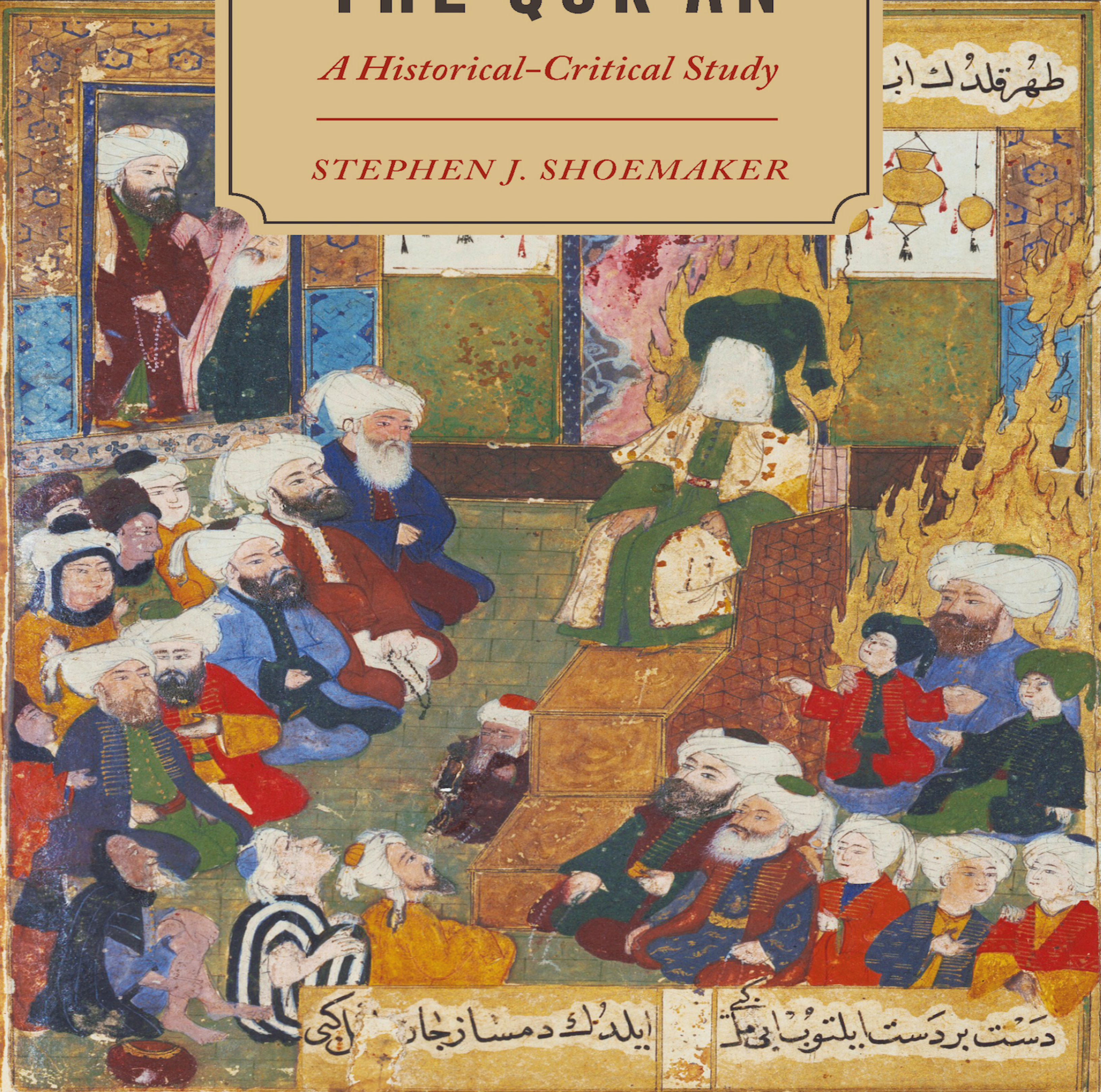
CREATING THE QUR'AN

A Historical-Critical Study

STEPHEN J. SHOEMAKER



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The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Open Access Article & Book Processing Charge Committee, the University of Oregon Libraries, and the University of Regensburg Centre for Advanced Studies "Beyond Canon."

Open access edition of this title is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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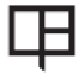

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

University of California Press
Oakland, California

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Suggested citation: Shoemaker, S. J. *Creating the Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Study*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.128

Names: Shoemaker, Stephen J., author.
Title: Creating the Qur'an : a historical-critical study / Stephen J. Shoemaker.
Description: Oakland, California : University of California Press, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references and index. ISBN 978–0-520–00000–0 (cloth : alk. paper)
Identifiers: LCCN 2021060219 (print) | LCCN 2021060220 (ebook) | ISBN 9780520389038 (paperback) | ISBN 9780520389045 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Qur'an—History. | Qur'an—History—Sources. | Qur'an—Criticism, interpretation, etc.—History—Sources.
Classification: LCC BP131 .S56 2022 (print) | LCC BP131 (ebook) | DDC 297.1/2209—dc23/eng/20220129
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021060219
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021060220

Manufactured in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 23 22
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For the Loncoske sisters

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The project that resulted in this book was originally conceived within the scope of my participation in the Center for Advanced Study “Beyond the Canon,” a collaborative research group at the University of Regensburg, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinde, and it marks my primary contribution to this ongoing Collaborative Research Group. I am enormously grateful for having been invited to participate in this research group as well as for the considerable intellectual and financial support that it provided for my research. My thanks especially to Tobias Nicklas, for initially inviting me to be a part of this project, and also to the two other directors, Harald Buchinger and Andreas Merkt. Likewise, I thank Stephanie Hallinger, the center’s academic director, and also the center’s research assistants, Charlotte von Schelling and Marko Jovanovic, for all of their help with my research and stays in Regensburg in 2019 and then in 2021–22. All have become close friends and valued collaborators in the process, contributing valuable ideas and perspectives to my research during the last several years on a number of topics. My stay in Regensburg was initially planned for 2020–21, but it was delayed a year owing to a number of factors, not the least of which was the global coronavirus pandemic. I am delighted now at last to be in Regensburg, where, fittingly, I completed and submitted the final manuscript for this book.

In as much as the particular focus of the Regensburg Center for Advanced Study is the contours of the Christian canon during late antiquity, there is perhaps some need for explanation of why a book on the canonization of the Qur’an is nonetheless an essential part of this broader, collaborative research trajectory. Initially, I had conceived of this book along somewhat different lines. It was my intention to write a book that would be titled “Qur’an and Canon: The Contours of Scripture at the End of

Antiquity." The plan was to investigate the Qur'an's emergence as a new scriptural tradition in the late ancient Near East from a novel perspective, understanding the Qur'an as a late ancient biblical apocryphon that eventually became the scripture of a new religious tradition. By approaching the Qur'an as a late ancient biblical apocryphon of uncertain origin, whose scriptural destiny was not yet determined, it would be possible to study the Qur'an as a witness to the diversity and creativity of religious culture in the late ancient Near East. When viewed from such a perspective, the Qur'an offers a fascinating example of how an emergent religious community approached both the boundaries and the riches of scriptural culture in late antiquity. The idea was to consider how the Qur'an recognizes and embraces the authority of these antecedent scriptural collections while simultaneously reconfiguring and supplementing their contents. From this perspective, the Qur'an can challenge and inspire us to rethink the boundaries of the scriptural canon in late antiquity, as well as conceptualizations of scripture that were in circulation at this time.

For better or worse, that is not the book I have written. Perhaps I will write it someday soon, and I think it is a worthy project, perhaps for others to pursue as well. Nevertheless, as I set out to write, I was hoping that I could deal with the thorny issues surrounding the date of the Qur'an, its transmission, composition, and canonization, in only a couple of chapters at the end of the study. Almost immediately, as soon as I began to set pixel to page, I realized that this would not work. The whole process of the Qur'an's production has been so underresearched from a critical perspective that there was simply no way to avoid beginning with this subject. Yet, as I began to write about this topic, it quickly became clear that it would take much more than just two chapters to set the terms for the historical-critical study of the Qur'an as part of the scriptural world of Near Eastern late antiquity. Indeed, it was not long before I realized that this was going to be the subject of the entire book, and it was going to be a long book at that. And so, rather than considering the Qur'an primarily as a witness to the rich world of late ancient apocryphicity, I have instead critically analyzed the process by which the Qur'an emerged from the scriptural surfeit of late antiquity, both canonical and noncanonical, to become the new canonical scripture of a new religion, Islam. It is a topic, I would venture to say without hesitation, which is essential for understanding the "heterotopias" of religious authority

in late antiquity, as well as the production of scriptural traditions “beyond the canon” and the various canonical processes at work in this pivotal era.

I also owe significant gratitude to a number of other benefactors for their support of this project. Firstly, I would like to thank the Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin–Madison for the support of a Robert M. Kingdon Fellowship, which, combined with a sabbatical, enabled me to focus on writing this book during 2020–21. Unfortunately, thanks to the coronavirus, I never made it to Madison, much to my disappointment. But I thank the institute’s director and staff, Steven Nadler, Ann Harris, and Elizabeth Nealy, for their creativity and flexibility in making for a successful fellowship year despite a raging pandemic. I also thank the other scholars in residence in our unusual virtual community for the many insights I gained both from their own research presentations and their questions and comments regarding my own.

This project was also supported by a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, which I was able to defer until 2021–22 so that I could hold it simultaneously with my senior fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in Regensburg. Other resources made it possible to take the year off from teaching on a research appointment, including support from a Presidential Fellowship in Humanistic Study from the University of Oregon and from the Ira E. Gaston Bequest at the University of Oregon through my appointment as Ira E. Gaston Fellow in Christian Studies for 2018–21. A Faculty Research Award from the University of Oregon for summer 2019 provided the opportunity to begin some of the initial work on this project. I am also grateful to the College of Arts and Sciences and the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Oregon for supporting me and allowing me to take this time to focus on research.

There are also many individuals to thank for their important contributions to this volume, and I fear that in attempting to name them all I will forget several friends and colleagues who helped me out along with way with a suggestion or the answer to a question. To anyone I may have inadvertently omitted, please accept my sincerest apologies. In the first place, however, I must thank Guillaume Dye, who has become perhaps my single most frequent collaborator and interlocutor, particularly when it comes to matters regarding formative Islam. Guillaume’s contributions to this study would be hard to overstate. He read every chapter after I had

written it and came back with sage questions, comments, and advice: some he read even twice. We debated certain points at some length over email. Yet no less importantly, my thinking about this project began in earnest in fall of 2018, when Guillaume hosted me as an International Chair at the Centre interdisciplinaire d'Étude des Religions et de la Laïcité, Université Libre de Bruxelles. Our conversations during those months, which included Julien Decharneux, Robert Kerr, and Jan van Reeth, were formative for conceiving of this book. I should also add that this book's primary inspiration came from one of Bart Ehrman's amazing trade books, *Jesus Before the Gospels*, as any reader of both works likely will quickly recognize. Although Bart was one of my teachers, ironically, I only became aware of this book thanks to Guillaume.

I also thank my colleague in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Oregon, David Hollenberg, who read the first two chapters and came back to me with some excellent ideas regarding how they could be improved. Likewise, I thank Michael Pregill, who is a constant email "pen pal" on all sorts of topics, including early Islam: a number of the ideas in this book were run by Michael for his thoughts at one point or another. Fred Donner and Gabriel Reynolds also offered extremely helpful comments on the complete manuscript that helped me to avoid a number of pitfalls while improving on many points. Last but not least I must thank my spouse, Melissa Aubin, who thought about many of the various issues related to this book, including especially the importance of memory and memory science. Others I must thank for various contributions of one sort or another include Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Sean Anthony, David Brakke, Éléonore Cellard, Rick Colby, Majid Daneshgar, Alba Fedeli, Reuven Firestone, Robert Gregg, Gerald Hawting, Morag Kersel, Anne Kreps, Andrew Marsham, Harry Munt, David Powers, Majied Robinson, Yorke Rowan, Jack Tannous, Tommaso Tesei, Mathieu Tillier, Dean Walton, and Philip Wood. No doubt I have forgotten some others as well, for which I apologize.

Early versions of some of the material that found its way into this book were presented in lectures at the following places: the Interdisciplinary Research Center on Late Antiquity, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville; the Religious World of Late Antiquity Section at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting; the Second Century Seminar in Fort Worth, Texas; and the Third Early Islamic Studies Seminar/Eleventh Nangeroni

Meeting, Gazzada, Italy. I thank the organizers and the participants for these opportunities and also for their helpful questions and comments.

I also thank the editors and staff of the University of California Press for their help in preparing this book for publication. I thank Eric Schmidt especially, not only for encouraging the project but also for suggesting the possibility of pursuing Open Access in order to make the book more widely available. And that we have done. In this regard I am grateful to the University of California Press, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the University of Oregon, and the University of Regensburg Center for Advanced Studies "Beyond the Canon" for their contributions to meeting the costs to make Open Access possible. Likewise, at the University of California Press I wish to thank LeKeisha Hughes and Steven Jenkins for their help with preparing the manuscript and securing Open Access. My thanks also to Cindy Fulton and Gabriel Bartlett for their help in preparing the manuscript.

I should also note that in cases where an Arabic word or name has a clear form in English, we have decided to use this rather than transliterating the Arabic: Muhammad instead of Muḥammad; Qur'an instead of Qurʾān; Hijaz instead of Ḥijāz; sura instead of sūra, and so on. In cases where there is no clear equivalent in English, we have transliterated the Arabic using the American Library Association and the Library of Congress standard, which is commonly used, and which yields forms that are generally easy to recognize and remember.

Finally, there are the Loncoske sisters, my aunts, to whom I wish to express a different sort of gratitude with this book's dedication. My mother was blessed with an amazing set of six aunts on her father's side, most of whom she grew up with in the same small town and most of whom I also knew well into adulthood. These great aunts were accomplished and inspiring women: Eunice, Agnes, Marie, Vivian, Jean, and Sally. All were bold, creative, smart, clever, and kind, in very different ways. They were inspirational examples of the many amazing opportunities and adventures life had to offer in choosing to follow one path or another. But even more so I also want to thank especially my own aunts, my mother's sisters, Susan and Linda, who are also amazing, for their love and for the profound impact that they have had on my life and its direction. I know that much of who I am

today comes as a result of having them both in my life, for which I am enormously grateful. And of course, last but not least, I thank the most important and wonderful of the Loncoske sisters, my mom, Lois. I cannot express how lucky I am to have her for a mother.

Introduction

> Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.
>
> —TERENCE, *HEAUTON TIMORUMENOS* 1.1

> Scholars committed to the idea that the history made by Muslims is comparable to that made by non-Muslims can recognize that, *taken as a whole*, the reliable evidence suggests that Qur'anic texts must have remained at least partially fluid through the late seventh and early eighth century.
>
> —CHASE F. ROBINSON[1]

The Qur'an's origins are a mystery. The genesis of this new sacred text remains one of the most abiding and baffling puzzles from the religious world of late antiquity. So it is, at least, for those who are willing to approach the Qur'an on its own terms and in its immediate context, rather than allowing its history and significance to be defined and controlled by the collective memory of the (much) later Islamic tradition. The truth is that we know precious little about the context or conditions in which the Qur'an first came to be: in many respects it seems to appear out of thin air into a world already saturated with Abrahamic monotheisms. Of course, the Islamic tradition stands at the ready to tell us everything we might want to know (and more) about the text and its origins. Perhaps understandably, then, modern scholarship on the Qur'an, with some notable exceptions, has been largely governed by traditional Islamic views of the Qur'an. Even many studies that seek deliberately to undertake historical-critical study of this text remain under the powerful influence of the Islamic tradition's

gravitational pull, at times without even fully realizing it. So engrained have certain patterns from the Islamic collective memory become in the discourse of Qur'anic studies that they can be hard to escape. The result, as Angelika Neuwirth on one occasion rightly observes, is "that Qur'anic studies is not informed by the methods of religious studies as currently practiced internationally, but still follows a limited and selective set of methods which tend to be essentialist in their attitude towards the Qur'an." Such obeisance to the Islamic tradition, rather than to the methods and perspectives of religious and biblical studies, she notes, reflects a "failure of Qur'anic studies to locate the Qur'an at eye level with the other Semitic scriptures."[2] Such is also Robinson's point in the epigraph above: we must not study the origins of the Qur'an according to the convictions of the later Islamic tradition, but instead using the standard tools of historical criticism that scholars have long applied to the study of other sacred writings.

Nevertheless, when this document is approached from the perspective of the history of religion in late antiquity, rather than the discipline of Qur'anic studies, various widely acknowledged givens about the Qur'an drawn from the later Islamic tradition seem much less obvious and authoritative. From such a vantage point, the Qur'an appears instead as an enigmatic product of late ancient religious culture that demands investigation within this milieu in its own right, without allowing the Islamic tradition to dictate the terms of its study. Not only will such an approach bring better understanding of the Qur'an itself, illuminating the historical circumstances of its origin, formation, and canonization, but it will also allow the Qur'an to speak directly to our understanding of the diversity and creativity of religious culture in the late ancient Near East. The Qur'an, after all, bears witness to a peculiar new religious movement arising from this matrix, one that is clearly modelled on the other Abrahamic monotheisms of this era, and yet it rearticulates many of their traditions in new ways and in different contexts.

For many potential readers, the very notion of approaching the Qur'an as a historical artifact from the religious cultures of late antiquity without allowing the Islamic tradition to define the text and control its interpretation may be controversial or even unwelcome. This is a particularly problematic issue in the study of early Islam, much more so, it would seem, than in most other areas of religious studies. Many scholars, including many non-Muslims, reject any departures from insider perspectives regarding the

Qur'an and early Islam as being tantamount to an act of intellectual colonialism and even as anti-Islamic. Such opposition comes partly as a consequence, I suspect, of the fact that the study of early Islam developed for most of its history outside religious studies and instead in departments of Middle Eastern studies, where philology and understanding of modern Middle Eastern cultures, rather than the critical historical study of religious traditions, were the primary focuses.[3] Of course, there are other contemporary cultural and political issues at play as well. Many contemporary Muslims object to non-Muslims taking their sacred text and subjecting it to independent critical analysis based in another intellectual tradition that is markedly different from their own faith perspective. It strikes some as offensive, perhaps understandably, that an outsider would come along and tell them what their sacred text "really" is and how it should be understood.

Let me be quite clear from the outset, however, that I have no intention of proposing any sort of final "truth" about the Qur'an and its significance in this book. What I offer is merely a perspective on the Qur'an as viewed by a historian of religion, rather than by a faithful Muslim, or a philologist for that matter. In contrast to the philologist, who seeks to understand the words of the text, the historian of religion seeks to understand the world behind the text and how the text came to be in the first place. Perhaps more importantly, my interest in the Qur'an is not, as it would be for a Muslim, to discern what God has revealed in its pages, but instead I seek to understand the text as a product of human history that can enable us to better understand the religious history of western Asia at the end of antiquity. These are simply different approaches, and one does not negate the other: they arise from very different interests and are aimed at very different audiences. Each, I would submit, is entirely appropriate in its proper context; and likewise it is inappropriate when introduced into the wrong sort of interpretive and intentional setting. Moreover, while Muslims certainly have a particular claim on the Qur'an, it is also a text that addresses and belongs to all humankind, as one of the most important and influential writings in all human history.[4] Accordingly, it is entirely legitimate, I maintain, for non-Muslims to form and express their own opinions about the text and also for specialists in the academic study of religion to address the text's history from this perspective as well. I make no pretense in this

book of explaining the Qur'an in a manner that reflects either what modern Muslims believe or should believe about it. Instead, this book offers a view of the Qur'an as it appears from outside its use in contemporary Islam, not as a sacred book revered by a living religious community but as a product of the religious cultures of late antiquity in western Asia. In order to investigate the Qur'an's formation within this milieu, we will approach the text very differently from modern believers, using the full toolkit of critical methods available to the scholar of religious studies, rather than having recourse to the Islamic tradition's interpretation of the text, which seeks to understand it as God's revealed message for humanity.

There is, of course, a long-standing tendency within religious studies itself that would insist on privileging insider perspectives and would refrain from any sort of explanation that could be considered reductive or that believers would find objectionable. As Bruce Lincoln wryly observes, it is often the case that "with the possible exception of Economics, ours [religious studies] is the only academic field that is effectively organized to protect its (putative) object of study against critical examination."[5] This trajectory has in fact had a particularly notable impact on the study of Islam as it would eventually enter religious studies departments, owing in large part to the outsize influence of Wilfred Cantrell Smith on the study of Islam during the latter half of the twentieth century. According to Smith's approach to the study of religion, for any statement about a given religious tradition to be valid, it must be recognized as such and accepted by members of that religious community.[6] Therefore, in order to come to any valid understanding of the Qur'an, according to Smith, one must approach the text as a believing Muslim would and seek to understand it on this basis.[7] Smith's tradition of deference to the beliefs of religious adherents and his views regarding the Qur'an in particular have cast a long shadow on the subsequent study of Islam, particularly in North America, where a concern to accommodate the convictions of believers remains widespread.[8]

In 1951, Smith founded the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Montreal, and the subsequent influence of this institution and its graduates on the development of Islamic religious studies in North America is difficult to overestimate. Smith established this center and its doctoral program with the explicit aim of grounding the Western study of Islam by non-Muslims squarely within the perspectives of the Islamic

tradition itself. Indeed, the degree requirements for the Institute explicitly required that students earning the Ph.D. must "produce work that would maintain continuity with the Islamic tradition" and must be relevant, significant, and cogent to members of this faith community.[9] In 1964, Smith left McGill, with his designs for the Institute of Islamic Studies firmly ensconced, and took up a position at Harvard University, where he served as director of the Harvard Divinity School's Center for the Study of World Religions. Between these two prestigious appointments, Smith was able to direct the training and influence the methodological approach of "many, if not the majority, of Islamicists who held (and continue to hold) positions in religious studies departments in North America."[10] Consequently, as the study of Islam entered North American religious studies departments, it was frequently colored by a deference to the religious views of (certain) contemporary Muslims, views that were allowed to control and direct the academic study of this religious tradition. Such broad acquiescence to the theological positions of a particular religious community is highly unusual and generally unwelcome in the academic study of religion, and the resulting tension between specialists on Islam and those who study just about any and every other religious tradition abides in many departments of religious studies.[11] This issue can be particularly acute for those, like myself, who teach religious studies at a state (public) university.

Nevertheless, despite the decisive influence that Smith in particular had in establishing the field of Islamic religious studies, in many regards his perspective reflects a broader trend within the field of religious studies in the mid-twentieth century, a trend that surely also played a role in steering the study of Islam in this direction. In this era, a move was in place to define religion as a phenomenon that is sui generis—that is, unique and in a class all to itself alongside the other topics studied in the modern academy. The claim was in part strategic, and it aimed to stake out a domain for religious studies within the secular university by maintaining that, given its distinctive nature, religion demanded a particular set of approaches to be properly studied and understood that other academic departments could not supply. Roughly contemporary with Smith was Mircea Eliade, who famously led a vibrant program of comparative religion at the University of Chicago that was grounded in similar assumptions about religion, identified at Chicago as the study of "the history of religions." It was an unfortunate

moniker, in my opinion, since what Eliade and his students were engaged in bears little resemblance to the actual practice of *Religionsgeschichte* as it emerged at the University of Göttingen during the last years of the nineteenth century.

The German scholars who developed this pioneering approach turned deliberately away from the dogmatic interests that guided most scholars of the Bible at that time. In their place they advocated a radical historicism that made every effort to understand the New Testament and early Christian literature in direct relation to the broader religious cultures in which they were formed. The present work stands resolutely in the same spirit and tradition as this Göttingen Religionsgeschichtliche Schule in seeking to understand the Qur'an from a similar, radically historicized perspective. What Eliade was advancing at Chicago, and Smith at McGill and Harvard for that matter, is strikingly different from the paramount concern of the history of religions for understanding religious phenomena in their immediate historical context. There is indeed little overlap between the two, other than the fact that the *religionsgeschichtliche* study of early Christianity created, for the first time, an interest in studying and understanding other religious traditions of the ancient world, primarily in order to better understand early Christianity.[12]

Eliade and Smith certainly shared the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule's concern for the study of non-Christian religions, although they developed this interest into an enterprise that is perhaps more properly named "comparative religion" than the history of religions. In sharp contrast to the radically historical orientation of the tradition established in Göttingen, Eliade and Smith advocated a deliberately ahistorical approach to the study of religion that privileged above all else individual personal experience. Anything else having to do with religious belief and practice—anything historically circumscribed or socially embedded and contingent—was not in fact real religion and needed to be bracketed and overcome, in effect, in order to understand the true experience of the individual's encounter with the sacred. It is a tradition of understanding religion with roots in Rudolf Otto's influential *The Idea of the Holy* and even further back in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, which sought to rescue religion from the critiques of modern science and historical criticism by locating its true reality in private experiences of intuition and feeling.[13] Ultimately, however,

this view of religion amounts to little more than an expression of Protestant Pietism in academic garb: in true Pietist fashion, it denigrates externals such as ritual and practice, or even theological expression, in order to validate instead the interior experience of the believer and focus on the importance of religion as a foundation of ethics.[14] In other ways, the difference in approach can be seen to reflect an older Platonist/Aristotelian divide as to whether truth should be sought in the inner workings of the human mind or in the external realities of the physical universe, a tension later manifest in many respects in the idealist/empiricist divide of the Enlightenment.

For Eliade, true religion, and thus the object of the scholar's interest, was to be found in the individual's experience of encountering the sacred, an experience that was irreducible and insusceptible to any sort of external analysis.[15] The sacred, for Eliade, is a deep spiritual reality experienced by all human beings, that

> lies behind, or is prior to, and motivates the practices and conceptions of all people and their communities. The dialectics of the sacred, then, designates the ways in which this supposedly unified and ultimately meaningful object constantly moves from the ahistorical to the historical sphere—for example, the fact that the sacred breaks through, and is expressed in, hierophanies that occur in the realm of the profane and that its manifestations provide centers for human existential orientation and motivate ostensibly authentic action.[16]

In almost identical fashion, Smith deploys a view of religion that rests on a fundamental distinction, indeed a profound tension, between the individual's private "personal faith in transcendence" and what Smith names the "cumulative tradition." In this way, Smith, like Eliade, elevates "internal, intuitive, and essentially ahistorical categories over interpersonally available and historical categories." Real religion is the individual's encounter with the transcendent; the "cumulative tradition" consists merely of the various external forms that this personal experience has taken over time and space. Such externals are of little interest to the scholar of religion, Smith maintains, since they are "socially determined, heterogeneous, and secondary," in contrast to the indeterminate, homogenous, and primal experience of faith as a response to the "transcendent."[17] Only by focusing on the personal encounter of individual believers with the sacred can one discern the true content of religion, something that is sui generis and hence

cannot be properly understood using methods from other disciplines in the humanities and social science.[18]

The legacy of this tradition of religion as a sui generis phenomenon, and the resultant privileging of personal experience and morality remains quite strong among scholars trained during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as those students who have been influenced by them. This conception of religion goes hand in hand, one should note, with yielding authority to the perspectives and the statements of insiders instead of studying religion as it exists historically within its broader social and cultural context. These two guiding principles are generally two sides of the same coin. Nevertheless, as Aaron Hughes rightly notes, particularly with regard to the study of Islam, it is very often a matter of exactly *which* insider perspectives are privileged by those adopting this approach. Indeed, selective validation of certain religious viewpoints at the expense of others is a significant problem on which the comparative projects and the perennial philosophy advocated by Eliade, Smith, and others founder profoundly. The truth of the matter is that human expressions of religious faith—their responses to "the sacred"—are incredibly diverse, no less within a particular faith tradition than among various independent traditions.

As Hughes rightly explains, Islamic religious studies, as generally practiced, reflects its formation in area studies, and more specifically Middle Eastern studies, during the second half of the twentieth century. A major impetus behind the establishment of departments of Middle or Near Eastern studies in American universities at this time was the pressing need for knowledge about the Middle East, a strategically important region, in the aftermath of the Second World War and during the Cold War. Much of the early funding for these departments was therefore linked to the US Defense Department, as well as powerful corporate interests; indeed, these ties have still not entirely vanished. The goal was to produce information that would be useful for navigating global politics and to advance the policy goals of the United States in this region. In this context, it was especially desirable to produce knowledge about Islam in its contemporary form, so that it would be politically useful; as a result, studies of Islam's early history became much less valued than they had once been in the age of the European "Orientalists." Further inspired by the sui generis discourse about religion that was in vogue at the time, experts on Middle Eastern studies presented

an understanding of Islam that was disembodied from history and was alleged to represent a sort of universal essence of Islamic identity and self-understanding that reached across a wide range of diverse cultures. In other words, a certain version of Islam was privileged at the expense of its other cultural expressions in a flattening that sought to make the information more universally relevant for policy makers and industry.[19]

Beginning in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, however, academics grew increasingly distrustful of and even opposed to the actions of the United States and its military around the globe and likewise became more attuned to a need to allow contemporary Muslims themselves to articulate the essentials of their religious faith. Nevertheless, this turn to allow believers to control scholarly discourse about their own religious tradition is one that is ill-suited to the discipline of religious studies. Religious studies, in contrast to Middle Eastern studies, is grounded in the premise that experts trained in the academic study of religion have analytical perspectives to offer on religious culture that are more appropriate for inclusion in the academy than the confessional statements of believers.[20] As Robert Orsi rightly reminds us, "religious studies is an outsider's discipline by definition, aspiring to critical knowledge through a strategy of distance."[21] Furthermore, as more and more Muslims entered departments of Middle Eastern studies and began to control the conversations around religion within this discipline, the problems of essentialization and homogenization endured; only now understandings of what Islam "really" is were crescively determined by believers, from the perspective of faith in the tradition. As Hughes notes, the new version of "authentic" Islam that emerged from this context, produced in concert with believing Muslims, remained, as it had been previously, "a reified Islam no less situated than that produced by Orientalists or practitioners of area studies." And in this case, the resulting construct is even more problematic for the scholar of religious studies than its predecessors, since it is based almost entirely on "experiential claims that are internal to individuals and that cannot be subject to social-scientific critique."[22]

The believers primarily responsible for this new, authentic discourse about Islam have tended to come, as Hughes notes, from more upper-class, privileged backgrounds in their home countries and also are more highly educated, obviously, than most Muslims. The result is an image of Islam that is largely derived from the Sunni tradition and is reflective of the social and

cultural status of those producing it. Speaking from their lofty perches in the ivory towers of academe, these Muslim scholars will frequently insist, for instance, that Islam, in its "true" form, is fully compatible with most of the liberal values of the Western academy on issues such as race, gender, and, especially, violence.[23] Yet, the fact of the matter is that global Islam, beyond the university campuses of North America, is far more diverse on these and other issues, and the truth is that often its adherents do not understand their faith as being at all compatible with these values. No less than its forerunners, this most recent effort to represent the essence of Islam for Western consumption fails entirely to represent the breadth and diversity of this religious tradition. In effect, it intellectually and culturally annihilates these other interpretations and expressions of Islamic faith and practice, denying them any legitimate place in the effort to understand and describe Islam in all of its multiform and often disparate contemporary manifestations. Ultimately, this more recent effort to essentialize Islam seeks, no less than its intellectual antecedents, to advance a political and theological agenda—a noble and optimistic one in most cases to be sure—but its result is to exclude much of the Islamic tradition from view. The goal of the historian of religion, by contrast, is to investigate Islam in all its global and historical diversity on its own terms, without seeking to elevate those elements alone that are deemed "true" Islam or that reflect values amenable to Western liberalism.

On this point, Orsi offers a particularly valuable perspective for scholars of religious studies that brings a much-needed correction to the discipline as it has often been practiced. In *Between Heaven and Earth*, Orsi devotes a chapter to explaining why students of religion cannot simply turn away from and ignore forms of religious expression that seem illegitimate or offensive from their own cultural perspective. One must instead recognize the full legitimacy of such beliefs and practices and study them without prejudice, seeking to understand them on their own terms, as perceived from the perspectives of their adherents and within their social and historical contexts. According to Orsi, "The mother of all religious dichotomies—us/them—has regularly been constituted as a moral distinction—good/bad religion," and it is the mission of the scholar of religious studies to overcome this dichotomy.[24] Yet religious studies itself has a long history of marginalizing beliefs and practices that stand sharply at odds with the values

of Western liberalism and liberal Protestantism in particular. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the academic study of religion in America's colleges and universities—to the extent that it was practiced—focused almost entirely on elevating those elements from the history of religion that would provide "morally uplifting undergraduate teaching."[25] It was a strategy, Orsi explains, deployed to find a way around the wide diversity of Christian faith and practice in American society. As a result, ethics were placed at the center of religious studies, a move that mirrored closely the similar emphasis on ethics in the influential (and not entirely unrelated) discourses of Protestant Pietism, liberal Protestantism, and Kantian philosophy that were popular at the time. Accordingly,

> The entire curriculum was understood by liberal Christian educational leaders to be morally uplifting, oriented to the shaping of human spiritual and moral development. . . . Outside the walls of the academy, the winds of religious "madness" howled (in the view of those inside)—fire-baptized people, ghost dancers, frenzied preachers and gullible masses, Mormons and Roman Catholics. "Religion" as it took shape in the academy was explicitly imagined in relation to these others and as a prophylactic against them.[26]

As religious studies expanded its footprint in American universities after the Second World War, the focus on studying and teaching "good" religion persisted and was applied equally to non-Christian traditions as they increasingly became objects of study. It remained the case that "true religion, then, is epistemologically and ethically singular. It is rational, respectful of persons, noncoercive, mature, nonanthropomorphic in its higher forms, mystical (as opposed to ritualistic), unmediated and agreeable to democracy (no hierarchy in gilded robes and fancy hats), monotheistic (no angels, saints, demons, ancestors), emotionally controlled, a reality of mind and spirit not body and matter."[27] Orsi's own scholarship has continuously challenged us to break this mold, drawing attention to highly popular and fascinating aspects of Roman Catholic piety that do not fit this paradigm. Religion, at its root, Orsi helpfully clarifies, "has nothing to do with morality." While this may come as a shock to many modern scholars and believers alike, historically it is true. Indeed, "Religion is often enough cruel and dangerous, and the same impulses that result in a special kind of compassion also lead to destruction, often among the same people at the

same time. Theories of religion have largely served as a protection against such truths about religion."[28] Therefore, students of religion are not entitled to look down their noses at Christian snake handlers or devout Catholics who fill their cars' radiators with holy water as if their beliefs and practices were somehow not "real" or "true" religion.[29] By the same token, scholars of religious studies must refuse to accept essentializations of "true" Islam that would exclude from legitimacy any expressions of Islam, no matter how unsavory they may be to liberal Western tastes. For the historian of religion, violent and hateful expressions of religion are no less legitimate and deserving of study that those that advance peace and love.[30]

Of course, the present study is not at all concerned with determining exactly what constitutes "real" or "true" Islam: that is something for faithful Muslims to debate among themselves, not something for specialists in religious studies to decide. I would never dare to pronounce on what true Islam is today, no more than I would for Christianity, particularly for those who practice it. Nevertheless, I do claim warrant to speak on behalf of the religious movement that Muhammad began and that developed over the course of the seventh century to lay the foundations of the faith tradition that we now call Islam. This "Believers" movement that Muhammad founded is simply not to be equated with contemporary Islam, in any of its expressions, any more than one would foolishly profess that Christianity today is identical with the faith of Jesus and his initial followers. Contemporary Muslims may of course believe and insist that their faith is indistinguishable and unchanged from the religious movement that Muhammad established in the seventh century. Yet any such claim, essential though it may be to Islamic self-identity, is theological and ideological and not historical. Therefore, while Muslims speaking within their tradition and in their faith communities are certainly justified in collapsing the two, the historian of religion must instead recognize and bring to light the numerous profound differences in these religious formations. With this in mind, we will approach the Qur'an as a historical artifact independent of the contemporary Islamic tradition and as a product instead of the diverse religious cultures of western Asia in late antiquity. In this regard we follow in the footsteps of Jonathan Z. Smith, who rightly avers that "the historian of religion . . . accepts neither the boundaries of canon nor of community in constituting his intellectual domain." Likewise, for the historian of religion

“there is *no privilege* to myth or other religious materials. They must be understood primarily as texts in context, specific acts of communication between specified individuals, at specific points in time and space, about specifiable subjects.”[31]

In contrast to the missteps of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “Orientalists,” our approach decidedly does not seek to paint Islam as an other of the Christian West. Instead, our aim is to compare the beginnings of Islam with the related Near Eastern monotheisms in the Abrahamic tradition that arose from the same context. Our study advocates substantial continuity, rather than difference, between Islam and these traditions. Likewise, in a sharp distinction from the “Orientalist” tendency to cast Islam as something exotic or eccentric, we find early Islam instead to be a movement that is engaged with and similar to the other monotheisms of late antiquity—rather than a new religion that emerged spontaneously from the cultural seclusion of the Hijaz. We also reject the tendency to flatten or homogenize the Islamic tradition, evident equally in “orientalist” scholarship and in more recent works published by scholars of Middle Eastern studies and Islamic religious studies—referring to the latter category particularly in the sense defined by Hughes.[32] To the contrary, we aim to unearth the buried complexity and diversity evidenced in the new religious movement founded by Muhammad and his followers. Accordingly, our presentation of Islam is decidedly not a “static system of essentialism” with little social and historical flux; nor do we expect that its adherents largely agree with one another on most things, with little historical or geographical variation.[33] In each case, then, this study seeks to move the investigation of Islam away from the classic mistakes and misrepresentations of nineteenth-century “orientalism” as identified by Edward Said.[34]

Our approach to understanding the earliest history of the Qur’an and its composition stands within the methodological tradition of religious studies often known as “naturalism,” a term seemingly first coined by J. Samuel Preus.[35] This paradigm views religious culture as a phenomenon that can and should, contra W. C. Smith,

> be understood without benefit of clergy—that is, without the magisterial guidance of religious authorities—and, more radically, without “conversion” or confessional and/or metaphysical commitments about its causes *different* from the assumptions one might use to understand

> and explain other realms of culture. . . . It is not necessary to believe in order to understand—indeed, . . . suspension of belief is probably a condition for understanding.[36]

The term "naturalism" is admittedly not entirely ideal, since it could imply a claim to reveal "what *is* or *is not* natural, normative, and acceptable" about religion.[37] Perhaps, then, it would be better to speak instead of this approach as "mundane" and "immanent," in contrast to understandings of religion that privilege personal, interior responses to the transcendent and the sacred. Russ McCutcheon further clarifies the "naturalist" approach as being guided by two main principles: "(1) the assumption that scholars carry out their work in the sociohistorical world, and (2) the assumption that the categories and concepts scholars routinely employ to describe and account for the world are equally natural products with not only a history but also material implications."[38] The mundane or immanent approach to religious culture therefore refrains from positing any supernatural phenomena or explanations, and it rejects the idea that religious phenomena are somehow sui generis so that they cannot be understood and explained using the same methods regularly employed for studying other aspects of culture and society. From the naturalist perspective, religion exists as an integral part of human social and cultural history and therefore may and must be studied as such, rather than through appeals to personal, private experiences of some sort of ineffable transcendent or "the Holy."

In studying a modern religious community, a naturalist approach might employ the tools of sociological and economic analysis in order to better understand the phenomena in view. Yet in a case such as ours, which deals with religious culture at a distance of many centuries, an approach using the various tools of historical criticism seems more appropriate. And so we position ourselves, again, squarely within the larger tradition of *Religionsgeschichte*, the history of religions. We take as a foundation for our study the thirteen essential "theses on method" for the history of religions as laid down by Bruce Lincoln, theses that give particularly clear expression to the underlying principles of this method. Although Lincoln was himself a product of Eliade's Chicago school and was even his student, Lincoln soon came to rather different conclusions about religion from his mentor, rejecting the approach in which he was trained for both its essentialism and its inability to challenge critically the ideological power of religion in culture

and society.[39] In order to give readers a better idea of the basis for our approach, we quote below several of the most salient theses posed by Lincoln, particularly since I suspect that both they and the approach to religion that they outline may not be altogether familiar to many scholars trained in Islamic studies.

1. The same destabilizing and irreverent questions one might ask of any speech act ought to be posed of religious discourse. The first of these is "Who speaks here?", i.e., what person, group, or institution is responsible for a text, whatever its putative or apparent author. Beyond that, "To what audience? In what immediate and broader context? Through what system of mediations? With what interests?" And further, "Of what would the speaker(s) persuade the audience? What are the consequences if this project of persuasion should happen to succeed? Who wins what, and how much? Who, conversely, loses?"
2. Reverence is a religious, and not a scholarly virtue. When good manners and good conscience cannot be reconciled, the demands of the latter ought to prevail.
3. Many who would not think of insulating their own or their parents' religion against critical inquiry still afford such protection to other people's faiths, via a stance of cultural relativism. One can appreciate their good intentions, while recognizing a certain displaced defensiveness, as well as the guilty conscience of western imperialism.
4. Beyond the question of motives and intentions, cultural relativism is predicated on the dubious—not to say, fetishistic—construction of "cultures" as if they were stable and discrete groups of people defined by the stable and discrete values, symbols, and practices they share. Insofar as this model stresses the continuity and integration of timeless groups, whose internal tensions and conflicts, turbulence and incoherence, permeability and malleability are largely erased, it risks becoming a religious and not a historic narrative: the story of a transcendent ideal threatened by debasing forces of change.
5. Those who sustain this idealized image of culture do so, *inter alia*, by mistaking the dominant fraction (sex, age group, class, and/or caste) of a given group for the group or "culture" itself. At the same time, they mistake ideological positions favoured and propagated by the dominant

> fraction for those of the group as a whole (e.g. when texts authored by Brahmins define "Hinduism", or when the statements of male elders constitute "Nuer religion"). Scholarly misrecognitions of this sort replicate the misrecognitions and misrepresentations of those the scholars privilege as their informants.[40]

In following this path, this book will make use of a wide range of methods and perspectives with broad currency in the humanities, social sciences, and even the natural sciences, tools that are regularly used to analyze and understand the panoply of human social and cultural phenomena. In the first two chapters, we will investigate the diverse reports concerning the Qur'an's composition that have come down to us from the earliest written sources, noting especially the confusion and contradictions of these reports. I should note that in speaking of the Qur'an's "composition," a term that I will regularly use in this study, I do not mean to suggest the Qur'an's creation out of thin air at some given point. Nevertheless, I do intend for readers to understand by such language that the production of a new version of the Qur'anic text is in view, and not just a passive collection of already long-established writings.[41] Nor should we have in mind mere cosmetic adjustments to an already fixed text, such as adding textual divisions or diacritical marks, as we think about the process of producing the canonical Qur'an during the middle and later seventh century.[42] Therefore, I deliberately choose the term "composition" to signal that this process involves more than the mere compilation of textual material that has already been fixed into a certain form, as if one were merely stringing together well-established textual traditions. On the basis of the available historical evidence, we conclude that the Qur'an's final composition into the canonical form that has come down to us today seems to have taken place around the turn of the eighth century under the direction of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705) and his viceroy al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf. This tradition not only holds the most consistency with the range of our available evidence, including the gradual development of the caliphal state, but it is also the most broadly attested account of the Qur'an's origins across the various sources relevant to this question.

I wish to be clear at the outset, however, that while it does in fact seem that we owe the unvarying and canonical version of the Qur'an to the actions of ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj, their ultimate imposition of this imperial standard certainly is not the whole story. On the one hand, then, our focus on the tradition of their decisive intervention in the text of the Qur'an flows from genuine conviction in its historical significance. Yet on the other hand, it is also partly strategic, affording an extremely useful foil for countering the ossified credence in the canonical Sunni narrative of the Qur'an's composition—particularly as rearticulated by Nöldeke and Schwally—that has stultified progress in the academic study of the Qur'an's origins for over a century now. In bringing attention to the pivotal roles played by ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj in establishing the canonical Qur'an, I do not at all propose to close off the possibility and importance of earlier collections or earlier efforts at closure or partial closure of the canonical text. On the contrary, it is hoped that instead the positions argued in this study will open up space for proposing and discussing more complex and nuanced understandings of the Qur'an's formation across the expanse of the seventh century. The primary goal of this study, then, is not so much to provide closure to questions about the Qur'an's origins around ʿAbd al-Malik's imperial vulgate, but rather to open up a range of possibilities for thinking about how the Qur'an came to be.

In chapter 3, we turn to the issue of the radiocarbon dating of early Qur'anic manuscripts. Recently, a number of scholars have cited the results of these assays as if they have somehow definitively resolved the question of the Qur'an's creation, locating its composition in the later part of the caliph ʿUthmān's reign (during the early 650s), a position favored by the Islamic tradition generally and the Sunni tradition especially. Nevertheless, a more careful analysis of the data from the radiometric analysis of these manuscripts belies this misplaced certainty, and in fact the early manuscripts and their radiocarbon datings, when properly understood, are most consistent with the canonical Qur'an's origins under ʿAbd al-Malik. The fourth chapter considers the social, cultural, and economic conditions of Mecca and Medina in late antiquity, at least, insofar as they can be known: the available evidence for understanding the central Hijaz in this era is in fact strikingly meagre in comparison with other regions. Nevertheless, we

can discern that both Mecca and the Yathrib oasis were very small and isolated settlements, of little cultural and economic significance—in short, hardly the sort of place one would expect to produce a complicated religious text like the Qur'an. Chapter 5 investigates the evidence currently available for understanding the Qur'an's linguistic context. Although we now have more inscriptions from the Arabian Peninsula in various forms of Arabic than ever before, it remains the case that during the lifetime of Muhammad, the peoples of the central Hijaz, which includes Mecca and Medina, were effectively nonliterate.

