tahrim

Another regarding the messenger’s private life. The Traditional Account, based on Ahadith, has its own explanation, presented by [Maududi here](#); I on the other hand suspect that it continues the saga of Muhammad’s quest to take possession of Zaid’s wife (Surahs 33 and 58). God has permitted some action to “the prophet”; he scolds him for continuing to forbid it, out of a mistaken desire to make his wives happy. An oath has been taken, but God permits its “absolution” (Yusufali: dissolution). (vv. 1, 2)

So far, that is consistent with what we know of the affair of Zaid’s wife. The oath can either be the oath that binds Zaid to Muhammad as “son,” or the giving to Zaid of his wife. Both promises are broken on divine authority. His other wives are understandably unhappy (see 58] with the new, young wife coming into the household, and Muhammad considers releasing his new heart-throb, in order to keep them happy. But God has told him that he is permitted to take Zaid’s wife.

In this surah, the “Prophet” “confided” something to one of his wives. She apparently let the secret slip, and he confronted her about her failure to keep a secret. She wonders at his ability to discern her guilt in the matter (as if it required a magician to determine how the secret got out)—“I was told of it by the All-knowing”. (v. 3)

What might the secret be? If my interpretation is valid, the most likely candidate would be Muhammad’s own guilty infatuation with Zaid’s wife. He let it slip, and then word got around, forcing his hand in the affair.

Be careful, he warns his wives; if you fail to please me, then I will divorce you and find better, more compliant and pious women—not only previously married (Zaid’s wife), but even virgins! (v. 5)

He provided his wayward wives with models on which to reflect: two wives who were judged, Noah’s wife (remember that his version of biblical history is idiosyncratic) and Lot’s wife; and two who were faithful, Pharaoh’s wife and Mary, presumably the mother of Jesus, since “we guarded her virginity,” but here called “Imran’s daughter.” (As has observed by others, the Qur’an confuses Mary the mother of Jesus with Moses’ sister Miriam, whose father was “Amran” [1 Chronicles 6:3].)(vv. 10-12).

As if in compensation, the “Prophet” warns unbelievers against making excuses for themselves (when these **surahs of the bedchamber**⁶ have been nothing but excuse-making). (v. 7)

67, “The Kingdom”, al-Mulk

The Qur’an is now quickly moving towards the apocalyptic surahs that most readers take to be the “original” vision of the revelations. There are several more surahs of an intermediate character (i.e., including elements of apocalypticism along with more developed ideas); but beginning with 74, almost all surahs will reflect the presumably earliest strands of the Qur’anic revelation.

⁶ See surahs 33, 49, 58.

Here have a mixture of the apocalyptic and the homiletic. God has created everything, “Thou seest not in the creation / of the All-merciful any imperfection (v. 3).” This perfect creation should make mankind recognize the coming judgment. The unbelievers at the day of chastisement will admit that warners had come to them, but they had “cried lies” (v. 9).

While the creation is perfect, our place in that creation is not. How does his listeners know that God will not make the earth quake, or send a “squall of pebbles” (an image he uses several times, see 17.68 for almost a verbatim repetition; it seems connected to biblical events in Muhammad’s mind, see 29.40 and 54.34) (vv. 16-17). Who holds up the birds?

This must be from a slightly later stage of the revelation, since people are asking when the promised disasters will come. The messenger does not have an answer, only God knows, “I am only a warner (v. 26).” There is an inchoate sense of doom in Muhammad’s sub-conscious, but the rest of the answers to life’s puzzles is beyond him.

68, “The Pen”, al-Mulk

Muhammad is promised that his aural revelations are not the result of possession. He will receive his “wage” (v. 3). He shouldn’t listen to the crude arrogant people who oppose him. They are like people who like they will harvest their fields in the morning, only to discover that the harvest is gone. His subconscious voice is trying to prop Muhammad up by convincing him that his voice is unique, the doubters less his own prophetically-endowed confidence and certainty, which confirms for Muhammad that the message is valid.

69, “The Indubitable”, al-Haaqqa

A developed apocalypse, which is beginning to morph into the later messenger stories. “The Indubitable,” also translated “Reality” or “Infallible” (Palmer), is the judgment, that which will certainly happen. He gives the examples of Thamood, Ad, and Pharaoh, who each alike experienced “the indubitable.” In by now familiar terms, they rejected the warnings and were destroyed.

V. 11 interjects the following: “Lo, when the waters rose, We bore you in the running ship / We We might make it a reminder for you / and for heeding ears to hold.” Yusufali paraphrases this to refer to Noah’s Ark, but there is nothing in the context to support that. I suspect it rather refers to Muhammad’s own experience, which supports Collingwood’s emphasis on the historicity of his role as merchant. As we have seen, the Qur’an frequently invokes sailing ships as a sign of God’s power, a motif that must arise directly out of Muhammad’s own emotional life.