This conclusion means that we must understand the Qur'anic text for much of its early history as a fundamentally oral tradition that was recited from memory and passed along primarily through oral transmission for several decades. Accordingly, the sixth and seventh chapters bring to bear on the Qur'an perspectives from memory science and the anthropological study of oral cultures and oral transmission respectively. The knowledge derived from these two disciplines leads us to conclude with some certainty that, if the Qur'an were indeed circulating orally for decades, as seems to have been the case, then we must understand the Qur'an as a text that remained in a constant state of composition and recomposition as its traditions were told and retold—and modified and amplified—during their transmission by Muhammad's followers in the decades after his death. Chapter 8, then, considers the impact and the process of the transition to a written text. Generally, the conversion of an oral tradition to a written one is not sudden but gradual, involving numerous stages and multiple editions along the way to a finished product. Nevertheless, even as the tradition shifts to a written medium, the influence of oral tradition on the written remains strong, and written collections themselves remain subject to significant change until a text becomes canonized and its contents are subject to a level of policing by authorities.

In the final chapter we look to the Qur'an itself for clues regarding the circumstances in which it was produced, and there we find abundant evidence that it often addresses a milieu that is simply not compatible with the central Hijaz during the early seventh century. Indeed, the Qur'an itself, as we are left to conclude, affirms the indications of the historical tradition, the social and linguistic history of the Arabian Peninsula, memory science, and the study of oral tradition to reveal a text that was in large part

composed—during the process of its oral transmission—outside the Hijaz. Although much of the Qur'an's content was presumably inspired by Muhammad's teachings to his followers in Mecca and Medina—as these teachings were remembered and re-remembered by his followers over decades, its content was also heavily influenced and, in many instances, directly inspired by the formation of its traditions within the sectarian milieu of the late ancient Near East. This recognition should lead to a profound reorientation in how scholars seek to understand the text of the Qur'an within the historical context that gave it birth.

1

The Traditional Narrative of the Qur'an's Origins

A Scholarly Sunnism

If one were to peruse the scholarly literature on the Qur'an from the last century and a half, it would be hard to escape the conclusion that the circumstances of the Qur'an's origins are in fact well known with great certainty, resting on a basis of rock-solid historical evidence. Almost everywhere in these writings one would meet with firm conviction that the Qur'an as it has come down to us today (at least in its consonantal structure) was established by the caliph ʿUthmān around 650, within about two decades of Muhammad's death. At this time, the Qur'an was immutably fixed into its now canonical form and did not undergo any significant changes at all from then on. Therefore, modern scholars regularly assure us that we can place great confidence in the fact that the words found in the Qur'an today bear witness directly to the very words spoken by Muhammad himself in Mecca and Medina in the early seventh century. The Qur'an is thus held forth in effect as a highly accurate transcript of the revelations that Muhammad spoke to his followers, allowing us to encounter, transparently and unmediated, the teaching of Islam's founding prophet. We can be assured of this because the words he taught were meticulously and carefully recorded soon after his death under the supervision of those who knew him well—most notably the caliph ʿUthmān, but also Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and others as well.

The truth of the matter, however, is that the evidence for the Qur'an's collection and composition is a convoluted tangle of traditions, and the uncomplicated confidence that most modern scholarship has invested in this particular narrative of its origins is undeserved. In actual fact, Islamic tradition relates not a single, regularly attested account of the Qur'an's formation, but instead a bewildering muddle of rival and contradictory reports scattered across a range of much later sources, all of them dating to around two hundred years or more after the death of Muhammad. Although it is certainly understandable that the Islamic tradition would eventually settle on a particular narrative of the Qur'an's origins chosen from among these various accounts, the sheer diversity of information coming from the early tradition regarding the Qur'an's production should doubtless occasion less certainty from modern Qur'anic scholarship. In this chapter, we will lay out the complexity and contradictions of these accounts without trying to resolve them. Instead, our aim will be to demonstrate that their variation and discontinuity undermine the widespread scholarly acquiescence to the traditional Sunni tradition of the Qur'an's formation, primarily in the form articulated by Theodor Nöldeke and his successors.

The canonical narrative of the Qur'an's collection sanctioned by the Sunni tradition is itself largely the handiwork of al-Bukhārī, the Sunni tradition's foremost and most esteemed collector of hadith—that is, teachings ascribed to Muhammad and his companions. Al-Bukhārī fashioned this canonical narrative out of what were originally several competing traditions that ascribed this task in various ways to the first three caliphs: Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān. From this array of discordant early memories, al-Bukhārī formed a congruous narrative of the Qur'an's origins, and by giving his new harmony pride of place in his collection of *Ṣaḥīḥ*—that is, "sound" hadith—he secured its reception by the subsequent Sunni tradition and, oddly enough, modern Qur'anic scholarship. This canonical Sunni account—which is sharply different from the earliest Shi'i memories, one should note—is as follows.[1]

THE CANONICAL SUNNI NARRATIVE

While Muhammad was still alive, the Qur'an seems to have been primarily an oral tradition. Some of his followers had presumably attempted to

memorize important parts of his revelations, and the later Islamic historical tradition suggests that some bits and pieces of it had even been committed to writing in some fashion. Yet when Muhammad died, the bulk of his revelations had not yet been written down or compiled into the Qur'an. Not long thereafter, during the reign of the first caliph, Abū Bakr (632–34), his future successor ʿUmar (634–44) came to him with a concern that many of the Qur'an's "reciters" (*qurrāʾ*) had died in battle, taking with them their knowledge of Muhammad's revelations. ʿUmar therefore proposed that a complete written version of the Qur'an should be produced. Initially, Abū Bakr refused, saying to ʿUmar, "How can you do something that the messenger of God did not do!?" Yet ʿUmar persisted, and eventually Abū Bakr yielded. Abū Bakr then charged a certain Zayd b. Thābit, whom the tradition identifies as one of Muhammad's scribes, with collecting and transcribing as much of the Qur'an that he could find. Nevertheless, Zayd initially responded as Abū Bakr had done, saying, "How can you do something that the messenger of God did not do!?" The account then relates Abū Bakr's persuasion of Zayd using language identical to the previous exchange in which ʿUmar similarly persuaded Abū Bakr. Thereupon, Zayd set out to collect what he could find of Muhammad's revelations, acquiring the various fragments as they were preserved on a range of media, including palm branches, stones, camel bones, and "in the hearts of men." He wrote down what he had been able to gather on "sheets" (*ṣuḥuf*) and gave these to Abū Bakr, who passed them on to ʿUmar at his death. When ʿUmar died, he left them with his daughter Ḥafṣa, who had been one of Muhammad's wives.

Some twenty years after Zayd's collection—still sticking with the traditional Sunni account—the caliph ʿUthmān (644–56) became concerned during the latter half of his reign that differing versions of the Qur'an were in circulation among the "Believers," by which name Muhammad and his early followers seem to have called themselves. One of his most important generals, Ḥudhayfa ibn al-Yamān, reported to him that significantly divergent versions of the Qur'an were in use in Syria and Iraq. Ḥudhayfa was afraid that divisions would arise among the faithful as to which version should be recognized as the authoritative form of Muhammad's revelations. ʿUthmān apparently shared his fear, and he decided to intervene by establishing an official version of the Qur'an for his empire. As Angelika

Neuwirth observes of ʿUthmān's response, the differences must have been significant, such that "the varying forms of reading thus seem to have presented a danger for the early Islamic state that could only be averted through the standardization of the text."[2] ʿUthmān, we are told, obtained the "sheets" that had been entrusted to Ḥafṣa and appointed a committee of scribes under the direction of, once again, Zayd b. Thābit to establish an official codex (*muṣḥaf*) of the Qur'an, using Ḥafṣa's sheets as their basis. ʿUthmān then authorized their text as the official version of the Qur'an, imposing it by his imperial authority. He sent copies of the text from Medina to the main centers of the caliphate—Damascus, Kufa, Basra, and Mecca—and he ordered that all other copies should be rounded up by the imperial authorities and destroyed. From this point on, so we are told, the Qur'an as we have it today was widely established and received among Muhammad's followers.

Nevertheless, as Alfred-Louis de Prémare observes, al-Bukhārī's canonical version has synthesized what appear to be at least five earlier traditions: one attributing the Qur'an's collection to Abū Bakr; another assigning it to ʿUmar; and a third identifying ʿUthmān as the original collector of the Qur'an.[3] Likewise, de Prémare notes that the successive objections by Abū Bakr and Zayd to collecting the Qur'an in writing because Muhammad himself had not done so also reflect a fusion of what were originally two separate traditions. The direct repetition of their protests and their identical resolutions indicate that two originally independent traditions attributing this objection to Abū Bakr and Zayd separately have here been merged.[4] Thus, al-Bukhārī renders what was originally a discordant and contested range of traditions into one harmonious and ordered process in which each of the three first caliphs plays a crucial role in concert with the others. Yet, in so doing, al-Bukhārī flattens the complexity and diversity of the earlier tradition, effacing it with a seamless narrative of persistent and coordinated care taken by the first three caliphs to preserve faithfully Muhammad's revelations, in a chain reaching back almost to the moment of Muhammad's death. Clearly the intention is to secure the accuracy of the Qur'an as a precise record of what Muhammad had taught his followers. Moreover, this narrative amalgam is the only account of the Qur'an's formation that al-Bukhārī included in his authoritative collection of

Muhammad's religious teaching, and as a collection of hadith, rather than a history or some other sort of treatise, al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* carried a special kind of theological authority that other types of writings did not. It is not at all surprising, therefore, to find that his homogenization of the early tradition's collage of memories quickly emerged as the canonical version—for the Sunni tradition, at least.

THE NÖLDEKEAN-SCHWALLIAN PARADIGM

In 1860, Theodor Nöldeke enshrined this canonical Sunni account of the Qur'an's formation as a pillar of modern Islamic studies, along with defining an internal chronology of the Qur'an's contents that was similarly derived from the Islamic tradition in the publication of his *Geschichte des Qorâns*.[5] Although true credit for developing this paradigm actually belongs to Gustav Weil, whose ideas Nöldeke adopted and adapted in his own work, the influence of Nöldeke's views on subsequent study of the Qur'an has been pervasive, particularly in German- and English-language scholarship, such that Neuwirth, for instance, has pronounced his work "the rock of our church."[6] As a result, this Nöldekean paradigm has become a fundamental tenet of much contemporary scholarship on the Qur'an, which continues to be largely governed by a conceptual framework that was frozen in the later nineteenth century on the basis of traditional Islamic beliefs about the Qur'an from the ninth century.[7] The deleterious effects of Nöldeke's wholehearted embrace of the Sunni tradition continue to linger in Qur'anic studies and to forestall progress in this field comparable to other areas of religious studies. For this reason, Patricia Crone rightly lamented that when it comes to study of the Qur'an,

> Western Islamicists frequently sound like Muslims, usually of the Sunni variety, not only in the sense that they accept Sunni information, but also in that they revere it in a manner incompatible with the question mark to which they have in principle committed themselves. This is a compliment to the strength of Sunnism, but it does not do the modern study of its origins and development any good.[8]

Several of Nöldeke's successors—Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser, and Otto Pretzl—continued to refine his work and also to extend its

influence with a new edition of *Geschichte des Qorâns*. Schwally was the first to take up the task, and his labors resulted in an updated version of Nöldeke's earlier study, published as volume 1 of the new edition. Schwally's second volume, however, which focuses on the collection of the Qur'an, revises Nöldeke's initial work so significantly that the final product must be understood, according to its preface, as "Schwally's own contribution."[9] In this volume, Schwally notably parts ways with Nöldeke regarding the reports of an initial collection of the Qur'an under Abū Bakr. Schwally argues that this tradition is not reliable and should be discounted, even as he simultaneously maintained absolute confidence in the account of the ʿUthmānic collection and standardization.[10]

Schwally also made significant changes to Nöldeke's earlier work on another matter relevant to the collection of the Qur'an—namely, the question of just how much, if any, of the Qur'an had been committed to writing before Muhammad's death. Indeed, it would appear that Schwally was the first scholar to propose that much of the Qur'an had been written down already while Muhammad was still alive.[11] Nöldeke, in his original study of the Qur'an and its collection, concluded that "an unambiguous tradition informs us that the Qur'an had not yet been collected during the Prophet's lifetime, which acquires certainty from the information concerning Zayd's collection" under Abū Bakr (which Nöldeke, in accord with Sunni tradition, regarded as accurate).[12] If large parts of the Qur'an had already been gathered, he remarks, either in writing or even in memorization, there would be no need to take such great effort to bring it all together later under Abū Bakr and ʿUthmān. This is seemingly all that Nöldeke had to say on the matter, and he proceeds immediately to consider the tradition of Zayd's collection of the Qur'an from fragments written on palm branches, stones, camel bones, and in the hearts of men.[13]

Schwally, by contrast, begins his volume on the collection of the Qur'an with several pages devoted to considering the evidence for written collections made during Muhammad's lifetime. Departing from his mentor's views, Schwally maintains the existence of compelling evidence that a significant portion of the Qur'an had already been written down before Muhammad's death. This conviction, one should note, provides an important basis for Schwally's rejection of the Abū Bakr tradition. There

would be no need to worry about the death of so many Qur'an reciters or to gather the Qur'an out of many fragmentary pieces, as the Abū Bakr tradition relates, since, Schwally maintains, "we know that Muḥammad himself had arranged for a written copy of the revelations."[14] Nevertheless, the actual evidence given in this section is shockingly modest, and on the whole the argument seems to be based more on conviction and assertion than on proof and argument.[15] Indeed, this declaration affords a perfect example of what John Burton rightly identifies as a prevalence of "investigation by intuition" in this storied collaborative work on the history of the Qur'an.[16]

Nevertheless, the belief that significant portions of the Qur'an had been written down already while Muhammad was still alive seems to have become a cornerstone of the now reigning Nöldekean paradigm. It certainly is not impossible, to be sure, that much of the Qur'an had been written down before Muhammad's death. Nevertheless, I have yet to see any convincing evidence at all that could validate the claim that significant parts of the Qur'an had been written down while Muhammad was still alive. Schwally's assertion demands a great deal of confidence in much later reports in the Islamic tradition about Muhammad and his use of scribes, even though the historical unreliability and general untrustworthiness of Muhammad's traditional biographies is widely conceded by most scholars.[17] While one is welcome to believe such a thing in the absence of much evidence, there is no compelling reason that we should assume this, particularly given the fundamentally oral nature of the Qur'an itself and the extremely marginal presence of writing in western Arabia at this time, as we shall see in chapter 5.[18]

One meets with similar claims in the writings of some Christian evangelical scholars, whose works on the New Testament effectively amount to apologies for the historical accuracy of the gospels—a common point of faith among evangelical Christians. The gospels, they propose, were written on the basis of notebooks written by Jesus's disciples as they were following him. Although the proponents of such notebooks look to reports from the later tradition suggesting that such written materials may have been produced by Jesus's followers during his lifetime as memory aids as evidence for their position, this hypothesis has been roundly rejected in New Testament scholarship. As Chris Keith rightly notes in this case, "one cannot

skip from the second and fourth centuries to the first century quite this easily, especially when class considerations and literate education are determinative factors in who even could own or write in notebooks."[19] Such reasoning seems only more apt in the case of Muhammad's followers and the Qur'an, particularly given that the traditions about the Qur'an from the second through fourth Islamic centuries on which these claims are based are extremely unreliable and were written down only after at least a century of oral transmission. Likewise, again as we will see in chapter 5, the issues concerning lack of literacy are even more acute in Muhammad's historical context than they were in Jesus's Galilee. Indeed, one suspects that the persistence of this presumption about scribes writing down Muhammad's words during his lifetime is largely a matter of scholarly inertia: it certainly does not stand on very solid evidence.

Since the publication of Schwally's second volume in 1919, his revised version of the Nöldekean paradigm has effectively dominated Western study of the Qur'an, with relatively few notable exceptions.[20] On the eve of its appearance, Alphonse Mingana already noted the outsize influence of this paradigm on the field in an excellent but often ignored article on the Qur'an's formation: "In England, where the views of Nöldeke had gathered considerable weight, no serious attempt was made for some years to study the subject afresh."[21] Nor was the situation much different in the German academy, where Nöldeke's influence was, not surprisingly, even greater. So dominant has this paradigm been that even as late as 1977 Burton could rightly observe that "Since the publication of [Schwally's second edition] no new suggestions on the history of the Qur'an texts have been advanced."[22] Yet 1977 was truly a pivotal year in Qur'anic studies, for alongside Burton's study of the Qur'an's collection, John Wansbrough published his *Quranic Studies*, and Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published their *Hagarism*, both brilliant and seminal (and likewise flawed) works that broke the mold and opened up new horizons for study of the Qur'an. All of a sudden, in one year, this handful scholars brought the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm into serious question from several different angles. Subsequent decades have seen a rise in studies of the Qur'an's early history that are not beholden to this marginally critical version of the received Sunni tradition. Although there was a slight stall in the 1980s and 1990s, presumably owing to the controversial and often extremely hostile reception that these works received

(particularly those of Wansbrough and Crone and Cook), the first two decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed new vitality and ingenuity beginning to take hold in this long-stalled area of research.

PROBLEMS WITH THE NÖLDEKEAN-SCHWALLIAN PARADIGM

In actual fact, it turns out that the tradition of ʿUthmān's standardization of text, which lies at the heart of the Nöldekean-Schwallian model, stands no better in the face of critical scrutiny than the Abū Bakr tradition that Schwally rejected. For example, Alford Welch's article on the Qur'an in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, published in 1986, reflects the continued ascendancy of the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm in twentieth-century scholarship—and yet at the same time it also betrays its tenuous underpinnings. In this article, Welch, following Schwally's lead, rejects the tradition of the Qur'an's collection under Abū Bakr, since "there are serious problems with this account," most notably that "most of the key points in this story are contradicted by alternative accounts in the canonical hadith collections and other early Muslim sources."[23] Instead, he concludes that this tradition was invented "to obscure Muḥammad's role in the preparation of a written Ḳurʾān, to reduce ʿUthmān's role in establishing an official text, and to attempt to establish the priority of the ʿUthmānic text over those of the (pre-ʿUthmānic) Companion codices." Implicit in Welch's assessment, one should note, is the assumption, inherited from Schwally, that much of the Qur'an had been written down under Muhammad's supervision.

Welch next considers the tradition of the Qur'an's compilation under ʿUthmān, which, as one can also see from his evaluation of the Abū Bakr tradition, has already been prejudged as authentic. Yet, when one reads Welch's evaluation of this tradition, one sees that such a conclusion is simply astonishing and unwarranted. Indeed, Welch himself observes that "this second collection story stands up to critical analysis no better than the first [i.e., Abū Bakr's collection] . . . .We thus have before us another story whose particulars cannot be accepted." Nevertheless, staying true to the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm, Welch remarks that

> the unanimity with which an official text is attributed to ʿUthmān, in the face of a lack of convincing evidence to the contrary leads most western scholars to accept that the Ḳurʾān we

have today, at least in terms of the number and arrangement of the *sūra*s and the basic structure of the consonantal text, goes back to the time of ʿUthmān, under whose authority the official text was produced.

How Welch, and so many other scholars, can recognize the historical problems of the Abū Bakr tradition and rightly dismiss it, while continuing to assent to an alternative tradition involving ʿUthmān that is clearly no less problematic is utterly baffling.

Moreover, Welch's claims about the unanimity of the ʿUthmānic tradition are simply not true, and demonstrably so. This assertion is a useful fiction for scholars committed to the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm, but in reality, despite its frequent repetition, this alleged unanimity is a red herring.[24] There is, in fact, substantial and unmistakable evidence to the contrary. Despite Welch's misleading assertion, there is significant dissension within the Islamic tradition itself regarding the historical circumstances in which the Qur'an, as the text that has come down to us today, was produced. For instance, as Schwally himself notes, there are at least three other accounts in the Islamic tradition of Abū Bakr or ʿUmar's involvement in the Qur'an's collection that differ from the official version. According to one such report, it was instead ʿUmar alone, without any involvement by Abū Bakr, who was the first to collect the Qur'an. Yet another tradition relates that Abū Bakr commissioned Zayd to write down Muhammad's revelations in fragments on bits of leather, shoulder bones, and palm branches, without any mention of ʿUmar's participation. Then, after Abū Bakr's death, ʿUmar later commissioned Zayd to copy these fragments together on a "single sheet." Finally, in another account, ʿUmar comes to Abū Bakr with concerns for the preservation of the Qur'an, asking that it should be written down. In this instance, Abū Bakr refuses and persists in his objection that he would not do so since this was something that Muhammad himself had not done. And so, ʿUmar decides to undertake the task himself after Abū Bakr's death, and has the Qur'an copied on leaves.[25] There is also a tradition, related in both Sunni and Shi'i sources, that it was Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, who was the first to collect the Qur'an. And yet another tradition ascribes the Qur'an's collection to Sālim b. Maʿqil, who reportedly compiled the text immediately after Muhammad's death.[26]

Other traditions identify a copy of the Qur'an, a *muṣḥaf* or codex, in the possession of Muhammad's wife Aisha.[27] Moreover, the canonical tradition itself identifies the existence of several competing recensions of the Qur'an that were in circulation prior to ʿUthmān's actions. These rival versions of the Qur'an that were already in existence are in fact explicitly identified as the impetus for ʿUthmān's production of a standard edition to be authorized and promulgated by order of imperial authority. Other versions of the ʿUthmānic story, besides al-Bukhārī's canonical version, name the four different versions of the Qur'an that were already in use, either in written or oral form, whose disparities were causing dissension among the faithful. These four versions, known collectively as the "companion codices," were attributed to the following early followers of Muhammad: Ubayy b. Kaʿb (whose Qur'an was in use in Syria); ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿūd (in use in Kufa); Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī (in use in Basra); and Miqdād b. al-Aswad (in use in Himṣ). Thus, we have in effect four additional claims to collection of the Qur'an by each of these individuals. Nevertheless, at ʿUthmān's order, as indicated above, all these versions were purportedly hunted down by the imperial authorities, who destroyed all the copies they could find.[28] I hardly think that this range of competing claims and opinions concerning the Qur'an's collection can be considered to reflect anything approaching unanimity.

COLLECTION OF THE QUR'AN IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC HISTORICAL TRADITION

As we move beyond the realm of hadith collections and leave behind the theological aura and agenda of these compendia, we find that several of the earliest Islamic historical sources transmit a range of even more diverse and discordant memories regarding the Qur'an's collection. Indeed, in contrast to the hadith collectors, whose goal it is to determine which traditions are "sound," these historical sources aim to collect as much information as they can about a given subject, without concern for establishing theological norms.[29] For instance, the ninth-century *History of Medina* by Ibn Shabba (d. 876) conveys a great deal more information about the Qur'an's early history than al-Bukhārī's roughly contemporary hadith collection. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of Ibn Shabba's assemblage of reports concerning

the Qur'an's production is the complete absence of any memory of Abū Bakr's involvement in the process. As for ʿUmar, one tradition relates that he began work on collecting the Qur'an but was murdered before he could complete the task. Yet, according to another tradition, ʿUmar himself owned a codex (*muṣḥaf*) of the Qur'an. Other anecdotes report ʿUmar's disagreements with the version of the text collected by Ubayy b. Kaʿb, and sometimes with Ubayy himself over the contents of the Qur'an. In one such account, ʿUmar and Zayd together proof a version of Ubayy's Qur'an and regularly make changes according to Zayd's authority.[30]

Ultimately, toward the end of Ibn Shabba's notices of ʿUmar's involvement in the Qur'an's collection, we learn that what he was actually engaged in was not so much the initial compilation of the Qur'an as he was trying to establish the authority of one among several already collected versions. According to Ibn Shabba, by the time of ʿUmar's reign the Qur'an had already been collected in multiple independent versions, each enjoying individual favor in different regions, and ʿUmar was attempting to assert the authority of the particular version of the Qur'an known in Medina against the rival codices of Syria and Iraq. Ibn Shabba then later devotes a lengthy chapter to traditions of ʿUthmān's collection of the Qur'an.[31] There, in addition to the canonical version of ʿUthmān's role known from al-Bukhārī, he brings a number of other reports concerning ʿUthmān's involvement in standardizing the Qur'anic text. Yet here, even more than with ʿUmar, the focus is not so much on collecting the Qur'an as it is on efforts to correct the dissimilar versions of the text already in circulation to make them conform to the caliphate's desired standard.[32]

A little earlier than Ibn Shabba and al-Bukhārī is the enormous collection of biographies of Muhammad and his early followers compiled by Ibn Saʿd (d. 845), his *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* (The book of the major classes). In the biographies of the early caliphs and of Muhammad himself, Ibn Saʿd provides a wealth of information concerning the Qur'an's early history, which, it turns out, is again far from unanimous. As de Prémare observes, for Ibn Saʿd, who was writing in the early ninth century, "the real history of the Qur'anic corpus seemed blurry, and the identity of its architects uncertain."[33] Ibn Saʿd initially raises the question of the Qur'an's origins at the end of his biography of Muhammad, where he relates numerous

traditions concerning "those who collected/memorized the Qur'an during the lifetime of the messenger of God."[34] As reflected in my translation, a key ambiguity underlies all these reports concerning the collection of the Qur'an, in that the word used in Arabic, *jamaʿa*, can mean both "to collect" and "to memorize." Therefore, we cannot be entirely certain what exactly the role of these individuals was in the production of the Qur'an: perhaps they were believed to have written parts of it down, or perhaps they merely memorized parts of Muhammad's revelations.

Two individuals figure most prominently in these reports, both of whom have already met: Zayd b. Thābit and Ubayy b. Kaʿb. According to later tradition, both men served Muhammad as scribes, and, as we have seen, both are often attributed significant roles in the collection of the Qur'an: Zayd is said to have played an important role in the various reports of collections by Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān, while an early version of the Qur'an circulated under Ubayy's authority. With these reports, Ibn Saʿd raises the possibility that some believed that the Qur'an had already been collected, at least in part, during Muhammad's lifetime, which, as noted above, seems to be the reigning assumption of those who still follow the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm. Nevertheless, it remains unclear as to whether or not this was the case, and it could be that the individuals named here are simply remembered for their memories of what Muhammad had taught. Of course, there may have been some limited efforts at notetaking while Muhammad was alive, and it would appear that there were in fact some written documents in the early movement, such as the so-called *Constitution of Medina*. Yet in view of the very minimal presence of writing in the Qur'an's traditional milieu of the Hijaz and the profoundly oral nature of culture there, it seems highly improbable that the Qur'an was written down while Muhammad was still alive.[35]

When we consider Ibn Saʿd's biographies of the early caliphs, we find—once again, as in Ibn Shabba—no tradition at all relating Abū Bakr's efforts to collect the Qur'an.[36] Yet what is far more remarkable, is the absence of any tradition in ʿUthmān's biography identifying him with the establishment of the Qur'anic text. So much, one should note, for unanimity: the lack of any mention of ʿUthmān's interest in establishing the text of the Qur'an in his biography is truly extraordinary and must be significant.[37] Indeed, if the

tradition of ʿUthmān's collection were a historical reality that was widely acknowledged in the early community, it is hard to imagine that Ibn Saʿd would not have known about this and likewise reported it in his biography. The only possible exception to ʿUthmān's complete absence comes in Ubayy's biography, where there is confusion about the timing of his death, so that some said that he died while ʿUmar was caliph. Yet according to other sources, we are told, he must have died in the caliphate of ʿUthmān, since it was said that ʿUthmān commanded him—instead of Zayd, one should note—to compile the Qur'an.[38] Another peculiar tradition, cited among "those who collected/memorized the Qur'an during the lifetime of the messenger of God," reports that ʿUthmān himself collected/memorized the Qur'an while ʿUmar was still caliph.[39] These are the only references to ʿUthmān's involvement with the Qur'an's collection, and again, the complete absence of any mention of his efforts to standardize the Qur'an in his own extensive biography in this collection remains very telling and significantly undermines claims of unanimity on this front.[40] It is also worth noting that, in contrast to the canonical tradition, Ibn Saʿd stands in a tradition in which Ubayy takes clear precedence over Zayd in various efforts to collect the Qur'an. In Zayd's biography there is, as with ʿUthmān, no mention of any involvement in the compilation of the Qur'an. No less striking is Ibn Saʿd's failure to make any mention of the supposed "sheets" of Ḥafṣa, which are central to the canonical account of ʿUthmān's collection. These sheets do not appear either in her biography or anywhere else in this massive compendium. It is yet another troubling silence.[41]

According to Ibn Saʿd, it was ʿUmar who was the first to collect the Qur'an on "sheets" (*ṣuḥuf*). Yet at the same time, he elsewhere reports a contradictory tradition that ʿUmar was assassinated before he could collect the Qur'an.[42] Unfortunately, Ibn Saʿd gives no specifics regarding ʿUmar's alleged activities in composing the Qur'an, although elsewhere he does report an intervention in the text of the Qur'an by ʿUmar. According to this tradition, at the request of Yazīd, the emir of Palestine and Syria, ʿUmar sent several experts on the Qur'an who could teach it to the many Believers who had settled in this region.[43] But that is it. And so, one must conclude, on the basis of Ibn Saʿd's apparent ignorance of the canonical account that Zayd compiled the Qur'an in a definitive codex at the order of ʿUthmān and on

the basis of Ḥafṣa's "sheets," that this tradition was not yet, in fact, a widely accepted and definitive "fact" about the Qur'an's origins at the beginning of the ninth century. For those scholars who would imagine it as such, "the silences of Ibn Sa'd pose a serious problem," as de Prémare observes, "for those who would like to stick, in the field of history, to a uniform version of the facts. To speak the euphemistic language of exegetes, the silences of Ibn Sa'd are 'disturbing.'"[44] Clearly, then, Ibn Saʿd's *Ṭabaqāt* belies any misplaced claims to unanimity.

An even earlier account of the Qur'an's formative history survives in the *Book of the Conquests*, one of the earliest Islamic historical sources, written by Sayf ibn ʿUmar (d. 796–97) in Kufa during the later eighth century.[45] Sayf considers the history of the Qur'an in his section on the "Emirate of ʿUthmān," a coincidence that could seem to bode well for the canonical narrative. Sayf identifies the source of his information in two different transmitters from the beginning of the eighth century, and so with his account we come plausibly within a century of the end of Muhammad's life. This, then, would appear to be the earliest surviving Islamic account of the Qur'an's formation.[46] Unlike many of the others that we have seen, however, the focus in Sayf's account is on resolving the differences of the early "companion" codices that were already in circulation, rather than the collection and promulgation of an authoritative new version. The report begins, as in the canonical account, with Ḥudhayfa on the front lines of conquest, where he was preparing his army in Azerbaijan for an invasion of the Caucasus. As he passed through the various centers where the Believers had settled in Syria and Iraq, including Damascus, Kufa, and Basra in particular, he discovered that different versions of the Qur'an were in use in each of these places. Still more troubling was the fact that the Believers in these different centers were contending with one another over whose version preserved the true words that Muhammad had taught them, while denouncing the codices of their rivals. Ḥudhayfa, again mirroring the canonical account, was greatly distressed at the divisions that the disparities in these Qur'anic codices were causing in the community. Therefore, he sent his lieutenant ahead with the army and reported immediately to ʿUthmān in Medina to seek a resolution.

The Syrians favored a version by Miqdād b. al-Aswad (and apparently Sālim), while the Kufans used ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿūd's codex and the Basrans that of Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī, although strangely there is no mention at all of a codex by Ubayy b. Kaʿb. The Basrans even had a title for Abū Mūsā's version of the Qur'an, *Lubāb al-fu'ād* (Purity of the heart), which certainly raises some intriguing questions about the precise nature of this text. Once Ḥudhayfa arrived in Medina and informed ʿUthmān of the problem, the latter summoned representatives from these centers to appear before him there in order to explain the nature of their various Qur'ans. Each then describes the origins of their version with the respective companion, and there is no question that we are dealing with written collections as related in this account, since it specifically identifies them as rival "codices." We see here, then, a circumstance in which the members of Muhammad's new religious movement have become dispersed and have settled into Syria and the garrisons in Iraq. In these conquered lands, the Believers undertook multiple, independent efforts to put Muhammad's revelations into written form, with significant differences among these first codices. Thus, the first Qur'ans were produced independently of Medina and the first caliphs, in milieux beyond their immediate control that were populated largely by Christians, Jews, and other religious communities. ʿUthmān's response to this circumstance was not to initiate a new collection of the Qur'an. Rather, he had certain unspecified codices copied in Medina, presumably on the basis of yet another version of the text in use there, and he then sent these to the various garrisons with instructions that all the other versions should be rounded up and destroyed. Beyond that, we do not learn whether ʿUthmān's efforts met with any success or if his codex was received in these centers as a replacement for their local versions.

ASSESSING THE DIVERSE MEMORIES OF THE QUR'AN' ORIGINS

Sayf's report provides the earliest information that we have from the Islamic tradition concerning the origins of the Qur'an, in an account transmitted in a historical collection from the later eighth century on the basis of a tradition from the beginning of the eighth century. In it, there is no ʿUthmānic collection at all, only several competing versions already in existence at the time of ʿUthmān's reign, among which he adjudicates by

authorizing a Medinan version(?) and attempting to purge all the others. It is true that Harald Motzki has made a strong argument for assigning the tradition of ʿUthmān's collection more or less in its canonical form to Ibn Shihab al-Zuhrī (d. 741–42), on the basis of its patterns of transmission, a dating method that is highly useful but not always completely reliable.[47] This would mean that at best some basic form of this tradition may be roughly contemporary with what Sayf relates. Yet the tradition of ʿUthmān's collection of the Qur'an itself is not particularly stable, and it occurs with numerous variations in early Islamic collections, as Schwally himself observes, so that one must wonder what any sort of "original" version might have looked like.[48]

It is significant that Motzki does not give similar consideration to any of the other alternative accounts of the Qur'an's formation, although he does identify several sources from around the end of the eighth century that attest to the disfavored tradition of a collection under Abū Bakr. Nevertheless, the majority of these accounts do not actually describe a collection of the Qur'an by Abū Bakr; instead they conclude simply with Zayd's refusal to do what Muhammad himself had not done. This fact certainly raises significant questions regarding the nature of the earliest version of the Abū Bakr tradition: did it conclude without a collection being made? As for the tradition of an ʿUthmānic collection, there is no surviving source before the ninth century that relates it, and only Motzki's dating according to the chains of transmission, the *isnād*s, can plausibly locate it any earlier.[49] Perhaps the memory of ʿUthmān's attempt to introduce a local Medinan version of the Qur'an as a universal standard, as reported by Sayf, eventually inspired a tradition that he was singularly responsible for establishing the canonical version of the Qur'an. It could even be that ʿUthmān himself may have led the initiative to produce this local Medinan version of the Qur'an, adding further basis for the development of this legend. Nonetheless, despite these potential sparks for the imagination, the tale of ʿUthmān's collection remains just one among several conflicting and historically improbable narratives of the Qur'an's origins that seek to pin this task on one of the first three caliphs.

One should also note that there are various early traditions indicating the lack of a clear distinction between the divine revelations transmitted

through Muhammad and Muhammad's own teaching. This amounts to a certain amount of early confusion between materials that the later tradition would clearly separate into the Qur'an (divine revelation) and the hadith (Muhammad's teaching). For instance, according to some early traditions, the term *qur'an*, "recitation" or "proclamation," is used to refer to everything that was said by Muhammad, both divine revelations and his own teaching. As Ali Amir-Moezzi observes, "a clear distinction between *hadith* and Qur'an—the former indicating the Prophet's statements and the latter the words of God—seems to be late."[50] For instance, Ibn Saʿd transmits a claim by Salima b. Jarmī that he had collected "many qur'ans," from Muhammad, presumably meaning by this many of what the later tradition would regard as hadith.[51] Likewise, an early letter attributed to Zayd ibn ʿĀlī (695–740), the first in the line of Zaydi imams, relates two hadith from Muhammad that are almost identical to passages from the Qur'an (5:56 and 21:24).[52] De Prémare also observes that certain sentences from Muhammad's famous "farewell sermon" in his traditional biographies are almost identical to certain passages from the Qur'an.[53] Still more complicated are the so-called *ḥadīth qudsī*—literally, "sacred hadith" or "Divine Sayings." This special category of hadith consists of sayings placed in the mouth of Muhammad that he identifies as direct words of God. Just how are these things spoken by God, although they are classed among the hadith, different from the divine revelations eventually codified in the Qur'an? William Graham has studied these traditions extensively, coming to the conclusion that there was "an essentially unitive understanding of divine and prophetic authority [i.e., Qur'an and hadith] in the early Muslim community, an understanding that differed significantly from the interpretation that Sunni Muslim scholarship was to develop by at least the third century of Islam."[54] So it is not at all clear what sort of distinctions would or even could have been made at the time of Abū Bakr or ʿUmar or ʿUthmān as to what should be collected and authorized as the divine revelation of the Qur'an, on the one hand, and the teachings of Muhammad, the hadith, on the other.

By now I hope it is sufficiently clear that the pretense of unanimity regarding ʿUthmān's collection of the Qur'an is not only deceptive but false. The Islamic tradition instead reports a tangle of conflicting and disjointed memories about the origins of the Qur'an rather than anything remotely

approaching unanimity. In effect, the Qur'an's production is seemingly assigned, almost at random, to one of the first three caliphs. The purpose of such attributions, in the Islamic collective memory, is to validate the Qur'an as an accurate record of Muhammad's revelation, as preserved and authorized by a close follower and early authority in the community. It is particularly important, in this regard, that the collection should have been accomplished by such a figure as close in time to Muhammad's death as possible, in order to offer a guarantee of the written text's verbal fidelity to what Muhammad taught. Thus Burton rightly concludes of the data from the Islamic tradition,

> The reports are a mass of confusions, contradictions and inconsistencies. By their nature, they represent the product of a lengthy process of evolution, accretion and "improvement." They were framed in response to a wide variety of progressing needs. . . . The existence of such reports makes it clear that the Muslims were confused. The earliest stage of the traditions on the collection of the Qur'an did consist in incompatible attributions of the first collection to Abū Bakr, to ʿUmar, to ʿUthmān.[55]

Likewise, de Prémare similarly judges that the information coming from the Islamic tradition exhibits "such variation among the reports that each one seems to reflect later circumstances rather than the fact that it is alleged to relate."[56] What we find, then, in the reigning Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm ultimately amounts to nothing more than the endorsement of one particular Sunni view of the Qur'an's origins from the ninth century, at the expense of these other traditions and without sufficient critical engagement with the complexity and contradictions of these reports. Thus, we can only agree with Claude Gilliot's sound assessment that

> because the misadventures detailed about the transmission and codification of the Qurʾān—as both orally delivered and transmitted in writing—are so great, the ancient Muslim narratives on these subjects offer no real clarity about what "ʿUthmānic codex" means. Secondly, even if Muslims believe that the Qurʾān we have now is the "ʿUthmānic codex," our analysis of Muslim narratives on the matter does not leave us with the same certainty.[57]

Therefore, despite the easy consensus on these issues imagined by most scholars of early Islam, the traditional Sunni version of the Qur'an's origins

does not merit the scholarly assent it has habitually garnered.

As is very often the case, comparison with the formation of the early Christian gospel traditions can shed some useful light on the complexity and incongruity of these reports. It is widely acknowledged in critical scholarship on the New Testament that we do not know the names, or really anything at all, about the four individuals (and their communities) that produced the now canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These Gospels were progressively compiled over a period of roughly fifty years, starting around twenty years after the death of Jesus (ca. 50 for Q) until the end of the first century. It seems there was no effort in this early process to remember when, where, and by whom these Gospels were written, presumably because what was important about them was their witness to Jesus Christ and the divine message that he bore: Christ himself gave the texts their authority, not the one who collected them in writing. Into the second century, these Gospels were still circulating among the Christian communities without any indications of authorship: the respective authors were only assigned toward the end of the second century.[58] One would certainly imagine that a similar set of circumstances must have applied to the Qur'an during the first several decades of its history. As it was being progressively remembered, revised, and written down during the first century, the Qur'an did not initially require an authority to validate its contents. For the early Believers of the seventh century, the content of their Qur'an(s) was undoubtedly self-authenticating: it was directly received as the divine word of God passed into human speech through Muhammad. Only later, it would seem, was it necessary to provide the Qur'an with a birth certificate and a pedigree.

The catalyst for producing various collective memories of the Qur'an's origins was clearly the emergence of multiple, divergent versions of the Qur'an as it was remembered, revised, and written down independently in various locations of the Believers' extensive and rapidly expanding polity. It is altogether expected, from a historical perspective, that something like this would occur. As Muhammad's followers were blitzing across western Asia and into North Africa during these early decades, we can imagine that they would have had little concern for meticulously preserving the words of their founder. Here we must fully agree with Nicolai Sinai that

> Although the Islamic tradition is generally concerned to depict the early Muslims as meticulously passing on detailed historical and exegetical remembrances of the Prophet's companions, it seems rather more probable that during the age of the conquests the majority of converts were not sufficiently preoccupied with the interpretation of the Quran in order for the community's prophetic understanding of it to be fully preserved. As a result, later Muslims needed to rediscover and hermeneutically reinvent their scripture.[59]

Eventually, the Believers ended up scattered among several garrisons dispersed throughout their new polity, where they found themselves a religious minority suddenly in dialogue with the Christians, Jews, and members of other faith communities that surrounded them. In relative isolation, then, from one another and in conversation with other similar faith traditions, not surprisingly the Believers' memories of Muhammad's revelations shifted, adapted, and multiplied. Indeed, in such conditions even written traditions are readily subject to significant changes.[60]

These circumstances, it should be noted, are not merely hypothetical. Rather, the earliest traditions about the origins of the Qur'an from the early eighth century, whether from Sayf's account or the canonical Sunni tradition possibly going back to al-Zuhrī, consistently relate that it was an initial diversity and divergence that necessitated the eventual standardization of the Qur'anic text. Although such reports about the variations of these codices that have come down to us suggest only relatively minor differences from the canonical text, there is no reason to assume that this was in fact the case.[61] To the contrary, the urgency and fear ascribed to Ḥudhayfa concerning the divisions that these competing versions were breeding among Muhammad's followers suggest something more, as does a sacred text titled *Lubāb al-fu'ād* (Purity of the heart). As de Prémare rightly observes, the variants that have been preserved from these early versions represent only "what survived from such collections after a selection that was more drastic than has been acknowledged."[62] One of the most important collector of such variants, Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī, even stated explicitly that he had deliberately omitted "those variants where there is too wide a divergence from' the standard text of ʿUthmān."[63] The variants that have come down to us have clearly passed through a filter of censorship that has removed the most divergent qualities of these competing codices.

Given the circumstances in which these early codices were produced, one would certainly expect that their memories of Muhammad's revelations differed significantly from one another. And as Muhammad's religious community swiftly expanded its domain, direct control over such matters from the weak and remote authorities of this nascent polity in Medina would have been extremely limited, if not altogether nonexistent. There is very little evidence to suggest the existence of any sort of effective Islamic state prior to ʿAbd al-Malik, or perhaps Muʿāwiya. But before the rise of the Umayyads, we find little evidence of anything more than a military command structure, while Damascus and Basra were more than one thousand kilometers distant from the caliphs in Medina.[64] Any communications between Medina and Syria or Iraq would have taken twenty days to travel in each direction, so that an exchange including a message and a response would have taken at least forty days.[65] Accordingly, the thought that the authorities in Medina could somehow directly police the contours of religious discourse in these faraway places seems preposterous, and as a result, differing memories of Muhammad's revelations were initially collected independently in these various centers during the seventh century.

Nevertheless, it certainly is not entirely out of the question that ʿUthmān may have directed some action toward standardizing the Qur'an, making the first initiative toward this end, perhaps only locally in the Hijaz, or perhaps with a greater scope in view. Yet in the latter case, I find it implausible that his efforts would have had any significant effect beyond Medina and perhaps Mecca: as we see even in the reports from the early Islamic tradition, and particularly from Sayf, the early Believers were extremely resistant to efforts to displace the sacred texts that had become established in their communities. Indeed, we hear reports from the Islamic tradition that these regional versions survived into the ninth and even the tenth century. Accordingly, even if ʿUthmān or one of the other first three caliphs may have taken some interest in collecting the Qur'an, I think it is extremely improbable that their efforts could have resulted in the establishment of the unvarying consonantal structure of the text that has come down to us. They simply were not in a position to accomplish this. The highly confused and contradictory reports about the origins of the Qur'anic text in the early

Islamic tradition themselves verify that there was no such decisive event in these early decades that left a lasting imprint in the collective memory. Instead, we find disorganized efforts to assign the text of the Qur'an to the authority of one of these early leaders and to secure its fixation close to the life of Muhammad. One has the sense that the Sunni traditionists of the eighth century were haphazardly identifying one or another of these figures to serve as the Qur'an's guarantor.[66] It fell to Bukhārī in the ninth century to knit all these memories into a coherent account involving a collective action by all three of the first caliphs that could serve as the canonical narrative of the Qur'an's composition for the Sunni tradition going forward.

It is certainly no surprise to find that the Islamic collective memory would settle on these three figures, either individually or jointly, in the absence of an established tradition. If we look again to the early Christian gospels for comparison, it is no wonder that later Christians eventually ascribed the composition of these texts to Matthew, one of Jesus's twelve disciples; Mark, who, according to tradition, was Peter's scribe; Luke, a companion and disciple of Paul; and the "Beloved Disciple" of Jesus, whom the tradition later identifies specifically as John—again one of the twelve disciples. Undoubtedly for similar reasons, the later Islamic tradition ascribed the establishment of the Qur'an to the immediate successors of their founder, much as the Christians did. One does not need any underlying historical reality at all, then, to understand how the job of fixing the Qur'an came to be assigned to these individuals in the Islamic collective memory. It is also worth underlining that in the case of the Christian gospels, the tradition actually is fully unanimous in ascribing these writings to the figures in question— something that the Islamic tradition did not successfully achieve. And yet despite such unanimity in subsequent Christian tradition, we know better than to trust these attributions simply on this basis, particularly since, thanks to far better evidence for the formation of early Christianity, we can see that the texts were not originally assigned to the authors in question.[67] Therefore, it strikes me as entirely unwarranted to conclude that ʿUthmān compiled the Qur'anic text that has come down to us even if there were some degree of unanimity to this effect starting around seventy years later. The comparative evidence from the Christian tradition should caution strongly against such an assumption,

clearly indicating that unanimity in the collective memory of a religious community regarding its formative history offers no guarantee that such a memory is accurate. And since the Islamic tradition is not in fact unanimous on this point, well into the eighth and ninth centuries and beyond, as we have just seen, such an argument is ultimately vacuous.

THE SHI'I TRADITION: COUNTER-MEMORIES OF THE QUR'AN'S ORIGINS

Then there is of course the very different collective memory concerning the Qur'an's formation that survives in the early Shi'i tradition, an alternative account that is unfortunately regularly ignored or dismissed in most modern studies of the Qur'an. Although the later Shi'i tradition, and particularly the Twelver tradition, would eventually find it necessary to adjust its memory to be more in line with Sunni traditions concerning the Qur'an, Shi'i writers from the first three centuries of Islam tell a very different story about the Qur'an's early history. Although there were other voices, even from the Sunni tradition, that questioned the nature and authority of the so-called ʿUthmānic text, it was the partisans of Ali especially who were the most vocal in their opposition to this version of the Qur'an and the process that led to its formation. According to a strong consensus in the early Shi'i historical tradition, it was Ali—and not Abū Bakr or ʿUmar or ʿUthmān—who first collected the Qur'an shortly after Muhammad's death, a tradition that, as noted above, also survives in Sunni sources as well. Yet, according to early Shi'i memory, Ali's version of the Qur'an, which was purportedly much longer than the ʿUthmānic version, was twisted and falsified by these first three caliphs, especially because, among other things, it explicitly named Ali as Muhammad's rightful successor. Thus, the ʿUthmānic text revered by the Sunni authorities was not in fact the actual Qur'an but a distorted version of it designed to suit the political and religious aims of the Sunni caliphs during the seventh century. Beginning in the later tenth century, however, scholars in the Twelver Shi'i tradition began to turn away from this older memory and embrace instead the Sunni orthodoxy of an ʿUthmānic text and its authority. It was a move, one must note, that seems to have been made more out of political necessity rather than religious conviction, since by this time "it became extremely dangerous to cast doubt on [the Qur'an's] integrity."[68]

The extent to which these Shi'i reports have been completely marginalized from most historical studies of the Qur'an is, frankly, absurd if not even scandalous. For instance, Nöldeke and Schwally's regnant tome devotes only a few pages to curtly dismissing the "Reproach [*Verläumdung*] of Muslim Sectarians, Particularly the Shīʿites, against ʿUthmān," a topic that shares equal space in the second edition with an equally sharp dismissal of the "Reproach of Christian Scholars of the West."[69] According to Schwally's account in the second edition, these doubts about the integrity of the Qur'an "are not based on scholarly facts of historical criticism but on dogmatic or ethnic prejudices," and as for the Shi'i in particular, they "suspected everywhere nothing but bias and malice."[70] Therefore, all Shi'i reports concerning the formation of the Qur'an are disdained as "untenable" and "far-fetched" and dismissed with great prejudice: "What an accumulation of impossibilities!" Schwally writes. The Shi'i, according to most scholars, are the ones who are in fact guilty of what they accuse the Sunni caliphs of doing: it is they who have falsified the nature of the Qur'an.[71] Sadly, such partiality and willful ignorance can regularly pass for good scholarship in Qur'anic studies.

It is true, of course, that the Shi'i sources reflect a strong ideological imprint from the distinctive beliefs that define this community, and largely for this reason most scholars have considered it justified to cast off these reports as historically irrelevant. Yet, as Amir-Moezzi rightly observes, this is truly

> an astonishing attitude on the part of scientific researchers reputed to be impartial, especially since it has been established, and in no uncertain terms, that from Ignaz Goldziher to Michael Cook and throughout the relevant studies, stretching over more than a century, the Sunni sources themselves might also be deemed historically of dubious credibility, at the very least in their explicit pronouncements, strongly oriented as they are in the quest to establish proofs of Sunni orthodoxy and orthopraxy.[72]

Moreover, the Shi'i traditions about the formation of the Qur'an, by contrast, "offer the advantage of being the voice of a minority that was ultimately defeated, and in this respect they appear to be all the more valuable in that they frequently report details that have been censored or distorted by the

victors."[73] Such reasoning closely mirrors similar principles that operate in the study of formative Christianity, where minority or deliberately marginalized traditions are afforded special value for reconstructing the contentious debates over the nature of Christianity, its orthodoxies, and its scriptures during its early history.[74] Such obscured and stifled voices often preserve an invaluable witness to the diversity of the early tradition, revealing traces of primitive convictions that the censorious filters of later orthodoxies have tried to conceal. A comparable approach would be desirable in the study of early Islam as well.

These dissonant Shi'i memories likewise bring into high relief the political and religious power dynamics that were directly at work in the actions of the Sunni imperial authorities to impose a standard version of the Qur'an. This was done in the immediate context of concerted efforts, often extremely violent, to eliminate resistance to the authority of the caliphal state, as directed most frequently at the supporters of Ali and his descendants who were insisting on their right to lead the community. As a result, in the words of Amir-Moezzi,

> religious, ascetic, and local Islam had been swiftly defeated or, at the least, had been supplanted by an Islam that was political, opportunistic, and imperial. Hence Umayyad rule had every reason to obscure or distort this past in an effort to justify the present and consolidate it. It accomplished this through violence and censorship. . . . In an attempt to justify these measures, caliphal power set up a complex system of propaganda, censorship, and historical falsification. First it altered the text of the Qur'an and forged an entire body of traditions falsely ascribed to the Prophet, drawing great scholars, judges, jurists, preachers, and historians into its service—all this within a policy of repression that was as savage as it was methodical, aimed at its opponents at large, but at Alids in particular.[75]

These remarks admittedly bear clear traces of a Shi'i bias, but in large part they seem correct, and offer a welcome antidote to the tacit embrace and authorization of the Sunni position, along with its own clear biases, in most Western scholarship on the Qur'an and the rise of Islam. In any case, these comments accurately reflect the memory of these events in the early Shi'i tradition.

With this in mind, then, we should consider an argument that is often raised in favor of the Qur'an's standardization into its canonical form under

ʿUthmān. For instance, Nicolai Sinai, echoing an earlier work by Fred Donner (who no longer advocates the tradition of an ʿUthmānic standardization), asks, "If the final redaction of the Quran had only taken place around 700 or later, rather than under ʿUthmān, should we not expect some echo of this to survive at least in Shii or Khārijī sources, which are not beholden to the mainstream Sunni view of early Islamic history?"[76] Moreover, Sinai argues, the fact that the Shi'i tradition uses the same version of the Qur'an and ascribes its collection to ʿUthmān similarly should validate this tradition. Yet such reasoning, in effect, merely presupposes the outcome that we have, the establishment of an invariable text of the Qur'an, as a result of a neutral, indifferent process. Nevertheless, as we have just seen, that does not, in fact, seem to have been the case. On the contrary, the standardized text seems to have been established by brute force, in a context where the imperial authorities responded violently to political and religious dissent (since the two went hand in hand) and were aggressively persecuting the groups in question. In this regard, Michael Cook helpfully states the obvious: "The fact that for all practical purposes we have only a single recension of the Koran is thus a remarkable testimony to the authority of the early Islamic state."[77] Indeed, as Omar Hamdan notes, these efforts of the state to purge any deviant Qur'ans were particularly aimed at the proto-Shi'i of southern Iraq, and their effect was so decisive and extensive "that one could only wonder in disbelief . . . if any remnant of a differing recension [of the Qur'an] were to come to light."[78] Accordingly, is it any wonder that we should fail to find any evidence of Shi'i dissent within a text, the Qur'an, whose standardization went hand in hand with efforts to marginalize and eradicate the threat of Ali's supporters? The collection was established and enforced by the opponents of Ali and his partisans, and they therefore had firm control over its contents. Undoubtedly, they ensured that it clearly advanced their religious and political agenda, with no trace of dissent. Would we expect anything else? Likewise, the fact that the Twelver Shi'i hierarchy would eventually assent to the traditional Sunni Qur'an and the canonical tradition of its origin is readily understandable: simply to survive they had to assent to the Sunni view of the Qur'an, and so they did.

CODICES, CONTRADICTIONS, AND CONFUSION

In his carefully argued defense of the tradition that ʿUthmān bears singular responsibility for the Qur'anic text that has come down to us today, Sinai attempts to pose a final clinching argument by shifting the burden of proof to any who would disagree with the veracity of the ʿUthmānic collection. He maintains as a baseline that a dating of the invariable consonantal text "to 650 or earlier ought to be our default view."[79] Unless one can "prove" that changes were introduced to the text beyond this point, then one must accept this traditional Sunni position more or less at face value. "Prove" is of course a very loaded term. Historians are rarely able to prove absolutely that something did or did not happen, particularly for matters of great antiquity or when dealing with the formative history of a particular community, which is often a very active site of shifting memories. Instead, historians seek to identify reconstructions of the past that seem to be more or less probable, using various critical methods of analysis and logical reasoning. Proof of something almost always escapes us. So what we are seeking in this case is not so much definitive proof one way or the other as the ability to determine whether it is more plausible that the final text was established by ʿUthmān and has since remained completely unchanged, or, alternatively, whether the establishment and enforcement of an officially authorized and unvarying text is something that more likely took place later and over a period of some time.

In order to make his point, Sinai presents the analogue of a black swan. As he argues, "if the only swans we have ever encountered are white ones, it is the proponent of the existence of black swans whom we may legitimately expect to argue his case."[80] As far as swans are concerned, I think his point is valid. In terms of the Qur'an, however, I think things are a bit mixed up here. For Sinai, the black swan represents, it would seem, any doubts that might be voiced regarding the accuracy of ʿUthmān's creation and establishment of the canonical text. Yet the true black swan in this case is in fact the ʿUthmānic Qur'an itself. When Sinai and others insist on the veracity of the Sunni tradition, they are asking us to believe in something that the history of religions repeatedly informs us is an extremely unlikely set of events. Chase Robinson, for instance, gives an apt and well-informed assessment of the inherent historical improbability of the ʿUthmānic tradition:

> The complicated and protracted processes that generated monotheist scriptures in antiquity and late antiquity are generally measured in centuries or at least several decades; the tradition would have us believe that in the case of Islam they were telescoped into about twenty years. Are we really to think that within a single generation God's word moved from individual lines and chapters scribbled on camel shoulder-blades and rocks to complete, single, fixed and authoritative text on papyrus or vellum? It would be virtually unprecedented. It is furthermore unlikely in the light of what we know of early Arabic: the nature of early Arabic script, which only imperfectly described vowels and consonants, and conventions of memorizing and reading, which often privileged memory over written text, would militate against the very rapid production of the fixed and authoritative text that the tradition describes.[81]

Indeed, as Neuwirth also acknowledges, the canonical Sunni narrative "seems to deviate from what is usual in the history of religions."[82] This traditional narrative of the Qur'an's composition is, therefore, the black swan, at least for the historian of religions. Accordingly, we should expect proponents of the Qur'an's canonization prior to the middle of the seventh century to bear the burden of proof.

Likewise, the history of religions teaches us that, as a general rule, a religious community's memory of its period of origins is usually highly suspect from a historical point of view. It is the norm, rather than the exception, that collective memories of the period of origins and the formation of a sacred text and doctrine have been altered significantly to accord with the beliefs and practices of the later community. Communities tend to remember these events from their past as having occurred in the way that they "should" have happened rather than meticulously seeking to preserve a detailed and accurate memory of what actually happened. This is normal and is in no way consequent to any sort of conspiracy to disguise the community's formative history. But it means that as a rule, we tend to distrust a religious community's memories about the events of its origins. Why, then, in the case of this religious community alone, should we believe that there is in fact a black swan—that is, a fully accurate remembrance of its origins unaffected the concerns of the later community? I think those who would suggest as much need to provide us with better arguments than we have seen so far. For our part, the chapters to follow will provide evidence and argument showing, to the contrary, that such early fixation of the

canonical form of the text is comparatively unlikely, for a host of reasons. From what we have seen thus far, however, the complexity of the earliest evidence from the Islamic tradition itself does not appear to warrant such complacent acquiescence to the canonical Sunni narrative. As Viviane Comerro rightly concludes in her comprehensive study of the traditions concerning ʿUthmān, we should not look to these narratives as reporting what "really" happened. Instead, each of these accounts was produced and transmitted in order to advance a particular set of religious and doctrinal interests, rather than simply to report a set of facts from the past.[83]

Yet despite all their diversity and confusion, one thing emerges quite clearly and consistently from the disorder of these traditions about the Qur'an's codification: the process of establishing a new sacred writing had begun already before the caliphal authorities stepped in in order to compel and enforce the standardization of this new sacred text across their demesne. The first versions of the Qur'an were produced, according to these reports, as the result of multiple, independent initiatives undertaken in the various centers where the Believers had settled into the newly conquered Near East—in Syria, Kufa, and Basra. The earliest efforts to remember and collect Muhammad's words, then, came not from a Medinan caliph, but in the distant locales of Syria and Iraq, regions that were rich with Jewish and Christian believers and traditions. The early versions were disturbingly different from one another, so much so that the imperial authorities saw it as essential to get involved and to eliminate these conflicting memories of Muhammad with a standard version. Such a circumstance, as related in our earliest account from Sayf, seems altogether plausible given the early history of this new religious community, which was a religious minority scattered in pockets across the Near East without a strong central state or religious authority. It is worth mentioning that two of these early rival versions were produced in southern Iraq, where the partisans of Ali were at their strongest: Kufa was, after all, the capital of his brief caliphate. It is certainly possible that these early codices may well have been alternative Shi'i recollections of Muhammad's revelations, something that the later tradition may have been keen to forget. The tantalizing title of the Basra version, *Lubāb al-fuʾād* (Purity of the heart), certainly suggests something along the lines of the esotericism often favored by the Shi'i tradition.

In such conditions, it would perhaps not be surprising if ʿUthmān attempted to take some sort of action. It is understandable that the leader of this new religious polity would have sought to ameliorate the troubling differences that had already arisen in the community by the middle of the seventh century over the content of Muhammad's revelations. Nevertheless, there is at the same time clear indication that for the first fifty years after the death of Muhammad, his followers did not look primarily either to him or his words for authority. As Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds have persuasively demonstrated, the early caliphs were esteemed not merely as successors to Muhammad but instead as deputies of God on earth, with religious authority over the community, including the ability to define its faith and practice.[84] The caliphs themselves determined and dispensed divine law for the Believers, covering the full range of relevant topics.[85] With such a living, inspired representative of God leading the community, there would have been little need to record Muhammad's words for posterity: the word of God's reigning deputy (*khalīfāt Allāh*) held ultimate authority. Often the Umayyad caliphs were regarded as equal to and even superior to Muhammad and the prophet: "salvation was perceived as coming through the caliph," and only through allegiance to his direction could one hope to attain redemption.[86] Only gradually were the scholars of this new religious community, the *ʿulamāʾ*, able to successfully challenge the spiritual authority of the caliphs, displacing it by investing complete authority instead in the words and teachings of Muhammad, of which they were the custodians.

Presumably, it is in the process of this transition that Muhammad's teachings, the Qur'an, were elevated to holding supreme authority within the community, prompting the need produce and authorize a standard written version of these teachings. This dynamic of a gradual shift from the caliphs' direct authority as deputies of God to recognizing instead the authority of Muhammad's teachings as remembered by the members of the *ʿulamāʾ* also goes a long way toward explaining the Qur'an's apparent absence from the Believers' faith until the end of the seventh century, as evidenced by both the Islamic tradition itself and the various contemporary reports from writers outside of the community of the Believers.[87] It is also noteworthy in this regard that prior to the enthronement of ʿAbd al-Malik's father, Marwān I

(684–85), Muhammad himself receives no mention at all in the documentary evidence from the early Islamic polity: he is not named by any one of the papyri, inscriptions, or coins from this period. We are thus left wondering what his importance was for the Believers during their first half century. Yet the ascension of the Marwānids marks a dramatic change in this regard, and suddenly Muhammad is prominently invoked in public media, as is the Qur'an. Moreover, this shift toward public proclamation of the authority of Muhammad and the Qur'an is most marked during the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik. This clear move to identify Muhammad and his teachings unambiguously as the basis for the faith of the Believers adds further reason for identifying this period as the time when the canonical text of the Qur'an was produced and proclaimed as the authoritative word of God for the community of the Believers.[88]

Yet even if ʿUthmān may have made some attempt to introduce a standard text of the Qur'an, it must have been an entirely futile effort. It is difficult to believe that any such actions would have had much, if any, effect during his reign, let alone succeed in achieving the establishment of the final unvarying version of the Qur'an that has come down to us today. The conditions in which ʿUthmān ruled make for an extremely low probability that he could have successfully established any standard form of the Qur'anic text that he might have had produced, even by employing the full force of the caliphate to do so. As Robinson succinctly points out, ʿUthmān was simply in no position to have credibly accomplished what the tradition has ascribes to him.

> ʿUthmān was deeply unpopular in many quarters; his reign was short and contentious. His successor's was longer, and one can imagine that the task of enforcing an ʿUthmānic version would have fallen in practice to Muʿāwiya. But in a polity that lacked many rudimentary instruments of coercion and made no systematic attempt to project images of its own transcendent authority—no coins, little public building or inscriptions—the very idea of "official" is problematic.[89]

Although there is currently some debate as to whether or not Muʿāwiya may have succeeded in establishing an effective state, there is a broad consensus that even the most basic elements of a functioning government were not yet

in place under ʿUthmān. The tumult and disruption of another civil war would follow Muʿāwiya's reign, yet, in its aftermath, ʿAbd al-Malik would emerge as the leader of a potent and well-organized state that would be fully capable of achieving what the tradition improbably ascribes instead to ʿUthmān. And ʿAbd al-Malik's central involvement in this process is, to return to Sinai's analogy, clearly a white swan: there is near universal agreement from every quarter that ʿAbd al-Malik was instrumental in establishing and enforcing the canonical version of the Qur'an. By comparison, the traditions regarding various earlier collections appear to be much more darkly hued.

2

ʿAbd al-Malik, al-Ḥajjāj, and the Composition of the Qur'an

In stark contrast to the disarray of reports concerning earlier individuals, the canonical Qur'an's composition during ʿAbd al-Malik's rule (685–705) seems highly credible. Turning once again to Chase Robinson for an acute summary,

> Here the events make some real sense. For ʿAbd al-Malik had a clear interest: as we shall see, his imperial program was in very large measure executed by broadcasting ideas of order and obedience in a distinctly Islamic idiom. What is more, unlike previous caliphs, ʿAbd al-Malik had the resources to attempt such a redaction and to impose the resulting text, which, amongst all its competitors, we inherit.[1]

The project was largely overseen by one of his deputies, al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, who served ʿAbd al-Malik as governor of Iraq and viceroy of the caliphate. Although ʿUbayd Allāh ibn Ziyād, who preceded al-Ḥajjāj in this position, is said to have begun the editorial process, al-Ḥajjāj was the main agent of the Qur'an's standardization during ʿAbd al-Malik's reign. Al-Ḥajjāj was an influential and notorious figure of the period, whom Alfred-Louis de Prémare aptly describes as a "regime strongman." Among other things, al-Ḥajjāj led the military conquest of Mecca for ʿAbd al-Malik, abolishing the rival caliphate that ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr had established there, thereby bringing to an end a ten-year civil war and uniting the caliphate under ʿAbd al-Malik's authority. As governor of Iraq, he led vicious campaigns against Islamic dissidents there, including the Khārijites, but especially against the

supporters of Ali, the Shi'i, whom he regularly subjected to tortures and massacres.[2] In all things, al-Ḥajjāj played a key role in the consolidation of political and religious authority in the caliphate of his age, and in this capacity he continued to serve ʿAbd al-Malik's son and successor al-Walīd (705–15) until his death in 714.

There is in fact a substantial body of evidence, from both inside and outside the Islamic tradition, identifying ʿAbd al-Malik as the one who, with the assistance of al-Ḥajjāj, standardized the Qur'an in the unvarying form that has come down to us today. Paul Casanova and Alphonse Mingana were the first to draw our attention to this tradition, and each argued independently that it presented the most probable circumstances for the Qur'an's standardization and canonization.[3] Nevertheless, most scholars responded with quick and curt dismissals of their determinations, continuing to rally around the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm. As a result, this alternative, yet well-attested, tradition of the Qur'an's standardization under ʿAbd al-Malik remained almost completely ignored in scholarship on early Islam for most of the past century, consigned to a kind of heterodox oblivion. As Omar Hamdan observes, ʿAbd al-Malik's program of standardizing the Qur'an "has scarcely been dealt with in the scholarship on the Qurʾan"; likewise, "al-Ḥajjāj's reforms have rarely been dealt with by scholars, and even when they are mentioned, no systematic approach is pursued." In fact, only in the last twenty years has the possibility of a Marwanid, rather than an ʿUthmānic, Qur'an been given much, if any, serious consideration, and Hamdan's study remains the single best inventory of the relevant reports from the Islamic tradition.[4] It was de Prémare, it would seem, who first returned our attention to the compelling evidence for ʿAbd al-Malik's decisive role in establishing the canonical Qur'an, and a number of other scholars have since followed in his wake. Indeed, even Angelika Neuwirth has recently shown some openness to this hypothesis, despite continuing to favor the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm.[5]

There seems to be little doubt that ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj played a critical role in establishing the text of the Qur'an, although, as with the traditions concerning the first four caliphs, there is some variation in opinion within the Islamic tradition about just what they did.[6] A number of reports ascribe to ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj (and ʿUbayd Allāh) only

rather minor improvements in the text of the Qur'an: most commonly, such accounts relate that they merely added diacritical marks and/or vowels that had long been absent in the Qur'an's transmission, or perhaps they divided the suras into their current form. Nevertheless, the Islamic historical tradition credits many other individuals with these innovations as well, and the contradictions and confusion on this subject leave us, once again, with the conclusion that there was in fact no established memory of how these amendments were introduced, so that the later tradition could only guess.[7] Yet, by placing ʿAbd al-Malik and his representatives in this role, it was possible to square the widely held memories of their involvement in standardizing the text of the Qur'an with what would eventually become the canonical tradition of its collection under ʿUthmān. No doubt the later tradition's need to harmonize these two accounts supplied the inspiration for limiting the actions of ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj to mere cosmetic adjustments in the text, in order to clear a path back to ʿUthmān.

Not surprisingly, Nöldeke and Schwally, along with their many disciples, emphasize those traditions reporting only minor improvements under ʿAbd al-Malik while disregarding others that describe much more significant interventions in the text, in order to maintain fidelity to the canonical Sunni narrative.[8] Yet these reports of only negligible amendments should hardly be taken seriously, since they can be easily disproved by the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts, which demonstrate unambiguously their falsehood.[9] Many manuscripts written after this point continue to lack these features, while at the same time there is evidence indicating the use of standard spellings and diacritics already before ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj.[10] Indeed, as François Déroche observes of the material evidence, "If we turn to the reports stating that the diacritics were introduced in the course of al-Ḥajjāj's '*Maṣāḥif* project' and that *tāʾ* and *yāʾ* were selected in order to distinguish between the second and third person of some verbal forms, we have to admit that manuscript evidence says otherwise."[11] Clearly, then, the standardization of the Qur'an text under ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj did not consist only of such minor changes, since the elements that were allegedly introduced were already in use in some instances and likewise did not become regular features in the material record of the Qur'an until much later.

Other reports from the Islamic tradition instead describe ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj as making considerable alterations to the Qur'anic text, even if these traditions have been largely ignored by most previous scholarship. Many of these reports involve actions taken specifically by al-Ḥajjāj, although there can be little question that in each instance he would have been acting with authorization from ʿAbd al-Malik, whom he faithfully served.[12] For instance, according to a widely circulated tradition, ʿAbd al-Malik is reported to have said that he feared death in the month of Ramadan, since "That is the month in which I was born, it is the month in which I was weaned, it is the month in which I gathered together the Qurʾān [*jamaʿtu l-Qurʾān*], and it is the month in which I was sworn allegiance [as the caliph]."[13] Of course, that hardly settles the matter, not in the least because, as we have already noted, the verb in question, *jamaʿa*, can mean either to collect or to memorize. Nevertheless, this tradition provides a wide opening for the many other traditions that indicate the efforts by ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj to compose the standard text of the Qur'an.

There is a well-attested tradition that al-Ḥajjāj sent codices containing his newly standardized text of the Qur'an to the various imperial centers of the caliphate—Egypt, Damascus, Medina, Mecca, Kufa, and Basra—intending that this version would supplant the local versions then in use. According to some reports, he was not only the first person to send official codices to all the major cities, but also, in the process, he was the first to establish the practice of reading the Qur'an aloud in the mosques. Along with these new codices he also sent instructions that all earlier versions of the Qur'an should be gathered up and destroyed, exactly as ʿUthmān was said to have ordered in the canonical narrative.[14] Al-Ḥajjāj deputized a committee and charged them with "inspecting all the *maṣāḥif* that were in private ownership, and to tear up every *muṣḥaf* that differed" from the new imperial standard. "As compensation, the owner was paid 60 dirham."[15] It would appear, then, that the original variety with which Muhammad's early followers remembered his teachings still remained in place even until the end of the seventh century, in the form of divergent collections of his revelations that had been produced and were in use locally in different centers. Hamdan remarks that, although these Qur'anic censors certainly did not succeed in tracking down every deviant copy, again, "the results were so extensive that one could only

wonder in disbelief if after the second *maṣāḥif* project any remnant of a differing recension were to come to light."[16]

According to one version of the reports concerning the distribution of al-Ḥajjāj's Qur'an, the governor of Egypt was reportedly taken aback by such presumption on the part of a fellow governor (al-Ḥajjāj). The governor objected that "He permits himself to send a *muṣḥaf* [codex] to the very military district [*jund*] where I am serving, me!" The Egyptian governor then responded by producing his own edition of the Qur'an, although we are not told what the basis for this Egyptian version was.[17] Yet, as Hamdan observes, this report indicates the total absence of the so-called ʿUthmānic version in Egypt up to this point, which in itself raises significant questions about the canonical tradition of an ʿUthmānic standardization.[18] As for Medina, when al-Ḥajjāj's version reached this City of the Prophet, the members of ʿUthmān's family living there, according to Ibn Shabba, sternly disapproved. The people of Medina told them to "get out the *muṣḥaf* of ʿUthmān b. Āffān, so that we may read it." Yet ʿUthmān's descendants cryptically replied that "it was destroyed on the day when ʿUthmān was killed."[19]

Indeed, multiple sources report an unsuccessful search for ʿUthmān's missing codex at this time, leading de Prémare to propose—rightly, I suspect —that "in ʿUthmān's day, there had been at that time, or possibly later, a collection of 'Qurʾānic' writings in Medina, for which he had been considered responsible, just as there had been others elsewhere, under the names of other Companions."[20] This conclusion is further warranted by Sayf's report that ʿUthmān seems to have favored the authority of an early Medinan version of the Qur'an, one that he may have even had a hand in producing. Yet such partiality affords no basis for assuming that this Medinan codex was identical with the version of the Qur'an that has come down to us today; nor does it seem at all possible that ʿUthmān could have established this version of the text (or any other version for that matter) across his vast and rapidly expanding empire, as the canonical narrative would have us believe. Instead, this codex was almost certainly no more than a regional version of the Qur'an that held authority in Medina and perhaps in Mecca as well. As such, it must be understood as simply another of the so-called "companion codices," standing alongside the other regional

versions of the Qur'an that had been collected independently in Syria and Iraq. What this means is that while there may have been an early version of the Qur'an identified with ʿUthmān, this collection was simply one among many early, independent efforts to remember the revelations that Muhammad had taught his followers and to gather them in a written volume. ʿUthmān's Qur'an, then, was likely nothing more than the regional codex of the Hijaz, which had been produced from the oral and written memories of Muhammad's followers living there, as was being done in parallel, and independently, in the other major centers of the Believers' faith during the early caliphate.

Perhaps related to this effort to standardize the Qur'an is another tradition, from Ibn Saʿd, that reports a speech given by ʿAbd al-Malik to the inhabitants of Medina in the context of his pilgrimage to the holy places of the Hijaz in 695. One must bear in mind, of course, that only three years before this these territories had stood in open revolt against ʿAbd al-Malik's authority, recognizing instead the rival caliph ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr. At the end of his discourse, ʿAbd al-Malik turns to address the status of the Qur'anic text. He mentions that the citizens of Medina were concerned by their discovery of some new "hadiths that we do not know." As the context makes clear, these "hadiths" were alternative versions of Muhammad's revelations circulating in Iraq that had only recently reached the Hijaz, one suspects, following its recent conquest and reintegration with the rest of the Believers' extensive polity. Thus, we find ourselves again in a circumstance with competing independent versions of the Qur'an in the main centers of the early caliphate. ʿAbd al-Malik urges the Medinans to cling to the "*muṣḥaf* around which the *imām* so unjustly treated has gathered you," a figure that de Prémare says should be identified with ʿUthmān.[21] It is, admittedly, a fairly puzzling passage, the meaning of which is not entirely clear, and it is perhaps open to various interpretations. Nevertheless, in de Prémare's reading, which I find persuasive, the episode seems to identify ʿUthmān's codex not as an imperial standard from the middle of the seventh century but instead as the regional version of the Hijaz.

One should note that in this account ʿAbd al-Malik appears to speak favorably of this Medinan version of the Qur'an, or at least he does so when addressing the Medinans in what would clearly have been a highly political

speech. Such a positive endorsement of Medina's religious traditions and its citizens' remembrance of Muhammad's revelations is likely best understood in this instance as politically calculated praise. His remarks reflect the need to curry favor with a region that only recently stood in rebellion against his claim to rule, an insurrection, one should note, that was motivated in large part by religious differences.[22] And so he reassures the Medinans, who were disturbed to learn of alternate memories of Muhammad's teachings that were circulating in other regions, that their version of the Qur'an is sound. Yet it is also possible that this passage, if it has any basis in reality, may indicate ʿAbd al-Malik's genuine preference for Medina's Qur'anic traditions and their "ʿUthmānic" codex. In such a case, one might imagine that this version of the Qur'an perhaps enjoyed some sort of favor in the process of standardization undertaken by the caliph and his viceroy. Nevertheless, this hypothesis offers no basis for simply assuming that this Medinan codex is identical with the version of the Qur'an that has come down to us today. Rather, it would have been merely one among several sources used to compose a new canonical version of the text, even if it may have made a significant contribution to the final product.

Perhaps, as a part of his campaign to authorize a new imperial version of the Qur'an, ʿAbd al-Malik and his legates first introduced the tradition of an ʿUthmānic Qur'an along with their codex. Such a legend not only would provide a more impressive pedigree for their text, but it would also assign this important task to the first caliph to come from the Umayyad clan. The Umayyads always considered ʿUthmān, and not Muʿāwiya, to be the inaugurator of their dynasty, and ʿUthmān was also, one should note, the first cousin of ʿAbd al-Malik's father Marwan I.[23] Al-Zuhrī, who seems to be the individual who placed this tradition into circulation, was after all highly favored by none other than ʿAbd al-Malik himself, who recruited him to reside at his court and lavished him with favors and privilege. In addition to being the most admired and influential scholar at the Umayyad court, where he enjoyed high rank, he was also appointed "as a judge, a tax collector, and the head of the caliphal elite troop."[24] Accordingly, "When ʿAbd al-Malik welcomed Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī into his court and resolved to become the scholar's benefactor, he created a relationship with profound consequences."[25] Perhaps, then, al- Zuhrī introduced this tradition of an

ʿUthmānic collection and standardization acting directly on behalf of his powerful patron.

Al-Zuhrī's status, his influence, and his work were in fact all intimately bound up with the Umayyad patronage that ultimately enabled him to determine much of the Islamic community's memory of its earliest history going forward. Numerous contemporary reports from the early Islamic tradition rebuke him as a shock trooper or enforcer (*shurṭa*) for the Umayyads and denounce him for serving as "the axle upon which their [the Umayyad's] mill of falsehood turns, a bridge across their ruin, and a ladder down into their perdition."[26] Not surprisingly, other sources defend al-Zuhrī and assert his independence from Umayyad influence, but one suspects that these are later voices attempting to rehabilitate his reputation, particularly in light of the shift to Abbasid hegemony.[27] Undoubtedly, Antoine Borrut is correct that the net effect of al-Zuhrī's Umayyad patronage was "to codify and set in place a Marwanid historiographical filter" that would profoundly shape subsequent Islamic memory and historiography. Indeed, "despite attempts to demonstrate that he was a truly independent scholar, it seems on the contrary that he was working in close collaboration with the caliphs."[28]

Therefore, we should consider the possibility of the following hypothesis. In order to afford further validation for his new, imperially authorized version of the Qur'an, in the face of numerous existing variant versions, ʿAbd al-Malik promulgated a tradition, with al-Zuhrī's assistance, claiming that his version was not in fact novel. Instead, it was ʿUthmān, ʿAbd al-Malik's cousin and the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, who was identified as responsible for standardizing the Qur'an, so that ʿAbd al-Malik's new imperial standard merely aimed to establish the authority of his forebear ʿUthmān's earlier version of the Qur'an across the empire. Even if this tradition was not deliberately introduced as a part of this program, it is rather easy to imagine how it could have developed almost spontaneously in the process. It would have been highly advantageous to identify an older precursor in the collective memory to ease the novelty of what ʿAbd al-Malik was enacting, and, given ʿUthmān's importance for the Umayyad clan and his close family relations with ʿAbd al-Malik, in this context he seems to emerge as a particularly obvious target for such attribution. Perhaps Medina's regional version of the Qur'an and a memory of its association with

ʿUthmān contributed to the development of this legend. Al-Zuhrī, then, serving as the expert mouthpiece on Islamic tradition for both ʿAbd al-Malik and the later Umayyad court, bears clear responsibility for placing this tradition into circulation under his esteemed authority, as Motzki has demonstrated, and thus the tradition has come down to us today. Indeed, it remains the case, as Pierre Larcher rightly notes, that "the *muṣḥaf ʿUthmān* is the 'conventional' name of the official version imposed by the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik."[29]

In any case, regardless of whether we embrace such a hypothesis or not, numerous reports from the early Islamic tradition indicate that the changes to the Qur'anic text introduced at the direction of ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj were in fact substantial. Their actions appear to have moved beyond earlier efforts to collect various memories of Muhammad's revelations in writing, undertaking the process of synthesizing the contents of these various independent collections into the canonical version of the Qur'an that comes down to us today. We perhaps catch a glimpse of their editorial efforts in a report ascribed to al-Aʿmash (d. 765) that survives in the canonical hadith collections of Muslim and al-Bukhārī. In this account, al-Ḥajjāj appears to be addressing a group of scribes and scholars whom he has charged with the project of composing what will be the new standard version of the Qur'an to replace the competing regional codices. While giving a speech from the pulpit (*minbar*), he instructs these savants to "compose the Qurʾān as Gabriel composed it [*allifū l-Qurʾāna kamā allafahu Jibrīl*]: the writing that includes mention of the cow [*al-sūra llatī yuḏkaru fīhā l-baqara*], and the writing that includes mention of the women [*al-nisā'*], and the writing that includes mention of the family of ʿImran [*'Āl 'Imrān*]."[30]

One should not be confused here by the use of the word *sūra*, since this term has a broad meaning, even and especially in the Qur'an itself, where it simply designates a writing of some sort. The other key term, *allafa*, means to join, unite, assemble, or collect the parts of something. Clearly, some sort of deliberate composition of the Qur'an under al-Ḥajjāj's direction is in view in this report— presumably, a synthesis of the earlier regional codices.[31] Other traditions describe al-Ḥajjāj as regularly inspecting the work of these scribes and scholars and considering his own judgments regarding the text

of the Qur'an to be inspired on the level of Muhammad himself.[32] This report also seems to indicate that various sections or suras now found in the Qur'an were at this time still circulating as independent collections of Muhammad's teachings. Some of these writings, it would appear, even bore names that would ultimately be given to some of the Qur'an's suras: the Cow (2), the Women (4), and the Family of Imran (3). Material evidence of the Cow's circulation as a discrete and independent text has recently emerged in the form of a newly identified and soon to be published papyrus, directly confirming the words of al-Ḥajjāj in this report.[33] And, as we will see in the following section, the earliest non-Islamic sources that refer to Islamic sacred writings similarly describe these texts as existing in a fragmentary and independent state even as late as the beginning of the eighth century, when the Qur'an was first brought together under ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj.

JOHN OF DAMASCUS AND THE QUR'AN

The most important non-Islamic witness to the Qur'an's early history is without doubt John of Damascus (675–749), who is also the very first writer to show any awareness at all that Muhammad's followers possessed distinctive sacred writings of their own. We find John's remarks about the "Qur'an" in his most important and widely read work, the *Fount of Knowledge*, which was written around 730. In a section of this treatise dedicated to cataloging various religious errors, John includes Muhammad's followers, whom he considers to be little more than another variety of Christian heresy, naming them the "Ishmaelites."[34] In his refutation of the Ishmaelites' faith, he describes certain writings that they attribute to their founder Muhammad, some of which clearly correspond to parts of the Qur'an, and others of which do not.[35] Although John's intent here is clearly polemical, one should not on this basis write off his account of this new religious community and their scripture so quickly. John's life experiences positioned him to be extremely well informed about Muhammad's followers, their internal affairs, and the content of their faith.

John's paternal grandfather had been the financial governor of Damascus and Syria during the final years of Roman rule, a role that his father would assume after the transition to the rule of the Believers. John's father, Sarjūn

ibn Manṣūr, served as secretary for each of the first Umayyad caliphs—from Muʿāwiya (661–80) to ʿAbd al-Malik (685–705), with responsibility for taxation and the caliphal treasury. John himself later followed his father into the caliphal administration, serving also as secretary and chief financial officer for ʿAbd al-Malik before he departed for Jerusalem early in the eighth century to live out the remainder of his life as a monk. Indeed, in the 680s and 690s and perhaps beyond, John was effectively the head of the Umayyad civil administration.[36] These experiences serving in high office within the Umayyad caliphate ensure that "John was well-positioned to have gathered some of the best information about Islam that could be acquired [in Damascus]." Accordingly, any differences between what John reports about Muhammad's followers and the memories of the later Islamic tradition cannot be simply pushed aside as polemical falsification. At the time when John was writing there is in fact little reason to assume that "Islamic practice was developed to such an extent to warrant the criticism that John distorts Islamic beliefs and practices."[37] Islam was still a work in progress that was trying to find its way among the various monotheisms of the late ancient Near East, and John's account provides a precious witness to how this process was still unfolding in his day before his own eyes. Indeed, it is likely that John would have been better informed than most Muslims regarding the affairs of the caliphate, including any official doctrines or scriptures that they were attempting to propagate.

John begins his description of this heresy of the "Ishmaelites" by noting its origins with a certain "Mamed," who, after having read the Old and New Testaments, began spreading tales that "a writing [*graphē*] had come down to him from heaven," compiling these "laughable things" into a book [*biblos*]. A bit later in his account, John turns to this particular writing in some detail, explaining further that "This Mamed, as was said, composed many foolish things, and gave each of them a title, such as, the writing of the Woman," while there are also other writings with the titles "the Table" (sura 5) and "the Cow." John additionally mentions a fourth writing entitled the "Camel of God," a mysterious reference that has generated much speculation, since there is no such writing in the Qur'an in its present form.[38] We are fortunate that in the course of his discussion of Islam, John makes numerous specific references to the Ishmaelites' scriptures, at times

even seeming to quote directly from them.[39] Despite his polemical intent, it is clear that John is well informed and highly knowledgeable about the sacred writings of this new religious community. Particularly noteworthy is John's reference to the existence of multiple and seemingly independent writings that were being used by Muhammad's followers as scriptures, which seems to confirm the similar indications in al-Ḥajjāj's address. Even more fortuitous is the fact that John identifies two of the three writings named by al-Ḥajjāj with the same title, although, one must note, John's description of the contents of the writing "the Woman" does not seem at all compatible with the sura "the Women," at least in its current form.[40] In any case, John would have known well what was going on inside the caliphate at this time, and it surely stands as no mere coincidence that he identifies significant portions of the Qur'an as separate writings, seeming to confirm the conditions implied by al-Ḥajjāj's speech. Clearly, we must conclude, the sacred Ishmaelite writings that John knew in this era and describes in his account of their beliefs "cannot have been the Qur'an as we know it in its present form."[41]

As for the "Camel of God," this text remains a mystery, and it is certainly possible, given the complex state of Islamic sacred scripture at this stage, that it was yet another early writing alleged to contain some of Muhammad's revelations that was ultimately rejected. Perhaps it included, among other things, a much more elaborate form of the Qur'anic legend of the "She-Camel of God" (e.g., 11.61–68, 26.155–58), augmented with a significant amount of non-Qur'anic material relevant to this tradition. The Qur'an's scattered references to this divine she-camel alone cannot suffice to explain the writing that John had read bearing such a title, leaving little doubt that this text must have been a separate, now vanished work. Much of what John ascribes to this writing does not find any parallels in the Qur'an, although we do find traces of similar traditions elsewhere in early Islamic literature. Perhaps during the final separation of the Qur'an from the hadith most of the camel traditions found themselves on the latter side of the divide. But clearly John must have had some sort of Qur'anic "apocryphon" with this title before his eyes that has since vanished. Indeed, John is quite explicit that what he relates is material contained in writings attributed to Muhammad that were available to him. The faint echoes of this writing that

we find now in the Qur'an thus reflect "the later result of mental labor aimed at the redaction, selection, and stylistic reorganization of this text, carried out during the final composition, based on various preexisting texts not yet formally fixed and rendered immutable."[42] On this basis alone it seems highly unlikely that the Qur'an as we now have it had been completely fixed by the turn of the eighth century, when John, who again was extremely well-informed and well-connected, wrote his description of the writings that Muhammad's followers ascribed to him and revered as sacred scripture.

Two additional non-Islamic sources also indicate "the Cow's" circulation as a separate work, and, if taken only on their own terms, their individual witness might not amount to much. Nevertheless, when added to John's account and al-Ḥajjāj's address, in addition to a papyrus containing "the Cow" as an independent writing, these reports gain significantly more credibility. The first of these witnesses is a Syriac text widely known as *The Disputation between a Muslim and a Monk of Bēt Ḥālē*. In this debate, the Christian disputant identifies among the sacred writings of his opponent a text named "the writing of the Cow" (*ṣūrat ʾal-baqara*), which he clearly distinguishes from the Qur'an, naming the latter separately as a different writing.[43] Scholars long thought that this Syriac text had been written during the early eighth century, so that it would constitute a parallel witness to John's report that parts of the Islamic sacred scriptures were still circulating independently at this time. Nevertheless, a more recent study has come to the conclusion that this disputation more probably belongs to the early ninth century. The most compelling evidence for this later dating is a reference to Muhammad's instruction by the Christian monk Sergius Bahira, a Syriac Christian legend not known before the later eighth century.[44] Yet this same legend of Sergius Bahira also identifies a sacred writing ascribed to Muhammad named "the book of the Cow" that is separate from the Qur'an.[45] Thus, it seems likely that mention of this "book of the Cow" in the Bahira legend inspired its subsequent appearance in the later Syriac *Disputation*, so that the latter is not necessarily an independent witness. Nevertheless, both texts attest to the survival of this tradition, first attested by John of Damascus, of an independent sacred writing titled "the Cow" that was distinct from the Qur'an. Inasmuch as John's treatise would not have circulated in the same Miaphysite and East Syrian circles that gave rise to

these two documents, we should consider them together as an independent witness to "the Cow's" differentiation from the Qur'an into the eighth century.