Following the judgment, all will be given a book. The good will receive it in their right hand, the bad in their left. “The book,” as a documentation of why one deserves judgment (or acquittal)—an image borrowed from Daniel and Revelation—is a primary metaphor of Muhammad. One can then understand why the book of the recitations becomes important: it anticipates judgment in documenting the warnings and the failure (or success) in heeding those warnings. Again, we know over the long term, that the warnings were *not* fulfilled—the final judgment did not occur, which forced Muhammad’s own hand in bringing about that judgment.

Among the indictments of the bad is: “Behold, he never believed in God the All-mighty, and / *he never urged the feeding of the needy*: therefore he / today has not here one loyal friend,

neither any food, / saving foul pus,....” (vv. 33-36) That theme, of course, supports Collingwood’s claim of the significance of the economic deprivation in the anticipated apocalypse.

He closes by again insisting (in the divine voice) that Muhammad is a “noble Messenger,” not a “poet” or a “soothsayer.” Had Muhammad “invented” any words, God would have killed him. (vv. 43-47) As noted previously, this begged the question of whether the deity speaking in this prophetic voice actually existed. The judgment of humanity never occurred, so maybe the deity did not have the power to judge Muhammad either.

70, “The Stairways”, al-Maarij

Someone asks about the chastisement, and Muhammad is counseled to patience. It will happen soon. The normal bonds of friendship and family will be torn as each person will try to save himself.

Humans beings are self-seeking and demanding, ungrateful and unappreciative when good times comes, and unwilling to share their well-being with others. It is here that the Qur’an expresses its religious and moral vision most eloquently: it summons mankind to a life that is also lived *before God* in prayer, “witnessing” and awareness of impending judgment—a sense that one is always responsible to God; this piety is then expressed in a willingness to share with the poor (since one can depend on God for one’s needs), sexual self-control, and keeping one’s word.

Surely man was created fretful, / when evil visits him, impatient, / when good visits him, grudging, / save those that pray / and continue at their prayers, / those in whose wealth is a right known / for the beggar and the outcast, / who confirm the Day of Doom / and go in fear of the chastisement of their Lord / (from their Lord’s chastisement none feels secure) / and guard their private parts / save from their wives and what their right hands own, / ... / and who preserve their trusts / and their covenant, and perform their witnessings,.... (vv. 19-33)

Apparently the unbelievers think Muhammad is “putting on a show”; v. 36 ff. gives a picture of crowds running here and there, staring at Muhammad and then running off. The qur’anic voice washes its hands of them and tells Muhammad to let them go to their judgment, it will give him (Muhammad) a “better” group of people, presumably to accept his revelation and follow his words.

71, “Noah”, *Nooh*

Muhammad uses the Noah story to reflect on his own frustrated experience with his community. The more he talks to them, the more they run away; the more he preaches, the more they stuff their ears. They turn away from the message, and desire children and wealth, although that brings only disappointment and “loss” (v. 21). Muhammad-as-Noah asks for total destruction, lest the evil-doers breed nothing but “libertines” (v. 27). But “forgive me and my parents” (remember Muhammad’s parents were supposedly dead) / and whosoever enters my house / as a believer.” (v. 28)

Observe again the constant call to pray for forgiveness, a central theme in the pre-Muhammadan inscriptions, according to *Crossroads to Islam*.

72, “The Jinn”, al-Jinn

The jinni are spiritual beings; the word is etymologically related to “genius” (as in the “genius” of the Roman Emperor). According to [Wikipedia](#), contrary to popular opinion, our “genie” is not directly derived from the Arabic, but comes from the French, which in turn is derived from the Latin. The root means “concealment,” which implies that the jinni play a role similar to English fairies or Irish leprechauns—tiny beings (in fact, intangible) that may manifest themselves to humans for good or for ill, in magic or trickery.

Since many pagan Arabs gave religious honor to the jinni as more immediate proxies for the ultimate divine power, Muhammad saw the religious and magical use of the jinni as a challenge to his claim that God alone should be worshipped. So he claimed that some of the the jinni had heard and believed in the message. Here the jinni are giving witness to their belief and announcing the its implications to humans who might want to honor them: God has neither consort (mate) nor son (v. 3). Therefore, neither should you (humans) honor *us* alongside of or in the place of God.

So Muhammad was attempting to assimilate Arabic mythology into his monotheistic religion (much like pagan deities were assimilated into Christianity). Another analogy is from ancient Israelite religion, where the vestiges of pagan practice were assimilated into (where possible), or abolished in the name of, the worship of YHWH. The high places were periodically attacked by certain “righteous” kings, and all worship was brought to the temple in the royal city, Jerusalem. Here, Muhammad said: “The places of worship belong to God; so call not, along with God, to anyone else (v. 18)” The “places” were traditional cult centers (probably very similar in character and religious signification to the ancient Israelite “high places”; Muhammad was disenfranchising the worship of the jinni at such places and claiming them in the name of his unitary God.

Like humans, the jinni are separated between those who believe and those who do not; each group will share the fate of the parallel class of humans.