THE *LETTER OF LEO III TO ʿUMAR II* AND THE QUR'AN

Other non-Islamic sources that are contemporary with the earliest Islamic sources confirm the Qur'an's composition and standardization under ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj. The single most important piece of evidence in this regard is the complex of writings purporting to be an exchange of letters between the Byzantine emperor Leo III (717–41) and the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar II (717–20). Christian historical writers of the ninth and tenth centuries refer to just such an exchange of letters between these two leaders, and it is now well established that these historians have drawn this information from a still earlier report of the exchange in a now vanished chronicle by the eighth-century polymath Theophilus of Edessa that was their collective source.[46] The original account of this exchange dates, accordingly, to sometime around 750, not long at all after the lifetimes of the two alleged correspondents. According to Theophilus's report, ʿUmar II wrote to Leo III inviting him to convert to Islam, and Leo replied by sending a response to ʿUmar's arguments for his conversion with a critique of Islamic faith and practice.[47]

As it turns out, we have letters from each of these two rulers addressed to the other, preserved within their respective traditions: Leo's letter survives in Christian sources, while ʿUmar's has come down through the Islamic tradition. The transmission of these "letters" is a bit complex, however, since neither missive is completely extant in the language of its original composition—Greek and Arabic, one would assume—and likewise the texts reach us through an assortment of different channels. Scholars of course are not so naïve as to assume that we have in these two documents writings from the actual hands of Leo and ʿUmar themselves. Nevertheless, there is now a fairly broad consensus that what has come down to us in this correspondence "is an amalgamation of several letters written either by the two leaders, or two persons living in the early eighth century."[48] The letter of Leo III, which is the writing that concerns us, survives in the Armenian *Chronicle* of Łewond, a text was written in the later eight century, around

789.[49] There seems to be little room for any doubt, then, that the letter from Leo III to ʿUmar II, whoever may have written it, is a Christian critique of Islam that was composed during the first part of the eighth century, and most likely sometime before 730, as Peter Schadler persuasively argues.[50] Thus, Leo's letter effectively ties John of Damascus as the first non-Islamic witness to the existence of an Islamic sacred text.

ʿUmar's letter, as we have it, opens with an attack on the Christian scriptures, maintaining that the Old Testament was falsified by the Jews, and that the Christians then falsified the teaching of Jesus in their gospels.[51] Leo's letter responds with an extended defense of the scriptures, arguing that their witness has not in fact been falsified by the Jews, the apostles, or the leaders of the church. At the conclusion of this topic, before turning to a new subject, the Trinity, "Leo" addresses the collection of the Qur'an.

> But you are yourself wont to make such falsifications, especially in the case of a certain al-Ḥajjāj, who was appointed governor of Persia by you, who gathered all your ancient books and wrote another according to his taste and distributed it throughout all your lands. For such a thing was quite easy to accomplish with a single people with a single language, as it was in fact done—excepting only a few works of Abu Turab [i.e., Ali], for al-Ḥajjāj was not able to destroy them completely.

Such a thing would be impossible among the Christians, Leo explains, not only because God has strictly forbidden it, but because Christianity has been established among so many different peoples and languages.[52]

Leo's letter is an extremely high-quality source, even if it is, once again, a polemical one. By all accounts, it was written close to the events in question, during the first half of the eighth century and very likely a little before 730. Al-Ḥajjāj himself had died just over a decade before this in 714, and his efforts to compose and disseminate the standard version of the Qur'an presumably took place during the two decades from 694–714, while he served as viceroy in Iraq first for ʿAbd al-Malik and then for his son al-Walid (705–15).[53] The events referred to in this letter thus appear to have transpired likely within the lifetime of its author. If Leo himself were in some sense its author, the Qur'an's standardization and canonization would have taken place while he was between the ages of ten and thirty, with al-Ḥajjāj's

death coming only three years before Leo assumed the imperial throne at the age of thirty-three. Clearly, whoever the author was, he knew about al-Ḥajjāj's composition and enforcement of a new standard version of the Qur'an from his own lived experience within the same world that saw these events take place. Al-Ḥajjāj was a very prominent and well-known figure of the era, such that during his tenure as viceroy of the caliphate and governor of Iraq he stands as "the dominant figure in the sources" for this period.[54] Undoubtedly, this vice caliph of the Islamic empire would have been a familiar figure to Leo and other members of the Byzantine court, and likewise, an endeavor as momentous and convulsive as establishing a revised, mandatory version of the Islamic sacred text certainly would not have escaped their attention.

We have here, then, a contemporary report from outside the Islamic tradition that confirms what the Islamic sources relate about al-Ḥajjāj's production of a new standard Qur'an to replace the various regional versions and their divergent memories of Muhammad's revelations. Leo's account closely matches the description in these sources of al-Ḥajjāj gathering together the regional codices that had emerged independently in the main centers of Islam and harmonizing their differences into a new official, standard version, which presumably was more or less identical with the Qur'an that has come down to us today. Leo's letter also notes, like the Islamic sources, that this program of standardization involved the destruction of these older regional versions, although he notes that some of these traditions managed to survive al-Ḥajjāj's purge. In this regard, Leo singles out certain works of Abū Turāb—that is, Ali. One imagines that Ali's mention in this particular context signals the author's awareness that Ali's supporters vigorously contested the accuracy and authority of the Umayyad Qur'an in this era, as noted in the previous chapter. Indeed, according to Hamdan, "the real motive" for this project of producing and enforcing a standard version of the Qur'an "should be sought in the political conflicts between the Shiʿites in Kufa and the ruling Umayyads which had escalated since the rule of Ibn Ziyād (r. 55–66/675–685)."[55] As already noted, it would appear that al-Ḥajjāj and his committee of official censors enjoyed great success in eliminating these divergent records of Muhammad's revelations, so that they have effectively vanished from the earth. In contrast to

ʿUthmān, who is said to have attempted the same, al-Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik were actually in a position to accomplish this, with a powerful and effective state apparatus—even if they did not initially succeed in eliminating every trace of the older codices. For what it is worth, Leo's letter says nothing about any sort of prior collection of the Qur'an by earlier figures from Islamic history, ʿUthmān or otherwise.

THE *DIALOGUE* OF ABRAHAM OF TIBERIAS, THE *APOLOGY* OF AL-KINDĪ, AND THE QUR'AN

Two other Christian writers from roughly a century later, Abraham of Tiberias and the apologist al-Kindī, likewise affirm the Qur'an's final revision and standardization by al-Ḥajjāj. Abraham of Tiberias appears as a disputant in an Arabic text purporting to record a dialogue between this Melkite Christian and the emir ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Hāshimī in Jerusalem sometime around 820. Although the text is certainly not a transcript of any such dialogue, it does seem to have a connection with the historical context that frames this literary exchange.[56] In it, Abraham at one point addresses the matter of the Qur'an's lineage. In contrast to Leo's letter, the author of this dialogue is well aware of the Islamic tradition's many different accounts of the Qur'an's origins. He notes that although Muhammad claimed to be the recipient of its revelations, only after his death did his followers begin to compile the words that he had taught them, and, mirroring the confusion of the Islamic sources, Abraham names the full range of the various alleged instigators: Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān, Ali, Ibn ʿAbbās, and Muʿāwiya. Yet Abraham then explains that "after them, it was al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf who composed [*allafa*] and arranged [*rattaba*] it [the Qur'an]."[57] Clearly, according to this witness, the final composition and edition of the Qur'an was achieved by al-Ḥajjāj. While others may have made earlier efforts to gather Muhammad's teachings together, it was al-Ḥajjāj who produced the final authoritative version of the Islamic sacred text.

Al-Kindī discusses the Qur'an at much greater length in his *Apology*, which he composed in the early ninth century during the reign of the caliph al-Maʾmūn (813–33).[58] Like Abraham, al-Kindī also knows the muddle of Islamic traditions concerning the Qur'an's origins, and he adduces this multiplicity to a polemical end, identifying all of the hands that are reported

to have had a turn at altering the text of the Qur'an. He notes that Ali is alleged to have collected the Qur'an soon after Muhammad's death, although he insists to his readers from the very start of this discussion that "you know that al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf collected [*jamaʿa*] the codices [*maṣāḥif*], and he removed things [*ʾasqala*] from them."[59] Nevertheless, al-Kindī also notes the tradition of an initial collection of leaves under Abū Bakr, further explaining that Ali's supporters did not accept this version but remained faithful to Ali's version. Other collections were also independently produced at this time, he explains, including those of Ubayy b. Kaʿb and ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿūd. Then ʿUthmān was troubled by the various versions of the Qur'an that had established themselves already among the Believers in different regions, and, as in the canonical narrative, he undertook to establish an authoritative version, sending copies to Mecca, Medina, Syria, and Kufa. Of these, only the Syrian copy of ʿUthmān's Qur'an is said to have escaped destruction fairly soon thereafter. "Then there was the intervention by al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, who left no copy [*muṣḥaf*] that he did not acquire, and he removed many things from it."[60] Clearly, al-Kindī, like Abraham, has drawn his information about the Qur'an from the Islamic tradition, and yet both writers show that the collection of the Qur'an, at least as these Christian writers had learned of it, was largely the work of al-Ḥajjāj, who made some substantial changes to the contents of the text and established its final form. And what these Christian authors were hearing from their Islamic contemporaries in the early ninth century clearly indicates that al-Ḥajjāj did far more than merely add some diacritics and arrange the suras in their current form.

Before moving on from these witnesses, it is worth emphasizing in the strongest terms, I think, that prior to John of Damascus and the letter of Leo, which appear to be roughly contemporary works from the early eighth century, no writer, Christian or otherwise, shows any awareness *at all* that Muhammad's followers had a sacred book of their own. This long silence should certainly give us pause, and it raises significant questions about the history and status of the Qur'an during the first Islamic century. The Jews and Christians of late antiquity were peoples for whom the authority of a sacred book was paramount. Surely, they would have been curious and inquisitive to learn whether these newly arrived Abrahamic monotheists had

a scripture of their own. And yet they show complete ignorance of any distinctive corpus of scripture claimed by Muhammad's followers until the early eighth century. This lengthy collective silence is quite telling: such silence, as they say, speaks volumes. Nicolai Sinai, in his otherwise thoughtful article defending the ʿUthmānic tradition, can only give this evidence a curt dismissal as being "of course easy to impugn." Yet such judgment is, to borrow Sinai's own words, "worryingly cavalier."[61]

Sinai's only support for this position is reference to one of Harald Motzki's articles, where Motzki alleges that the use of *argumenta e silentio* in Mingana's articles on the collection of the Qur'an represents a weakness in his case for the text's standardization under ʿAbd al-Malik. Yet Motzki himself does not bother to give any explanation whatsoever for the stunning absence of any mention in any source from the first century of this new religious movement's existence of what is purported to be the centerpiece of the Believers' faith. Instead, Motzki blithely notes "the fact that the Qur'an is not mentioned in the few early Christian sources reporting on the Muslims," as if this simple observation should somehow suffice resolve the matter.[62] Yet this remark is, frankly, both empty and inaccurate. To describe the number of contemporary "Christian sources reporting on the Muslims" as "few" is utterly absurd and disingenuous. Surely at the time of his writing Motzki was at least aware of Robert Hoyland's *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*. In this more than 870-page volume, Hoyland catalogues over one hundred and thirty non-Islamic sources that make reference to the religious movement founded by Muhammad at various stages in its early history. Around sixty of these witnesses were written during the first Islamic century: sixty, I believe, is well more than a few. None of these first-century witnesses so much as mentions any sort of sacred writing used in any capacity at all by Muhammad's followers. This is nothing short of incredible if, as many would suppose, the Qur'an was already collected by 650 in a standard canonical form and was believed by Muhammad's followers to be direct revelations from their God. If this striking, consistent pattern from the earliest evidence is truly so easy to impugn, as alleged, then by all means, it would be helpful if someone were to put forth the negligible effort to do so. To the contrary, it is solid evidence that is deeply problematic for accepting the canonical

narrative of the Sunni-Nödekean-Schwallian paradigm, evidence that has accordingly been widely ignored.

Sinai further maintains, again following Motzki, that while Casanova and Mingana had previously argued for the Qur'an's composition under al-Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik on the basis that this tradition appears in the historical record before the canonical Islamic version, this assumption, he maintains, is no longer valid. It is true that Motzki has made a solid argument that some basic version of the tradition of an ʿUthmānic collection goes back to al-Zuhrī (d. 741–42). Yet one must note and even insist that the reports from the letter of Leo and John of Damascus are just as old if not even older, as is the alternative account of the Qur'an's origins related by Sayf ibn ʿUmar described above.[63] Likewise, we should not discount Abraham of Tiberias or al-Kindī, particularly since their accounts concur with both Leo and an important thread in the Islamic collective memory regarding the Qur'an's standardization under ʿAbd al-Malik. Motzki unfortunately misevaluates al-Kindī's witness as negligible (ignoring Abraham of Tiberius entirely), regarding it as nothing more than "distorted summary of several Muslim traditions" that is of more recent vintage than the tradition he attributes to al-Zuhrī.[64]

Such an appraisal of al-Kindī's witness is indeed unfair and inconsistent. As Guillaume Dye observes of Motzki's inequitable judgment in this instance, "it is necessary to compare what is comparable: either the dating of the composition of the works, or the dating of the traditions that they reproduce—but one cannot compare the dating of the letter of al-Kindī with that of the traditions of al-Bukhārī," which is what Motzki in fact does.[65] Al-Kindī's apology is roughly contemporary with Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* as a witness, and there is no reason to assume that al-Kindī does not, like Bukhārī, transmit a tradition that is older than the writing in which it appears. Moreover, in the case of the letter of Leo III, we have clear evidence from an early eighth-century source—a much more direct and certain witness than the ins and outs of Motzki's preferred method of *isnād* criticism can afford. It is true that al-Kindī uses every tool at his disposal, since he wants to show that the Qur'an has been falsified, but every tool in his kit is, so to speak, taken from the Muslim tool bench. In this regard al-Kindī is true to his remarks from the conclusion of this section on the Qur'an's composition:

"All that I have said is drawn from your own [i.e., Islamic] authorities, and no argument have I advanced but what is based on evidence accepted by yourselves."[66] Accordingly, we should look on al-Kindī's witness to this early tradition about al-Ḥajjāj no differently than the reports of al-Bukhārī and other later Muslim writers. Like al-Buhkārī, al-Kindī—and Abraham of Tiberias as well for that matter—bears witness in the early ninth century to a tradition from the early eighth century that was circulating in both Christian and Islamic circles.

DELIBERATE DECEPTION OR COLLECTIVE MEMORY?

Ultimately, even Sinai must concede that "the fact that two [three actually] Christian texts which are not obviously interdependent, as well as various Islamic reports, concurrently ascribe to al-Ḥajjāj measures of textual dissemination and suppression strongly indicates that something of the sort really was afoot."[67] Thus, we have here a tradition that satisfies one of the highest standards for evaluating the worth of historical evidence: multiple independent attestations. As biblical scholars have long recognized, a higher degree of historical probability inheres in observations attested by several independent sources, since this pattern makes it highly unlikely that a particular writer has invented a given report.[68] We have in this instance three early, independent witnesses from the Christian tradition, one of which, the *Letter of Leo*, is almost contemporary with the events in question and seems to originate from the Byzantine imperial court. One imagines that Byzantine officials would likely be fairly well-informed concerning major developments in the caliphate, particularly those undertaken by an individual as prominent as the imperial viceroy, al-Ḥajjāj. In addition, we have multiple reports from various sources in the Islamic tradition that similarly ascribe the Qur'an's composition to al-Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik. By comparison, the tradition of the ʿUthmānic compilation, it would appear, ultimately has but a single witness, al-Zuhrī, whose individual account all of the later sources merely reproduce with some variations, as Motzki has demonstrated. To have it otherwise in this case would be to fall prey to the common fallacy identified by Lawrence Conrad, according to which "a report generated in a particular time and place, and then cited 30 times subsequently in other later texts, will be cited for all 30 attestations as if

these were independent witnesses."[69] They are not, and in this case there seems to be only one witness for this particular account of the Qur'an's formation—al-Zuhrī.

Nevertheless, Sinai remains unwilling to allow that the actions of al-Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik could have amounted to actually composing the text of the Qur'an in the final form that it has now come down to us. For instance, Sinai argues that the lack of any clear anachronisms in the Qur'an showing the influence of developments from the period after 650 is an indication that the text must have been fixed by this point. In a previous study, I noted that in the Christian Gospel of John, Jesus does not offer any anachronistic predictions beyond his lifetime, and yet scholars have generally dated the composition of this Gospel to some seventy years after his death; this is roughly the same interval as from Muhammad to ʿAbd al-Malik.[70] In response, Sinai notes that the Gospel of John does have at least one anachronism, in 9:22, where the Gospel (but not Jesus) refers to the expulsion of Christians from the Jewish synagogue, an event that postdates the life of Jesus.[71] Well, by this measure, then, the Qur'an is indeed replete with anachronisms.

In the same way that this verse from the Gospel of John reflects later developments in the relationship between nascent Christianity and early Judaism, so we find innumerable passages in the Qur'an that clearly reflect later adjustments— almost certainly post-650—in the relationships between Muhammad's new religious community and Judaism and Christianity. In their early decades, Muhammad's followers seem to have welcomed Jews and Christians into their community, even as they remained Jews and Christians and despite certain differences in doctrine. Many passages in the Qur'an indicate that this was the nature of the earliest community, as Fred Donner in particular has persuasively demonstrated.[72] Muhammad and his followers do not seem to have conceived of themselves initially as "a separate religious confession distinct from others" during the first several decades of their movement's existence.[73] Instead, the earliest "Islamic" community appears to have been a loosely organized confederation of Abrahamic monotheists "who shared Muhammad's intense belief in one God and in the impending arrival of the Last Day, and who joined together to carry out what they saw as the urgent task of establishing righteousness on earth—at

least within their own community of Believers, and, when possible, outside it—in preparation for the End."[74]

The only question, it would seem, is when did the boundaries of the community of the Believers change to exclude members of these antecedent traditions? When did the Believers, like the Jews before them, expel the Christians from their assembly? It would appear that this shift was not at all complete by 650, as evidence from the reign of Muʿāwiya (661–80) seems to make unmistakably clear.[75] This means that the Qur'anic passages referring to Jews and Christians and their beliefs in a negative and polemical manner —in contrast to the many others that, to the contrary, speak very favorably of the Jews and Christians—must have entered the tradition only after the boundaries between these communities had solidified and intensified. This certainly seems to have happened sometime after ʿUthmān's reign by just about any estimation.[76] In addition, we would note that effectively all the Christian lore found in the Qur'an must have entered into its corpus after Muhammad's followers reached the Near East, since there was no Christian presence in Mecca and Medina during the lifetime of Muhammad that could account for these traditions before then. We will return to this particular topic in more detail in the final chapter.

Sinai also insists that if we do not accept the tradition of an ʿUthmānic collection, then we must postulate a coordinated later effort to replace the memory of al-Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik's composition of the Qur'an with "fictitious narratives about ʿUthmān's promulgation of the Quranic *rasm*."[77] Sinai resorts instead to the explanation that the reports concerning al-Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik merely refer to their introduction of minor diacritical clarifications and divisions within an otherwise unchanged consonantal text. Yet, as we have already seen, these reports are clearly and easily falsified by the evidence of the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts.[78] Likewise, as we have also already seen, one can identify credible means and motives for ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Zuhrī to have collaborated in order to achieve exactly the introduction of such a manufactured narrative. Yet at the same time, the charge that the tradition of ʿUthmān's collection could have arisen *only* through the spread of deliberately false reports to this effect is too simplistic for it to carry much weight. One not infrequently finds this kind of false "either/or" from time to time in traditionally oriented studies of early

Islamic history: either it must be the way the tradition says it was, or there must have been a deliberate and concerted effort to spread false information later on.[79] Yet such objections simply fail to understand how collective memory works within a community, particularly with regard to how a religious community will remember the events of its origins.

We will have much more to say about the roles that individual memory and collective memory have to play in the formation of a religious tradition in chapters 6 and 7. But for now, it suffices to say that memory, collective or otherwise, operates in the present—whenever and wherever that time and place may be—and, with great regularity across human cultures, it remembers the past in a manner that is suited to contemporary needs and interests. Modern scientific studies of human memory have shown repeatedly that our memories are surprisingly inaccurate, particularly in the absence of any written record, and at best we can over time remember only the bare bones "gist" of an event from the past.[80] Yet, since we remember the past solely for the sake of understanding the present, as these memories are recalled and transmitted, they are quickly reshaped according to the present concerns of those remembering and transmitting them. Memory science has in fact revealed that every time the mind remembers an event, it actually recomposes the memory anew from scratch, with the "original" growing quickly and steadily weaker over time. "Sometimes," as Daniel Schacter notes, "in the process of reconstructing we add on feelings, beliefs, or even knowledge we obtained after the experience. In other words, we bias our memories of the past by attributing them emotions or knowledge we acquired after the event."[81]

It turns out that "of all forms of memory, the autobiographical memory is the most susceptible to disruption," a finding that applies no less to communities, whose autobiographies are a fundamental part of their collective memory.[82] As Maurice Halbwachs writes of the latter, collective memory "does not preserve the past but reconstructs it with the aid of the material traces, text, and traditions left behind by the past, and with the aid moreover of recent sociological and social data, that is to say, with the present."[83] Thus, there is no need to invent and insert a grand conspiracy of forgery into Islamic history in order to explain altered memories of the past: individual and collective memories take care of that well enough on their own. Our memories are extremely pliable and are constantly adjusting to

make sense of what we believe and experience in the present. Likewise, oral transmission, which largely characterizes the Islamic tradition for at least the first hundred years of its existence, involves not the rote transmission of a literary artifact from the past but also a constant process of recomposition, as specialists have regularly demonstrated. As we will see in chapter 7, this is no less true of preliterate cultures than literate ones.[84]

Therefore, we do not need some sort of pervasive mendacity to explain the existence of traditions attributing the collection of the Qur'an to ʿUthmān, ʿUmar, Abū Bakr, Ali, and/or others, even if in the case of the ʿUthmānic tradition the insertion of such a legend seems entirely advantageous and achievable. Without a doubt the collective memory of the community would have naturally gravitated toward such early authority figures over time in order to provide the Qur'an sanction and to bring its standardization closer to the lifetime of Muhammad, both of which serve to validate the authenticity of the sacred word contained therein: no fraudulence or conspiracy, then, is required. Consider, for instance, the fact that it is all but certain that Jesus of Nazareth was not actually born in Bethlehem, and yet billions of Christians across the ages have known with great certainty that he was in fact born in Bethlehem. Was this the product of a massive campaign to spread a false tradition to mask over the truth? Of course not. Christians came to remember Jesus's birth in Bethlehem because that is where the messiah would be born. Because he was the messiah, he *had* to be born there even if he had actually been born elsewhere—any other sort of memory was incompatible with the convictions of their faith.[85] Or consider again the matter of the authorship of the gospels themselves, mentioned above. Their true authors were not known, and yet, during the second century, Christians came to the widespread agreement that they had been written by apostolic or subapostolic figures on the basis of eyewitness testimony. Even though this is not historically true and does not reflect the actual origins of the gospels and their traditions, it was not established through a coordinated campaign of falsehood. It was instead an altogether ordinary and expected result of the development of collective memory. Unquestionably similar dynamics underly the various shifts in the Islamic collective memory to identify the Qur'an's fixation with one of its early

luminaries, which can ensure the accuracy and authority of its record of Muhammad's divine revelations.

By the same token, there seems to be little reason why the collective memory would have invented a tradition that al-Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik composed the Qur'an into its final received version if this had not in fact happened. Why would later Muslims remember them as dramatically revising the text in the form of a new edition on the basis of various regional collections that had been in circulation for decades, which they aimed to destroy and displace, unless this had actually taken place? Why, if ʿUthmān truly had already established the final, definitive version of the Qur'an and this fact were widely known, would the tradition arise that al-Ḥajjāj, a ruthless strongman for the regime, was responsible for establishing the Qur'an? Al-Ḥajjāj hardly strikes one as the sort of figure that pious memory would seek out to identify as the inaugurator of the most sacred and revered foundation of the Believers' faith, the Qur'an. Instead, one imagines that this tradition was remembered despite the difficulty that it posed for the expected patterns of piety because it relates events that had actually transpired very close to the time when Islamic traditions first began to be written down, and so it could not be easily denied or completely forgotten. It is hard to imagine another reason for the existence of this tradition—which runs so clearly against the grain of the collective memory's effort to anchor the Qur'an in a revered early authority—than a basis in genuine and significant historical events.

The historical quality of this tradition thus also receives validation from the criterion of embarrassment or dissimilarity, a cornerstone of historical analysis. According to this principle, material that is sharply at odds with the received tradition is unlikely to have been invented by the later community. Such divergences from established belief and practice instead likely reflect remnants of an older formation, preserved in spite of their deviance and on account of their antiquity and accuracy.[86] Indeed, as Chase Robinson observes, "discordant reports have a special claim on our trust, especially when they fit a broader pattern."[87] Moreover, it is not at all uncommon for such dissonant reports to survive along the margins of the received tradition, discordant as they are with the canonical narratives. Yet in this case we must again note that this tradition is confirmed by an almost

contemporary source from outside the Islamic tradition, indeed by one of the two first non-Islamic sources to even mention the Qur'an's existence, Leo's letter to ʿUmar. This witness, along with two other independent witnesses from outside the Islamic tradition, offers compelling validation to an already highly probable memory, which likely relates the oldest and most historically accurate account of the Qur'an's production. The fact that no source prior to the eighth century even so much as mentions the Qur'an or any sacred text belonging to Muhammad's followers similarly suggests the veracity of these reports.

So what about the ʿUthmān tradition? As already mentioned, the success of this tradition owes itself largely to al-Bukhārī's creation of the now canonical narrative on the basis of older traditions and its authorization and promulgation through the unique prominence he afforded it in his esteemed collection of hadiths. Where, then, did the story of ʿUthmān come from, if it was in fact al-Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik who composed the Qur'an? Quite likely not out of completely thin air. We noted already above the distinct possibility that some sort of early collection may have been made under ʿUthmān's authority or at least that the regional codex of the Hijaz was believed to have his endorsement. Yet again, as already noted, this early version of the Qur'an, if it indeed existed, should be identified as, in effect, merely one among several early versions of the Qur'an that were clearly in circulation in the mid-seventh century. Any such ʿUthmānic Qur'an must be understood as simply another among the competing companion codices, in this case one with authority limited presumably to Medina and perhaps Mecca. It also bears repeating that, even if there was such an ʿUthmānic codex, ʿUthmān simply was not in a position to have achieved what the Islamic tradition ascribes to him: the establishment of the final version of the Qur'an for all Believers throughout the caliphate and beyond. Given the current state of our evidence, this reality simply cannot be ignored or denied. Indeed, even Sinai, who is determined to vindicate ʿUthmān's establishment of the invariable consonantal text of the Qur'an, must ultimately allow that the limited conditions of ʿUthmān's rule "create a strong impression that ʿUthmān did not achieve, or did not entirely achieve, the establishment of a uniform version of the Quran, but it hardly implies that he could not have tried."[88] Try as he may have done, what ʿUthmān

would have accomplished in such a case is little more than another companion codex with regional authority, one that was presumably used, along with the others, by al-Ḥajjāj in composing the now canonical version of the Qur'an.

As for the specific contours of the ʿUthmānic tradition of the Qur'an's collection, we can effectively draw on an hypothesis offered by Sinai, who, in an effort to explain the traditions involving al-Ḥajjāj, proposes that his "destruction of codices and the dissemination of others, could perhaps be read as oblique reverberations of the distressing memory that the Quranic text had once undergone a significant makeover."[89] Yet it makes much more sense, I think, to understand these aspects of the ʿUthmānic legend as projecting elements from al-Ḥajjāj's composition and imposition of the canonical Qur'an into an earlier time. Comparing the two stories certainly gives the impression that the shared elements of seeking to displace rival versions with a new standard and then using the apparatus of the empire to round up and destroy all the competing antecedents is no mere coincidence. One imagines that these reports of destroying and displacing the divergent versions with a new standard were transferred, along with the action of collecting the Qur'an itself, back to ʿUthmān in the collective memory, with or without deliberate assistance from ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Zuhrī. One should further note that in the memories of ʿUthmān's assassination, as preserved in the early Islamic historical tradition, there is little mention at all of any anger directed toward him on account of his alleged destruction of rival Qur'ans. Although his elimination of variant Qur'ans is occasionally mentioned in these accounts, in such instances it appears as a relatively minor detail alongside much more forceful censures of his corruption—his nepotism, favoritism, embezzlement, taxation, and so on. By comparison, as de Prémare observes, "the grievances expressed regarding the Qur'an appear almost as additions, for good measure."[90] Such a secondary quality is of course to be expected if the tradition was adopted only later as a revision of an earlier memory of the Qur'an's composition and forced standardization by ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj.

THE QUR'AN OF ʿABD AL-MALIK AND AL- ḤAJJĀJ

One should add to these considerations the fact that despite the apparent efforts of al- Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik, it would still be sometime before an invariable text of the Qur'an would be universally established within the Islamic world. We hear that furtive copies of some of the companion codices managed to survive al-Ḥajjāj's purge, even into the tenth century in some instances.[91] Just how much these remained identical with their seventh-century ancestors is highly uncertain. Furthermore, there remain the "thousands" of variant Qur'anic readings preserved by early Islamic authors or recorded on coinage.[92] The degree to which the Qur'an remained an unstable text in Islamic usage during the first few centuries of Islam remains effectively still unknown in the absence of concerted study of these variants and their relation to the invariable, now canonical, text. Yet their mere existence raises questions about the state of the Qur'an well beyond al-Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik. So, too, do the Qur'anic inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock that were installed by ʿAbd al-Malik. These inscriptions are our earliest surviving evidence for the text of the Qur'an, and yet they differ from the now canonical version of the Qur'an. How can this be, especially if the text of the Qur'an had already been firmly established already for forty years since the reign of ʿUthmān? It would appear that even at the close of the seventh century, as al- Ḥajjāj's efforts were presumably about to get underway, the official version of the Qur'an, in Jerusalem at least, was different from the received text. Some scholars wish to understand the differences between the two versions as reflecting adaptations for a missionary purpose. Nevertheless, I maintain, as I have before, that this seems to amount to special pleading, wanting to allow a special exception for this earliest witness to the Qur'an simply because it does not conform to what has already been assumed to be true: an invariable ʿUthmānic Qur'an that had already been widely established for several decades.[93]

As numerous scholars have noted, ʿAbd al-Malik's reign was transformative on a number of fronts, but it was especially so in regard to the nature of the religious beliefs and practices of the new religious movement founded by Muhammad and the relation between this religion and the caliphal state. Prior to ʿAbd al-Malik's rule, the caliphate appears to have shown a remarkable degree of tolerance for other monotheist faiths; and, as noted above, there is even good evidence to suggest that they were

welcomed within the fold of the Believers' religious community, even as they remained in their own religious faiths. This inclusion of Jews and Christians, as Jews and Christians, within the community of the Believers seems to have persisted for decades beyond Muhammad's death, as Donner and others have persuasively argued. Whether or not one agrees entirely with this hypothesis, the evidence on which it rests—which is substantial, particularly given the limitations of what we know about earliest Islam—indicates fairly broad tolerance and inclusion of other monotheists within the early history of the Believers movement.[94]

Things appear to have changed abruptly as a result of ʿAbd al-Malik's civil war with the rival caliph Ibn al-Zubayr. Although victorious, ʿAbd al-Malik appears to have been inspired by the conflict itself to consolidate and clearly define the faith of the Believers and join it intimately with the state and its ruling authority. Thus, we witness during ʿAbd al-Malik's rule a concerted move to establish a distinctively "Islamic" version of monotheism as the ideological basis of his state. There was, moreover, a related move to thoroughly Arabicize this new religion and its conjoined polity as well. While the state increasingly began to conduct its official affairs solely in Arabic, in the religious sphere the effect was a new and profound emphasis on a distinctively Islamic monotheism defined by an Arabic prophet who brought a unique revelation in Arabic in the Arabian Ḥijāz that is now preserved in an unequalled Arabic sacred scripture.[95] These were the markers of a new Islamic identity that would distinguish this nascent religious tradition from the fellow monotheists with whom it had once freely associated. Accordingly, we find in ʿAbd al-Malik's deliberate program of Islamicizing and Arabicizing the faith of the Believers and their polity a highly credible context in which to situate the final composition and establishment of a new Islamic scripture in the Qur'an. Not only, then, did ʿAbd al-Malik have a clear motive for establishing such a text; he, unlike ʿUthmān and his other earlier predecessors, also had the means to enforce it.

Finally, and no less importantly, the composition of the Qur'an by al-Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik also comports with one of the more bizarre features of the early Islamic tradition—that is, the almost complete absence of the Qur'an from the religious life of the Believers or Muslims for most of the first century of their existence. As Jack Tannous has recently observed,

there is persistent and considerable "evidence for confusion about, lack of knowledge of, and disregard for Prophetic and Qur'ānic teaching in the early decades of Muslim rule in the Middle East." Tannous further notes that other than perhaps a small number of scholars, "significant numbers of the Prophet's community only took a real interest in his example and message long after he and those who knew him, or knew him best, had died."[96] Indeed, the near complete absence and ignorance of the Qur'an among Muhammad's followers for most of the seventh century seems widely acknowledged. As Sinai, for instance, writes: "the Quran may well have reached closure as early as 650, but nevertheless remained absent from Islamic history until c. 700, when it was secondarily co-opted, without much revision, into an existent religious tradition."[97] Even Theodor Nöldeke was compelled to acknowledge that "as far as the Koran is concerned, the ignorance of the average believer in the early years of Islam was beyond imagination."[98]

Given such widespread acknowledgment of the Qur'an's almost total absence from the early Islamic tradition across the seventh century, how could we possibly believe that ʿUthmān established the Qur'an as a new Islamic sacred text on par with the Jewish and Christian scriptures? If the Qur'an had already been collected by 650 in a standard canonical form, was then disseminated throughout the caliphate by state officials, and was believed by Muhmmad's followers to be a direct revelation from their God, how can one possibly explain the near total ignorance of its contents or even significance among Muslims of the seventh century? Frankly, it defies all credibility—all the more so given that the non-Islamic sources from this period, as noted above, join the evidence from the early Islamic tradition to confirm that, in effect, the Qur'an was in many respects nonexistent before the end of the seventh century. Nevertheless, if we put the legend of an ʿUthmānic—or earlier—compilation to the side as historically improbable, which it seems we must, then the whole matter suddenly comes into view with great historical clarity and credibility. Once again, the Qur'an's composition and dissemination under the supervision and authority of al-Ḥajjāj and ʿAbd al-Malik makes perfect sense. Their production and distribution of the Qur'an at the turn of the eighth century matches perfectly

with the Qur'an's first appearance in the historical record only at this rather late date.

A FIN DE SIÈCLE QUR'AN

Let us return to a quotation from Alford Welch cited in the previous chapter, only this time slightly adjusted in light of what we have now seen. On the basis of the evidence presently available to us, we may conclude that

> the unanimity with which an official text is attributed to ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj, in the face of a lack of convincing evidence to the contrary, leads us to accept that the Ḳurʾān we have today, at least in terms of the number and arrangement of the *sūra*s and the basic structure of the consonantal text, goes back to the time of ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj, under whose authority the official text was produced.[99]

The myth of ʿUthmān's establishment of the now canonical Qur'an seems by comparison highly improbable. There is, in fact, no unanimity in the early Islamic tradition on this point, despite the frequent assertions of modern scholars otherwise. Rather, the Islamic tradition instead brings a chaotic tangle of inconsistent traditions, which it has often sought to harmonize in one way or another. One draws from this manifest confusion a clear sense that there was no early tradition of the Qur'an's definitive collection by one of the first four caliphs, and presumably there also was no such authoritative collection. Instead, we witness various strands developing in the collective memory of the Islamic community that sought to establish an anchor for its sacred text in the person of one of these early authorities, in close chronological proximity to the life of Muhammad. There is, moreover, despite the claims by Welch and other scholars as well, considerable evidence raising serious doubts about the historicity of reports alleging ʿUthmān's collection of the Qur'an, from the Islamic tradition and elsewhere. The tradition that ʿUthmān is responsible for the consonantal text of the Qur'an as we now have it is simply not as quotidian and uncontested in the tradition as scholars have long convinced themselves that it was. The Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm has lived a good life up until now, but it seems that the time has come to lay it to rest.

By comparison, however, the Qur'an's composition under ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj carries a high degree of historical probability. It is attested by a source very close to the event in question, the *Letter of Leo III*. Likewise, it comports well with the Qur'an's near complete absence from any sources—Islamic or non-Islamic, during the seventh century. The conditions of ʿAbd al-Malik's reign, in contrast to those of his predecessors, make such an undertaking entirely feasible. The project fits well within ʿAbd al-Malik's program of Islamicization and Arabicization. It corresponds with the very first witness to the text of the Qur'an—the inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock. And it seems highly unlikely that the later Islamic collective memory would spontaneously invent such a tradition, particularly given that al-Ḥajjāj was a very cruel and severe ruler, whose reputation was unlikely to spark an association with this hallowed task in pious memory. As for the traditions ascribing only rather minor refinements of the Qur'anic text to ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj, such as diacritical marks or textual divisions, these are clearly later attempts to harmonize an earlier memory of the Qur'an's composition under ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj with emergent canonical Sunni traditions that would ascribe the foundation of Islam's sacred text to more esteemed figures, closer in time to Muhammad. That they are such is clearly in evidence from the fact that the early Qur'anic manuscript tradition falsifies these reports, leaving us to conclude that the actions of ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj in composing the Qur'an were of a much more substantial nature, as reported again in both Islamic and non-Islamic sources.

It is no surprise, I think, that recent years have seen some scholars begin to move away from the older Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm and move instead toward understanding the Qur'an as a text that finally came together in its current form only at the end of the seventh century.[100] Déroche, through careful paleographic and codicological study, has confirmed that that the earliest extant Qur'ans were in fact produced in the imperial chancery during the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik.[101] Only the so-called *Codex Parisino-petropolitanus* poses a possible exception to this courtly context. Déroche dates this manuscript, which was written by five different hands, to sometime during the last thirty years of the seventh century, on the basis of its orthographic differences from the textus receptus.[102] Nevertheless, I am

not entirely persuaded that these variations alone can securely date the manuscript before ʿAbd al-Malik's standardization campaign. It is true that this codex does not conform perfectly to the new imperial standard, but it certainly is not out of the question that this manuscript could be a work from the early eighth century that had not yet been impacted by the new reforms.[103] Moreover, as Robinson rightly reminds us, "there is not a single Qurʾānic manuscript, Yemeni or otherwise, that has been dated to the seventh century on anything other than palaeographical grounds, which, given the paltry evidence that survives, remain controversial in the extreme. One scholar's seventh-century leaf, another may assign to the eighth or ninth." And even if this manuscript truly is from the end of the seventh century, its witness remains, according to Robinson, "a far cry from establishing the traditional account of Qurʾānic origins or, for that matter, its collection and editing."[104]

Nevertheless, whether this manuscript was written in 685 or 705 or 715, any of which years could be possible judging from the paleography alone, there is no question that it does not fit with the canonical narrative of an ʿUthmānic standardization, which it also belies. As Déroche rightly maintains, "When looking at the transcription of the *Codex Parisino-petropolitanus*, one sees that this copy as well as all those which belong to these chronological strata of the transmission are unable to prevent what the ʿUthmānic edition was supposed to achieve"—that is, variation in the Qur'anic text.[105] Therefore, rather than validating the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm, this manuscript instead affords evidence, as David Powers persuasively argues, that "the consonantal skeleton of the Qurʾān remained open and fluid for three-quarters of a century between the death of the Prophet and the caliphate of ʿAbd al-Malik."[106] Thus, with the historical evidence for an ʿUthmānic collection now looking shakier than ever, there remains one bulwark behind which its proponents still seek refuge—namely, the radiocarbon (^{14}C) dating of certain early manuscripts of the Qur'an. As we turn now to the next chapter, however, we will see that this method, at least when applied to the dating of early Qur'anic manuscripts, is not in fact all that it is frequently made out to be. The process, it seems, is still not precise enough to date artifacts from this particular context accurately, at least not to the level of specific years and decades, which is what would be

necessary to validate an ʿUthmānic collection. For the moment, then, it remains the case that if one gives precedence to the manuscript evidence, the view of the Qur'an's gradual development and final composition under al-Ḥajjāj has the best support.[107]

3

Radiocarbon Dating and the Origins of the Qur'an

As we noted at the end of the preceding chapter, the radiocarbon dating of certain early manuscripts of the Qur'an has become something of a flashpoint in recent studies of the Qur'an.[1] For those who wish to maintain the accuracy of the traditional Sunni account of the Qur'an's composition, as well as its contrived scholarly offspring, the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm, some radiocarbon analyses of these early manuscripts could appear to validate their convictions. Yet at the same time, repeated attempts to date these same early codices have yielded drastically different results in some cases, seeming to indicate that something is not working quite right with this method of dating, at least for parchments from the early medieval Near East. Nevertheless, scholars committed to the traditional narrative of the Qur'an's origins have fervently upheld the accuracy of those studies favoring their position, while searching out reasons to impugn the results that do not.

The scientific luster of these results can and often does beguile scholars (particularly when the results support their presuppositions), even as it seems increasingly clear that this method is not entirely accurate for dating early Qur'ans, at least not within a range narrower than a century or two. Indeed, scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls faced very similar difficulties when trying to radiocarbon date documents from that collection. A deeper look into the ins and outs of radiocarbon dating can help us to understand why, for the time being at least, radiocarbon dating has not proved a reliable method for determining the date of the Qur'an's formation. While these

methods of scientific analysis are welcome and useful for the contribution that they can bring, they nevertheless have so far failed to deliver any sort of "silver bullet" that can instantly resolve the many complex issues surrounding the early history of the Qur'an. Instead, it seems that for the time being we must continue the hard work of historical-critical analysis, alongside the data from radiocarbon analysis, in order to understand the history of the Qur'an's composition and canonization.

THE METHOD OF RADIOCARBON DATING OR ^{14}C ANALYSIS

Radiocarbon dating is a method capable of dating organic materials on the basis of the steady radioactive decay over time of a particular isotope of carbon, Carbon-14 or radiocarbon (^{14}C), that is present in the atmosphere of the earth and in all life forms.[2] The nucleus of a ^{14}C atom contains six protons and eight neutrons, in contrast to the more common, stable isotope ^{12}C, which has six protons and six neutrons. ^{14}C exists in trace amounts in the atmosphere, where it is the result of cosmic rays from the sun acting on ^{14}N, one of the stable isotopes of nitrogen, and changing it into the unstable (radioactive) carbon isotope ^{14}C in very small amounts: there is approximately one ^{14}C atom in the atmosphere for every one quadrillion (1,000,000,000,000,000) atoms of ^{12}C and ^{13}C (another rare but stable isotope of carbon). Since ^{14}C is unstable, over time it decays into ^{14}N at a predictable rate, so that in approximately 5,730 years, ± 40 years, half of the original ^{14}C has become instead ^{14}N. In another 5,730 years, half of the remaining ^{14}C has turned into ^{14}N, so that only 25 percent of the original amount remains after roughly 11,460 years.

This is the "half-life" of ^{14}C: approximately, every 5,730 years the original amount of ^{14}C is reduced by half through radioactive decay. Of course, for living organisms, the amount is constantly replenished from the atmosphere. Plant life absorbs ^{14}C along with other isotopes of carbon in the process of photosynthesis, and humans and other animals then absorb ^{14}C by consuming plants and other animals. Yet at death, the amount of ^{14}C in organic material becomes fixed at the level in the atmosphere at the time of decease. This means that if we know exactly the amount of ^{14}C present in the atmosphere when some particular organic matter ceased to be alive, we can calculate the approximate age of the material in question, or at least, when

the organism died. So, if the amount of atmospheric ^{14}C at an organism's death is *x* amount, and a tool or a manuscript that was produced from its remains contains amount, then the organism from which the artifact was fashioned died approximately 5,730 years ago, ± 40 years; if the amount is , then the age of death would be approximately 11,460 years before the present.

This method affords a deceptively simple way of identifying the approximate date at which organic material ceased to be alive. At death, the amount of ^{14}C is fixed and will decay steadily over time. The only problem with this method, however, its underlying complexity, lies in determining the precise amount of ^{14}C present in the atmosphere at the time and place of the organism's death. The earliest efforts at radiocarbon dating simply assumed that the amount of ^{14}C in the atmosphere remains effectively constant over time, so that the current levels of ^{14}C could be used as the *x* amount from which to measure an artifact's age. To a limited extent, this is true: there are not massive fluctuations in the amount of atmospheric ^{14}C over time. Nevertheless, at the same time the amount does regularly change, resulting especially from changes in solar activity that determine the number of cosmic rays hitting the earth's upper atmosphere at any given time. Any increase or decrease in cosmic rays will affect a corresponding rise or fall in the amount of ^{14}C in the atmosphere, and by consequence, also in any organisms alive at that time. So, if something dies at a time when the amount of ^{14}C is particularly higher or lower due to changes in the sun's activity, the *x* amount from which we measure the decay of ^{14}C must be specifically determined for that particular moment in order to achieve an accurate assessment.

Since the amount of ^{14}C in the atmosphere can vary in time and even according to place, radiocarbon scientists recognized that they must find a way to calculate more specific ^{14}C amounts for different times in the past. This is particularly necessary if one wishes to narrow the dating of an object down to a particular century, a refinement that becomes increasingly important for more recent objects, from the Middle Ages for instance, such as early Qur'anic manuscripts. Yet, even in the case of materials from more than forty thousand years before the present, it is necessary to calibrate the amount of ^{14}C found in an object, so that the measurement will reflect as closely as possible the amount of atmospheric ^{14}C present at the time when

the organic source of the object died. This marks an important refinement in radiocarbon dating that was pioneered in the late 1950s by Hessel de Vries (as well as others), which has since made the method more accurate in identifying the age at which an organism had expired. It turns out that tree rings provide an annual series of sealed carbon reservoirs that can be used to determine more precisely the atmospheric ^{14}C levels of a given time and place. By using measurements taken from dated tree rings, we can calculate the level of ^{14}C for a given year, and, using this data, we can better calibrate the initial ^{14}C level for an object. In this way, we can determine the date of the object's decease with much greater accuracy, at least for items from ten thousand years before the present, which is the chronological limit of our tree ring data. In the case of older objects, different carbon reservoirs are used to establish historical ^{14}C levels.

Yet, despite the refinements that calibration according to tree ring data has brought, there is still a high level of uncertainty that comes with radiocarbon dating. Eva Mira Youssef-Grob, for instance, expertly describes the limitations of this method, particularly with regard to objects from the early Islamic period, as follows:

> ^{14}C dating alone, with no further evidence available, hardly yields meaningful and hard results. A single test result may prove that a document, i.e. the material it is written upon, is medieval and no modern forgery. Under good conditions and with a careful experimental set up . . . , we might reach a highly probable 50-year window for dating, but day-to-day business is rather the assignment of a century.[3]

Therefore, if one is interested in dating an object generally to a particular historical period, the method of radiocarbon dating is quite accurate and reliable. For example, one of the most famous cases employing radiocarbon dating to determine the age of an object involved the famous Shroud of Turin, the alleged burial shroud of Christ, which was suspected to be a forgery even in the Middle Ages. Thanks to radiocarbon dating, we can now be absolutely certain that this relic is indeed a medieval forgery, since such analysis dates the material of the shroud to sometime between 1260 and 1390 CE.[4] This is a wide range, of course, but it is sufficient to exclude any possibility that the shroud is from the first century CE, as had long been claimed. And so as Brent Nongbri rightly notes of this method, "the most

compelling results of radiocarbon analysis emerge when an object's date is disputed by a matter of several centuries or more."[5]

It is therefore customary for the results of radiocarbon dating to be given in a relatively broad range of dates, so that it might date an object to sometime around five thousand years ago, give or take a few centuries or so, to borrow an example from Doug Macdougall. At this level, the method is highly accurate in its application, and in such a case we would be dealing with an artifact fashioned sometime between 4,700 and 5,300 years before the present with near certainty. Yet it is important to note that *any* date within this given range is equally probable, so that "it is as likely to be 4,795 years, or 5,123 years, or anything else in that range, as to be exactly 5,000 years."[6] In the era that concerns us, the early Middle Ages, it is not possible in most cases to date an object with greater precision than to a one-hundred-year interval at best. For this reason, François Déroche observes of this method, particularly in reference to dating early Qur'anic manuscripts, that "the results of ^{14}C analysis are quite valuable as a first indication of the age of the copies, but their accuracy is insufficient when it comes to arranging the material within a period which lasted less than a century."[7] Moreover, as if to compound the problem, many of the results obtained so far in attempts to radiocarbon date early Qur'anic manuscripts suggest that there are some problems specific to using this method to date parchment codices from the early medieval Near East, issues that we currently are not able to fully understand.

THE RADIOCARBON DATING OF EARLY QUR'ANIC MANUSCRIPTS: SANAA

For much of the early history of radiocarbon dating there was some reluctance to subject manuscripts to such analysis because the process is destructive, and the samples required for investigation were too large. In more recent years, however, the process has become more refined so that one can now make ^{14}C measurements of an object by taking only a miniscule sample from somewhere on the empty margins of the text. Utilizing these new procedures, the first radiocarbon study of an early Qur'anic manuscript, to my knowledge, was undertaken in 2007, and the initial results were then published in 2010 by Behnam Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann.[8] The manuscript in question was a single folio taken from a very famous early Qur'an, Ṣanʿāʾ

1, one of the oldest manuscripts to emerge from an important genizah of Qur'ans in Yemen during the 1970s.[9] Somehow a stray folio from this manuscript came onto the antiquities market, and an anonymous collector purchased it from Sotheby's in 1993: the provenance is suspicious, and one suspects that the acquisition of this folio was not entirely legal, which certainly raises ethical issues regarding its use in academic study.[10] In any case, when the results were published, the authors of the article announced that radiocarbon analysis of the palimpsest, done at the Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) Laboratory at the University of Arizona, was able to date the manuscript with a high degree of probability (95 percent) to the period between 578 and 669 CE, and with somewhat less probability (68 percent) to 614–56 CE and a 75.1 percent probability of dating it to before 646 CE. On this basis, the authors concluded that there is a very high probability that this manuscript "was produced no more than 15 years after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad."[11] Such a dating, they further note, comports well with and thus confirms the accuracy of the canonical reports of the Qur'an's collection under ʿUthmān, although it may have sat around for a few decades if the actual date is before 646.

Case closed then. The Nöldekean-Schwallian stands vindicated. Such, at least, has been the conclusion of many scholars of the Qur'an and early Islam following this article's publication.[12] Even Patricia Crone acquiesced to the dating of the Qur'an indicated by the radiocarbon analysis of the Stanford fragment (although she had already come to favor an early dating for the Qur'an at least a decade before this, suspecting that much of it might be even pre-Muhammad).[13] The dating of this and other early Qur'ans has been widely publicized online and in print, so that the general public has also been led to believe that science has indeed rescued us from the complexities of historical analysis in regard to the Qur'an's origins.[14] Unfortunately, however, there appear to be real problems with obtaining an accurate dating for this folio and for other early Qur'anic manuscripts as well, and accordingly, such unquestioned confidence in the results of the radiocarbon dating of a single folio by a single lab appears greatly misplaced. For instance, other samples from the same manuscript were obtained in Yemen by Christian Robin, who sent them for analysis to the Centre de datation par le Radiocarbone at the University of Lyon (Université Claude Bernard Lyon

1). In this instance, the French laboratory's radiocarbon analysis of samples taken from the same manuscript that originally contained Sadeghi and Bergmann's Stanford 2007 study yielded radically different datings for its parchment leaves. The table below gives the datings of folios from this same manuscript as they were published by Robin.[15]

TABLE 1. Radiocarbon Dating of Folios from Sana MS 01-27-1

Folio	Laboratory Code	Date
01-27-1 fol. 2 (sura 6.159)	Lyon-6042 (SacA 15616)	543–643 CE[a]
01-27-1 fol. 11 (sura 20.74)	Lyon-6043 (SacA 15617)	433–599 CE[b]
01-27-1 fol. 13 (sura 21.72)	Lyon-6045 (SacA 15619)	388–535 CE[c]

[a]1475 ± 30 years BP. The uncalibrated radiocarbon dates for these and other folios dated by Lyon are available online through the Banque Nationale de Données Radiocarbone pour l'Europe et le Proche Orient of the Lyon Laboratory, Centre de datation par le Radiocarbone, http://carbon14.univ-lyon1.fr/p1.htm.

[b]1530 ± 30 years BP.

[c]1530 ± 30 years BP.

So much for the case being closed. One will surely be quick to notice that the datings of these folios effectively indicate the manuscript's production before Muhammad ever began his prophetic mission. As Déroche notes, one could perhaps explain datings that were too late as the result some sort of contamination by another substance that was interfering with obtaining a correct analysis of the amount of ^{14}C present in the parchment leaves. Such early datings are much harder to explain, and yet, Déroche concludes, "they cannot be accepted." Instead, he speculates that "the problem may lie with the conditions (arid or semi-arid climate) under which the cattle, the hides of which were later turned into parchment, were raised."[16] Perhaps, although this explanation amounts to little more than pure speculation, and we still need to find better solutions to the confounding results from radiometric analysis of this and other early Qur'ans. It also tells us clearly that for some

reason, whether it is the arid climate or something else, this method of dating is not working as it should when applied to materials from this time and place. Indeed, to make matters only worse, samples from the third folio in the table above, 01–27–1 fol. 13, were subsequently tested at the Research Laboratory for Archeology and the History of Art at the University of Oxford (OxA-29409), the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich (ETH 52910), and at the Labor für Altersbestimmung und Isotopenforschung at Christian-Albrecht-Universität Kiel (KIA50087). The results from these labs for this same artifact, which the Lyon lab dated to between 388–535 CE (now 406–543 CE using the new IntCal 20 calibration curve), are 565–660 CE from Zürich (575–655 CE with IntCal 20) and 430–95 CE or 530–610 CE from Kiel (441–636 CE with IntCal 20), and 595–658 CE from Oxford (599–655 CE with IntCal 20).[17] Thus, these assays have yielded significantly different results for the very same parchment leaf! Such results hardly settle the matter but instead only confirm that, again, something clearly is not working correctly with this method. For some reason, this method of analysis has shown itself incapable in its current practice of producing consistent and reliable results for objects fashioned in western Asia during the early Middle Ages: at the very least, it certainly is not working in the case of this manuscript.

It could be that this manuscript has somehow become contaminated, making an accurate dating of it according to radiocarbon impossible. Other environmental factors could indeed have affected the levels of ^{14}C in the manuscript's parchment folios. Parchment in particular is sensitive to damage from "environmental pollution, harsh cleaning, improper conservation and restoration," as well as extremes in humidity, temperature, light, pollution, and saturation, all of which can make an accurate radiocarbon dating impossible.[18] As Alba Fedeli notes, the folios of this ancient manuscript were stored in two different locations in Sanaa: al-Maktaba al-Sharqiyya, the library of the Great Mosque of Sanaa, and Dār al-Makhṭūṭāt, the "House of Manuscripts." The samples obtained by Robin were taken from folios at the House of Manuscripts, with official permission and in the context of a scientific analysis of the early manuscripts kept there. The Stanford folio, it seems, likely came from folios of this manuscript now at the library of the Great Mosque, although this is not certain, since it is

unprovenanced and was purchased from an antiquities dealer, who presumably obtained it on the black market.[19]

According to Fedeli, who was on site in Sanaa with the French expedition in 2008, the parchment folios at the Great Mosque were in good condition at the time. The folios from the House of Manuscripts, however, “were stored in the false ceiling of the Great Mosque of Ṣanʿāʾ for centuries, thus exposed to hot conditions and heavy rain.” These ancient manuscripts were only discovered on account of restorations necessitated by damage from heavy rains and floods to the structure housing them. For this reason, Fedeli suggests, the margins of a manuscript, the location from which samples are ordinarily taken, may have been more susceptible to environmental damage, and so samples should instead be taken from a different part of the manuscript. Likewise, the various labs may have used different pretreatment methods to prepare their samples, which could also have affected the outcome.[20] Other factors that can possibly affect the measurable amount of ^{14}C in an artifact, including, but not limited to, “*in situ* production of 14C in plant structures (particularly wood) at relatively high altitudes by the direct action of cosmic-ray-produced neutrons” (Sanna is at 2,300 m) and “the presence of high organic content materials such as peats, . . . and the proximity of petroleum products such as asphalt or tar or fossil organics such as lignite or coal.”[21]

Further complicating efforts to date the Sanaa palimpsest is the evidence provided by the text itself—that is, the format, orthography, and paleography with which the Qur’an was written onto this parchment in its underlying layer. Although Déroche notes that this manuscript still has not received a proper codicological description, he nevertheless provides sufficient analysis of the text in his *Qurʾans of the Umayyads* to be able to date the Qur’anic text that was originally written on it.[22] As a palimpsest, this Sanaa manuscript contains two texts at once: an original text that has been erased but that can still be read, and a second text that was written over the erasure. In the original text, which was a Qur’an, the presence of sura titles and decorative features between the suras indicate a later date in the seventh or in the early eighth century. Likewise, Sadeghi and Bergmann claim to have identified short vowel marks in the text, which, if accurate, as Déroche notes, would further indicate a later dating of this Qur’anic text. Éléonore

Cellard has recently compared the original text of this palimpsest with another manuscript from the Sanaa collection, DAM 01–29–1, and she concludes, based on their similarities, that a dating to the early eighth century seems to be indicated for the palimpsest.[23] The upper text of this manuscript is also a Qur'an, which Déroche identifies as a copy of the text made not before the middle of the eighth century.[24] Both layers of the manuscript, then, preserve the text of the Qur'an, which of course raises a further question: why was one Qur'anic text erased and written over with another Qur'anic text?

The answer would appear to lie in the fact that the original Qur'anic text of the Sanaa manuscript's erased lower writing is a nonstandard version of the Qur'an that deviates regularly from the received version now identified as the "ʿUthmānic" Qur'an. As such, it is an extremely rare, although not unique, witness to the diverse ways with which the Qur'an continued to circulate still at the end of the seventh century. Efforts have been made to identify the manuscript's original Qur'an with one of the early Companion codices as described by the later tradition, without much success. Instead, what we have in the undertext of Sanaa 01–27–1 is a witness to a different, early version of the Qur'an.[25] Only once the "ʿUthmānic" text had achieved dominance was it erased and replaced with the canonical version of the Qur'an in the middle of the eighth century. Thus, as Déroche concludes, it would appear that noncanonical versions of the Qur'an were still being produced as late as 700 CE and were only eliminated eventually through the efforts of ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj to establish a particular version of the Qur'an as canonical.[26]

Yet Nicolai Sinai writes as if the radiocarbon dating has more or less settled things, alleging that this method has confirmed "that a very considerable part of the Qur'anic text was around, albeit not without variants, by the 650s."[27] This is hardly surprising, given Sinai's commitment to defending the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm, an explicit aim in a number of his publications.[28] Nevertheless, if the Sanaa manuscript's earliest folio dates to the middle of the seventh century, even this finding would effectively disprove the establishment of the ʿUthmānic version at this time, demonstrating instead that at this time the Qur'an still had not yet been standardized. Furthermore, and from a rather different perspective,

professional ethics should perhaps lead us instead in the opposite direction from the one that Sinai suggests. Given that Robin's sources were legitimately obtained in the context of a scientific mission, in contrast to the shady circumstances surrounding the Stanford fragment's origins, perhaps we should give them precedence. Moreover, unlike Sadeghi and Bergmann's folio, which involved one sample tested by one lab, Robin's had three different samples analyzed and employed four different labs to run independent analyses of one sample, which could also favor privileging these results. Nevertheless, there are two additional early Qur'anic manuscripts that have recently been radiocarbon dated that we need to bring into the discussion.

THE RADIOCARBON DATING OF EARLY QUR'ANIC MANUSCRIPTS: TÜBINGEN AND BIRMINGHAM

Toward the end of 2014, the University of Tübingen announced the results of radiometric analysis of an early Qur'an in its library collection, originally from Damascus (MA VI 165). A sample of the manuscript was analyzed by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich, which reported a greater than 95 percent probability that the animal from which the folio had been produced died sometime between 649 and 675 CE. Yet this manuscript had previously been dated by experts on the basis of its paleography and format as most likely having been written in the early eighth century.[29] Suddenly, with a university press release, this manuscript was widely proclaimed—largely through online media, one must note—as one of the two oldest Qur'ans in the word, equal in age to the Sanaa Qur'an: the results of radiocarbon dating guaranteed it![30] Nevertheless, it is far too simplistic to rely on the results of a single dating from a single lab while completely discounting the evidence for dating the manuscript based on its script and format. As Fedeli rightly notes in the case of this manuscript, radiocarbon dating is often assumed "to possess a sort of supremacy that authorizes the acceptance of its results separate from other methods of relative dating." Consequently, in this case "the notion of the dating of the parchment has completely been superimposed upon the dating of the text. In this replacement process, no reference has been proposed to the type of script

and letter shapes of the text itself or a comparison to contemporary dated documents which exhibit similar features."[31]

Despite the understandable enthusiasm to proclaim this the world's oldest Qur'an, one certainly must not discount the possibility that, although the animal died in the 660s or 670s, the text of the Qur'an may not have been written onto the palimpsest until the first part of the eighth century. This possibility also applies to the folios of the Sanaa manuscript: perhaps they are indeed quite old but remained unused for decades or even centuries: some of the early datings, if accurate, would effectively require as much if one wishes to maintain a connection between Muhammad and the contents of the Qur'an. Yet Michael Marx and Tobias Jocham maintain that "For economic reasons, it seems unlikely that the time span between the production of the parchment and its acquisition by the producing atelier, on the one hand, and the moment the scribe began to produce the manuscript, on the other, would have encompassed decades."[32] The assumption certainly is not without reason, although it is unsubstantiated. We simply do not know enough about how the market for parchment operated in the late ancient Near East, and especially in the Hijaz, if one believes the traditional narrative of the Qur'an's original production there under ʿUthmān's supervision. Yet, at the same time, Marx and Jocham also allow that "it is highly possible that the parchments for the manuscripts . . . were bought by a writing workshop and that a certain amount of time passed before they were used as writing material."[33] There certainly is no "sell by date" on a parchment, and unwritten leaves could sit in storage for generations, let alone decades, before their use. In the words of Youssef-Grob, radiocarbon dating "results do not give the time when the manuscript was written, but only the time of the vegetable or animal organism serving as the writing support," and accordingly "calibrated radiocarbon dates must always be carefully aligned with further evidence, such as that of paleographic, stylistic, or internal textual nature."[34] Marx and Jocham ultimately also concede this important point: "Because Qurʾān manuscripts can be dated precisely neither by paleography nor ^{14}C analysis, additional features such as their orthography must be taken into consideration."[35]

The date of the Tübingen manuscript is particularly complicated when it comes to considering these qualities. This Qur'an contains elements of

ornamentation that seem unlikely in what would purportedly be one of the very first efforts to place Muhammad's revelations into writing. For example, dots punctuate divisions between the verses, with a hollow red circle surrounded by dots at every tenth verse, a series of triangular dots filling the line to the margin to mark the end of the suras. The manuscript is freely available online, thanks to the Tübingen Universitätbibliothek, and so interested readers can examine these features for themselves and draw their own conclusions.[36] But to my admittedly untrained eye, this does not look like what we would expect from one of the first attempts to put the Qur'an into writing. A far more expert opinion, from Déroche, identifies this manuscript on the basis of the page layout, illuminations, paleography, and other markers from the production of the text on the page, among a larger group of manuscripts produced at end of the seventh and beginning of the eighth centuries under official state patronage at the imperial court. The ornamentation and style of these manuscripts reflect the campaign initiated by ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj to establish a new, distinctively Islamic, Arabic scripture to surpass the scriptures of the Christians and Jews. Indeed, Déroche concludes that these elements of ornamentation in the early codices were intended to rival the luxury bibles of the Christians in appearance.[37]

Yet Marx and Jocham make an attempt to argue instead that the form of the text written in the Tübingen manuscript corresponds with an earlier dating, and thereby they hope to bring the Qur'an nearer to the earlier range of the radiocarbon dates. They point specifically to the use of archaic forms for a few words; there is no consistent pattern, yet, that allows for any significant conclusions on this basis. For instance, they observe the spelling of *shay'* ("something") according to a more archaic form *sh'y*, but they fail to mention that the word *shay'* is spelled with the correct form overwhelmingly in the manuscript, over 80 percent of the time. Therefore, this and other archaic spellings perhaps merely preserve a form that some scribe had copied from an earlier source along the way, as Marx and Jocham both elsewhere concede.[38] These occasional alternative spellings are simply not enough to date the written text to the middle of the seventh century, and such variants would not be at all unexpected in a manuscript from the early eighth century. And so it remains that "in any case," as Youssef-Grob

underscores, "^{14}C results have to be interpreted from different angles and with the help of further internal and external evidence (paleographic, stylistic, contextual, etc.) which must be carefully aligned with it."[39] Therefore, given the current state of our knowledge, it remains the fact that the form of the text as written onto the Tübingen parchments corresponds with other Qur'ans from the early eighth century, which bear the hallmarks of production under imperial auspices.[40]

A similar early Qur'an, whose "discovery" was heralded online around the same time as the Tübingen manuscript, has emerged from the Mingana collection at the University of Birmingham. The manuscript had been in the university library's collection for almost a century at the time (Mingana Islamic Arabic 1572a), overlooked until radiocarbon analysis of a folio, done at Oxford University, dated its parchment to sometime between 568 and 645 CE with a probability of 95.4 percent (1456 BP ± 21; 578–646 CE with IntCal 20).[41] As with the Tübingen manuscript, following the announcement of these results, the press and online media quickly went into a frenzy over this "oldest" witness to the Qur'an, beguiled once again by the supposedly rock-solid scientific evidence of the radiocarbon dating. The only problem is that if we strictly follow the radiocarbon dating, the parchment seems a bit too early for the tradition of an ʿUthmānic collection, if not also for Muhammad's authorship, at least in the case of earlier dates within the range of possibilities. As Gabriel Reynolds notes, the very early results from the radiocarbon dating of this manuscript would in fact seem to confirm that early datings of folios from the Sanaa manuscript are not, as some have suggested, the result of a "botched job," but are instead relatively accurate datings of the parchments used in this codex.[42] The so-called "Birmingham Qur'an" consists in fact of just two leaves from an ancient manuscript that have been bound together with seven leaves from another manuscript. Yet Fedeli, who "discovered" the Birmingham manuscript, has also identified sixteen folios in the Bibliothèque nationale de France from the same early manuscript (MS BnF328c). There are thus eighteen total folios from this early manuscript, and their analysis forms a major part of Fedeli's dissertation, which convincingly demonstrates that the text written on the parchment seems to be significantly more recent. Indeed, despite being credited with discovering the world's oldest Qur'an in the press, Fedeli has

from the start insisted that this witness to the Qur'an should not necessarily be dated as early as this particular radiocarbon analysis might suggest.[43]

The dating of the Birmingham Qur'an only becomes more complicated after a careful examination of the text that has been written onto the parchment folios. In her dissertation, Fedeli demonstrates that the Birmingham Qur'an, much like the Tübingen Qur'an, bears the marks of production at a relatively later stage in the history of the Qur'anic text. "On the basis of the analysis of the palaeographical features, i.e. the overall appearance of the script and habits of the scribe, as well as of the analysis of the content from a linguistic point of view," she establishes that "it is likely to assume that the first hand in charge of writing MS PaB [i.e., the Paris and Birmingham fragments] was copying the text from an exemplar, and in accomplishing such a task, he expressed his mastery, e.g. in planning the page layout and in executing a rather well-proportioned relationship between letter blocks and empty spaces."[44] As she continues to explain,

> The mechanism of copying from an exemplar implies consequently that the work could not have been executed very early, as the written exemplar requires a period of time for producing the exemplar and also the establishment of a mechanism of copying from an authoritative text. Moreover, the regular and coherent presence of a blank line between two *sūra*s seems to be interpreted as a sign of a later practice, as it was introduced and established during the so-called second *maṣāḥif* project accomplished in the period between 84–85 AH (703–5 CE), whose main initiator was al-Ḥajjāj (d. 95/713). [45]

Déroche likewise identifies a similar date for this Qur'an's production based on the same qualities of the text: it clearly bears the marks of a high level of sophistication in writing that one would associate with production at the imperial chancery of ʿAbd al-Malik.[46]

Given the state of the Qur'anic text as it was copied onto this manuscript, it seems extremely unlikely that this Qur'an could possibly date to the time indicated by the radiocarbon analysis of the parchment. If we insisted on such a date, between 568 and 645 CE, then we must revise the traditional narrative of the Qur'an's origins not to a later date, but in the opposite direction, concluding that it took place much earlier than the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm would have it. In such a case we must assume that a

highly advanced and technical practice of writing was in place well *before* ʿUthmān (who began to reign in 644 CE), but this is extremely unlikely, as we will see in chapter 5. Likewise, such a dating requires the circulation of even older exemplars that could have been copied by the individual who produced this particular manuscript. This manuscript simply is not a first draft of the Qur'an for reasons that Fedeli has amply demonstrated, and so we cannot imagine that this might somehow be one of ʿUthmān's initial codices. Yet the possibility of a pre-ʿUthmānic Qur'an leads us in another direction and to another possibility—namely, that the Qur'an, or at least some significant parts of it, is in fact pre-Muhammad. In fact, Reynolds suggested as much following the announcement of the Birmingham Qur'an's radiocarbon dating.[47]

As Reynolds briefly remarks, there are many elements of the Qur'anic text that early Islamic scholarship simply could not understand, which is rather puzzling if the text had a continuous transmission from Muhammad through the early community. This is particularly so in instances where the meaning of certain words and their vocalization is largely unknown—indeed, sometimes the Qur'an itself does not seem to fully understand some of its own declarations.[48] James Bellamy convincingly demonstrated in several articles that these passages indicate, at least in some cases, that "there was no oral tradition stemming directly from the prophet strong enough to overcome all the uncertainties inherent in the writing system."[49] One could readily understand such ignorance if in fact the Qur'an—at least in some parts—were a much older text that predated Muhammad and his new religious movement, written using language that the members of that movement did not always comprehend. Both Michael Cook and Patricia Crone (as noted already above) have suggested this hypothesis in their more recent works, and it is one that we will return to in the final chapter of this book, when we come to consider the context implied by the contents of the Qur'an.[50]

FURTHER PROBLEMS WITH RADIOCARBON DATING EARLY QUR'ANS

In their recent article, Marx and Jocham present the results from radiocarbon analysis of yet another early Qur'an, in this case fragments of a manuscript now in Berlin (ms. or. fol. 4313), folios of which are also in

Cairo (*Qāf* 47). Radiocarbon dating of two of the Berlin folios yields a range of 606–52 CE with a 95.4 percent probability (602–54 CE with IntCal 20).[51] Unfortunately, however, to my knowledge there has been no codicological study of this Qur'an and its manuscript yet that we could use to evaluate the radiocarbon dating, as is the case with the Tübingen and Birmingham Qur'ans. Photographs of the manuscript are online, however, and although I am, again, no expert, they look very similar to the other manuscripts we have considered thus far.[52] Accordingly, one suspects that this manuscript, of Cairene provenance, was likewise produced at the same time as the others, probably sometime around the year 700. Moreover, as Omar Hamdan observes, the fact that the "ʿUthmānic" codex seems to have been completely absent from Egypt prior to the turn of the eighth century also strongly indicates a later date for this Egyptian manuscript.[53] Marx and Jocham also include among their dated early Qur'ans another Sanaa manuscript (DAM 01–29–1), which they give a radiocarbon dating of 633–65 CE. Nevertheless, as noted above, Cellard has recently published a study of this manuscript; based on codicological and orthographic analysis, she concludes that the Qur'anic text copied into this codex dates to the early eighth century, much later than the radiocarbon date would indicate.[54]

Moreover, Robin also had two folios from this same Sanaa manuscript (DAM 01–29–1), dated by the Lyon lab, which returned results of 439–606 CE and 603–62 CE (436–640 CE and 598–665 CE with IntCal 20); but for whatever reason, Marx and Jocham do not mention these divergent datings in their study. We should note that, according to Reynolds, additional folios of DAM 01–27–1 have been radiocarbon dated, and the results, which still remain to be published, confirm the early dating of the other folios from this codex.[55] On this basis, then, it would seem that the evidence from radiocarbon dating leaves us with two possible conclusions: either the Qur'an is largely pre-Muhammadan, a possibility that by no means should be completely excluded, or we must accept the fact that radiocarbon dating cannot provide us with a basis for dating the texts of the earliest Qur'ans with much precision at all. If the Qur'an does not somehow predate Muhammad and we maintain these radiocarbon datings, then we must accept as a fact that parchment folios would often remain in storage for decades—even more than a century—before they were used for writing. In

such cases we clearly cannot rely on the radiocarbon age of these early manuscripts alone to date these early Qur'ans, and other methods must be employed.

Moreover, further radiocarbon measurements need to be taken for all these manuscripts. More folios need to be sampled, and we likewise need to have samples from the same folios analyzed independently by different labs. The latter is especially necessary since some scholars, particularly those who wish to maintain the traditional Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm, have sought to dismiss any results that do not conform with this paradigm as resulting from improper analyses by these labs—notably, those at the University of Lyon and the University of Kiel.[56] It is quite troubling to find young scholars, some of whom are not even trained in any field related to early Islamic studies, carelessly launching allegations about the shabby work done at these institutions with no basis other than the fact that the results do not agree with their presuppositions. One will find such comments mostly on social media, the use of which as an often uncritical, unreviewed, and unprofessional academic forum to disseminate opinions has become highly problematic. Islamic history should not be the product of social media influencers, regardless of their academic credentials.

Yet there are far more substantial issues that require datings of the same object independently by different labs. If multiple AMS labs are given samples from the same artifact, and their analyses yield significantly different datings, as we know to have been the case with Sanaa 01–27–1 fol. 13 (and also 01–29–1 fol. 8), then we must fundamentally question the accuracy and value of this method of dating, at least for the dating of parchments from the early medieval Near East. As anyone who ever paid attention in high school science class will know, reproducibility and replicability of experimental results are fundamental principles of the scientific method, and without these qualities, a result cannot be considered scientific. Judging from the analyses of this folio from Sanaa, radiocarbon dating of this object has not produced a scientifically valid dating, beyond the conclusion that the parchment almost certainly dates to sometime around the sixth or seventh century. Four other folios from Sanaa have been dated by both the Lyon and Zürich labs, and while similar results were returned for two folios, the results were again significantly different for the other two.[57] In light of the method's relative failure thus far, when early

Qur'an parchments have been tested independently by different labs, we must conduct further independent tests of singular artifacts in order to establish that the method actually works with the level of precision that has generally been expected. So far, this seems in doubt, and, for the time being, we should not rely on datings using radiocarbon analysis for ranges of less than a century or two until the problematic results obtained so far are better understood.

TABLE 2. Radiocarbon Dating of Folios from Early Qur'anic Manuscripts in Sana according to IntCal 13 and IntCal 20

	Published Date / IntCal 13	IntCal 20 Date
01-27-1 fol. 2 (Lyon)	543–643 CE	554–645 CE
01-27-1 fol. 2 (Zürich)	589–650 CE	598–649 CE
01-27-1 fol. 11 (Lyon)	433–599 CE	434–603 CE
01-27-1 fol. 11 (Zürich)	611–660 CE	605–660 CE
01-27-1 fol. 13 (Lyon)	388–535 CE	406–543 CE
01-27-1 fol. 13 (Zürich)	590–650 CE	598–649 CE
01-29-1 fol. 8 (Lyon)	439–606 CE	436–640 CE
01-29-1 fol. 8 (Zürich)	638–669 CE	641–669 CE
01-29-1 fol. 13 (Lyon)	603–662 CE	598–665 CE
01-29-1 fol. 13 (Zürich)	615–660 CE	605–662 CE

Also complicating matters is the fact that some of the results published by the Corpus Coranicum project are a product of combining the data from samples taken from several different folios within the same manuscript. As Marx and Jocham explain, "This is due to the underlying assumption that in order to produce a codex, parchment of the same or of only slightly differing age was used."[58] As we have seen by now, this assumption is not at all

warranted and could easily lead to inaccurate results, since different folios from the same manuscript have produced very different dates on occasion. If the data for the Sanaa Qur'an from both Arizona and Lyon are accurate, as they should be if they are scientific, then we clearly have folios of greatly different age used in producing one codex. Indeed, one imagines that codices were often made using whatever parchments were on hand at the time, and the available stock could very well have varied significantly in age. Therefore, combining the radiocarbon measurements from multiple folios in a manuscript in order to give a date for the whole manuscript is highly problematic, and the assumption underlying it is not valid.

Thus, we are presented with a radiocarbon age for the Tübingen manuscript as a whole of 1,355 BP ±14 years, which seems to have been produced through a certain sleight of hand. The three individual leaves from this manuscript that were tested yielded the following raw dates (see table 3).[59] We are not given calibrations for these individual folios, but one of the folios returned a raw radiocarbon date of 1,319 BP ± 24. The calibrated radiocarbon dating of this folio is not 649–75 CE, as the Berlin project falsely would suggest, but it instead dates to 654–775 CE with a 95.4 percent probability, with almost a 50 percent chance of being dated to the middle of the eighth century![60] One can see the calibrated data in figure 1. If the radiocarbon dating of this folio is at all accurate, then the Tübingen manuscript as a whole clearly should be dated instead to 654–775 CE, or the late seventh or eighth century, the age of its most recent folio, as presently known. Moreover, one should also note that folio 23 from this same manuscript now dates to sometime between 641 and 686 CE or 743 and 773 CE, according to the latest calibration data (IntCal 20).

TABLE 3. Radiocarbon Datings of Folios from Tübingen MA VI 165

fol. 23:	1,357 BP ± 24 years
fol. 28:	1,388 BP ± 24 years
fol. 37:	1,319 BP ± 24 years

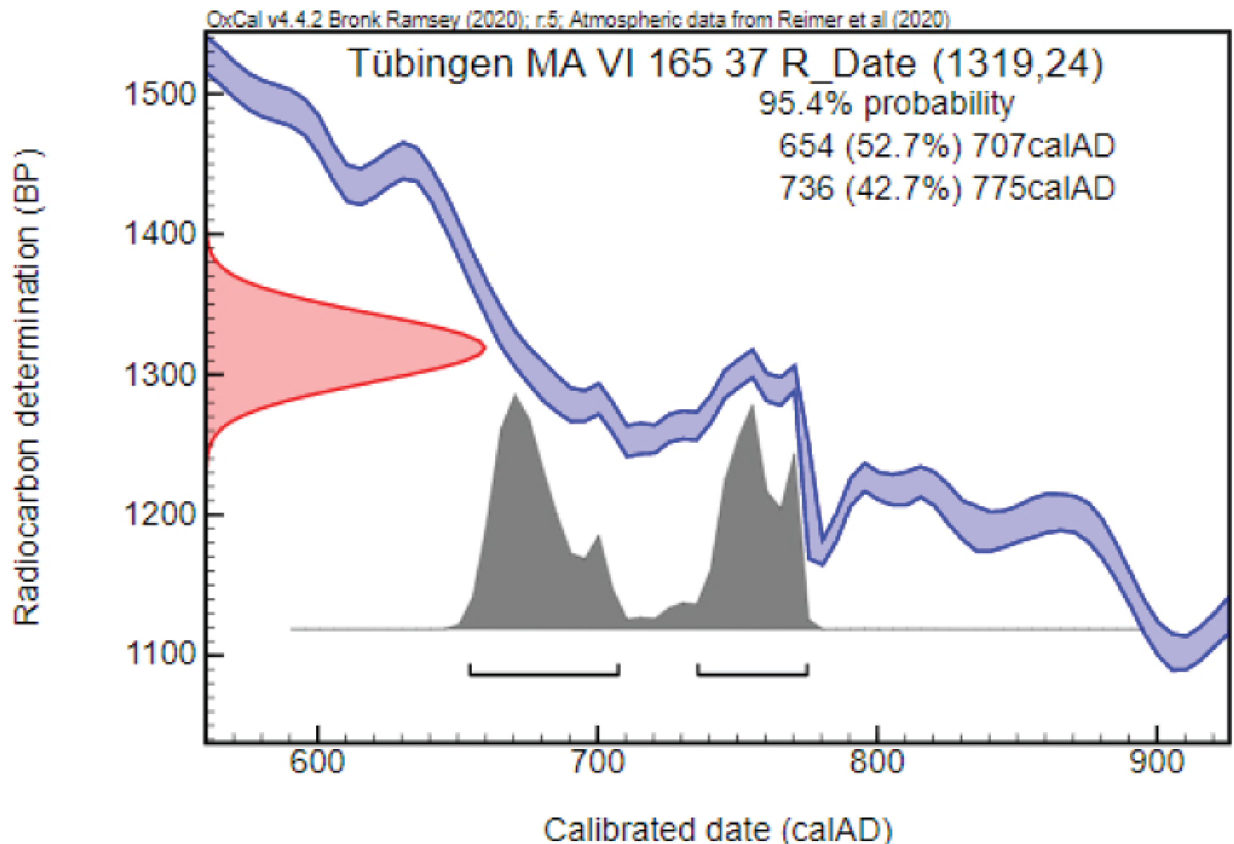

FIGURE 1. Radiocarbon Dating of Tübingen MA VI 165 f. 37.

It seems extremely careless to date this manuscript earlier than the age of its youngest known folio. In reality, then, we can only be certain that this manuscript was produced using writings materials that were prepared sometime between 654 and 775 CE. Contrary, then, to what Marx and Jocham suppose, the Tübingen manuscript would appear to falsify their "underlying assumption that in order to produce a codex, parchment of the same or of only slightly differing age was used." Instead, we find in this manuscript that parchments of varying ages seem to have been used. Likewise, this manuscript also appears to demonstrate that it is possible for a codex to contain parchment folios that are significantly older than the date of the production of the codex itself. An eighth-century dating, by the way, which fits perfectly with the corrected figures for these folios, corresponds very well with the codicological and paleographical analysis of the Qur'anic text copied onto this manuscript. Therefore, in the Tübingen Qur'an we have a manuscript that was most likely produced in the early eighth century but

that used at least one piece of vellum, folio 28, that was produced much earlier—sometime between 605 and 669 CE according to the radiocarbon dating. This means that we *cannot* simply use the radiocarbon datings of individual folios to determine the age of the Qur'anic text that is copied into a particular manuscript. In the Tübingen Qur'an we have clear evidence of a folio being used for a Qur'anic manuscript fifty to one hundred years after it had originally been produced. One must assume that this was not entirely uncommon, particularly given vellum's durability and value. It must also be noted that there are similar problems in the Berlin project's presentation of the data for the Sanaa palimpsest: the variant datings from Lyon and Kiel are completely ignored in determining the age of this Qur'an. I could find no explanation whatsoever for their exclusion from the analysis.

If one is still clinging to some hope that we might be able to find a way out of the messiness of this method, well, things are about to get even more complicated. I know of two instances in which early Islamic documents with known dates were subjected to radiocarbon analysis, and the results were not at all reassuring. Déroche had samples from two dated Qur'ans analyzed by the Lyon lab: one with a known date indicating its production in 1020 CE and the other in 907 CE. The radiocarbon dating of the first Qur'an came in at 1130 BP ± 30 years, or between 871 and 986 CE with a 95 percent probability (774–994 CE with IntCal 20). "The most probable dates," Déroche further reports, "arranged in decreasing order of probability were 937, 895 and 785AD. The closest result, that is to say 937 AD, is separated by eighty-three years from the date provided by the colophon." Even if we use the upper limit of the date range—that is to say, 986 CE—the difference still amounts to thirty-four years, around a third of a century.[61] For the second Qur'an, the radiocarbon date was determined at 1205 BP ± 30, with a calibrated date of between 716 and 891 CE (704–941 CE with IntCal 20). Déroche identifies the most probable dates, "once again in decreasing order of probability: 791, 806 and 780AD. The most probable result, 791AD, is 116 years earlier than the actual date."[62] It is true, however, that in this case the uppermost date is reasonably close to the actual year in which the Qur'an was copied. Nevertheless, absent this specific information regarding its production, we would be very much at sea in dating this Qur'an, and it is certainly quite possible that the parchment used for this codex was a century

or so older than the text itself. Or it may be that, again, for whatever reason, something is not working with our calibration of historical C-14 levels.

Fred Donner has also performed similar tests of this method and its accuracy. Although the results have not yet been published, Donner revealed them publicly during the question and answer session at the presidential address for the International Association of Qur'anic Studies in November 2018. Professor Donner was kind enough to allow me to relate the gist of his findings in advance of their pending formal publication.[63] He took samples from an undated papyrus, which, based on content, he is quite sure dates to early in the seventh century. He sent samples to two labs. The first one returned a dating in the early 800s CE. The second lab, Oxford, gave a result of 650–700 CE, which is closer to the suspected date, but still a little too late. In light of these results, he sent samples from two dated papyrus letters to the Oxford lab, without revealing that he already knew the dates. One letter was dated to 715 CE, and the other to 860 CE; both samples came back with dates around 780 CE, much too late for the former, while indicating use of an eighty-year-old papyrus in the case of the later. In both instances the radiocarbon date was an altogether inaccurate indicator of the age of the texts in questions, beyond a general dating to the eighth or ninth centuries. And here, once again, we also see dramatically different results obtained from different labs for the same artifact. If this is a method whose results are truly scientific, it seems that the results should be able to be reproduced and replicated with regularity.

POSSIBLE PROBLEMS WITH CALIBRATION

Finally, we come to the thorny issue of the calibration of raw C-14 datings. As noted above, relatively soon after the development of radiocarbon dating, experts on this technique came to the recognition that we cannot simply assume that the amount of ^{14}C remained constant across the ages. Rather, it has in fact fluctuated over time, in relation to the sun's activity and the number of cosmic rays striking the earth's upper atmosphere at a given point in time. Tree rings were identified as the solution to this problem, since it was possible to date their individual rings, and each ring provided an annual time capsule of the amount of ^{14}C in the tree's atmosphere for a given year. The method has allowed for great refinements in the precision of

radiocarbon dating in many instances, to be sure. But the levels of atmospheric ^{14}C vary significantly over time, with the result that in some eras it is possible to be more precise than in others. Furthermore, the data set for making the needed adjustments to the raw datings has changed over the years, as more information from tree rings and other carbon deposits has become available. The standard calibration curve for radiocarbon dating has thus been revised several times since this first became a standard practice in the 1960s, with the most recent standard established in late 2020 as the IntCal20 dataset.[64] Nevertheless, there is increasing evidence to suggest that a single calibration standard may not be universally valid for every location on earth. It is well known now that the amount of ^{14}C can differ significantly between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres at a given point in time, and, as a result, a separate set of calibration data has been established to use for dating objects from the Southern Hemisphere since 2004. In more recent years, scholars have become aware that there is also a likely variation in C-14 levels according to different regions even within the hemispheres. It is of particular importance that scholars have recently shown the need for a different set of calibration data to ensure accuracy for dating objects from the broader region in which these early Qur'ans were produced: Egypt and the Near East.