Muhammad uses the jinni story to state an explicit doctrine of revelation. God only discloses the nature of “unseen” reality through messengers (i.e., not through the traditional mythology and cult practices); then “watchers” (jinni ?) guard the message to ensure its delivery. (vv. 26, 27) Here also, the jinni have no independent authority, but are coopted both mythically and sociologically as guards of the revealed message.

No other power (jinni, a divine son) can protect a person from divine judgment. Only a message of “deliverance” from God, conveyed through a messenger, can provide the necessary “protect[ion]”. (vv. 22, 23)

73, “Enwrapped”, al-Muzzammil

In terms of my attempt of thematic analysis and creation a broad historical reconstruction, 73 is a very curious surah. It begins by describing someone who is wrapped up in his robes, probably to create a silent, private place for prayer and revelation. This would seem to tie it to the next (74), which is clearly apocalyptic, and begins with the same image.

But the Koran is now conceived as a completed text; Muhammad was instructed to recite it “very distinctly” (v. 4). Yusufali translates: “in slow, measured rhythmic tones.” One can

assume that the revelations when they came to Muhammad were impassioned, stumbling over words as the excitement overcame him, broken by stops and starts, as the prophetic voice was losing the inner guidance and then picking it up again. So we have a *text* that is to be memorized and repeated in a liturgical manner.

Muhammad was not to worry about those who do not accept the message; but “respice them” and leave them to God (v. 11). I have already argued that “respice” signals a that came after the initial apocalyptic pronouncements, and it became clear that the day of doom is not to arrive immediately.

Furthermore, according to v. 20, in the world of this surah, some were “fighting in God’s way.” Yet in v. 7 Muhammad was told that “surely in the day thou hast long business.” (Yusufali and Shakir say “occupation.”) What was his business? Supposedly he had long given up his merchant duties? Is it the task of running the community? He was to recite at night as much as he can (“a half of it, or diminish a little, / or add a little,” vv. 2-3), since he was busy in the day. V. 20 says that others were with, presumably sharing is the recitation of the Koran.

In any case, in this surah, the Koran is now a text; Muhammad (or some later Muhammad or conceives himself as continuing the role of Muhammad) is active in the day with the affairs of his life—I believe of running the community—so he spends the night reciting the text already given with other members of the community.

The Book of Doom

I have finally reached the beginning of the end: with 74, we are at the first of the long run of surahs that completes the Qur’an canonically, and, presumably, started it chronologically and historically. Surahs 74 through 115, with a few anachronistic exceptions, are united thematically and historically.

Because these surahs are short (and get progressively shorter towards the end), and because they share the constant reiteration of the same themes, rather treat them one by one, I will analyze them thematically.

In this book, Muhammad is given what he believes to be a revelation of imminent destruction. While divine origin is, of course, a hypothetical possibility, I will argue that this revelation is triggered by Muhammad’s horrified, and finally deeply misanthropic, reaction to the pain and suffering of the weakest and poorest in his society. He is outraged, and his originally moral and humanitarian concerns twist into an angry attack on his community. He enacts what I have called, following Stephen Donaldson’s *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever*, a “Ritual of Desecration.” He wants destruction. He wants doom.

I shall describe “The Book of Doom” under the following headings:

1. Muhammad’s summons
2. The reasons for judgment
3. The signs of judgment
4. Deniers of the day of doom
5. Muhammad’s misanthropy: “no idle talk”

6 The sentence: paradise and Gehenna.

1. Muhammad's summons

The Traditional Account gives the honor of the first to **96**: “Recite: In the Name of the thy Lord who created, / created Man of a blood-clot. / Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, / who taught by the Pen, / taught Man that he knew not. (vv. 1-5)”

This designation is unlikely for several reasons:

1. The reference to “the Pen” says that the messenger is already thinking about the written quality of the text, a quality that is unlikely to be attributed to an aural revelation. (This exception is on point, even if we detach these verses from the remainder of the surah.)
2. V. 6 already refers to humanity as “insolent,” an attribute that seems to arise in the Qur’an from the unwillingness of the messenger’s listeners to hear and accept the message. But if they have not yet had a chance to hear, there is no reason to ascribe “insolence” to them.
3. Vv. 9-10 refers to one “who forbids / a servant when he prays.” But why should the powers that be (presumably in Mecca) forbid Muhammad to pray when there has been no message to which they could respond?
4. Vv. 15-16 threatens to “seize” this person who forbids prayer “by the forelock,” again a reaction that suggests opposition to Muhammad’s message has already emerged.

Some western scholars prefer **74** (canonically, the first of the “Book of Doom,” as I am describing it): “O thou shrouded in thy mantle, / arise, and warn! Thy Lord magnify / thy robes purify / and defilement flee! Give not, thinking to gain greater / and be patient unto thy Lord. (vv. 1-7)”

As I described it in my comments on the previous surah, Muhammad enclosed himself in his cloak to create a private place for prayer. It would also have created a cocoon of “sensory deprivation,” a fact significant in understanding the psychosomatic roots of his prophecies. He was told to purify himself, give without expecting reward, and wait patiently for “thy Lord.” Especially the last phrase—the particularity of the deity—argues an primitive strand of the qur’anic tradition. Furthermore, in content and complexity of line, the first 7 verses could easily be separated from the remainder of the surah. But the fact that he is urged to “be patient” suggests that it is not the very first.