First, we should consider the nature of the calibration data drawn from tree ring samples. All the carbon measurements used to establish the historical levels of atmospheric ^{14}C for radiocarbon calibration were taken from trees very geographically distant from the Near East. The data were collected almost exclusively from trees in the western United States, the British Isles, and the northwestern European continent.[65] For the period here in question, the most precise calibration is based primarily on data from oak trees in the southern part of Ireland that was collected only within the last twenty years.[66] The narrow geographic range of these samples raises important questions regarding the assumption that this data should be universally valid for every region of the planet, in the Northern Hemisphere at least. It has been widely presumed in the field of radiocarbon dating that this hypothesis is valid, since circulation within the atmosphere of the Northern Hemisphere ensures that ^{14}C levels should be standard in every location in any given year. Yet at the same time, there is widespread acknowledgement that "^{14}C calibration should be seen as a work in progress"

in need of constant refinement through measurement of further carbon archives and "that the calibration data set should be considered with some degree of uncertainty, because it represents a set of measurements (with inherent analytical uncertainty) of past atmospheric ^{14}C levels."[67]

Despite this general operating assumption that the calibration data collected from these ancient trees is universally valid, it is nevertheless becoming increasingly apparent that this is not the case. One of the most significant recent developments in radiocarbon dating is an emerging recognition of regional variation in the carbon measurements taken from tree rings. For this reason, experts in radiocarbon analysis have become more attentive to the likelihood that significant interhemispheric variations in the amount of atmospheric ^{14}C can exist in different regions during the same year. Differences in latitude and in ocean surface area have a significant impact on the amount of regional ^{14}C, although even within similar latitudes, longitudinal differences are also evident.[68] This was evident already in the early 1980s, through comparison of tree ring data taken from sequoias in western Washington state and German oaks. Prior to the publication of the new data from southern Ireland in recent decades, these were the primary measurements used to date materials from the early Middle Ages. And yet the tree samples from these two sources showed that "a substantial systematic difference exists between the Seattle Sequoia and Heidelberg German Oak radiocarbon ages," amounting to differences of as much as fifty-eight years.[69] Continued comparison of these samples has led to the conclusion "that the ^{14}C activity of contemporaneous wood from different locations may not be the same at all times."[70] Indeed, there is now even some doubt that in light of such variations, data taken from the western United States may not accurately calibrate the calendar date of materials from the eastern United States.[71]

The reality of significant regional differences in ^{14}C is beginning to dawn on scholars in the field, and it still remains unaccounted for in the current methodologies. Of course, if one is content to employ radiocarbon analysis for what it is most useful—dating an object broadly within an era, such as the early or late Middle Ages or sometime in the seventh or eighth centuries, then such variations become largely irrelevant. Otherwise, the only way to adjust for such differences will be to develop regional datasets of historical ^{14}C amounts. In the case of ancient Egypt, a group of scholars recently

undertook a massive project of interdisciplinary study to evaluate the accuracy of radiocarbon dating for plant-based materials from this time and place.[72] In developing their new model, they did not simply defer to the data from radiocarbon dating; historical methods were given equal footing in order to refine all the methods available for analyzing the age of an object. As a part of this effort, more recent objects from Egypt with known dates were analyzed to determine if there were persistent regional differences in the levels of ^{14}C in Egypt. The results identified a need to account for a 0.25 percent difference in radiocarbon amounts for Egypt from the accepted norms for the Northern Hemisphere. Although this may seem like a small difference, in actuality it amounts to a difference of 19 ± 5 radiocarbon years, and the tendency has been to correct conventional calibrations so that the objects turn out to be more recent. The hypothesis is that an earlier growing season in Egypt relative to other places forms a basis for the difference.[73] This new calibration for Egypt appears to be a finding with "major ramifications for the chronologies and cultural syntheses of the wider east Mediterranean and ancient Near East."[74]

As it turns out, the Mediterranean region and the Near East in general are both areas that have recently been identified as very likely standing in need of similar regional offsets for radiocarbon calibration.[75] For the southern Levant in particular, an area that concerns us very much in the present context, it seems that radiocarbon datings for this region have been, as was found to be the case in Egypt, off by about twenty years or so. The suspected cause is the same as with Egypt: seasonal fluctuations in the amount of ^{14}C in the atmosphere and an earlier growing season than in northern Europe and the northwestern United States.[76] The basis for identifying this new inaccuracy in the calibration of radiocarbon dates from this region came from the measurement of ^{14}C ages of calendar-dated tree rings from 1610 to 1940 CE from southern Jordan. The measurements were compared with ^{14}C levels given by the previously used standard calibration data (IntCal13), which were found to be inaccurate by approximately 19 ± 5 radiocarbon years on average, the same as for ancient Egypt, it turns out. Again, while this may seem like a small amount, further analysis of some published radiocarbon dates determined that the calibrated calendar years were off from the actual dating of the object by an average of 60 percent.[77] According to the study's lead investigator, their evidence indicates that the fundamental

basis for such datings using the standard calibration dataset "is faulty—they are using a calibration curve that is not accurate for this region."[78] Of course, this finding is again of very little significance if one merely wishes to date an object within a century or so. But a twenty-year variance, when trying to distinguish among decades, is highly significant and problematic. In the case of the manuscripts of Cairene and Damascene origin, this would mean that the actual radiocarbon dating ranges of these manuscripts may in fact be two decades or so later than dates calculated using the current calibration data. Accordingly, we must clearly exercise even greater caution with regard to radiocarbon dating and we should refrain from believing it to be some sort of magical instrument capable of providing certainty regarding the age of early Qur'anic manuscripts. Historic levels of atmospheric C-14 still remain too uncertain in this region to lean on the method for datings more precise than a range of a couple of centuries or so.

WHICH HEMISPHERE?

As mentioned already, over the past couple of decades, scientists have come to recognize that C-14 levels differ between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, which have separate systems of atmospheric circulation.[79] Accordingly, objects from the Southern Hemisphere require a different set of data for calibration, since in any given year the amount of atmospheric ^{14}C can vary significantly between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres.[80] The difference "is thought to be due to the larger expanse of the Southern Hemisphere oceans and slightly higher wind speeds resulting in more ^{14}C-depleted CO2 from the ocean entering the southern atmosphere than the northern."[81] Therefore, a separate dataset for radiocarbon calibration has been developed for the Southern Hemisphere, on the basis of tree rings from Chile, South Africa, New Zealand, and Tasmania.[82] But this should be irrelevant, since all the early Qur'anic manuscripts are from the Northern Hemisphere, right? Actually, the matter is not so simple as it may at first seem. The boundary between the atmospheric hemispheres is not the equator, as one might imagine, since this is the line that divides the earth physically into two hemispheres. The atmospheric separation between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres occurs instead along the earth's thermal equator, which is different from the standard equator. Moreover,

unlike the standard equator, the thermal equator, also known as the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ), is not stationary. Instead, it moves between north and south across the equator as the seasons change. What this means is that, atmospherically, the Southern and Northern hemispheres cover different areas of the earth's surface in July than they do in January. The extent to which this boundary between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres shifts varies from location to location and is determined largely by difference in land mass and ocean area.

For our purposes the main importance of this annual atmospheric shift is that for a significant part of the year, roughly the southern half of the Arabian Peninsula is not in the Northern Hemisphere but experiences instead the atmospheric circulation of the Southern Hemisphere. One can easily see the impact of this effect in figure 2, in which the red band marks the earth's thermal equator in July and the blue band marks its location in January.[83] This seasonal shift in the earth's thermal equator means that Sanaa and the rest of the southern half of the Arabian Peninsula spend much of the year, including the summer, in the Southern Hemisphere, exposed to the differing radiocarbon levels circulating in this part of the planet. Accordingly, any parchment or other organic materials from Sanaa or elsewhere in southern Arabia is within a mixed radiocarbon zone, in which, it would seem, neither the northern nor the southern datasets for radiocarbon dating would give an entirely accurate reading. Organisms in Intertropical Convergence Zone, by their very nature, will be exposed to some mixture of the radiocarbon levels of the two hemispheres in any given year, which will affect efforts to calculate the calendar years for raw radiocarbon dates. There is no calibration data for the ITCZ yet, and it seems that scientists are only beginning to recognize the significance of the complexities posed by this region for radiocarbon dating. Data for radiocarbon levels on both sides of the equator in this region from the past seventy years are only beginning to be compiled, and this may give us some idea of what needs to be done in order to determine more accurate radiocarbon datings of historical artifacts produced in this region.[84] For the time being, however, it would appear that we must again refrain from ascribing anything more than a general accuracy to radiocarbon dates from this region to within a century or two, which is, after all, what radiocarbon dating has always been best for.

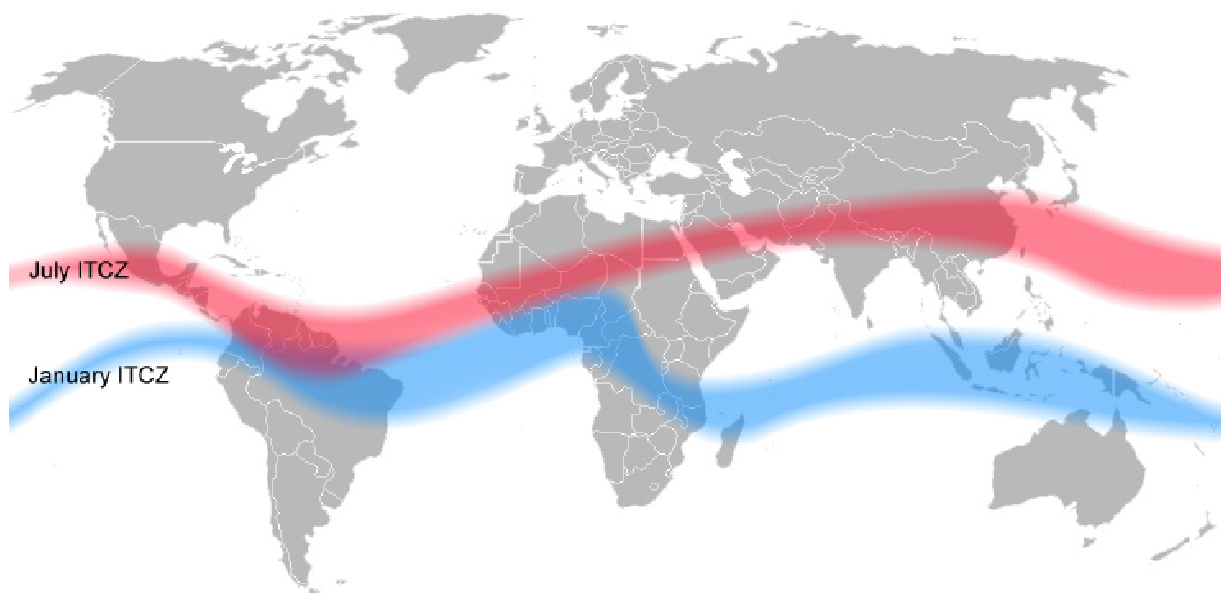

FIGURE 2. The Intertropical Convergence Zone / Thermal Equator.

How any refinements in radiocarbon dating for this region will impact our calibration of the raw radiocarbon dates for the parchments from Sanaa and anywhere else in southern Arabia remains unknown and will likely continue to remain unknown for some time to come. Therefore, it would be prudent to abandon any efforts to assign dates to these materials on the basis of radiocarbon measurements with any greater precision than a century or so for the foreseeable future. Just to give an idea of how much the differing radiocarbon levels from the southern hemisphere that would affect Sanaa seasonally could have an impact on calibration of radiocarbon age to dates CE, we give the dates calculated for each object according to the Northern and Southern hemispheric datasets with a 95 percent probability side by side (see table 4).[85] In some cases, the differences are relatively minimal, yet in others they are significant. In general, one will note, the concentrations of ^{14}C in the Southern Hemisphere yield later datings, as is the trend of this calibration dataset. In some cases, the difference is only a couple of decades; in others, dating with the data from the Southern Hemisphere could change the date of an object by a century. We would therefore be wise, I think, to use such data with greater caution than some scholars have hastily proposed and resist the temptation to misuse the method of radiocarbon analysis in attempting to date an object with greater precision than the method can

presently provide. Clearly, these are all early manuscripts from the beginnings of Islam: radiocarbon dating affirms this, which we already knew. But what it cannot do, at least not as of yet, is date the text of the Qur'an in these manuscripts with any precision to a time before the very end of the seventh century, at the earliest.

TABLE 4. Calibrated Dating of Folios from Early Qur'anic Manuscripts in Sana according to Hemispheric Differences

Folio	Northern Hemisphere (IntCal20)	Southern Hemisphere (SHCal20)
Stanford '07 (Arizona)	583–670 CE	602–774 CE
01-25-1 fol. 22 (Lyon)	554–645 CE	578–661 CE
01-27-1 fol. 2 (Lyon)	543–643 CE	576–660 CE
01-27-1 fol. 2 (Zürich)	598–649 CE	605–669 CE
01-27-1 fol. 11 (Lyon)	434–603 CE	529–643 CE
01-27-1 fol. 11 (Zürich)	605–660 CE	645–680 or 751–767 CE
01-27-1 fol. 13 (Lyon)	406–543 CE	415–574 CE
01-27-1 fol. 13 (Zürich)[a]	598–649 CE	605–669 CE
01-27-1 fol. 13 (Kiel)	441–635 CE	544–642 CE
01-27-1 fol. 13 (Oxford)	599–655 CE	607–680 or 750–768 CE
01-29-1 fol. 8 (Lyon)	436–640 CE	541–644 CE
01-29-1 fol. 8 (Zürich)	641–669 CE	654–772 CE
01-29-1 fol. 13 (Lyon)	598–665 CE	636–773 CE
01-29-1 fol. 13 (Zürich)	605–662 CE	647–680 or 750–768 CE

[a] Using the data from Marx and Jocham 2019, 216 rather than Robin 2015b, 65, since the former is more recent and gives more precision.

Scholars in other fields of historical study have long recognized both the enormous value and also the inescapable limitations of radiocarbon dating, particularly in the case of dating ancient manuscripts. Indeed, here it would appear that specialists on early Islam and the Qur'an have again missed an opportunity to learn from the results of earlier, similar investigations in biblical studies. Several decades ago, specialists on the Dead Sea Scrolls sought assistance from radiocarbon dating in trying to better understand the history of this collection of documents, which were produced and collected over a period of centuries. Most of these texts were written, like our early Qur'ans, on parchment, and of the total of more than nine hundred documents that were discovered at Qumran, over two hundred preserve some of the earliest witnesses to the Hebrew Bible, or the Christian Old Testament. Precise dating of these writings thus holds enormous significance for understanding the history of the biblical text. No less important is the precious information that the remaining texts provide for understanding the development of Judaism between 250 BCE and 70 CE, a decisive moment in the history of Near Eastern religions that would ultimately give birth to both Christian Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism.

The ages of the various fragments and scrolls discovered at Qumran in the Dead Sea valley were initially determined using traditional means of archaeological context and paleography, following examination and study by numerous experts on such matters. In the 1990s, however, samples from over twenty different scrolls were analyzed by the Zürich and Arizona labs, in most cases returning dates ranging over a span of more than a century.[86] The results thus did little more than affirm matters on which there was widespread agreement, while failing to provide answers to questions that were in dispute. On the whole, the results were not inconsistent with the paleographic datings of the manuscripts, and it was accordingly decided that "Paleography, the study of ancient writings, is often a more accurate method of dating."[87] As Nongbri aptly summarizes this endeavor to radiocarbon date the Dead Sea Scrolls, "The results of these tests showed that some of the samples could be as early as the third century BCE and some as late as the end of the first century CE, with many of the ranges clustering in the first century BCE. This outcome thus did not end the debates about the precise

time that the scrolls were copied, and in fact the analysis may have created as much controversy as it resolved."[88] One can say with some confidence, I think, that efforts to radiocarbon date early Qur'anic manuscripts have produced a nearly identical result.

Ingo Kottsieper, in a chapter on "Scientific Technologies" published in a recent handbook on the Dead Sea Scrolls, summarizes the *status quaestionis* regarding the use of radiocarbon dating in the study of the Qumran library quite well, and in so doing he provides some sound and experienced advice for those of us in Qur'anic studies. Firstly, Kottsieper draws attention to the narrow geographic range from which the tree ring samples that underly the calibration process have been taken. More reliable radiocarbon dating of the Dead Sea scrolls manuscripts, he notes, will require calibration data taken from the region in which they were produced—a point that, as we saw above, recent studies have confirmed.

> Different regions of the world require different sets of data to calibrate, and there are different sets available for the Northern and Southern hemispheres and for marine versus nonmarine areas. These data sets are constantly refined, and data provided by labs should always be recalibrated according to the most up-to-date set.. . . . For Qumran the data set is currently IntCal13 for the Northern hemisphere. However, this set is based predominantly on material from Northern Europe (Ireland) and North America providing data for periods of only 10–20 years each. The implications of applying such a calibration to material found in Palestine and to organisms from an extreme environment such as the Dead Sea region are still unknown.[89]

Likewise, Kottsieper rightly insists that even in the best cases, radiocarbon dating must not be treated like some sort of infallible dating method that can allow us to simply disregard all other historical evidence that would indicate an alternative date—a point that we have already stressed several times. As he concludes, "radiocarbon analysis offers valuable data on probabilities allowing us to estimate the periods when a scroll was produced and—assuming it was not stored first—also the date of its inscription. One should use the data cautiously and not misuse them to date manuscripts into a timeframe of only a few decades." As a general rule, then, "If the results [of radiocarbon dating] do not fit a certain hypothesis, the reason could be that either the measurement or the hypothesis or both are wrong—a scenario which cannot be totally excluded even if all the data fit!"[90]

Therefore, while radiocarbon dating adds an important new tool for studying the early manuscripts of the Qur'an, it must be used with caution, fully acknowledging its limitations and in conjunction with other methods of historical analysis. To invoke the results of radiocarbon dating as if it were the only data that matters is intellectually irresponsible and should be avoided, particularly since we have seen just how complex and often uncertain the process still remains. Indeed, Yasin Dutton similarly observes that a clear tendency can be observed in the results that leans toward dating manuscripts much earlier than otherwise seems to be likely, and he accordingly concludes as follows: "while the technique is broadly useful, it cannot be expected to yield the accuracy of dating that would be important."[91] And so, it seems, we ourselves are left to conclude that, despite the sensational claims of a few scholars, which have been amplified by the internet, the radiocarbon dating of a number of early Qur'anic manuscripts does not prove the historical accuracy of the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm. On the contrary, the convergence of all the presently available evidence—radiocarbon and historical—is not at all incompatible with the Qur'an's composition into its present form only around the turn of the eighth century under the direction of ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj; indeed, it would seem to favor this conclusion.

4

The Hijaz in Late Antiquity

Social and Economic Conditions in the Cradle of the Qur'an

It is genuinely surprising how little we actually know about the social and economic conditions of the Qur'an's traditional milieu during the early seventh century. To a certain extent, the severe limitations of our evidence for this region have largely forestalled any efforts to critically investigate the history of Mecca and Yathrib in late antiquity. Yet at the same time, the almost complete absence of any information at all regarding the central Hijaz in our late ancient sources tells its own tale: once again, such silence can speak volumes. Indeed, the near total invisibility of this region in any of our late ancient sources is seemingly a clear sign that it was isolated from and insignificant to the broader world of late antiquity. Nevertheless, despite the severe paucity of our evidence, some efforts have been made to reconstruct the society and economy of Mecca and Medina, even if the majority of these studies are less than fully critical in their willingness to embrace the collective memory of the later Islamic tradition. Perhaps the single most famous and influential such study is Henri Lammens's *La Mecque à la veille de l'Hégire*, wherein this priest-scholar almost single-handedly invented the myth of Mecca as the wealthy financial center of a vast international network of spice trade. It is certainly not without considerable irony, one must note, that this notoriously hostile critic of Islam singularly bears the most responsibility for reifying what can only be

considered as some of the most dubious elements from the Islamic tradition's sacred history of its traditional birthplace.

Lammens received a considerable assist in promoting this myth from the Scottish historian Montgomery Watt, whose widely popular and influential books on Muhammad in Mecca and Medina effectively established the baseline knowledge for much subsequent scholarship on early Islam, particularly in Anglophone contexts. Yet even more than Lammens before him, Watt's biographies of Muhammad present little more than a slightly critical summary of how Islam's prophet is remembered in the hagiographies of the later Islamic tradition. The result of this combination is such that Watt's studies promulgate, as Peter van Sivers rightly notes, a deceptively "secular" version of the "sacred vulgate" of the period of origins as remembered by the later Islamic tradition.[1] In full lockstep with Lammens, Watt conjures forth a vision of late ancient Mecca as swimming in riches from the spice trade, on the basis of which he then constructs the image of Muhammad as a "liberal" social reformer and champion of the poor against their exploitation by wealthy capitalists, a narrative of earliest Islam for which his work is especially famous. I have elsewhere discussed the implausibility and inspirations of this modern myth of Islam's founding prophet, but presently we are concerned with evaluating its imagined economic basis, as fashioned by Lammens and Watt. As it turns out, their collaborative vision of Mecca as in effect a kind of Dubai of ancient Arabia rests on an insufficient scrutiny of the available evidence and a willing assent to some of the most questionable elements of the Islamic tradition's memory of late ancient Mecca. Indeed, as we will see, the most probable reconstruction of the social and economic conditions in Mecca and Yathrib at the beginning of the seventh century could hardly be farther from the wealthy and cosmopolitan financial capital conjured forth by Lammens and Watt.[2]

We have Patricia Crone in particular to thank for dispelling this myth of Mecca as the wealthy hub of an international spice trade, which she thoroughly debunked in her meticulous study *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Despite some initial resistance—some of it quite hostile and even ad hominem—the legacy of this study is a definitive and final refutation of the myth of Mecca as the wealthy center of a sprawling network of trade in luxury goods—most notably, spices and perfumes. In response, some

scholars have recently sought to salvage Mecca's riches by finding an alternative source of immense wealth in the mining of precious metals in late ancient Arabia. Yet, as we will see, the evidence for such claims, despite their frequent repetition, remains entirely lacking. Other attempts to find some sort of basis for Meccan affluence all founder on a variety of problematic issues, as Crone has noted in her most recent consideration of the Meccan economy, "Quraysh and the Roman Army." There she introduces the possibility that the Roman army's insatiable need for leather goods could possibly have commanded sufficiently high prices that it may have theoretically made sense for some of the Meccans to travel to the Roman frontier to trade their hides for a better price. Yet at the same time, she also notes—a point that has often gone unnoticed by many scholars of early Islam—that this is merely a hypothesis and one that is problematic in its own right, involving a number of questionable assumptions at that. Instead, as we will see, both Mecca and the Yathrib oasis, the future Medina, were by all indications at the beginning of the seventh century small, sleepy, out-of-the-way places with little economic or other significance to the outside world. Accordingly, as this chapter will demonstrate, moving forward we must adjust our assumptions about the Qur'an's traditional milieu(x) in order to conceive of its initial formation in far more humble conditions than often have been envisioned. Indeed, it is nothing short of astonishing how persistent this scholarly fiction of Mecca's mammon remains, even after its thorough unmasking.[3]

MECCA AND THE MYTH OF THE SPICE TRADE

According to the Islamic tradition, Mecca's commerce consisted primarily in some sort of trade, and there is even some indication that Muhamad himself was a merchant who was active in this trade.[4] Since the landscape of Mecca, "set among barren rocks," could not support agriculture, it seems reasonable to assume that its economy must have involved some sort of exchange. The only question, however, is exactly what the nature of this trade was. Long was it assumed that Mecca was an extremely prosperous center of trade, whose wealth accrued from its important position in the network of spice and incense trade from the south of Arabia and points farther to the east. On this basis, it was even supposed that Mecca must have been a major

financial center, where, as Watt maintains, "financial operations of considerable complexity were carried out."[5] Of course, one imagines that the complex transactions of such a major financial center would require a high level of literacy within the community, which, as we will see in the following chapter, is not in evidence. To the contrary, as Peter Stein concludes, the level of literacy evidenced in Arabia outside the northern oases and South Arabia was not sufficient to suppose any "ability, or even interest in drawing up complex economic documents."[6]

This Orientalist myth, which is not even very well evidenced in the historical sources, has since been thoroughly dispelled by Crone. Her *Meccan Trade* completely dismantles the conceit of Meccan trade in luxury goods for lack of any sufficient evidence to support this scholarly mirage: Mecca, she observes, "was not just distant and barren; it was off the beaten track as well." Instead, she convincingly identifies the Meccan economy as primarily pastoralist, since its barren landscape could support little else.[7] One imagines, accordingly, that "devoid of food and other amenities that human beings and other animals generally require to engage in activities of any kind," it must have held a relatively small population.[8] Fred Donner comes to much the same conclusion, noting that, in the absence of such international trade, we must recognize that Mecca "remained a very small settlement, for it is located in an area ill-suited to agriculture."[9] When considered within the broader context of settlement patterns in the late ancient Near East, Mecca certainly was not a city or even a town.[10] According to a reliable recent estimate based on data from the early Islamic tradition, it was a very small village with only a few hundred inhabitants, perhaps around five hundred or so, with around 130 free adult men.[11] Therefore, although this myth of Mecca as a major mercantile center of considerable wealth and with a far-reaching network is, as Sean Anthony notes, a central part of the *Heilsgeschichte*, the "sacred history," of the early Islamic tradition's memory of its origins, it bears little resemblance whatsoever to the conditions in Mecca in the early seventh century.[12]

Crone ultimately determines that "Whether the Meccans traded outside of Mecca on the eve of Islam or not is a question that cannot be answered on the basis of these stories. Indeed the very theme of trade could be legendary." Any such trade in which the Meccans were engaged therefore "was a local trade. Moreover, it was an Arab trade, that is to say, a trade

conducted overwhelmingly with Arabs and generated by Arab rather than foreign needs."[13] It was a trade in which the Meccans would exchange goods from their pastoralist economy, the only economy that their landscape could support, for other goods produced in settled agricultural communities, particularly foodstuffs. Mecca could not produce enough food to support even its very meager population, as both Frank Peters and Fred Donner have also determined.[14] Predictably, Crone's devastating exposure of the spice trade fallacy initially drew some inimical, knee-jerk reactions from the wardens of the scholarly guild, most famously from Robert Serjeant, but in the years since, her correction of this Orientalist myth seems to have emerged as the new scholarly consensus.[15]

Indeed, we may look to Peters's book on *Mecca* as an example of the extent to which *Meccan Trade* established a new *status quaestionis* on the Meccan economy, even among scholars taking a more traditional approach to the Islamic sources. As Peters writes,

> When we attempt to assemble the widely dispersed and diverse evidence about the commercial activity of pre-Islamic Mecca into a coherent picture of plausible enterprises unfolding in an identifiably historical place, the results are often as varied, and perhaps as little convincing, as some of the sources themselves. . . . Often we are reduced to remarking what is likely *not* true of the mercantile life of Mecca before the birth of the Prophet. . . . The city's connections with what we know to be the broader commercial networks of the fifth and sixth century are far more problematic, however. The later Arab sources strongly urge such a connection, but everything that we know about international trade in the Near East on the eve of Islam raises serious doubts about the claim. . . . What information we do possess suggests the very opposite: there was little money in Mecca. . . . Mecca's pre-Islamic commercial prosperity is, in fact, an illusion at worst and a considerable exaggeration at best.[16]

Mecca was therefore no major center of international trade, but rather a small, remote village with a subsistence economy based in pastoralism.[17] Mecca's location is in fact so desolate that it is difficult to imagine it even as having been a viable way station along any caravan route, and indeed, "only by the most tortured map reading can [its location] be described as a natural crossroads between a north-south route and an east-west one."[18]

More recently, Crone returned to this topic, with the same goal as before of trying to determine "the extent to which the standard account of Meccan

trade is defensible in terms of *any* evidence in this tradition."[19] In this instance, she considers the value that leather likely had for outfitting the Roman army as it stood watch along the marches of the frontier across the Syrian desert. Perhaps, she suggests, the high prices that tanned hides could command from the Roman soldiers, owing to their pressing need for leather products, could have made it financially profitable for some Meccans to travel in caravans up to the southeastern fringe of the Roman Empire to trade their wares. While this proposal remains uncertain, it is one possible explanation for the reports of Meccan trade with Syria in the Islamic historical tradition. Yet at the same time, one must underscore in this instance the purely hypothetical nature of Crone's conjecture. All too often one finds references to this study suggesting that in this article Crone established the existence of a long-distance Meccan trade in leather goods, when she does nothing of the sort. Such assertions elide the extremely tentative nature of her proposal even in this instance. Indeed, as she deliberately concludes her article, "a case can be made for it, but not proved," and "for the moment, the hypothesis that Quraysh were suppliers to the Roman army must be said to involve an uncomfortable amount of guesswork."[20] Still, even if one were to grant that in some manner the Meccans sold the tanned hides from their flocks to the Roman army, the picture of Mecca in the early seventh century would change very little, if at all. As Crone remarks, it is "not likely that the inhabitants of a remote and barren valley should have founded a commercial empire of international dimensions on the basis of hides and skins."[21]

MINING IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA: FOOL'S GOLD

Over the past few decades, a handful of scholars have sought to find some other commodity that could potentially replace the illusory spices of the Orient and still provide both Mecca and the Hijaz with a robust and wealthy economy. The new contender for the source of Mecca's riches would appear to be trade in precious metals, particularly gold. For instance, as Aziz al-Azmeh maintains, scholars, in their quest "to challenge untenable assumptions about the spice trade," have mistakenly "overshot" the underlying importance of precious metals in the Meccan economy in late antiquity.[22] Nevertheless, despite a recent trend adducing trade in gold and

silver as the new basis of a prosperous Meccan economy, it turns out that this alleged commerce in precious metals proves to be no less of a mirage than the spice trade of old. The primary inspiration for this latest effort to enrich Mecca's otherwise subsistence pastoralist economy would appear to be a 1999 article by Gene Heck on "Gold Mining in Arabia and the Rise of the Islamic State." In this article, Heck argues that the early caliphal state drew a significant amount of its financial resources from precious metals mined in various locations across the Arabian Peninsula. On this point, his hypothesis seems quite sound, and there is in fact archaeological evidence indicating active mining across the region at the end of the Umayyad period, starting in the early decades of eighth century. Yet it was only in the Abbasid period that the extraction of precious metals really took off and was conducted on a wide scale, a development owing itself especially to "the stark lack of mineral resources in the Mesopotamian heartland of the Abbasid Empire."[23] Indeed, according to the most recent archaeological surveys of mining in the region, "all the sites fall within the Abbasid period and confirm that the Abbasids were highly committed to the exploitation of copper and gold on the Arabian Shield."[24]

Accordingly, one wishes that Heck had been content to stick to his initial observation that the C-14 data from the Arabian gold mining sites generally "indicate late ʿAbbāsid 10th–13th century mining activities."[25] On this point at least, he appears to be entirely correct—if only he had left it at that. Instead, his study has muddied the waters considerably by introducing some unsubstantiated claims regarding evidence for mining precious metals in the lifetime of Muhammad. With regard to the sixth and seventh centuries, as well as for several centuries prior, I have not seen any archaeological evidence at all indicating mining activity at any of these sites for well over a thousand years before the eighth century CE. And it is on this crucial point that Heck's article has greatly misled much recent scholarship in the field.[26] The primary basis for Heck's claim consists of charcoal slags discovered at a particular mining site, Mahd adh-Dhahab, which he reports were dated using radiocarbon analysis to 430 CE–830 CE. According to Heck, these tailings provide solid evidence of gold mining activity there in the pre-Islamic period, a claim that he also repeats in his monograph on *The Precious Metals of West Arabia*.[27] Of course, these tailings on their own

establish no such thing, since, based on the figures given by Heck, they could just as easily date to 700 CE as to 500 CE. For this reason, one must look to other factors, including the broader archaeological context in which the samples were discovered in order to determine the date more precisely.

Fortunately, in addition to Heck's studies, we have a number of geological and archaeological surveys of this site, most of which present a more careful analysis of both Mahd adh-Dhahab and other Arabian mining sites as well. If we look at the most important and authoritative study of Mahd adh-Dhahab, for instance, we find that the scientists from the US Geological Survey who studied the site concluded that, on the contrary, "the Mahd adh Dhahab gold-silver mine . . . was worked extensively during the reign of Solomon (961–922 B.C.) and during the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 A.D.)." Otherwise, they found no evidence of any mining activity at this site during antiquity.[28] So, too, the archeological surveys of mining sites across western Arabia, including Mahd adh-Dhahab, have persistently determined that the only evidence of mining activity in the region is either from more than a thousand years before Muhammad was born, or one hundred years after his death.[29] In regard to Mahd adh-Dhahab specifically, one should note Hussein Sabir's important observation (following K. S. Twitchell) that the archeological context of the radiocarbon dated materials from this site clearly determines the Abbasid era as the period when mining activity was underway: "Kufic inscriptions found among ancient tailings at the Mahd adh Dhahab mine indicate that the age of the tailings is from A.H. 130 to A.H. 545 (A.D. 750 to A.D. 1150)."[30]

In addition, it turns out that the radiocarbon dates cited by Heck are not accurate but instead appear to reproduce raw, uncalibrated radiocarbon data indicating a date of 1350 BP ± 200 years—although I have not yet been able to determine where this data was originally published. Sabir refers to the US Geological Survey report authored by R. J. Roberts and others as his source for this information, but this document provides no such data and instead confirms the other reports in finding that mining was conducted at Mahd adh Dhahab only at two periods prior to the mine's revival in the twentieth century: about 950 BCE and from 750 CE to 1258 CE.[31] It would appear that Heck's main source for this information is another US Geological Survey report by Hilpert, Roberts, and Dirom, which provides the raw data, along with an extremely misleading interpretation of it as "show[ing] that mining

and smelting in the area continued from A.D. 430 until 830."[32] Of course, as we have just seen in the previous chapter, this radiocarbon dating shows no such thing and indicates instead mining activity only at some specific point during that range of dates. Yet more importantly, once we calibrate the C-14 data for these slags, we find a very different range of dates from what Heck and others following him have reported: the radiocarbon measurements yield not a range of 430 CE to 830 CE but instead, according to the most recent calibration curve, evidence of mining activity at some point between 250 CE and 1148 CE (see figure 3). Such a broad range—nearly a full millennium—can hardly establish gold mining at this site during the sixth and seventh centuries in the absence of any other reliable evidence indicating as much. This is particularly so when all our other evidence indicates instead that such mining began only late in the Umayyad period and was active especially under the Abbasids.

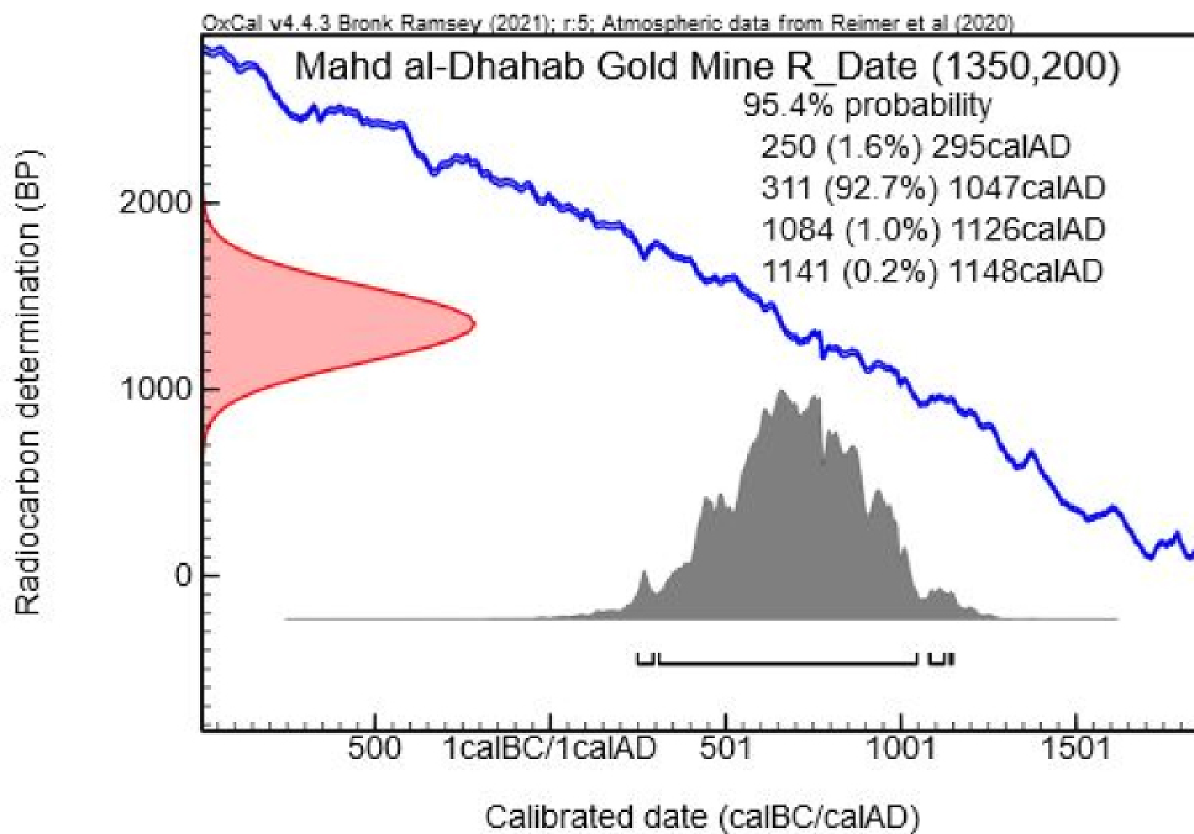

FIGURE 3. Radiocarbon Dating of Slags from the Mahd adh Dhahab Mine.

Heck also maintains that there is similar evidence from a gold mine at Jabal Makhiyaṭ (Jabal Mokhyat), from "gold placers" that have been radiocarbon dated to 626 CE. On this point he appears to follow an earlier article by Keith Ackermann, who reports radiocarbon evidence of mining near Jabal Mokhyat that has been radiocarbon dated to 660 CE. Nevertheless, the published sources cited in both studies do not actually verify either claim.[33] Ackermann refers to an "internal memorandum" from 1974 by D. L. Schmidt of the US Geological Survey in support of his claim. Yet, if one looks to the official USGS report, on which Schmidt was the lead author, there is no evidence of gold mining at this site at this time. And it is certainly odd that while Ackermann cites this unpublished memo from 1974 in his own article of 1990, he makes no reference to this formal USGS report published by the same author in 1981. According to the official report, to which, I propose, we must cede authority in this case, all the radiocarbon datings for the site relevant to the early Islamic period returned dates with a broad range between the eighth and tenth centuries CE. There are no radiocarbon datings in this report that would indicate any seventh- or sixth-century activity, or any earlier for that matter—other than the first millennium BCE.[34]

The actual date given by this report for the gold placers in question is instead 2,600 ± 250 years before the present in one instance and 2,620 ± 250 in another; these yield calibrated dates of 1407 BCE to 159 BCE or 1414 BCE to 173 BCE! Later in the same report the authors give an uncalibrated date range for these samples of "645 + 250 years B.C.": could it be that a BCE date here has been mistaken by Ackermann for CE?[35] The USGS report does elsewhere report radiocarbon evidence of "gold-quartz" mining at a site around fifty kilometers north of Jabal Mokhyat sometime 950 ± 300 years before the present, for a calibrated range of 433 CE–1618 CE, which the authors rightly conclude, based on correlative evidence, reflects mining activity in the Abbasid period.[36] On the very the same page the report also mentions evidence of *copper* mining near Jabal Mokhyat (discussed below), for which it gives a date of 660 CE, the same date indicated by Ackermann.[37] Although Ackerman refers here generally to evidence of "mining activity" near Mokhyat, the clear implication from the immediate context in his article is that he has gold mining, rather than copper, in view. It would

appear that Heck has followed Ackermann's misleading claim in this context, although, if so, it is admittedly not clear at all how he comes up with a date of 626 CE in this instance: indeed, one struggles to identify the basis of this claim.

Heck also reports radiocarbon dated evidence for mining of silver at Samrah in the al-Dawadimi district between 668 and 819 CE, on the basis of an unpublished report at the Saudi Arabian Directorate General of Mineral Resources. Fortunately, we have the raw radiocarbon datings for these materials in Ahmed M. Shanti's report on the site, and according to the most up to date calibration curve, IntCal 20, the datings of these two samples are between 668–976 CE and 684–990 CE. Yet one must note that this data, even with the most recent calibration, confirms Shanti's clear finding that there is no evidence of any pre-Islamic mining activity at this site.[38] One should also note that according to the US Geological Survey report for this site, these charcoal samples were dated instead to 700 and 725 CE in a finding that has also been repeated in other subsequent studies of this site. Nevertheless, the meaning of these numbers is not clear, since they do not reflect the range of dates that one would expect for uncalibrated dates; nor does it appear that they have been calibrated in any way.[39] Therefore, in light of this clear evidence to the contrary, it is utterly astonishing, then, to find Ackermann citing these very same datings as if they somehow provide "confirmation of mining in the fifth and sixth centuries" at Samrah.[40] I fail to see how such a conclusion could possibly be warranted on the basis of this evidence, and it only adds further to confusion to an already highly muddled discussion of this topic.

This brings us, then, to consider the evidence for copper mining; and, as was the case with gold and silver, so it is with copper. While there is abundant archaeological evidence for the mining of copper during the late Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, there is in fact no clear evidence for the pre-Islamic period. Tailings from copper mining near Jabal Mokhyat, mentioned just above, have a calibrated radiocarbon date of sometime between 229 and 1222 CE, which is almost identical to those from another copper mine at Jabal ash Shizm, which date to between 248 and 1228 CE.[41] In both cases, however, once again the wide range of the possible datings, nearly one thousand years as was also the case with Madh adh-Dhahab, hardly provides confidence to assert that these sites were actively mined in

the sixth and seventh centuries. Indeed, given the clear pattern that we have seen indicating an Arabian mining boom that began only in the eighth century, unquestionably the most probable conclusion to draw from this evidence is that, again like Madh adh-Dhahb, these findings are indicative of copper mining at these sites during the eighth and ninth centuries.[42] One suspects the same is also true of the wide range of dates indicating silver mining noted in the paragraph above: presumably these, too, reflect activity most likely during the Abbasid period. Therefore, given the startling lack of evidence to support Heck's claim that precious metals were mined in the Hijaz during in the time Muhammad, one can only note that it is highly unfortunate that his misrepresentations of the data have led numerous recent scholars to assert the importance of trade in gold in Mecca during the sixth and seventh centuries when there is in fact no such evidence.[43] It is a classic case in which a claim is made that confirms what scholars expect and hope to find, and so it is received and repeated without a thorough vetting.

At the same time, even if evidence were to emerge that could verify Heck's claims, one must consider just how small the impact would truly be for our understanding of the Meccan economy in the sixth and early seventh centuries. Only James Montgomery and Timothy Power have expressed the appropriate amount of caution in response to Heck's article. Montgomery notes, for instance, that only in one instance does Heck purport to have evidence of gold mining before Muhammad's death—in "circa 626 CE."[44] Here Montgomery unfortunately reproduces Heck's unfounded claim regarding Jabal Mokhyat, which, it turns out, is simply not in evidence in any published report that I have seen cited by Heck or anyone else. Power, for his part, accepts Heck's reports of archaeological evidence for gold and copper mining at some indeterminate time in the period between the fifth and tenth centuries CE at face value. As we have seen, however, the data actually indicate a range between the third and thirteenth centuries CE, which we can narrow with a high degree of probability to 750 CE–1150 CE based on the archeological context of the radiocarbon dated materials. Yet Power is unquestionably right that even if one were to accept that gold was mined at Mahd al-Dhahab sometime between the fifth and ninth centuries CE, "the balance of evidence does not at present support the contention that mining was a significant part of the economy in the pre-Islamic Hijaz."[45]

Indeed, one must also consider the fact that the mining sites in question were all in the remote and punishing desert interior of the Arabian Peninsula. The closest site to Mecca, Mahd al-Dhahab, was more than 250 kilometers northeast of Mecca, separated by towering mountains and a treacherous wasteland. Are we really to believe that, despite the lack of any positive archaeological evidence and other evidence to the contrary, gold was being mined there and, for some bizarre reason, was carted back to the small and isolated shepherding community of Mecca, particularly when the markets for such commodities would have lain directly to the north? In the case of more distant and desolate areas, the logic becomes only more strained. For instance, the two sites with potential, albeit unlikely, copper mining during this period would almost certainly have had no impact at all on the Meccan economy. Jabal Mokhyat is nearly 450 kilometers east of Mecca, and is also deep within the desert, while Jabal ash Shizm is nearly six hundred kilometers to the north, close to al-ʿUlā. It is true, one must note, that the Sasanians appear to have been engaged in silver mining to the south in Yemen during the sixth century. Nevertheless, there is no reason at all to imagine that any of this silver would have passed through Mecca or had any impact on its economy. Instead, as Power explains, this silver was transported from the mine along garrisoned roads heading south, where it was exported from the port of Aden.[46]

It is true, as many of these studies of early Islamic mining have noted, that the literary sources from the ninth and tenth centuries occasionally boast of the tremendous wealth of the region's gold mines during the pre-Islamic period. Nevertheless, in the absence of any corroborating archaeological evidence, there is no reason to place much stock in these fanciful reports, which, as Power observes, have "a legendary flavor" and are regularly "put to hagiographic uses."[47] Montgomery similarly judges that even if Heck's claim regarding gold mining were valid, it "does not prove the veracity of the pre-modern Muslim sources which attest to an astonishing abundance of gold."[48] One imagines that the Arabian mining boom that took place during the Abbasid period stimulated the imagination of these much later historians to project the conditions of the age in which they were writing back onto the Arabia of three centuries prior. Given the notoriously unreliable nature of the early Islamic historical tradition for knowledge of

late ancient Arabia on the whole, these reports are best left to the side in the absence of any sort of corroborating evidence. This is all the more so since, as Crone has demonstrated with devastating force, the accounts of the seventh-century Meccan economy found in the later Islamic historical tradition have little to no basis in the historical realities of the early seventh-century Hijaz. Likewise, in regard to these later reports of an abundance of gold specifically, Crone brings to our attention other literary traditions indicating, to the contrary, a decided scarcity of gold and silver in the seventh-century Hijaz.[49] Therefore, we are left to conclude, with Crone and Peters, among others, that Meccan trade was based above all on Mecca's privation and its pressing need to obtain food for humans and livestock alike, as well as a need to obtain *qaraẓ*, a plant they used to tan the hides they traded.[50]

THE MECCAN SHRINE

There is one remaining factor to consider in evaluating the economy and society of late ancient Mecca—namely, the alleged economic impact of the so-called Meccan shrine. The notion that Mecca was in late antiquity a major pilgrimage destination continues to serve as a cornerstone of the Orientalist myth of Mecca as a center of great wealth. Accordingly, scholars have frequently maintained that Mecca regularly hosted myriads of visitors who traveled from the far corners of Arabia to venerate its holy shrine, bringing with them their commerce. Moreover, on this same basis scholars also have frequently asserted that Mecca was itself a *ḥaram* or religious sanctuary, a place that was inviolable and in which no violence or bloodshed could be committed. Not only, then, did Mecca's annual pilgrimage traffic bring considerable wealth to town, as is commonly supposed, but the city's sanctuary status also encouraged people to settle there and brought visitors year-round, on account of the safety afforded by the inviolability of its precincts. Thus, Mecca's sanctuary status formed the basis for its emergence as a major center of international trade in luxury goods, since, as Watt maintains, people could come to trade there "without fear of molestation."[51] Yet it turns out that the image of Mecca in so much modern scholarship and in the early Islamic tradition as both a major pilgrimage center and a

sanctuary is also no less of a scholarly mirage than the envisaged Meccan spice trade to which these notions have become so closely bound.