Surahs 105 through 114 are very primitive in tone and content. 105 refers to what “thy Lord did with the Men of the Elephant,” a war that supposedly took place in the year Muhammad was born. I can not be persuaded that a prophet in an oral culture would have alluded to a event that happened when he was born—in a community he would come to reject as godless—as somehow evidence for God’s activity. Furthermore, some scholars claim place this war 20 years earlier, in 552. (Muhammad’s prophecy supposedly began in 610.) So either 105 is pre-Muhammeden, or Muhammad lived much earlier than the Traditional Account says, or it is a pagan poem “quranized”. (See *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 256-7 for a summary for the problems with the dating of Muhammad’s birth.)

I am reasonably certain that 106 is pagan: “For the composing of Koraish, / their composing for the winter and summer caravan! / So let them serve the Lord *of this House* / who had fed them....” “Of this house” is henotheistic, not monotheistic. (Cf. the parallel at the

beginning of the Ten Commandments: “I am YHWH your Elohim, you shall have no other Elohim before me.”) Two options are possible: Muhammad began his career as a pagan prophet of the Koraish (Quraysh) shrine, or this poem is also a pagan litany “quranized”.

Surahs 113 and 114 are apotropaic (“designed to warn off evil”) incantations:

Say: ‘I take refuge with the Lord of the Daybreak / from the evil of what He has created, / from the evil of darkness when it gathers, / from the evil of the women who blow on knots, / from the evil of an envier when he envies.’ [114] Say: ‘I take refuge with the Lord of men, / the King of men, / the God of men, / from the evil of the slinking whisperer / who whispers in the breasts of men / of jinn and men.’

113 esp. suggests that “the Lord” here is a daemon— a non-moral spiritual power; the chanter is invoking his power for his own safety against those who would use it for evil. Certainly the first, and probably the second, has pagan origins (although I will cite the second as evidence for my claim of Muhammad’s misanthropy).

I believe the most likely candidate for the first is **93**:

By the white forenoon / and the brooding night! / Thy Lord is has neither forsaken thee nor hates thee / and the Last shall be better for thee than the First. / Thy Lord shall give thee, and thou shalt be satisfied. / Did He not find thee an orphan, and shelter thee? / Did He not find thee erring, and guide thee? / Did He not find thee needy, and suffice thee? / As for the orphan, do not oppress him, / and as for the beggar, scold him not; / and as for thy Lord’s blessing, declare it.

Muhammad had experienced some emotional trauma. The voice was assuring him of “thy Lord’s” presence, and that which would come afterwards would be better than that which he had lost. The words assume that Muhammad was indeed an orphan (unless we conclude that there was a proto-Muhammad that preceded the “real” Muhammad, and whose identity by taken on by the latter.) His own felt loss and presumably divine reassurance was then the basis of the central moral claim of the voice: care for the poor. For now, the “Lord” is Muhammad’s specific daemon (as in Socrates’ *daimonion semeion*, the “divine sign” or “spiritual guide”). There is no hint of the absolute monotheism that emerges later.

The divine assurance is repeated in 94:

Did We not expand thy breast for thee / and lift from from thee thy burden, / the burden that weighted down thy back? / Did We not exalt thy fame? / So truly with hardship comes ease, / truly with hardship comes ease. / So when thou art empty, labour, / and let thy Lord be thy Quest.

Muhammad hopes for some eventual divine reward in a life of “ease,” a goal that he will eventually universalize in his concept of paradise.

Whatever the experience was, it is referred to in 97 as a “Night of Power.” Muhammad wanted to relive that first night, and apparently struggled to re-experience energy that went with the flow of the voice. 75.16 tells him that he should not move his tongue in an attempt to make the words flow.

The next step of Muhammad's aural revelations was the development of the belief in a judgment. His community didn't accept his call for a more just economic order. 90.1-2 had to assure Muhammad was he indeed belonged to the community which was rejecting him. The wealthy in it thought that they were protected from any loss, from the intrusion of any alien power that would deprive them of the fruits of their labor (vv. 5-6). They hadn't realized "the steep," the hard pathway to human flourishing: "The freeing of a slave, / or giving food upon a day of hunger / to an orphan near of kin / or a needy man in misery;.... (vv. 11-16)."

They would be divided among the "Companions of the Right Hand" and "Companions of the Left Hand"; the latter were "those who disbelieve in Our signs." Note here the primitive concept of disbelief and judgment: The wicked were those who rejected Muhammad's message; their fate was simply described as "Fire." (vv. 18-20)

92 must have been revealed soon after. It describes the Fire with a little more detail (vv. 14-15); the reward of the "godfearing" is now a reward for those who share their wealth (and not simply a positive response to the message). "We shall surely **ease him to the Easing.**" (v. 7)

2. *The reasons for judgment*

In the (canonically) first of the Book of Doom, the revelations have the "Companions of the Right" ask the "sinners," "What thrust you into Sakar?" (74.42) Most translations render it as "hell" or "hell-fire," but Arberry leaves it untranslated, presumably because its actual meaning is unknown (i.e., other translations are in fact rendering it based on the context, and not on their knowledge of the actual meaning of the word, something that I suspect happens quite frequently). "Sakar" is mentioned earlier in the surah, and the voice knows the hearers will not know what it means: "...and what will teach thee what is Sakar? (v. 27)" "Sakar" therefore appears to be the original qur'anic word for the place of burning judgment, but is immediately dropped for "Gehenna" (surahs 78, 79, 89, 98, all of which appear as relatively developed surahs of the "Book of Doom").

The answer to the question is: "We were not of those who prayed, / and we fed not the needy, / and we plunged along with the plungers, and we cried lies to the Day of Doom,.... (vv. 43-46) The last two elements of the indictment require separate sections to develop; this section will provide the sources for the first two, and several other points of indictment: [list=1]

1. **Did not pray:** 74.43; 75.30. Prayer is reliance on "the Lord," Muhammad's daemon, now universalized as the one true God of justice and judgment
2. **Did not give to the needy:** 74.44; 76.8 (those who did give); 89.17-20; 90.11-17; 92.8; 93.9-11 (which I have identified as the first revealed); 107.
3. Ingratitude for God's blessings and ill use of wealth: 74.10-25; 75.30-35;
4. 77.23: God determines, not man;
5. 80.17, 19-32: blessings of existence and life;
6. 82.6-9: we are deceived about the origins of our lives, and thus fail to give proper thanks;
7. 83.14: wealth has "rusted upon their hearts"
8. **Failure to trust God in the bad as well as the good:** 89.15-16; cf. 93.3 (The "Lord has neither forsaken thee nor hates thee")
9. **Would only do the right if there was some reward:** the "godfearing...confers no favour on anyman for recompense (92.19)"—i.e., the godfearing does not bribe
10. Rivalry (102.1), Backbiting and Slander (104.1);

11. Arrogance and “Insolence”: 75.30-35; 78.22; 96.6-7.

In summary, the indictment is the men are ungrateful, arrogant, and self-reliant, they rely too much on their wealth, they do not live rightly for its own sake, without some this-worldly reward, and they are constantly struggling to get ahead in life’s game, at the expense of their fellows.

3. *The signs of judgment*

This is probably the strangest part of these surahs. Many of them include oaths, often at the beginning, that seem to claim to support the truth and veracity of the revelations. They take the form: “by my mother’s grave, I...”; occasionally they include “I swear”. The oddity is that object of the oath does not seem to support the assertion. It would be as if I said: “By Bill Clinton’s honor, so and so is true...”; or, for some of you, “by George Bush’s intelligence, ...”. Not all of the signs take the form of oaths, but they still evince a claim to authorization of some assertion of the revelations.

Again, I simply list them, after which I will try to explain them.

1. 74.32-35: “by the moon / and night when it retreats / and the dawn when it is white, / surely it is one of the greatest things...”
2. 75.5-6: an eclipse (“of the moon”; but it talks about being “dazed”)
3. 76.1-2: the passing of time, when a “man” becomes a “thing unremembered”;
4. 77: very obscure, possibly a storm, or an army of horse riders spreading apart with “a reminder” or “warning”;
5. 74.30-35: the fact of judgment itself (being used to prove that judgment is coming)
6. 79.1-5: “By those that pluck out vehemently...draw out violently...swim serenely...outstrip suddenly”;
7. 84.16-18: sunset, night, moon, see also 86.1-3, 91.1-6;
8. 85.1-2: constellations;
9. 100.1-5: snorting horse-borne raiders burning villages;

The first commonality I observe is that these are events or phenomena of generally obscure, barely explainable, emotional power (e.g., ##4, 6, 9; in general, all the astronomical phenomena). Muhammad seems to be saying: “there are amazing, astonishing, inexplicable things that happen in the world—and that’s what’s happening to me and in me and through these messages I bring.” The dynamism of the words is self-evidencing, and is of the same *order* of energy and impact as all these other phenomena.

Secondly, there is the awe we experience in the skies. A transcendent yearning rises within us, unnameable, surging like a great wave that both threatens to overwhelm us, yet comforts us with its stability and certainty.

Thirdly, the other events are **liminal** events. “Liminal” is applied by anthropologists to rituals where a transition from one stage to another is underway, but has not yet been accomplished. In our culture, weddings and funerals are the best examples: in the former, the couple is neither single or wedded; in the latter, the bereaved family has lost a loved one, but has not fully relinquished that one to the post-life state. In cultures where there are complex coming-of-age rituals, the young man or woman is no longer a child, and not yet an adult. Traditional

cultures view such events as times of great danger, to be navigated with complex and carefully enacted ritual.