Once again, we have Crone largely to thank for disabusing us of these false notions. This she does with relative ease, by simply reviving arguments made already at the end of the nineteenth century by Julius Wellhausen, a compelling analysis that much subsequent scholarship has forgotten and continues to overlook. The logic is as simple as it is seemingly inescapable. In the first place, the Islamic tradition itself is unanimous in indicating that Mecca was not the site of any pilgrimage fair. There are reports of annual pilgrimage fairs that took place in relatively close proximity to Mecca, but none specifying any pilgrimage to Mecca itself or any corresponding pilgrim market. As such, as Crone rightly observes, in the case of the scholarly fiction of Mecca as hosting an annual pilgrimage fair, just "as in the case of the Meccan spice trade, the axiomatic truths of the secondary literature have only a tangential relationship with the evidence presented in the sources."[52] Nevertheless, perhaps it was at one of these nearby pilgrimage markets, which, in contrast to Mecca, were in fact inviolable sanctuaries or *ḥarams*, that the Meccans of late antiquity traded the various goods of their pastoralist economy for the other foodstuffs and supplies they so desperately needed.

Therefore, not only was Mecca not the site of any pilgrim fair or a sanctuary city in late antiquity; it was by all indications also not the focus of any sort of pre-Islamic pilgrimage, with or without a corresponding market. Here, in particular, Wellhausen's logic is quite compelling, making its neglect in so much subsequent scholarship a regrettable source of misunderstanding regarding the "Meccan shrine." As Wellhausen rightly observed, the most important elements of the Islamic pilgrimage to this day still take place at locations outside Mecca, around ten kilometers from the city, a fact that affords crucial evidence indicating that the pre-Islamic pilgrimage rites at these nearby sites—Arafat and Mina—almost certainly did not involve Mecca at all. The visits to Mecca before and after the pilgrimage in subsequent Islamic practice clearly seem to be more recent additions to a more ancient practice. Indeed, in all the discussions of the ancient pilgrimage to Arafat and Mina in the pre-Islamic period, the sources consistently present Mecca as an afterthought, if they do so at all. There

simply is not sufficient evidence even from the later Islamic tradition to support the existence of any pilgrimage to Mecca prior to the rise of Islam. Its incorporation into the pre-Islamic practices as a launching and landing pad for rites that took place at some distance from Mecca clearly appears as a secondary, post-Islamic development that seeks to Islamicize these more ancient practices. And so Mecca, as Gerald Hawting persuasively argues, seems to have been incorporated into the *hajj* only sometime well after Muhammad's lifetime, most likely in the later seventh century.[53]

So, what about the Meccan shrine, then? Well, it seems abundantly clear that it was not the cause of any pilgrim fair or sanctuary; nor was it even the object of pilgrimage from outside Mecca. Did it even exist then? I think it is entirely reasonable to assume on general principles that the herdsmen of this small, remote village and their kith and kin would have had some sort of sacred shrine, as is customary in most cultures. Just what the nature of this shrine may have been, however, is a difficult question that is not easily answered based on the limited and much later information that we have from the Islamic tradition, as both Crone and Hawting have made clear. The existing structure of the Meccan Kaʿba does not help us much in this quest, since it is not only off limits to investigators, but this shrine was destroyed and rebuilt twice in close proximity at the end of the seventh century.[54] So what survives today is not the shrine of pre-Islamic Mecca but a product of competing religious interests during the second Islamic civil war, at a time when Mecca became newly incorporated into the older pilgrimage practices.

One thing we must consider is whether Mecca's shrine was in fact a "pagan" holy place, dedicated to one of the deities of the pre-Islamic Arabian pantheon, as the Islamic tradition remembers, or if it was instead a monotheist place of worship, as the Qur'an itself seems to suggest. As Hawting and Crone have both persuasively argued, the Qur'an's response to its opponents seems to indicate its origin within a context that was thoroughly monotheist.[55] The Qur'an's primary disagreement with its "associator" opponents does not appear to concern the number of gods but instead whether or not it is appropriate to associate any intermediary spiritual powers with the one God, who was seemingly confessed and worshipped by both parties. So, if the Qur'an truly reflects a Meccan context in its contendings with these associators, then we need to radically rethink

what the nature of their local shrine may have been. Presumably, it would have been already dedicated to the one God, Allah, the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. In such case, would it have been something resembling a church or a synagogue? The lack of evidence to support any Christian or Jewish presence at all in Mecca, as we will see in more detail in the final chapter, complicates any such simple solutions to the nature of either the Qur'an's monotheist opponents or their shrine. In any case, however, there is no reason why we should suppose that such a monotheist shrine would have been of any significance for anyone beyond the local inhabitants of Mecca, and there is likewise nothing to suggest that it was a major pilgrimage destination for Abrahamic monotheists of late antiquity.

As for the Islamic tradition's memories of Mecca's shrine as a "pagan" temple, Crone in particular has laid bare the deeply contradictory and confused nature of these reports. For instance, according to tradition, the Meccan shrine was dedicated to the Arabian deity Hubal, although Muhammad's tribe, the Quraysh, who were supposed to have been the guardians of the shrine, are said to have served the god Allah. Nevertheless, as Crone observes, no pre-Islamic Arabian shrine is ever said to have housed more than one male god, as the later Islamic tradition would compel us to suppose in this case. It is an important first sign that something is not quite right with these accounts. Likewise, the tradition's identification of the Quraysh as the shrine's guardians is not compatible with its separate memory of them as far-flung traders, unlikely though that tradition is in its own right. Here again, broad inconsistencies in the Islamic tradition's account of Mecca's "pagan" shrine do not inspire much confidence. Indeed, the conflicting facets of these traditions appear to indicate their design at some historical distance in order to provide the Qur'an with a more tangibly and credibly "pagan" context, rather than bearing any resemblance to historical realities of the early seventh century.[56] To be sure, it is not impossible that there may have been a shrine at Mecca dedicated to one of the pre-Islamic deities, but it suffices to say that this hypothesis is not compatible with the image of the "associators" as they appear in the Qur'an; nor should we assume that we have reliable information concerning this shrine from the Islamic tradition. Instead, any shrine that once existed in this small, hardscrabble village, whether it was monotheist or "pagan," is highly unlikely to have been of any significance for anyone beyond Mecca's

few hundred inhabitants and perhaps some of the nomads in its surroundings. As such, it can hardly be imagined to have had enough financial significance to improve Mecca's subsistence pastoralist economy in any meaningful way.

In order to round out this discussion of the Meccan shrine, we should also note that the Qur'an occasionally identifies its sacred House with *al-masjid al-ḥarām*, that is, "the inviolable place of prayer," whatever that may have been. Indeed, the Qur'an itself is not always precise and consistent in regard to just what it means by *al-masjid al-ḥarām*. Of course, in the decades following Muhammad's death, *al-masjid al-ḥarām* came to be identified with the mosque that was built around the Meccan shrine, but it seems rather obvious that no such mosque would have existed in the pre-Islamic period, and so this designation must mean something else in the Qur'an. According to the later Islamic tradition, *al-masjid al-ḥarām* was in Muhammad's lifetime the name given to the empty space surrounding the House, effectively anticipating the subsequent construction of an Islamic *masjid* around the House during the early caliphate. In this case, however, as Hawting observes, we come to the rather peculiar and unsatisfying conclusion that "a name figuring so prominently in the Qurʾān should be applied to an empty space without any apparent function."[57] There are a few passages in the Qur'an that suggest some sort of relation between *al-masjid al-ḥarām* and the House, but in each case "the details are not clear."[58] Since Mecca is otherwise not known in the Islamic tradition as having been either a *ḥarām* or the focus of a pilgrimage before the rise of Islam, it would seem to follow that in the pre-Islamic period, any *al-masjid al-ḥarām* must have been elsewhere. The nearby holy sites of Mina and Arafat offer possible candidates, inasmuch as the Islamic tradition identifies them as having been *ḥarām*s in the pre-Islamic period, but this is not at all clear from the Qur'an itself.

What we find in the Qur'an, then, is not a simple reflection of Mecca's pre-Islamic religious status or the role of its shrine in an annual pilgrimage. Instead, as Hawting rightly discerns, the Qur'an reflects the process of Islamicizing the pre-Islamic religious practices of a *ḥajj* and perhaps a related *masjid al-ḥarām* by linking them directly with Mecca and establishing Muhammad's hometown as a distinctively Islamic holy place. It

was a process that was still ongoing at the time when the Qur'an itself was being composed, which explains the messiness of the Qur'an's representations of the pre-Islamic pilgrimage and sanctuary.[59] Accordingly, it seems we may safely conclude that prior to the rise of Islam, Mecca was not in fact some sort of renowned and important holy place, and likewise there is no reason to imagine that the Meccan economy was greatly enriched by the presence of any sort of major pilgrimage shrine. Rather, pre-Islamic Mecca remains little more than an obscure, sleepy, out-of-the way village deep within the deserts of Arabia, with no particular religious significance and a subsistence economy based in pastoralism.

Nor can we even say with any certainty that the Kaʿba and the House of the Qur'an refer to a shrine in Mecca. After all, the Qur'an explicitly identifies the location of the House as "Bakka" rather than Mecca (3:96). Judging on the basis of the Qur'an itself, and not the later Islamic tradition, Bakka clearly seems to be a different place from Mecca. The Islamic tradition is of course desperate to identify this Bakka and its sanctuary with the Meccan shrine still revered by Muslims today. Therefore, in order to remedy the Qur'an's highly inconvenient location of its shrine in Bakka, many later Islamic scholars simply decided, without any actual historical basis, that either Bakka is an older name for Mecca or else Bakka refers specifically to the Kaʿba itself and its immediate surrounding in Mecca. There is, however, no justification for identifying Bakka with Mecca either in whole or in part other than a determined need to bring the Qur'an fully into agreement with the Islamic tradition.[60] Nothing allows us to assume that when the Qur'an says Bakka it means Mecca, particularly since it correctly names Mecca elsewhere.

Scholars have of course scoured ancient literature searching for some toponym resembling Bakka that could somehow be aligned with Mecca, generally to no avail. There is in fact only one other reference to a place known as Baka, in Psalms 84:6–7, and here the psalm explicitly identifies Jerusalem's Holy House with a barren place named Baka. Moreover, scholars are widely agreed that Psalm 84 is a "pilgrim psalm," giving voice to the experience of pilgrims to Jerusalem as they drew near to the Temple.[61] It is thus a truly remarkable parallel to Qur'an 3:96–97, and one that is far too close to be simply ignored, as has long been the case. This biblical Baka was,

it turns out, the place where, in Jewish memory, pilgrims to the Temple would gather and make their ascent to the Temple Mount. Accordingly, the Qur'an's location of its "House" (*al-Bayt*) in Bakka draws this shrine directly into the orbit of Jerusalem's "Holy House" (*Beit HaMikdash*).[62] Likewise, we should further note that the name "valley of Baka" in essence means "a valley of drought" or "a desert valley," as modern commentators are agreed.[63] Thus, this valley lying just below God's Holy House, through which its pilgrims must process, is described by the psalm as a dry and desert place. How interesting, then, that the Qur'an's Holy House is not only located in a place called Bakka, where it drew pilgrims, but the Qur'an also specifically indicates its location near a "valley where no crops are sewn" (14:37).

If we are to take seriously the Qur'an's intertextuality with the Psalter, then we must acknowledge this instance as in fact a textbook example: it describes pilgrimage to a Holy House dedicated to the God of Abraham, founded by Abraham, at a place named Baka, which is an uncultivatable valley. Ironically, this close correspondence has not been lost at all on many modern Muslim scholars, who often assert that in Psalm 84 the Hebrew Bible directly refers to the ancient sanctuary founded by Abraham at Mecca (since for them Bakka is the same as Mecca), even as it presents the Meccan shrine in deliberately obscured and disguised form as the Jerusalem Temple.[64] Yet, while this interpretation obviously makes perfect sense to a devout Muslim, for the historian, let alone the historian of religion, such a reading of the psalm is of course simply preposterous. At the same time, however, this interpretation, apologetic though it may be, is undeniably correct in identifying the important connection between these two passages.

As Neuwirth has frequently noted, the Qur'an's pronounced interest in associating its House directly with the Jerusalem Temple often leads to some significant slippage between the two in the text.[65] Otherwise, however, the connection between the Qur'an's shrine and Jerusalem's Holy House still remains relatively unexplored. The fact that Muhammad's earliest followers initially prayed facing Jerusalem and are reported to have had an intense interest in restoring worship and dignity to the site of the Jerusalem Temple certainly steers us in this direction. Likewise, the failure of the non-Islamic witnesses from the seventh century to locate the shrine revered by Muhammad's followers in Mecca also strongly invites us to consider other possibilities regarding the "House" of the Qur'an.[66] To be sure, the Qur'an's

presentation of the House is highly complex, and its identification of the House with the Temple is not always such a simple matter as it is in case of Bakka/Baka. But we must understand that the traditions of the Qur'an remained a work in progress seemingly for decades, and therefore it is no great surprise to find that in its presentation of the House the early identification of this Qur'anic shrine with the Jerusalem Temple has become increasingly blurry as other currents have influenced the emerging collective memories of Muhammad's followers. It is a topic that I hope to return to soon in another context.

THE YATHRIB OASIS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

The economic situation in Yathrib/Medina was certainly different from Mecca, although it was not much better. Like Mecca, Yathrib was not sizeable enough even to be called a town, let alone a "city." It was in fact not a single organized settlement but rather "an oasis comprising a somewhat looser collection of disparate settlements" located around the region's various water sources that made possible the cultivation of dates and possibly some limited amount of grain as well.[67] As none other than Montgomery Watt, for instance, describes Yathrib at the time of Muhammad, "It was not so much a city as a collection of hamlets, farms, and strongholds scattered over an oasis . . . surrounded by hills, rocks, and stony ground—all uncultivable."[68] The total population of Yathrib was seemingly larger than Mecca, although not dramatically so. One would guess that there were probably around one thousand inhabitants scattered across the approximately twenty-square-mile oasis. There were more than a dozen small settlements in the oasis, none of which, one imagines, would have been individually as large as Mecca, and presumably no single settlement had a population of more than a couple hundred people, while most probably had fewer than one hundred inhabitants.[69]

Yathrib of course was in a more economically viable location since, unlike Mecca, it could support some agriculture. Yet again, there is no indication that Yathrib was any sort of major center for trade, and its exchange was almost certainly limited to trading locally produced goods with other nearby settlements. There surely was no long-distance trade of Yathrib's main commodity, dates, since these were—and are—ubiquitous

throughout western Asia. Date farming offered Yathrib's inhabitants a slightly more robust economic basis than the Meccans enjoyed, since they could produce enough food to feed themselves and presumably even enough surplus for some exchange. But this was by no means a high-value commodity: dates famously are "the bread of the desert," and while such a basic food staple would have been in demand, there certainly was no shortage of supply.[70] As noted by Paul Popenoe, who introduced date cultivation to California's Coachella Valley in the early twentieth century, "date growing is not a 'get-rich-quick scheme'" by any measure.[71] Still, dates were essential foodstuff for the inhabitants of ancient Arabia, serving as a primary source of nutrition that could easily be transported and stored over long periods.

Yet, since dates were so abundant everywhere in the late ancient Near East, Yathrib's dates could hardly command a premium; nor should one imagine that they were traded over long distance to the Roman and Sasanian worlds, which had no need whatsoever for such imports. Indeed, our best source of information regarding date cultivation in the Near East at the end of antiquity comes from the Yadin papyri discovered in 1961 near the Dead Sea. These papyri once belonged to a Jewish woman named Babatha who owned a date farm in the Nabatean village of Maoza, on the southwestern shore of the Dead Sea, which her father acquired from a Nabatean woman named ʾAbi-ʿadan. Several of the documents in this collection of papyri, written in Nabatean Aramaic, directly concern her ownership of the date orchard. When she first took possession of the date farm, Maoza was a part of the Nabatean kingdom, with a mixed population that included a Nabatean majority and a sizeable Jewish minority. Yet it was not long thereafter that Maoza, along with the Nabatean capital Petra, would become part of the Roman Empire as the province of Arabia.[72] The dates of this region were very famous in the late ancient Near East, earning the nearby city of Zoara the title "City of Dates": one could hardly imagine that with such an abundance of high-quality dates there was any profit in bringing dates from Yathrib to this nearest part of the Roman Empire.[73] Philip Esler has recently studied these papyri, in part to reconstruct Babatha's economic activities as a date grower. Esler reaches the conclusion that despite Babatha's ownership of the orchard and her father's ability to purchase land, her economic status nevertheless stood at the upper end of what was ultimately

a peasant economy.[74] One would certainly not expect any more than this of Yathrib's growers, inasmuch as they were far more economically isolated and likewise were presumably without a sophisticated irrigation system comparable to that of the Nabateans.[75]

It is relatively common for scholars of early Islam to assert that Yathrib stood at a crossroads linking major trade routes, and so it must have been a significant economic center, but this simply does not follow in the way they would assume. There does not seem to have been any sort of main town to the region; nor would we expect in these conditions that there was any kind of significant central marketplace for exchange. The economies of these small farms and hamlets must have been on a very small scale, and there is no indication at all that they operated in any sort of collective fashion to create a larger regional economy. To the contrary, by all indications there was profound political disunity among these various homesteads and hamlets before Muhammad's arrival. Indeed, most of the archaeological remains in Yathrib from the pre-Islamic period consist of various private fortifications, small towers called *uṭum*, which were maintained by the individual communities for their defense amid constant feuding with their neighbors. And so G. R. D. King, in considering the lack of any more substantial fortifications in Yathrib, concludes that given "the anarchic political conditions at Yathrib before the Prophet arrived. . . too little agreement existed among the tribes to allow a wall to be built." The lack of any such collective defenses reflects, in King's estimation, the "profound divisions" and "political disunity among the inhabitants of Yathrib" before Muhammad's arrival.[76] Need it be said that it seems highly unlikely that the quarrelsome farmers of Yathrib's scattered settlements would have come together in some sort of economic cooperative with a central market? It is safe to conclude, I think, that no less than Mecca, the Yathrib oasis was an economically insignificant and culturally isolated collection of small settlements. And again, like Mecca, Yathrib appears as an extremely unlikely context for the Qur'an, one that was simply not capable of producing or even comprehending such a rich and sophisticated collection of late ancient religious traditions, as we will consider in the chapters to follow.

CONCLUSIONS: THE QUR'AN IN THE "EMPTY HIJAZ"

By all measures, the central Hijaz, and especially Mecca, appears to have been culturally isolated, except perhaps for the quite hypothetical possibility of some long-distance traders who might have interacted with Romans near the desert frontier. It is highly significant, one should note, that no source prior to the Qur'an makes any mention of Mecca, and the Qur'an itself mentions it only a single time (48:24).[77] Despite the fact that we have detailed descriptions of western and southern Arabia from various Roman historians, including Procopius (ca. 500–570 CE) most notably, Mecca seems to have been completely unknown to the classical and late ancient worlds. The fact that Mecca is not named even once in any Greek, Latin, Syriac, Nabatean, Persian (etc.) source provides strong evidence that Mecca did not have any significant cultural, economic, or political ties to the broader world of the late ancient Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. Of course, once we recognize that Mecca was a small village with only a few hundred inhabitants and a subsistence economy, its omission becomes perfectly understandable.

There are, it is true, a few references to the Yathrib oasis, ranging from an ancient Babylonian inscription from the sixth century BCE to a South Arabian inscription from the sixth century CE.[78] Yet in each case the reference is entirely perfunctory. Yathrib appears merely as the name of a place in Arabia, usually in a list with other nearby places, without any further significance or information ascribed to it. Clearly, it too was a place of little interest and significance for late ancient authorities and intellectuals. Likewise, as we noted above, there is no evidence that the Yathrib oasis, or Mecca for that matter, stood at the center of a network of long-distance international trade in late antiquity. Although modern scholars have often sought to reconstruct the hypothetical routes of this trade, there is simply no convincing evidence of Mecca or Yathrib's involvement in such an international trade network in late antiquity.[79] Rather, the evidence at hand makes clear instead that such trade bypassed both cities on its way to the Mediterranean world, moving across the Red Sea by ship, as Crone in particular has painstakingly demonstrated. As she rightly observes, once this trade had shifted to sea transit, "it is hard to believe that the overland route survived this competition for long."[80] Perhaps there may have been caravans that passed through the Yathrib oasis from time to time, but in such cases they would truly have been merely passing through an insignificant

collection of hamlets along their way. Perhaps they traded for some local dates and other basic foodstuffs as provisions for their journey to the next settlement, but we should not imagine that these caravans were laden with expensive luxury goods, nor that they had any business in Yathrib beyond preparing to move along further on their journey.

Medina/Yathrib of course served as the center of the Believers' polity during the first few decades of its existence, and so it is no surprise to find that the *Khuzistan Chronicle* briefly mentions Medina/Yathrib around the middle of the seventh century. Mecca, however, is not mentioned at all by any source other than the Qur'an before the so-called *Byzantine-Arab Chronicle*, a Latin chronicle written in Spain around 741 CE, which nonetheless incorrectly locates Mecca in Mesopotamia rather than the Hijaz![81] One must admit that this collective and persistent disregard for Mecca and Medina militates strongly against any easy assumption that this region and these two cities were integrated with the broader world of late antiquity, as some scholars are wont to imagine.

As Neuwirth rightly observes, the Qur'an clearly demands an audience that is "best described as educated individuals familiar with late antique traditions." Accordingly, she continues, "we must assume that an extensive transfer of knowledge had already taken place and that a broad scope of not only local but also Biblical and post-Biblical traditions was familiar to Muhammad's audience."[82] Likewise, Michael Pregill rightly observes that the Qur'an's "many allusions to monotheistic scripturalist tradition presuppose a great deal of familiarity with biblical tropes and themes, which its audience would presumably have found meaningful. In addressing the significant residuum of biblical lore in the Qur'an, scholars have generally acknowledged that the revelation's intended audience must have understood such references, especially given their frequent opacity."[83] Based on what we have seen in this chapter, then, the question must be asked: does this sound anything like what we might reasonably expect of the one hundred or so herdsmen of Mecca, or the feuding date farmers of the Yathrib oasis? There is simply no basis, I think, to presume that the inhabitants of these places would have been either well educated or deeply familiar with the cultural traditions of Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity. For this reason, it seems far more reasonable to assume that any significant cultural contact between Muhammad's early followers and the world of late antiquity must

instead have occurred somewhere outside the central Hijaz. Indeed, it is largely for these reasons that scholars such as Cook, Crone, Wansbrough, Hawting, and others have postulated that the beginnings of Islam must have occurred somewhere much farther to the north.[84]

On this very point the recent trend toward reading the Qur'an as a late ancient text in sophisticated conversation with the religious cultures of the late ancient Near East, a development that in itself is certainly quite welcome, encounters substantial difficulties. In order for such cultural dialogue to have occurred we must assume either one of two things, both of which are problematic. One option is to move the Qur'an, at least in some significant part, out of the central Hijaz and into the world of late antiquity, as Wansbrough, Crone, and others propose. Otherwise, the only alternative is to import the full panoply of late ancient religious culture into the central Hijaz, as presumed, for instance, in the work of Neuwirth and her coterie. Nicolai Sinai, for instance, directly advocates inserting the cultural world of late antiquity fully into the Hijaz, in order to make it conceivable that the Qur'an could have been produced there.[85] So, too, Pregill builds his otherwise excellent study of the traditions of the Golden Calf on an assumption that Mecca was imbued with the cultural and religious traditions of Mediterranean and Sasanian late antiquity.[86] And although Neuwirth invokes a catena of scholars of late antiquity in support of her claim that the Hijaz was filled with "Late Antique knowledge," the works that she cites do not in fact provide any evidence for the presence of late ancient culture anywhere near Mecca or the Yathrib oasis.[87] We will return to this topic again in the final chapter, when we consider the nature of the cultural and religious context that seems to be implicit in much of the Qur'an's content. Nevertheless, as we will now see in the next chapter, given the state of literacy in the Hijaz in the early seventh century, on this basis alone it does not seem possible for the region to have been steeped in the rich cultural heritage of the late ancient Roman and Sasanian worlds.

5

Literacy, Orality, and the Qur'an's Linguistic Environment

One of the most exciting and productive developments in the study of Islamic origins during the past few decades has been a prodigious expansion in our knowledge of the linguistic history of ancient Arabia.[1] Innumerable inscriptions in a range of dialects and scripts have emerged from the deserts of Arabia, as well as from some of the oasis settlements in the north of the peninsula. Many of these have been dated well into the first millennium BCE, affording us a long record of linguistic data for understanding the history of the Arabian Peninsula. There are also many more recent inscriptions, including some from the centuries just before the rise of Islam. Although there are some surviving monumental inscriptions, mostly from the oases in the north, the overwhelming majority of these inscriptions are graffiti, mere doodlings on rocks by random passersby. These graffiti are often poorly executed and in a rudimentary script, and unfortunately their content is generally of negligible value for the historian, limited as they are to personal names and simple statements of a largely personal nature. Nevertheless, these graffiti offer the historical linguist a new opportunity to study the history of scripts and language in the Arabian Peninsula, and in recent years these findings have been brought to bear on understanding the early history of the Qur'an.

Although some bold claims have occasionally been advanced regarding the history of the Qur'an on the basis of this evidence, in light of the significant limitations inherent to the nature of this data, many of the conclusions that have been drawn are not always as certain as they may at

first seem. Nevertheless, the net effect of this development has been an extremely positive one, inasmuch as it allows us to better comprehend the linguistic environment in which the Qur'an emerged, as well as the status of writing and literacy in this historical context. As regards the latter, surely the most definitive and decisive conclusion to emerge from this new interest in the early history of the Arabic language concerns the status of literacy. According to the most recent and authoritative scholarship on the subject, the cultures of both Mecca and Yathrib, as well as the surrounding settlements of the pre-Islamic Hijaz, were, despite the existence of various systems of writing, fundamentally nonliterate. This means that insofar as we seek to understand the Qur'an, or at least some part of it, as a product of Muhammad's Mecca and Medina, we must at the same time recognize its status as a fundamentally oral text that developed within a broader cultural context that also was fundamentally oral. Consequently, recognition of these conditions must constantly stand at the center of any efforts to understand the formation and transmission of the Qur'an in its earliest history.

ORALITY AND WRITING IN THE LATE ANCIENT HIJAZ

For the Islamic tradition, the Qur'an in its truest and purest form exists only as a spoken text: the very word *qurʾān* means "recitation, reading, lecture." Thus the Qur'an as divine proclamation was and still remains primarily oral even in the face of its written form.[2] Angelika Neuwirth highlights this quality nicely at the outset of her recent book on *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*: "the Qur'an is not only a text composed orally but one that was also transmitted orally throughout history and is today represented primarily in this way."[3] Yet, as one reads further in this volume, Neuwirth's position regarding the Qur'an's orality becomes increasingly muddled and unworkable, as she tries persistently to have it both ways. On the one hand, the Qur'an is fundamentally oral in its true form, yet on the other hand, Neuwirth also maintains that the Qur'an was written down effectively in its current form even in the lifetime of Muhammad. On this particular point, one must note, she stands sharply at odds with the reports from the Islamic tradition indicating the Qur'an's oral transmission as well as the reigning consensus of modern scholarship on the Qur'an.

Neuwirth identifies the Qur'an "not—as one might conclude from its frequent self- designation *al-kitāb*, 'the writing'—a 'book' conceived by an author that unfolds according to a preconceived plan; rather, as is clear from its equally frequent self-designation *qurʾān*, 'lecture, reading,' it is a proclamation." And so "the Qur'an itself," as she explains, "confronts the problem of its non-written form and the lack of the paraphernalia of writing."[4] Neuwirth therefore concludes that "the very preservation of the proclamation, in oral tradition, was a task that lay on many shoulders, and its codification after the death of the proclaimer required further transmitters."[5] Thus far, we seem to be dealing with a set of traditions delivered and then transmitted orally, without being fully committed to writing for some time—precisely as the Islamic tradition reports. Nevertheless, when Neuwirth comes to consider the Qur'an's status as a written text, we meet with the surprising assertion that "the most probable theory seems to be that at the death of the proclaimer, the revelations received by this time had been fixed in writing, in the form of copies that had been established with his approval by some of his companions, although these forms were not submitted by the Prophet himself to a final redaction in the form of a codex."[6] Thus, Neuwirth would have us believe, without much evidence at all, that by the time of Muhammad's death, all the revelations that he proclaimed had been committed to their final written form by some of his followers, and that Muhammad had inspected their copies and had given his approval. All that remained was to organize the revelations into a codex, with perhaps some final tweaks added to the text along the way.

It is true that Neuwirth's work has been greatly influential on much recent study of the Qur'an, and yet one must identify her opinion that the suras of the Qur'an were written down in their present form during Muhammad's lifetime under his supervision for what it is: an outlier that is far from the mainstream. To the contrary, as Daniel Madigan observes, "There is general agreement in Muslim, as in non-Muslim, circles that the Qur'an in its present form had not been written at the time of Muḥammad's death."[7] Only John Burton has previously advocated this position, and although his work brings great scholarly rigor in its argument for this hypothesis, it has convinced almost no one that the written Qur'an goes back to Muhammad's

lifetime.[8] Some scholars, as noted in the first chapter, have suggested that there may have been some limited efforts to write down some of Muhammad's teachings during his lifetime. While this is not impossible, the suggestion remains purely hypothetical and supposes that only some limited portions of the text, and not all the Qur'anic suras, were committed to writing.[9] Indeed, Nöldeke and Schwally both concluded that "it is doubtful that Muḥammad put down in writing all the revelations of the divine book from the start." Nevertheless, Nöldeke (and Schwally) simultaneously maintained that "it is likely that already many years before the flight he dictated entire suras to a scribe, not merely single verses, as Muslims claim." The only specific evidence adduced for this claim, however, on which both Nöldeke and Schwally knowingly diverge from the Islamic tradition, is a report from Muhammad's early biographies concerning the conversion of ʿUmar, which even Schwally must admit is a bit shaky.[10] Indeed, these biographical traditions are, as we have already noted, notoriously untrustworthy when it comes to relating events of the early seventh century, and this memory of ʿUmar's conversion certainly has more to do with how the Muslims of the eighth and later centuries remembered ʿUmar than with any historical information concerning the actual state of the Qur'an during Muhammad's lifetime.[11]

Schwally, as we discussed in the first chapter, appears to be primarily responsible for introducing the idea that significant parts of the Qur'an were written down during Muhammad's lifetime. And while many scholars seem to have subsequently embraced this assumption, any convincing evidence for it is wanting. For instance, in making his case Schwally argues that the Qur'an's "different names for revelation, like *qurʾān*, *kitāb*, and *waḥy*, are allusions to its written origin."[12] Yet these terms, in fact, clearly indicate the opposite! For instance, as Neuwirth notes, the word *qurʾān* means "recitation, proclamation," and it stands as one of the most important indicators of the Qur'an's fundamental status as an oral rather than a written text. Likewise, *waḥy* means "revelation" and it refers not to anything written but rather to the "preverbal inspiration" believed to lie behind the words of Muhammad's revelations. And as for *kitāb*, it is true that this word means "book." Nevertheless, *kitāb*/book in the Qur'an refers not to the written Qur'an itself but rather, as Neuwirth rightly explains, to the archetypal

heavenly "book" of which its revelations are but an earthly manifestation.[13] Thus, when Schwally maintains that "sūra 29:47 contains an allusion to writing down the revelations," this is simply not true. Instead, this verse refers to the heavenly *kitāb* from which the words of the Qur'an were taken, and there is no indication at all of anything being written down.[14]

The only other evidence that Schwally can muster is that the later Islamic tradition reports the names of certain individuals alleged to be Muhammad's scribes, as we noted in chapter 1.[15] Yet there is no reason that we must take these later memories at face value, given the well-known unreliability of the Islamic historical tradition for the period of origins in general and for the history of the Qur'an in particular. Instead, it is quite likely that these reports simply reflect one manner in which later Muslim scholars came to imagine the Qur'an's production and transmission within the early community, in a manner that reflected their own highly literate and scribal culture. None other than Nöldeke himself judges the witness of the early Islamic traditions about the Qur'an as itself affording "unambiguous" evidence "that the Qur'an had not yet been collected during the Prophet's lifetime." Otherwise, the reports of its subsequent collection would make little sense: "if they had gathered the whole Qur'an, why did it require so much effort to bring it together later on?"[16] Or, to quote from a more recent scholar, Gerald Hawting, "The [Islamic] tradition's own account of the early history of the Qurʾān makes that point for us. It tells of the existence and destruction of variant texts, and it is acknowledged that the text of the Qurʾān as we have it bears no relation to the order in which it was revealed to Muḥammad. It is implicit, therefore, that the Qurʾān would look rather different if it had been compiled and put into order by the Prophet himself."[17]

ORALITY AND LITERACY IN MUHAMMAD'S ARABIA

The question of the status of literacy in the Qur'an's traditional milieu, and more specifically the lack thereof, is of course directly relevant to understanding the Qur'an's early composition and transmission. It is therefore unfortunate that despite a number of important recent studies on precisely this topic, the matter of literacy in sixth- and seventh-century Arabia has been largely ignored and passed over in most studies of the Qur'an.[18] The same is no less true of any number of recent edited volumes on

the Qur'an's historical context, which, despite their contributions from many prominent scholars, generally elide the thorny matter of literacy entirely.[19] Time and again, one finds a problematic absence of recent studies that directly address the status and role of writing in Muhammad's Mecca and Medina, issues that obviously have enormous bearing for understanding the Qur'an's earliest history.[20] It is true that scholarship on the formation of the Qur'an has occasionally ventured outside the Hijaz, to South Arabia or the northern oases in the orbit of the Nabateans, in order to find evidence of pre-Islamic literacy in Arabic, as evidenced most notably in the work of Christian Robin and Robert Hoyland. Yet not only are these regions quite distant from Mecca and Medina, but they are also socially, culturally, economically, and environmentally very different, so that we may not blithely draw conclusions about the Qur'an's traditional homeland based on what we find in these locations. Accordingly, as Peter Stein rightly cautions, epigraphic evidence from these other regions "does not warrant the assumption of literacy in the sense that writing is used on a regular basis in order to perform a range of communicative tasks within commercial and social life."[21]

Given the near-total absence of the important and authoritative studies of literacy in pre-Islamic Arabia by Michael Macdonald, Peter Stein, and others from much recent scholarship on the Qur'an, I have little doubt that many readers will be surprised and perhaps even incredulous to learn of their striking conclusions. Indeed, to my knowledge, only Sidney Griffith has taken Macdonald's studies on this topic fully into consideration, leading him to conclude that the severe limitations of literacy at the dawn of Islam mean that any knowledge of biblical tradition in the Qur'an's audience must have been learned through oral tradition.[22] Yet, despite their frequent absence from the conversation, the conditions of literacy in late ancient Arabia as Macdonald has identified them must inform how we understand the early history of the Qur'an.

As it turns out, literacy in the early seventh-century Hijaz was in fact extremely rare and almost completely unknown, to such a degree that we must conceive of the formation of Muhammad's new religious movement and its sacred text within a context that was nonliterate and fundamentally oral. Robin effectively removes all ambiguity on this matter in alerting us plainly to the reality that "writing was hardly practiced at all in the time of

Muhammad."[23] There are numerous graffiti carved onto rocks in the desert from around this time, it is true, and so writing in Arabic was not entirely unknown in Muhammad's Hijaz. Indeed, as Stein observes, the sheer number of these scrawlings could easily give one a false impression that the Arabian Peninsula was "a stronghold of literacy."[24] Yet, to the contrary, there seems to be widespread agreement among experts on the early history of the Arabic language "that, before and immediately after the rise of Islam, Arab culture was in all important respects fundamentally oral," as Macdonald's studies in particular have now established.[25] Indeed, even Angelika Neuwirth has recently acknowledged "that the technique of writing did not play a decisive part in the cultural life of pre-Islamic Arabia."[26] Unfortunately, however, Neuwirth fails to see how this recognition fatally undermines her fervent conviction that the late ancient Hijaz was brimming with the sophisticated cultural and religious traditions of Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean that somehow had been transferred there.

Although Macdonald's determinations regarding literacy, which seem to reflect a reigning consensus on the matter, could not be more important or clearer, they have nonetheless been widely overlooked. Yet his words leave little room for doubt regarding literacy in the traditional milieu of the Qur'an's birth: as he writes elsewhere, we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that "—and this is a crucial point—despite the extensive use of writing with pen and ink implied by (a) the development of the Nabataean into the Arabic script; (b) the confident handwriting of the earliest Arabic papyri; and (c) the reports from the early Islamic period mentioning writing and documents, Arab culture at the dawn of Islam was fundamentally oral."[27] Therefore, if we accept the findings of Macdonald, Stein, Robin, and Neuwirth regarding the nature of literacy in the Qur'an's historical context, then the Qur'an itself must also have been a fundamentally oral text that was not written down until much later, and possibly even in a different cultural context. Accordingly, we must conceive of the Qur'an's initial production and transmission as taking place in a setting that was effectively without writing and that was, most importantly, nonliterate more specifically with regard to the production and transmission of cultural and religious texts.

What, then, are we to make of the clear evidence of writing found in the numerous graffiti scattered throughout the Arabian desert? There is no question that multiple writing systems existed in Muhammad's lifetime that

could be used for writing Arabic: why, then, did these remain effectively unused, and why did the cultures of the central Hijaz remain nonliterate, despite having writing systems readily available? A great deal of Macdonald's scholarship has been dedicated to explaining just how, despite the existence of a rudimentary writing system, ancient Arabian societies could in fact still be fundamentally nonliterate. According to Macdonald, a literate society is one "in which reading and writing have become essential to its functioning, either throughout the society (as in the modern West) or in certain vital aspects, such as the bureaucracy, economic and commercial activities, or religious life." By comparison, a nonliterate society is one "in which literacy is not essential to any of its activities, and memory and oral communication perform the functions which reading and writing have within a literate society."[28] With some exceptions, including most notably southwestern Arabia (i.e., Yemen), and certain larger settlements in the northwest near the Fertile Crescent, culture within the societies of late ancient Arabia remained almost completely nonliterate. Although some individuals had learned how to write in one of ancient Arabia's many alphabets,

> the choice of writing materials available to nomads in antiquity was generally limited to the rocks of the desert. Literacy was therefore of little practical use in these societies and would not have displaced speech and memory as the means of communication and record. Instead, writing seems to have been used almost entirely as a pastime for those doing jobs which involved long hours of enforced, usually solitary, idleness in the desert, such as guarding the herds while they pastured, or keeping watch for game or enemies.[29]

Macdonald reaches this conclusion not only on the basis of the available evidence for ancient—and late ancient—Arabia, but also through careful and illuminating anthropological comparisons with similar societies across the ages and even into the present. In many nonliterate cultures, both past and present, it is not uncommon for some individuals to acquire a form of rudimentary literacy in a basic system of writing that is generally learned from family in the home or from friends as children. In such cultures, writing is used mostly for games and entertainment, as well as graffiti and other sorts of brief messages, serving virtually no practical or official function whatsoever.[30] The presence of a primitive, casual system of writing in these cultures thus has no effect on "their continued use of memory and

oral communication in their daily lives," and these societies maintain "an extremely rich oral literature in which writing, even in their own script, plays no part."[31] For the inhabitants of the more remote areas of central Arabia, Macdonald notes, one must additionally consider the limitations that acquiring suitable media for writing will have played in restricting the transition to a literate society.

> Writing materials have to be imported from the settled areas and are easily destroyed and, unlike paper in the modern age, papyrus outside Egypt is likely to have been expensive for people in a subsistence economy. Pottery, which when broken seems to have provided the everyday writing support for the sedentaries in much of the ancient Near East, was of little use to nomads for the very reason that it was breakable and not easily replaced, and they preferred vessels made of stone, wood, metal and leather. Thus, the only writing materials which were plentifully available to them were the rocks of the desert, but for most people these are not much use for writing lists, letters, or other everyday documents.[32]

Why, then, did the nomads of the Arabian deserts bother to learn a simple form of writing that had no practical use? Macdonald suggests that, like the use of similar writings systems in other nonliterate societies, they learned it as a form of recreation. Their basic knowledge of a writing system likely came through contact with literate individuals, whom the nomads would have observed writing and then would have asked to teach them the basics, Macdonald suggests. Having learned a rudimentary form of writing, "the nomad would return to the desert and no doubt show off his skills to his family and friends, tracing the letters in the dust or cutting them with a sharp stone on a rock." In this way, other members of the society would also learn the elements of the writing system. But

> Because his nomadic society had no other materials to write on, the skill would have remained more of a curiosity than something of practical use, except for one thing. Nomadic life involves long periods of solitary idleness, guarding the herds while they pasture, keeping a lookout for game and enemies, etc. Anything that can help pass the time is welcome. Some people carved their tribal marks on the rocks; others carved drawings, often with great skill. Writing provided the perfect pastime and both men and women among the nomads seized it with great enthusiasm, covering the rocks of the Syro-Arabian deserts with scores of thousands of graffiti. The graffito was the perfect medium for such circumstances.[33]

The nature of what we find written in these graffiti is indeed perfectly compatible with this hypothesis: "The content of these graffiti, when it is more than purely personal names, is concerned exclusively with nomadic life and 98% of them have been found in the desert and almost nowhere else."[34] There is, in effect, a lot of "Kilroy was here" scattered across the Arabian deserts. So Neuwirth also observes, "Although recent archaeological expeditions have brought to light innumerable rock inscriptions dispersed widely over the Arabian Peninsula, there are hardly any written units that could be described as significant 'texts.' Most of the rock inscriptions, some of which are at least partly in a North Arabian language, employ the Nabatean script, and they are extremely short, dedicated mostly to private, ephemeral issues."[35]

It is true that Macdonald states at one point in his work

> that the picture that emerges from the settled populations of ancient west Arabia is one of literate societies in which, even if the majority of the population was illiterate, the written word was fundamental to the functioning of government, religion, and especially commerce. There must also have been a sizeable number of private citizens able to carve graffiti in the forms of the script used for public inscriptions. In South Arabia, we now have evidence of the extensive use, through scribes, of writing in day-to-day activities. In the north, we have as yet no direct evidence for the use of writing at this level, but there are strong indications that it must have existed there as well.[36]

Nevertheless, it must be made fully clear, lest such a statement be misinterpreted out of context, that in this instance Macdonald's observations are made specifically in regard to southern Arabia (Yemen) and the larger oasis cities of the north, Taymāʾ, Dedān, and Dūmah, based on evidence from the first millennium BCE. By contrast, when he comes to consider in this same study the very different circumstances that saw the rise of Islam in Mecca and Medina, he draws the unequivocal conclusion "that, before and immediately after the rise of Islam, Arab culture was in all important respects fundamentally oral, as is that of the Tuareg today."[37] One must assume that Macdonald has been very careful in drawing differing conclusions as they are relevant to different times and places, and one should accordingly read his analysis with similar care for discerning the

specific contexts that he addresses. Indeed, one will note in this article, which considers the whole of the Arabian Peninsula over the course of many centuries, that Macdonald has taken care to clearly punctuate the divisions between sections and topics: presumably readers are intended to take notice of these breaks in the article, which mark important shifts in geographic and temporal focus. Otherwise, his conclusions in this article would be entirely contradictory and make no sense at all.