No! I swear by the slinkers, / the runners, the sinkers, / by the night swarming, / by the dawn sighing, / truly this is the word of a noble Messenger / having power, with the Lord of the Throne secure, / obeyed, moreover trusty. (81.15-18)

Note the energy and motion of the words (slink, run, sink). The night “swarms” (ever stared up in a night sky until your head swims?), the dawn “sighs” as the sun—not yet here—slowly rises.

All of these phenomena are phenomena or times of emotional tension. The old has gone, the new has not yet come. Indeed, the entirety of the Book of Doom is a liminal time: Doom is coming, but not yet here. Thus all the other liminal, emotionally charged, moments give evidence that *this* impending Day of Doom is real.

4. *Deniers of the day of doom*

I argued previously that Muhammad’s summons that Muhammad’s prophetic mission began with a personal promise to him from his *daemon* (“spirit guide”) that he would take care of him. This promise was attached to the revealed declaration that people were to provide for the poor, needy and orphans, even as the *daemon* was taking care of Muhammad.

Muhammad began to spread the message, but it was not well received. Muhammad responded with bitter anger: “how dare you not respond to this divinely revealed message? God [actually, Muhammad’s *daemon*] will punish you.” This, I contend, is the origin of both Muhammad’s belief in a final judgment and in a single deity. The logic was:

1. Muhammad was powerless to effect the revenge, therefore the *daemon* must do it at some future point.
2. As resistance continued, and no resolution was in sight, Muhammad’s expectation both hardened and was projected into an eschatological future: there would be a *decisive* judgment, at which those who resisted the teaching would receive a final and full punishment.
3. A final punishment required a single, unitary deity, otherwise some opposing deity (the *jinni*, among others) could counter the acts of Muhammad’s *daemon*.
4. Therefore, a judgment day was coming, and the judge would be the one true divinity of the universe. So now Muhammad has added to his message the claim of the “Day of Doom.” But this was simply another assertion that needed to be substantiated against the nay-sayers.

77 is largely devoted to attacking the “deniers of the day of doom,” and providing “evidence” for the reality of that day.

When the stars shall be extinguished, / when the heaven shall be split / when the mountains shall be scattered / and when the Messengers’ time is set, / to what day shall they be delayed? / To the Day of Decision. / And what shall teach thee what is the Day of Decision? / Woe that day unto those who cry it lies! (vv. 8-15)

The text follows with what it regards as corroborating evidence for the “Day of Decision: “

- destruction of ancient peoples (vv. 16-19);
- gestation of the unborn in the womb, a place of “mean water” (water that is regarded as “impure” when expelled in the act of birth) (vv. 20-22);
- creation of earth with its mountains (vv. 25-27), see also ;
- ”sweetest water” (to drink, in apparent contrast to the “mean water” of the womb) (v. 27)

Other examples include:

- 78.5-15: earth, mountains, sleep, night and day, the “seven strong ones” (heavens?), sun, rain to “bring forth ...gardens luxuriant”;
- 86.11-12: the “returning rain” that gives rise to the “earth splitting with verdure, / ...it is no merriment (apparently meaning, “it is no joke”);
- 87.4-5: God creates the “pasturage,” and then turns it into “a blackening wrack”;
- 88.17-20: “do they not consider how the camel was created, / how heaven was lifted up, / how the mountains were hoisted, / how the earth was outstretched

I have already argued that that this purported evidence does not really prove anything. Every pagan knew that the world was both wonderful in its created order, and yet terrible in the cycle of human order and destruction. Muhammad was not telling them anything they did not already know. The natural and social cycle of life and death does not give any evidence for a final judgment, or for resurrection. It can be explained within a non-revealed religious understanding of the world.

Lastly, Muhammad refers to the ancient stories of judgment he has learned from the surrounding traditions:

- 73.15: Pharaoh
- 79.15: Moses
- 88.17-18: Pharaoh and Thamood
- 87.17-19: “the scrolls of Moses and Abraham,” which say “the world to come is better, and more enduring”
- 89.6-13 and 91.11-14: Ad and Thamood.

Two aspects of these references are noteworthy: with the partial, brief, exception of 87, there was no reference to the *content* of the stories, he only knew that judgment (as he understood it) had taken place in the past, as he thought it would take place in his story; secondly, the Arabic stories were on the same level as, and had the same authority as, the biblical stories.

In evaluating Muhammad’s use of these stories, it is proper to point out a misunderstanding of the meaning of “divine judgment” in the biblical accounts: judgment does not consist in a view of events, simply considered. “Judgment” is perceived as the events are (re-)interpreted in the “story-line,” also called a *narrative*. The Exile was “judgment” for the Jews because it both separated them from the alleged declension of the earlier Israelite “narrative,” and was necessary prologue to the reestablishment of the community, but now as “Jews,” and not as “Israelites”.

The reason that we cannot say whether or not Hurricane Katrina was divine judgment upon New Orleans, or the USA generally, is because we have no common narrative about what went before (a city of licentiousness? an administration of incompetence?) or what came after (moral renewal? more government handouts? the sabotage of the Bush administration?).

Muhammad separated the stories from the larger narrative, and the accounts therefore lost the *signification* they had, but only within the narrative. In simple terms: just because Pharaoh or Thamood were destroyed, did not prove that the people opposing Muhammad would be destroyed. (In the same way, just because the Roman Empire fell, does not prove the American Empire will fall next year, or in 20 years, etc. It will eventually happen, but in a time and way we do know.)

Just because “the scrolls of Moses and Abraham” became texts full of religious meaning and power, did not prove that Muhammad’s “recitations” were similarly such texts. They had to be placed in a history, a context, and a narrative to gain their *signification*.

5. *Muhammad’s misanthropy: “no idle talk”*

Surely for the godfearing awaits a place of security, / gardens and vineyards / and maidens with swelling breasts, like of age, / and a cup of overflowing. / Therein they shall hear no idle talk, no cry of lies, / for a recompense from thy Lord, a gift, a reckoning, / Lord of the heavens and earth, and all that between them is, / the All-merciful / of whom they have no power to speak. / Upon the day when the Spirit and the angels stand in ranks / they shall speak not, save him to whom the All-merciful has / given leave, and who speaks aright. (78.31-38]

Why is it so important that there be no idle talk in paradise? Note that it is precisely this “gift” that will be the Lord’s “recompense,” presumably for the past troubles of the “godfearing.” Furthermore, “the Spirit and the angels” will not be able to speak to anyone, unless the “All-merciful” gives them “leave,” and they speak properly (whatever that might be). Clearly, Muhammad viewed paradise as a place of appropriate conversation, instead of the “idle talk” he must have experienced in his lifetime.

What was “idle talk”? And why was its cessation in paradise so central to Muhammad’s vision of the reward of the “godfearing”?

Answering those questions led me to a persuasive solution to two other puzzles that had “lain on the table,” as it were, in my exploration of the Qur’an. I will explain each of them in the order they came to my attention.

5a. *“plunging with the plungers”*

In “2. The reasons for judgment,” I quoted 74.43-46. Among the reasons given, was “we plunged along with the plungers (74.45).” This curious term first appeared in 6.91. Muhammad was arguing with the Jews, who by this point in the Qur’an were rejecting his authority. He affirmed God had given them the “Book, / the Judgment, the Prophethood” (6.89); but in v. 91 accused them of “hiding much” in their interpretations of “the Book,” and making things up that God did not intend them to teach. He concludes: “Then leave them alone, playing / their game of plunging.”

A second occurrence is 43.83. Muhammad was denying the Christian claim that God had a son (v. 81); he dismissed the question with “Then leave them alone to plunge and play,....” 70.42 uses the exact same phrase, after describing the “unbelievers” as running around in circles in response to his message (vv. 36-37).

Therefore, “plunging” is something that people who do not accept the message do in response to the message. It is always used in the context of debate: people are *arguing with* the messenger rather than accepting his message. (My father, a simple working man, described it as “arguifying and spudifying and specifying whereon.”)

Muhammad wanted obeisance and obedience. Instead he received bemused debate and argument. The picture in 70.36-42 is that of Muhammad the celebrity, holding the attention of the crowds as long as he could entertain them. But he did not want to entertain them, he wanted to compel their acceptance of his message. “Plunging” is the frivolous attitude of the worldly person; he views everything and everyone as providing amusement, but he does not take anything seriously. The ironic amusement of Muhammad’s listeners would earn them the day of doom.

5b. *“They advance one upon another”*

In 78 (the that includes the phrase “no idle talk”) begins with “Of what do they question one another (v. 1)?” The phrase suggests a debate among the community concerning the message, a debate that I described above. This picture, I believe, is developed in another picture that has long puzzled me:

Muster those who did evil, their wives, and that they were serving, / apart from God, and guide them unto the path of Hell! / And halt them, to be questioned: “Why help you not one another?” / No indeed; but today they resign themselves in submission / and advance one upon another, asking each questions. These say, ‘Why, you of old would come to us from the right hand.’ Those say, ‘No, on the contrary, you were not believers; / we had no authority over you; no, you were an insolent people. So our Lord’s Word is realised against us; we are tasting it. There we perverted you, and we ourselves were perverts.’ So all of them on that day are sharers in the chastisement. (vv. 22-33)

There is much here that is obscure. There are apparently two parties who are being questioned by some third entity: “why didn’t you help each other?,” presumably, to avoid judgment. The two parties then turn on each other. One says to the other, “you came to us”—to guide us? The second responds: “you were insolent, and now we are all being judged.” My uncertainty comes from the phrase, “from the right hand,” usually a sign for uprightness. But at the end, both parties are condemned.

In any case, the word-picture is that of a community hurling accusations at each other, each in the face of eternal judgment. The qur’anic question—*why don’t you help each other*—would seem to be the prophet’s question. Why cannot people within the community support each other, instead of condemning and attacking each other, in constant arguments and bickering? (To get an idea of what I think he meant, just spend a week reading any of the major political forums on the ‘net’.)

34.31-33 describes the two sides as the “proud” and the “abased”. The “abased” accuse the “proud” of forcing them to associate other beings with God; while the “proud” deny that they kept the “abased” from following the “guidance”. And thus they stand “before / their Lord, bandying argument[s]” against each other. According to 40.47, the argument between the “proud” and the “weak” continues even “in the Fire.” In 52.25, those who “advance one upon another,” are instead the “godfearing,” who seem surprised and humbled by their good fortune.

So the image of the community in conflict at the judgment reflects and is the projection of his present community, a community with constant bickering, argument, and discussion. Or, as many participants of our current American political scene would say, it was a community riven by deep “partisanship” (!).

Summary: “idle talk,” “plunging,” and Muhammad’s misanthropy

I contend that we have enough circumstantial evidence to paint a picture of Muhammad’s psychology, at least in broad strokes. He was a private, introspective man, whose religious struggles had generated what he believed to be a new, profound vision of life. When he tried to convey this vision to those around him, he met idle chatter, vulgar enthusiasms, and raucous discussion. People argued for the sake of argument and dissension.

He succumbed to the temptation that assails every person with an introverted and mystical personality: the masses are stupid and venal, while I am wise and fore-sighted and think deep thoughts. He was appalled at the supposed vulgarity and social conflict around him. His fury was now channeled through his prophetic alter-ego, and its voice: *you stupid people, you refuse to understand or appreciate the great truth I am bringing you. Since I understand it well enough, and submit to it gladly, your failure can only be attributed to your viciousness and profound evil. Go to hell!*

6. The sentence: paradise and Gehenna

Behold, Gehenna has become an ambush, / for the insolent a resort, / therein to tarry for ages, / tasting therein neither coolness nor any drink / save boiling water and pus / for a suitable recompense. / They indeed hoped not for a reckoning, / and they cried loud lies to Our signs; and everything We have numbered in a Book. / ‘Taste! We shall increase you not save in chastisement.’

Surely for the godfearing awaits a place of security, / gardens and vineyards / and maidens with swelling breasts, like of age, / and a cup overflowing. / Therein they shall hear no idle talk, no cry of lies, for a recompense from thy Lord, a gift, a reckoning. (78.21-36)

Hast thou received the story of the Enveloper?

Faces on that day humbled? / labouring, toilworn, / roasting at a scorching fire, / watered at a boiling fountain, / no food for them but cactus thorn / unfattening, unappeasing hunger. / Faces on that day jocund, / with their striving well-pleased, / in a sublime Garden, hearing there no babble; / therein a running fountain, / therein uplifted couches / and goblets set forth / and cushions arrayed / and carpets outspread. (88.1-16)

‘O soul at peace, return unto thy Lord, / well-pleased, well-pleasing! / Enter thou among My servants! Enter thou My Paradise!’ (89.27-30)

The human race is primarily divided between the “insolent” and the “godfearing.” I have previously argued that “insolence” is defined by rebellion against the message as delivered by the earlier prophets or Muhammad. If correct, then “godfearing” primarily means *acceptance* of God’s message through the prophets. The analysis in the earlier sections on “The Book of Doom,” strongly implies that one’s doom is determined by whether one listens to (or argues against, by “plunging”) Muhammad’s revelations.

A notable characteristic of the Qur'anic descriptions of paradise and Gehenna is their **sensuality**. The judgment of Gehenna is expressed by graphic images of water that does not cool, liquid that does not quench thirst, food that does not nourish or “fatten”. (The former would have doubtlessly been especially galling for people used to desert winds and heat.)

In contrast, for the believers is a feast set in a garden with running water, reclining among cushions spread among luxurious “couches” (? benches), set on carpets—presumably in tents on the ground. The conversation will be quiet and pleasant, no argument or heated discussion. For the pleasure of the guests, there will “maidens” (? virgins), of the same age of the guests, with “swelling breasts.”

According to the Traditional Account, most of Muhammad's wives were either significantly older than he, or very young. At 25, Muhammad was supposed to have married a woman 40 years old; when she died, he married a “old/poor” widow of 65 as an act of charity. His next wife was supposedly the infamous case of Aisha, who was between 6 and 9. Of all his wives, the one that seems to have been in her sexual prime was Zaynab bint Jahsh, who was the wife of Zaid. (There was one or two more, shortly before he died.) I hope I don't need to spell out why one can reasonably think that Muhammad had a “thing” for “maidens” of his age, with “swelling breasts.” (Read the account, and scan the table at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad's_marriages .)

I therefore conclude that “paradise” for Muhammad was the community he always wanted but never had. It was the community in which he could experience God's pleasure (see 89.27-30 above), and also **be pleased**, experience the gratification, both spiritual and sensual, that he desired.

The end of 89 is a paradigm for the ambiguity of the entire Qur'an. There are moments of high poetry, transcendent moral insight, moving spiritual passion. But they are, for me, all too brief and all too few. The text always comes back to Muhammad's—or the later “neo-Muhammad's”—personal gratification, religion vision in the service of sensual satisfaction.