Likewise, in stark contrast with the numerous monumental inscriptions that have been found in these northern oases and Yemen, there are no surviving inscriptions from either Mecca or Yathrib or their immediate surroundings.[38] Were there any monumental inscriptions in the central Hijaz, then presumably Robin and Macdonald would have come to different conclusions regarding the levels of literacy in Mecca and Medina. Yet the complete absence of any such monuments undergirds their shared finding that culture in Muhammad's Hijaz was both nonliterate and fundamentally oral. According to Macdonald, from the late first millennium BCE and the early first millennium CE, up until the rise of Islam, the Old Arabic language was "the vernacular of groups that were basically non-literate, perhaps primarily nomadic." Hoyland too identifies Arabic in this period as the language of nonliterate peoples.[39] Thus, on the basis of these studies, we must confront the reality that by all measures Muhammad's new religious movement appears to have emerged within a fundamentally nonliterate society, where even in the presence of a basic system of writing, orality remained the privileged and authoritative medium. Recent affirmation of Macdonald's findings by Ahmad Al-Jallad importantly verifies their continued status as the reigning consensus regarding orality and literacy in pre-Islamic Arabia.[40] And so, as Jonathan Brown aptly summarizes the conditions in the late ancient Hijaz, we must understand that its inhabitants were "always on the verge of famine, drought, and death. . . . There is no government, no law, only family and the tribe. There are no written histories, only the recited poems of deeds done in battle and lost desert loves."[41]

A culture that "was in all important respects fundamentally oral" comports well what we can discern otherwise about the social and political conditions of Mecca and Yathrib at this time, affirming what we saw already in the previous chapter. The available evidence indicates that Muhammad's

new religious movement formed within a tribal society, which was, like many tribal societies, stateless. Its political organization consisted of several competing tribes, each led by a chieftain, a role that Muhammad himself filled once he came to power in Yathrib/Medina.[42] Governance in such a society did not require writing and literacy, and tribal societies very commonly have oral, nonliterate cultures: historically, even empires have functioned without the existence of literacy.[43] Moreover, religious culture in tribal societies generally exists in oral tradition, and, even if we were to assume that pre-Islamic Mecca was the site of a major pilgrimage shrine—which, as we have seen, by all indications it was not, pilgrimage, too, is a common feature of tribal religious practice.[44] The subsistence-level agricultural economies of Mecca and Yathrib likewise would have had little need for writing. Even any hypothetical trade in leather goods with the Roman army would not have required any high level of literacy, and trade on such a scale is quite common in nonliterate, tribal societies.[45] The well-studied trade networks of the pre-Columbian native Americans in what would become the United States afford an excellent example of long-distance trade in goods between nonliterate, tribal societies.[46] One suspects that in the case of any Meccan-Roman trade, gold—and not necessarily Hijazi gold—would have been used as the primary means of exchange.[47]

At the same time, however, one certainly should not exclude entirely the possibility that the rudimentary writing systems evident in the Arabian graffiti may have been used occasionally to write simple receipts or records of exchange. Yet this level of writing would not require any adjustments to the broader findings of Macdonald, Robin, and Stein concerning literacy. It is fully conceivable that in a nonliterate society such as Muhammad's Hijaz some very basic documents may have been drafted from time to time; the same may have been true of quotidian writings such as simple contracts, lists, or receipts. Such practices, one should emphasize, are generally assumed, however, rather than evidenced.[48] The one exception would appear to be a single passage from the Qur'an (2:282), which directs that all debts should be recorded by a scribe, a dictate that seems to presume that scribes were available somewhere, possibly in Mecca or Yathrib, unless the passage originated outside the Hijaz. Nevertheless, in this case, the members of the community are instructed to dictate their contract to a scribe, suggesting that Muhammad's followers were themselves illiterate. The same is further

indicated by the following verse (2:283), which notes that if a scribe cannot be found, then there should be some sort of security deposit: writing an agreement on their own does not seem to be an option. Indeed, this passage from the Qur'an itself thus offers another sign pointing to the Qur'an's genesis in a fundamentally nonliterate context, even if there may have been some very limited use of writing in its immediate milieux.

Yet even if we allow the occasional production of brief documents of a practical nature, there remains, as Robin frequently reminds us, a "complete absence of literary texts, chronicles, treatises, poetic pieces, myths, or rituals."[49] That is to say, in terms of culture, these societies remained completely nonliterate and fundamentally oral, a point equally confirmed by Stein. Outside the northern oasis towns and South Arabia, Stein concludes, the extent of literacy present in the Arabian Peninsula was effectively limited to "the ability to leave behind spontaneous and brief rock graffiti, which serve the sole purpose of passing the time and fulfill no communicative function." And more importantly, as Stein further observes, "There are no indicators of the existence of a literature of an epic, mythological, or historical kind in pre-Islamic Arabia."[50] Therefore, even if we allow, as Stein in particular suggests, that the "presence of several people who knew how to write in a city like Mecca or Yathrib/Medina is plausible," this does not take us very far and still finds us squarely within a society that is fundamentally nonliterate.[51]

Perhaps there may have been some individuals who learned their letters as a pastime during the solitary days and weeks attending to livestock in remote areas outside of Mecca, as Macdonald's research would suggest. Yet, given Mecca's very small population and its remote location, one has to wonder if any of its inhabitants would actually have acquired even this rudimentary literacy. With just over a hundred adult males, was there really any need for writing or the opportunity to practice it? Indeed, if we think about such matters a little further, we should also note that according to the Islamic tradition, as well as many modern scholars, much of the Qur'an was first delivered in Mecca, where most of the village's inhabitants rejected the authority of both Muhammad and his revelations. This circumstance would leave us with perhaps around twenty to thirty adult males, at most, who were following Muhammad and listening to his teachings. Should we then assume that somehow one or more of these subsistence pastoralists was

skilled at writing and was busy taking down notes of what Muhammad said? Need it be said that this seems inherently unlikely? One also must consider, along the same lines for that matter, just how few people would have even been around to hear any of the Qur'anic traditions that are alleged to have been spoken in Mecca in the first place. Any Meccan traditions, in such case, would have depended entirely on the memories of this same small handful of individuals. Likewise, in the case of Yathrib's small, quarrelsome, agricultural hamlets, do we really imagine that there was great need for individuals who could write complex texts, as would be necessary for any records of Muhammad's teaching there?

One should also perhaps briefly consider in this context the matter of Muhammad's personal illiteracy, as reported in the Islamic tradition. Although many scholars have long viewed this as an apologetic motif, designed to insulate Muhammad from knowledge of earlier Jewish and Christian traditions, given the social and cultural context in which he is alleged to have lived his life, his illiteracy actually seems highly plausible. Yet in any case, the reality is that if a Meccan merchant, or for that matter anyone else in the late ancient Hijaz, wished to become literate, he or she almost certainly would not have done so in Arabic, which was not in use for literary purposes or international exchange at this time. Instead, like the modern nonliterate communities identified by Macdonald, they surely would have learned to write in Greek or Aramaic, one of the prestige languages of the people with whom they traded, just as among the Via and the Tuareg, members who wish to acquire literacy do so in English or French, respectively.[52] Likewise, any scribal work or receipts that they would have commissioned as a result of any long-distance trade would almost certainly have been in one of these two literate languages. Accordingly, if Muhammad were a merchant who traded over great distances and had acquired some level of genuine literacy as a merchant, both big "ifs," one imagines that he would have become literate in Aramaic and almost certainly not in Arabic. If this were so, then presumably his knowledge of Aramaic would have given him access to Jewish and Christian religious culture, which provided then the basis for his new religious movement. While such a hypothesis is highly speculative (and I certainly would not endorse it), it certainly would explain a lot.

The state of literacy in Mecca and in the central Hijaz on the eve of Islam, therefore, is simply not compatible with the prominent practice of writing that Neuwirth's hypothesis regarding the Qur'an's full commitment to writing before Muhammad's death would require. This finding is significant, since the literary approach that she and her disciples advocate for studying the Qur'an as a text deliberately composed by Muhammad and his early followers in Mecca and Medina demands its rapid fixation in a written version that he himself helped to produce. Yet, if Macdonald and Robin are correct, and it seems they are, then the notion that Muhammad supervised the collection of his teachings into a written form before his death is extremely improbable. The social, economic, and material conditions in Mecca and Medina make for a rather high improbability that writing was practiced in either settlement at such a high level, if at all. Where, then, we must ask, could Muhammad have found scribes capable of transcribing his words in these subsistence-level villages where formal writing was practically nonexistent? Belief that the Qur'an was written down to any significant extent during Muhammad's lifetime simply defies plausibility in the current state of our evidence. It is hard to see how such a task could have been possible or would even have been contemplated in a fundamentally nonliterate context such as the Hijaz of this era. Reports of Muhammad's scribes in the later Islamic tradition must be, again, the innocent inventions of medieval Islamic intellectuals who were projecting the conditions of their own circumstances back onto memories of the life of their revered founder. Even Neuwirth on occasion acknowledges the fundamentally nonliterate nature of Hijazi culture in the early seventh century. And yet, she has chosen to believe, strangely and in the absence of any evidence, that toward the end of Muhammad's life his followers suddenly made the great leap forward to literacy and wrote down the entirety of the Qur'an under his direct supervision.[53]

Nevertheless, if one follows the canonical narrative of the Qur'an's collection, as Neuwirth professes to do, both Abū Bakr and Zayd initially refused to undertake the task, protesting, "How can you do something that the messenger of God did not do!?" One has to admit, along with Nöldeke, that it is hard to imagine how such a tradition could ever have come about

in the first place if the Qur'an had been effectively written down in its entirety or even in significant part under Muhammad's supervision during his lifetime. In this case, what could possibly have given rise to such a memory, which would be so patently false? The later Islamic tradition struggled to accommodate this remembrance, which was a source of considerable embarrassment for later interpreters.[54] Accordingly, in the case of those whom the tradition recalls as having collected/memorized (*jama'a*) the Qur'an during Muhammad's lifetime, we must assume that the latter meaning, "memorized," is intended—that is, if we place any stock in these traditions at all. If, as seems to be the case, Muhammad's teachings were not quickly written down, it would be extremely important for certain individuals to take on the task of trying to remember what he had told his followers. Such recourse to individual memory is the norm in a nonliterate, tribal society, although one should not make the mistake of supposing that these individuals were able to memorize his words entirely and verbatim, in the way that many Muslims will memorize the Qur'an today. As we will see in the following two chapters, human memory and oral tradition are simply not capable of such scope and accuracy absent the existence of a written tradition. Instead, we should presumably look on such figures as individuals who were held in esteem by the later tradition for what they could recall, to the best of their abilities, of Muhammad's teachings, rather than as human tape recorders.

Moreover, as the work of Gregor Schoeler has demonstrated, writing in early Islam long occupied a controversial position in relation to orality, which enjoyed privileged status. There was great reluctance to commit things to writing during the first century, a tendency that simply maintained the dominant cultural values of the nonliterate society within which Muhammad began his new religious movement.[55] In such societies, although a writing system may exist, "their scripts have not penetrated the basic functions of their own communities," and oral tradition retains its place of primacy for the production and transmission of culture.[56] Therefore, even after Muhammad's death, it remained the case that "writing in the early Islamic centuries was used for practical purposes, for letters or memoranda, for treaties, legal documents, etc., but religious materials (with the eventual exception of the Qurʾān), poetry and literary prose, genealogy, and

historical traditions were transmitted orally." As Macdonald further remarks, "It is very doubtful that such a situation came about suddenly in the first Islamic century and therefore, although we have no direct evidence from the Jahiliyyah, it seems safe to assume that this was a situation which early Islamic society in Arabia inherited."[57] Unfortunately, Schoeler does not give much attention to the history of the Qur'an in relation to the fundamental orality of both formative Islam and the pre-Islamic Hijaz, since he instead faithfully reproduces the Nöldekean-Schwallian credo.[58] Nevertheless, at the same time, Schoeler makes very clear that by all indications the Qur'an was not and could not have been edited in Muhammad's lifetime but circulated orally after his death until its eventual collection.[59] Furthermore, the fact that early Arabic poetry—whatever its age and origins may be—also existed only in oral tradition for centuries offers yet another sign that we are dealing with a culture at the rise of Islam that was fundamentally oral in nature.[60]

By all indications, the eventual move toward a literate culture and writing in Arabic comes later with the expansion of Muhammad's religious polity and the need for more sophisticated tools of governance in what was increasingly becoming a vast multicultural and wealthy empire rather than a tribal state.[61] Moreover, most of the inhabitants of this hastily acquired and sprawling polity belonged to cultures that had known a high level of cultural literacy for centuries and would therefore expect a literate administration that would govern using the written word. During the first forty years following Muhammad's death, we accordingly find just a few inscriptions and papyri written in Arabic, as well as some Arabic inscriptions on a number of Arab-Sasanian coins. These documents bear evidence of a limited move toward using Arabic as an administrative language in a manner that is not seen prior to the 640s CE.[62] Nevertheless, much of the early caliphate's administrative activities continued to be conducted in Greek and other non-Arabic languages of the late ancient Near East. This was so not only because the vast majority of the region's inhabitants would have used these languages and not known Arabic, but also because many of the caliphate's early administrators were drawn from the among the same local notables who had been in power under Roman and Sasanian rule.[63] Only during the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik do texts written in Arabic begin to appear in significant

quantities for the first time.[64] Surely it is not a mere coincidence, I suggest, that the rise in use of Arabic as a written language would also coincide with the standardization of a written Qur'an into its now canonical version?

There is but one exception that I can think of to the otherwise consistent pattern of evidence indicating that Muhammad's new religious movement emerged within a nonliterate context, and it is admittedly a significant one: the so-called "Constitution of Medina," or the "*Umma* Document" as Fred Donner prefers to name it.[65] Scholars of Islamic origins are nearly unanimous in recognizing this text as a document from the time of Muhammad's rule as a chieftain of Medina's various tribes. This agreement between Muhammad and the Jews of Medina (as well as Medina's other inhabitants) allowed certain Jewish tribes to be incorporated within Muhammad's new religious polity, even as they were allowed to retain their Jewish identity and follow the Jewish law and scripture. The boundaries of Muhammad's new religious community as defined by this document, establishing the inclusion of Jews who remained Jews, are radically different from the attitudes that the later tradition would take toward Jews and Judaism. For this reason especially, scholars are widely agreed that this compact must bear witness to an authentic document from Muhammad's time in Medina. Its fabrication in some other context is by comparison highly improbable. Multiple versions of this document have come down to us via the Islamic historical tradition, no single one of which is likely to have preserved the exact wording of the agreement, let alone the features of the dialect in which it was originally written.[66] Yet it seems clear that these varying recensions must ultimately derive from some sort of written agreement that Muhammad had drawn up between the Jewish and non-Jewish tribes of Yathrib, outlining the terms of their union as one community under his leadership.

How should we square the production of this document with the fact that by all indications, Muhammad and his followers appear to have lived in a nonliterate society? I have to admit, the answer is not entirely certain, and Macdonald, Stein, and others do not provide us with any suggestions. Nevertheless, this document is at the same time not at all impossible to reconcile with such conditions. The most likely explanation is that, even though Hijazi culture was in fact fundamentally nonliterate, there were, as we have seen, basic systems of writing available that could be used when

some sort of document was required, even if such occasions were relatively rare. It would appear that this agreement afforded just such an occasion, when the various parties involved demanded that some sort of terms be committed to writing before they would consent to come together under Muhammad's authority. Given the quarrelsome history of the Medinans prior to Muhammad's arrival, it would not be at all surprising if the inhabitants of Yathrib's hamlets demanded a clearly written account of the terms of their alliance before they would agree to come together. And, as noted above, it is entirely possible that, as Stein suggests, there were several individuals in Medina and even Mecca who could produce simple contracts or receipts in writing if needed. Presumably, then, there must have been someone at hand who could write down the terms of their accord using one of the many alphabets that were available on the Arabian Peninsula at the time, a skill perhaps acquired initially from the practice of desert graffiti. Accordingly, the production of this document to form the basis for Muhammad's new community of the Believers in Yathrib serves, I would suggest, as the exception that helps solidify the rule.

Based on what we have seen so far regarding the status of literacy and writing among the Arabs of the early seventh century, we must conclude that Muhammad's teachings were delivered to his followers orally and remained an oral tradition throughout his lifetime and even well beyond his death. The cultural conditions in which he lived and taught his religious vision were simply incompatible with any notion that we—and obviously many later Islamic intellectuals as well—might have of scribes writing down his teachings under his supervision. Even if there were a few individuals in Mecca and Medina who were capable of writing basic documents—simple contracts, receipts, lists, and so on—there is a clear and broad consensus that in Muhammad's Arabia writing was not used to record cultural and religious texts, which remained exclusively oral. Such is typical, one might add, as Jan Assmann notes, of societies that are only just beginning to use writing: in such cultures, "writing is rarely used to store cultural texts."[67] In our case, this limitation would include, rather obviously and inescapably, the religious traditions that would eventually inspire the Qur'an. Therefore, Muhammad's teachings must have been transmitted orally and without recourse to writing among his followers in the decades following his death, as they began to spread out swiftly across western Asia and North Africa.

At some point, and we don't know exactly when, Muhammad's followers began to record some fragments of his teachings insofar as they were able to remember them, piecemeal, as the Islamic tradition would suggest, on palm branches, stones, camel bones, even as many of his teachings continued to remain "in the hearts of men." Perhaps this process had begun already as early as the reign of Abū Bakr, or possibly not until Uthman came to power. Yet one would imagine that there was no great urgency to commit the Qur'an to writing during the first few decades of this new religious movement's existence for two reasons. Firstly, the fundamentally oral nature of culture familiar to Muhammad's earliest followers would have strongly discouraged such a move. Secondly, as I have noted in a number of other publications, Muhammad and his followers were expecting the apocalyptic end of the world to occur very soon, seemingly even before Muhammad's own death.[68] With such firm conviction, there would have been little need to bother with writing the Qur'an down in order to ensure its accurate transmission for posterity: there would be no posterity, since the world was soon to end. For comparison, scholars of early Christianity likewise understand that Jesus's early followers did not begin to write his teachings down until a few decades after his death for similar reasons. They, too, were expecting the imminent end of the world. Only as the end was persistently delayed longer and longer did they come to the conclusion that they would need to write things down so they could be remembered faithfully in the years—and centuries—to come. So it must have been also for Muhammad's early followers, who likewise only began the process of writing down Muhammad's teachings as time continued to pass and the end did not, in fact, arrive with the immediacy that was originally anticipated.

After these early rudimentary efforts to collect bits and pieces of the Qur'an on a variety of smaller media, Muhammad's followers eventually began to produce larger written collections of his teachings as they were circulating in the oral traditions and collective memory of the early community of the Believers. It was at this stage, most likely, that the first regional efforts to collect the Qur'an were undertaken independently of one another, as we explained in the first chapter. There was possibly even an "Uthmanic" version of the Qur'an that was produced at this stage, but if such a codex existed it would again have amounted to little more than the regional version of the Qur'an collected in the Hijaz, as proposed in the

second chapter. One would obviously need to assume that in the process of transmitting memories of Muhammad orally over decades and collecting them into different regional collections, various changes and additions could and likely would have been made to Muhammad's teachings. Such alterations would have occurred, one must again note, without deliberate or malicious intent but instead as an altogether natural consequence of oral transmission and the nature of human memory, both individual and collective, as we will see in the following chapters.

Moreover, there is no reason to suppose that once these regional versions of the Qur'an began to be collected, their contents could not be modified or added to. Even in Muhammad's lifetime we are informed that the contents of the Qur'an were regularly being changed, as old teachings were canceled and replaced by new, often strikingly different traditions through the process of abrogation. This same process likely continued as contradictory traditions continued to be newly remembered or discovered, even after the move to begin writing things down. Indeed, the Islamic traditions of the Qur'an's compilation and composition themselves alert us to the fact that there was great variation among these regional versions, so much so that their differences were perceived as an existential threat to the community of the Believers. It finally fell to ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj to forge scriptural unity out of this diversity, right at the moment when writing and literacy in Arabic were beginning to emerge as common, widespread practices. The result of their efforts was, to reiterate, a standard imperial version of the Qur'an that, with the backing of political force, would eventually supplant the other early versions and become the invariable received text that has come down to us today.

THE QUR'AN AND THE DIALECTS OF LATE ANCIENT ARABIA

Much work has been done of late in identifying the various linguistic dialects and writing systems in use in ancient Arabia as evidenced by the many graffiti and inscriptions that survive across the expanse of the Arabian Peninsula. Even more recently, scholars have sought to apply these findings in order to understand the early history of the Qur'an. Unfortunately, however, this promising new approach has yielded relatively limited concrete results so far, and there are in fact some significant methodological

problems with the approach itself, at least as it has been employed until now. The promise of this method lies in the fact that the Qur'an was written largely in a very distinctive and almost singular dialect of Arabic. If one could, therefore, locate this particular dialect somewhere on the linguistic map of early Arabic, it would be possible to get a good idea of where the Arabic and the text of the Qur'an were produced. The only problem is that the scarcity of the unusual dialect in which the Qur'an survives leaves us with limited options for locating a home for the Qur'an.

Ahmad Al-Jallad has been the single most active scholar in this area; building on earlier work by Macdonald, he has considerably refined our knowledge of pre-Islamic languages, dialects, and writing systems. Even more important for our purposes are his ambitious efforts in some recent studies to bring this information to bear on understanding the earliest history of the Qur'an. In a recent article, for instance, Al-Jallad identifies some brief parallels between some very short phrases from the pre-Islamic inscriptions and similar elements in the Qur'an.[69] Unfortunately, however, these expressions are so brief and banal that there is little—if any—significance to them: for the most part they are generic idioms and vocabulary common to the traditions of Near Eastern monotheism, which clearly held some presence in areas of the peninsula. The names of the northern Arabian deities mentioned in the Qur'an (53:19–22), *allāt*, *al-ʿuzzā*, and *manāt*, also appear in inscriptions from the northern cities and Nabatean territory. Moreover, a number of the identified parallels come from South Arabia, which, one must again note, is culturally, socially, and linguistically quite distinct from the rest of the peninsula, thus further complicating the relevance of what amounts, in the end, to rather trivial similarities.[70]

Nevertheless, the most relevant development to emerge from Al-Jallad's work is his very recent and also very hypothetical identification of an "Old Hijazi" dialect of early Arabic, which is characterized especially by the use of a particular form of the relative pronoun. This dialect, he proposes, is represented primarily in the Qur'anic text, which could potentially aide us in locating the Qur'an's historical context. Al-Jallad has only briefly introduced the idea of an Old Hijazi dialect so far, beginning with a footnote in his important 2015 monograph on the grammar of the Safaitic inscriptions

from the deserts of southern Syria, eastern Jordan, and northwest Saudi Arabia.[71] The notion of such a dialect also receives fleeting mention in a pair of subsequent articles, where Al-Jallad repeats mention of an inscription containing this distinctive, isoglossic form of the relative pronoun.[72] Nevertheless, the fullest—although still rather limited—discussions of this proposed dialect appear in his unpublished "Historical Grammar of Arabic" and his recent monograph on a bilingual Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment from Damascus.

In his "Historical Grammar," Al-Jallad proposes that the Old Hijazi dialect formed part of a larger continuum within Old Arabic, reaching back at least as far as the mid-first millennium BCE.[73] Such an early date is extremely questionable, however, as the actual evidence for this so-called Old Hijazi dialect is very limited and much more recent. The only potential witness to an Old Hijazi dialect before the seventh century CE comes from a single, ten-word funerary inscription from Dedān (modern al-ʿUlā), one of the northern oasis towns that also is mentioned several times in the Hebrew Bible.[74] The inscription employs the particular form of the relative pronoun distinctive to this dialect and dates with some uncertainty to possibly sometime before the first century CE.[75] This solitary epitaph, from the far north of the Hijaz, close to the Roman frontier, affords extremely meager evidence for dating this proposed dialect so early. Indeed, other than this lone inscription, the earliest witness to this dialect would be the Qur'anic text, on the basis of which Al-Jallad constructs the defining features of this particular form of Arabic. The only other witnesses to this hypothetical dialect are found in papyri from the first Islamic century and the bilingual Psalm fragment studied in Al-Jallad's recent monograph, in which study he proposes to "fully articulate the hypothesis of Old Ḥigāzī,"[76]

As it turns out, however, the linguistic evidence does not in fact support the location of the Qur'an or its dialect in the central Hijaz. The main problem is that Al-Jallad simply assumes from the very start that the Qur'anic text was produced in the Hijaz, and therefore that its peculiar dialect may be identified with the dialect of Arabic used in the Hijaz. Accordingly, for historical purposes, this linguistic study of the Qur'an's dialect leads only to viciously circular reasoning, along the following lines. The Qur'an, we know, is from the Hijaz; so we also know its peculiar form of

Arabic is the Hijazi dialect. And since the Qur'an is in Hijazi, its origins must be in the Hijaz. Yet, if one does not accept prima facie, as Al-Jallad does and we certainly do not, that the Qur'anic text as we have it was composed in the Hijaz, the linguistic data suddenly looks altogether different and invites very different conclusions. If anything, the linguistic evidence would seem to favor the location of the Qur'an's dialect in the lands of the early Islamic conquests, in the Levant or possibly in the Arabian lands along the Roman frontier.

As already noted, Al-Jallad identifies a particular form of the relative pronoun as the primary hallmark of this dialect. The lexeme in question is "based on the portmanteau demonstrative *(h)alla+DEM*," which yields the forms *ʾallatī* and *ʾallaḏī*.[77] This form of the relative does indeed appear frequently in the Qur'an, yet in all the pre-Islamic inscriptions it occurs only one time in a single inscription of uncertain date from northern Arabia, in a location that is part of the biblical world. Otherwise, the form is found exclusively in the bilingual Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment from Damascus and in Levantine papyri from the first Islamic century. In addition, another feature distinctive to the Qur'anic dialect "is the replacement of the infinitive as a verbal complement with a subordinated clause introduced by *ʾan*," as in the classical Arabic construction *ʾan yafʿala*—"that he do."[78] This construction also is witnessed in just a single inscription from northern Arabia, again from the biblical town of Dedān, whose date has not been determined to my knowledge, as well as in the Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment and the early Levantine papyri.[79] In his latest monograph on the Psalm fragment, Al-Jallad adds the form of the "distal particle" as a third characteristic marker of Old Hijazi. This distinctive form inserts an "l-element between the demonstrative base and the distal particle, producing from the original proximal set *ḏālika* and *tilka*," a form that Al-Jallad proposes is closely related to the form of the distal in Aramaic.[80] These forms of the demonstrative occur only in the Qur'an and the early Islamic papyri of the Levant: Al-Jallad gives no indication of their attestation either in inscriptions or in the Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment. Al-Jallad also seeks support from the later Arabic grammarians on these points, but, of course, their idea of just what the Hijazi dialect was determined, just like Al-Jallad's, on the basis of what they found in the Qur'an. As Pierre Larcher observes in

his recently published monograph, in the later Islamic tradition, "'The language (of the people) of the Hijaz' . . . appears to be nothing more than the Islamic name for Qur'anic Arabic, resulting from a detached examination of the rasm and not a study of the region."[81]

So, let us take stock of the particular Arab dialect that Al-Jallad purports to have identified and which he names "Old Ḥigāzī." It has three distinguishing features: (1) a distinctive form of the relative pronoun; (2) a distinctive form of the distal demonstrative; and (3) the use of the verbal construction *ʾan yafʿala* in circumstances where other dialects would use an infinite form. The corpus of Old Hijazi, as defined by these markers consist of the following: (1) the consonantal text of the Qur'an; (2) Levantine papyri from the first Islamic century; (3) the Damascus Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment (also Levantine); and (4) two inscriptions of uncertain age (perhaps much older than the Qur'an) from the biblical city of Dedān, each of which attests to only one of the three elements used in identifying this dialect. The defining characteristics of this dialect are indeed quite few in number, but perhaps for a linguist they are sufficient to identify a particular idiom of the language. Yet the dataset identified as representative of this alleged Hijazi dialect is also very small; it is even, one could say, extremely narrow, consisting primarily of the Qur'an, with a few bits and pieces alongside of it. Much more significantly, however, this corpus of writings does not locate this dialect in the Hijaz, let alone in the central Hijaz, as Al-Jallad casually presumes.[82] Indeed, such a conclusion can only result from the circular logic identified above: for the historian it amounts, as it were, to putting the cart before the horse. Any value that linguistic data might have for shedding light on the origins of the Qur'an is possible only if we do not assume that we already know the circumstances of the Qur'an's origins in advance. Instead, we must leave this factor as the unknown in our reckoning, allowing the linguistic data to lead us where it will.

Where, then, do we find the Hijazi dialect—or, as one should more properly call it, "the Qur'anic dialect"—beyond the Qur'an? Not in the central Hijaz, it turns out. Instead, the witnesses to this dialect are overwhelmingly found in the Levant, soon after this region came under the dominion of Muhammad's followers. The only exceptions to this are the two inscriptions from northern Arabia, which are, admittedly, on the northern

edge of the Hijaz but which also stand within the world of the Hebrew Bible. And two stray inscriptions alone, of uncertain date, can hardly bear the weight of positing the use of the Qur'anic dialect in Dedān almost two thousand years earlier. This is particularly the case when both inscriptions are not only extremely short and perfunctory, but one is badly damaged and fragmentary.[83] Moreover, each inscription attests to only one of the three linguistic elements characteristic of this Qur'anic dialect. Should we not allow that the linguistic variants in these two inscriptions are just that, the unexpected appearance of exceptional forms rather than unambiguous and decisive evidence for the use of a particular yet otherwise unattested dialect in the region? The former would seem to be the more cautious conclusion in the absence of further evidence.

It is a long reach, I think, from the appearance of an isolated form in a terse inscription to the identification of a full-fledged dialect current in a particular time and place. And I am certainly no expert in Arabic linguistics, but the fact that nearly two thousand inscriptions in the Dadanitic script have been published so far, and yet only two evidence these stray features, hardly justifies identifying this as the distinctive dialect that was in use in the Hijaz. More verification for actual use of the Qur'anic dialect in Dedān seems warranted, and it may possibly emerge one day. Or perhaps someone will better explain the significance of these two unremarkable inscriptions from a sea of thousands, as well as their singular variants for establishing usage in the area of Dedān (or for that matter the entire Hijaz). But even if we were to locate the Qur'anic dialect in this part of the Hijaz, one must note that this is essentially the same region that Patricia Crone and Michael Cook identified as the likely location of Islam's origins.[84] It is a region, for that matter, that could make better sense of the Qur'an's persistent conversations with the religious cultures of the late ancient Near East, including Christianity in particular. Dedān and the northern Hijaz would be a much better fit than Mecca and the central Hijaz, for instance; and if more evidence were to confirm the localization of the Qur'anic dialect in this area, it could be a good match for the Qur'anic text. But of course, this is not Mecca and Medina, and it would place the Qur'an's genesis in a decidedly different location.

The remaining witnesses to the Qur'anic dialect, the Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment and the early Islamic papyri, show more substantial evidence of direct correspondence with the language of the Qur'an, and it seems clear that these documents do in fact reflect the same linguistic tradition. Let us consider, then, what we may discern from this historical evidence regarding the locations where this dialect was in use. The origins of the Qur'an itself remain a question, and so we must leave that question to the side for this purpose: indeed, the location of its production in time and space is the variable that we are trying to solve. I have not the slightest doubt that many scholars of early Islam will think this exercise absurd in the extreme, so firm is their faith in the traditional narrative of the Qur'an's Hijazi origins. Yet, as I hope to have persuaded those readers who have made it this far in the book at least, the context wherein the Qur'an as we now have it was written down into its present form is not made certain in the least by the early Islamic historical tradition. Likewise, the complete absence of any mention of the Qur'an's existence in any source prior to the early eighth century, as we already noted, give further grounds for doubt.

Let me be clear, however: I am not proposing that the Qur'an has absolutely no historical connection to the Hijaz, as, for instance, John Wansbrough famously argued. It is quite possible that Muhammad had a prophetic career in Mecca and Medina, and the traditions of the Qur'an largely reflect many of the things that he taught during that period. Yet, as we have just seen, these teachings and the words of the Qur'an were almost certainly not written down during his lifetime in the Hijaz, but at a later time and in another place or places. Therefore, while we may envision some sort of connection between the Qur'an and the traditions taught by Muhammad in the Hijaz, it certainly is not a transcript of what he said, accurately recorded in the dialect that he spoke. Nor was it written down by his followers while they were still in the Hijaz. Instead, this process seemingly took place elsewhere in their nascent empire, and perhaps in a dialect that was not actually "Hijazi" but rather one in use in the regions of conquest and occupation.

The additional witnesses to the Qur'anic dialect that Al-Jallad has identified all seem to have been written in the Levant—Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, during the early Umayyad period. Accordingly, on this basis we can conclude with some certainty that the Arabic of the Qur'an corresponds

directly with an Arabic dialect that was in use in the newly occupied lands under the Umayyads. Should we not, then, also on this basis conclude also that this was the historical context in which the Qur'an as we have it was composed—during the Umayyad era in Syro-Palestine and Iraq, since it is written in a form of Arabic that was used in this context and is not otherwise well attested? Al-Jallad maintains instead that this peculiar form of Arabic is originally from the Hijaz, and was imported into the Levant by Muhammad's followers, who had brought it with them from the Hijaz. Thus, for Al-Jallad, these Umayyad period documents are actually written in the Hijazi dialect, which, he conjectures, likely became "a prestige dialect spread during the Arab conquests," and which, he further speculates, would have been the dialect adopted by non-Arabic speakers in the new empire of the Believers.[85] Such a development would certainly not be impossible, but it is entirely hypothetical, with no solid evidence to support it. Yet Al-Jallad is only able to identify this dialect with the Hijaz through the presumption that the Qur'an is written in the spoken dialect of the Hijaz, because he assumes, like the early Arabic grammarians, that it was produced there in the form that we now have it. Yet we do not in fact know this about the Qur'an, and so we cannot presume the provenance of its dialect was the Hijaz. All that we can be certain of, based on the linguistic evidence that we presently have, is that the Qur'anic dialect matches a dialect that was in use in Umayyad Syro-Palestine and Egypt, a dialect that appears to have been favored by the ruling authorities.

Likewise, I am not sure we should presume that the Arabic spoken by Muhammad's followers in the wake of the initial conquests and during the Umayyad period would have necessarily been a pure Hijazi dialect, even if that is where many of the movement's leaders hailed from. By the time Muhammad's followers invaded the Near East, the movement had come to comprise a mixture of all the peoples, and presumably the dialects, of the Arabian Peninsula. Perhaps what we find in the aftermath of the conquests, and in the Qur'an as well, is a kind of dialectic creole, a result of bringing so many Arabic-speaking peoples together in a single community for the first time. One should also consider that as Muhammad's followers burst forth northward from the Arabian Peninsula, they would have immediately encountered the many Arabic speakers on the margins of the Roman and Sasanian Empires, in the northern oases and the Nabatean lands, not to

mention the Arabic speakers already in Syria and Palestine. What, one must ask, was the contribution of these peoples, particularly those Arabs who had been allied with Rome or were themselves Roman citizens, to the Arabic used in Syro-Palestine after the conquests and during the Umayyad period? One would suspect that their usage had a significant influence on the spoken and written Arabic of the Umayyad caliphate. After all, Muhammad's followers were a small minority in the lands they had conquered, being vastly outnumbered by the peoples of the Levant.

Given the admittedly minimal and isolated features of this dialect in two much earlier inscriptions from Dedān, should we assume instead that the Qur'an's dialect reflects that of these northern oases instead? Perhaps as the larger populations of these oasis cities allied themselves with Muhammad's new religious movement, they quickly outnumbered his original followers such that their dialect came to prevail? Indeed, in the absence of much evidence, it would seem that there are a number of hypothetical possibilities. Furthermore, as has been already noted, the Umayyads employed a number of non-Muslims in the caliphal administration, including, most notably, John of Damascus and his father, both of whom were Arabic speakers, presumably of the dialect local to Syria. Is it not therefore possible that the Arabic of Damascus and Palestine would have had a significant impact on the form of Arabic used in Umayyad Syro-Palestine? It seems not unreasonable to suspect that it might have. Nevertheless, in the end the only result that linguistic comparison of the Qur'an yields with any certainty is that the Qur'anic dialect conforms to a type of prestige Arabic that was use in the Levant during the Umayyad period. This finding certainly is entirely consistent with what we have proposed in chapter 2 on the basis of the historical sources: that the Qur'an as we now have it was produced in written form initially in Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia after the conquests, and its final standardization took place under an imperial directive from ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj.

With respect to the Damascus Greek-Arabic Psalm fragment, as separate from the issue of the Qur'anic dialect more broadly, Al-Jallad proposes to have identified some peculiarities that can distinguish its dialect from that of the Levantine Arabic speakers in late antiquity, although I do not find his reasoning particularly convincing. Such a comparison is possible in the case

of this document alone, since its Arabic gloss of the Greek text is written in Greek letters, which include vocalization, in contrast to the Qur'an, the early Arabic papyri, and Arabic inscriptions. Al-Jallad's analysis of the Damascus fragment depends especially on the findings of a recent study that he published on Arabic inscriptions written in the Greek alphabet from southern Syria and Palestine.[86] On the basis of these inscriptions, he proposes to have reconstructed the distinctive Levantine dialect of Arabic, which he then compares with the Arabic of the Damascus Greek-Arabic fragment. The salient differences between the two, according to Al-Jallad, are found primarily in phonological differences rather than morphology: different Greek consonants and vowels are used to transliterate Arabic equivalents in the two corpora. For instance, various writings transliterate *ḍ* with either *σ*, *ζ*, or *δ*, and *ẓ* with *τ*, *ζ*, or *δ*. Likewise, in some cases, the *l* of the definite article is assimilated to the consonant of the following noun (for the sun consonants), while in other cases it is not written thus. Also, there are often differences in the way Arabic vowels are represented with various Greek counterparts. The only difference not based on different conventions of transliteration is that the Damascus fragment twice uses the *ʾallaḏī* form of the relative pronoun (ελλεδι), a form that so far seems to be absent from these Arabic inscriptions written with Greek letters.[87]

How reliably, then, can such phonological differences distinguish the Damascus Greek-Arabic fragment and its dialect, the Qur'anic dialect, from a proposedly distinctive Levantine dialect of Arabic? Not very, I would suggest, with due respect to the painstaking analysis that Al-Jallad has put into studying the various Greek-Arabic inscriptions from this region. The problem is not with the analysis itself but rather with the assumptions that are made concerning the nature of the texts that have been studied. Firstly, there is the general quality of the inscriptions themselves. Most of the information is drawn from the shortest of texts, and overwhelmingly the data are merely proper names, for people and places, transcribed onto a stela or a tombstone.[88] This hardly seems to be a sufficient dataset to serve as the basis for reconstructing a distinctive dialect. It does give us some indication of how various individuals in the region understood the correlation between Arabic and Greek pronunciation, as these languages were spoken by these individuals and in the various regions. And therein lies the problem. There

simply was no standard in place for transliterating Arabic into Greek, such that we can draw any real consistency from the inscription of these proper names. As Al-Jallad himself observes of these transliterations, the results "were surely not part of scribal training; thus with the exception of a few cases, their spellings do not reflect a fixed tradition. Instead, they are the result of the attempts by scribes to approximate Arabic words."[89] Al-Jallad somehow finds assurance in this disorder, leading him to conclude rather astonishingly that these inscriptions "are therefore a much more reliable source of contemporary pronunciation than the fixed orthographic conventions of Semitic chancelleries."[90] How this should follow, I simply do not understand.

To draw such broad conclusions on the basis of highly irregular evidence is, to put it mildly, unconvincing and unwarranted. To the contrary, the persistent variation evident among the transcriptions means that the data are not reliable but instead reflect varying individual interpretations of what Greek letter should be used as the equivalent for an Arabic phoneme. Consider how varied transliteration can be even in modern scholarship, in the Romanization of Arabic words. My "Hijaz" is Al-Jallad's "Ḥigāz," which could also be "Ḥijāz" or "Ḥiğāz." Likewise, one can transliterate with or without consonantal assimilation: the word for "sun," *al-shams*, can also be written *as-shams* or even *aš-šams* or *al-šams* depending on preference: all are correct representations of the same Arabic letters and none indicates any sort of dialectical variation. One must additionally take into full consideration the fact that Greek pronunciation seems to have varied regionally and was also in flux already in late antiquity, particularly in regard to vowels and also in areas where Greek may have been more marginal, such as regions where Arabic was widely used.[91] One need only look at a Coptic manuscript from late antiquity to see how fluid Greek spelling could be, particularly in the case of individuals who did not have high levels of literacy in Greek. Even in contemporary English, some of us must regularly confront the nagging problem of those who would transliterate the Greek Στέφανος (incorrectly) as Steven, Stefan, or Stephan, rather than as Stephen (which obviously is the correct form). Accordingly, it seems unreasonable to assume that we can somehow retro-transliterate these haphazardly rendered names

and brief expressions with any accuracy so as to be able to faithfully reconstruct a dialect.

Therefore, we are left with only the form of relative pronoun in the Damascus fragment as potentially significant. Yet while Al-Jallad notes that "*ʔalla*-based relative pronouns are unknown in the Levant," he identifies only a single example from the Levant where an alternative form of the pronoun is used, the fourth-century CE Namārah inscription, a Nabatean inscription from southern Syria.[92] Can this solitary instance prove that this form of the pronoun was normative for Levantine Arabic in the seventh century CE, any more than the Damascus fragment could prove the opposite? One must admit the possibility that the *ʔalla*-based form entered the usage sometime between the inscription and the fragment, yet this would hardly require the importation of a Hijazi dialect as the only possible explanation for such a change. The data simply do not seem sufficient, in my view, to draw the kind of larger conclusions that Al-Jallad has proposed. Moreover, other scholars have recently argued, persuasively and on the basis of the same evidence, that the Qur'an's dialect instead most resembles the Arabic used in areas of Nabatean influence, which, if correct, would draw the language of the Qur'an more closely into the world of the late ancient Levant.[93] Indeed, even Al-Jallad himself, when considering the evidence of the Greco-Arabic inscriptions themselves rather than searching for the lost dialect of the ancient Hijaz, observes that "The Graeco-Arabica [of the southern Levant] generally agrees with Qurʾānic orthography."[94]

Given the inherent ambiguities and uncertainties of these Greek transliterations of various toponyms and anthroponyms, as well as the rather limited evidence otherwise, it is difficult at present to conclude with any certainty that the Qur'an is written in a Hijazi dialect rather in an Arabic of some other provenance. All we know for certain is that it is written in the prestige dialect of the Umayyad Levant. And yet, even if Al-Jallad is correct that the dialect of the Qur'an is the dialect of the Hijaz, this would afford no indications or assurance that the Qur'an was in fact composed in the Hijaz. Rather, all the evidence points instead to the Qur'an's composition in the Levant during the Umayyad period, when we know that this particular dialect was widely in use. Indeed, outside the isolated and irregular features of two much earlier inscriptions from Dedān, the only evidence we presently

have for the use of this dialect of Arabic is in Umayyad Syro-Palestine and Egypt, the context that is presumably reflected in the Qur'an's use of this same dialect. Even if Muhammad's followers may have brought this language with them to the Levant, it was only there that we have any evidence of them actually using it to write.

In sum, I remain unconvinced by linguistic or any other evidence that we should presume the Qur'an is written in the Arabic dialect of the Hijaz, let alone in the Hijaz itself. To the contrary, the linguistic data would appear to indicate that the Qur'an was written in a prestige Arabic dialect that was in use in the Levant during the Umayyad period; this finding is consistent with both the relevant historical information and the earliest surviving Qur'anic manuscripts. The fact that such differing conclusions can be formed on the basis of the same data in this instance is perhaps best explained by certain contrasting intellectual approaches identified by Crone in her legendary war of words with Robert Serjeant over *Meccan Trade*. As she observes, "Arabists are trained on *ʿarabiyya*, a linguistic paradigm which can be mastered or not mastered, but not refuted. It is normative and governs usage in the texts instead of being governed by it. . . . Arabists, in other words, are trained to know the historical pattern in advance whereas historians are trained to pretend that they know nothing about the past until they find support for it in the sources."[95] In contrast to the purely linguistic approach, then, I assume we do not know in advance that the wording of the Qur'an was fixed in the Hijaz and written in the Hijazi dialect, such that it may be judged as the normative standard for both this dialect and the Qur'an's history. And based on a historical-critical approach to all of the relevant sources, the Qur'an's gradual production in the lands of conquest, with a final standard version promulgated by ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj, seems to be the most probable genealogy for the canonical Qur'an. When the Qur'an is viewed from this perspective, the linguistic data looks rather different, yet it is not incompatible in the least with the hypothesis of its final composition in Umayyad Syro-Palestine, which, in fact, the data seem to support.

CONCLUSIONS: THE ORAL QUR'AN AND THE LITERATE QUR'AN

We are therefore left to conclude that, according to the current state of our evidence, the social and cultural context for Muhammad's new religious

movement was in fact a nonliterate, tribal society where the use of writing was virtually nonexistent. The fundamentally nonliterate nature of the seventh-century Hijaz should also sufficiently dispel any fantasy that Muhammad's Mecca and Yathrib were somehow integrated with the broader late ancient world and permeated with its culture, like a Palmyra or Petra of the Hijaz.[96] The most recent studies of the Qur'an's linguistic environment have identified conditions that make it extremely improbable, if not even effectively impossible, that the Qur'an was written down in the Hijaz during Muhammad's lifetime, or even shortly after his death. As we have seen, both Robin and Macdonald, perhaps the two leading experts on such matters, have told us that writing was effectively not in use in Muhammad's Arabia: once again, as Robin avers, "writing was hardly practiced at all in the time of Muhammad."[97] Consequently, even as rudimentary scripts were available for writing the language, as evidenced especially by the doodlings of desert herdsmen, the societies of the central Hijaz remained nonliterate. Unless Robin and Macdonald are far off the mark in their conclusions, it is hard to see how any of Muhammad's teachings would have been written down in these circumstances, even in short fragments on bones and stones. And according to what appears to be a fairly broad scholarly consensus, in this context writing was entirely neglected for the production and transmission of cultural and religious texts, which seemingly would include the traditions that eventually gave rise to the Qur'an.

Consequently, in the nonliterate cultures of the Hijaz there would have been effectively no inclination to write down Muhammad's teachings, since orality was the privileged, prestige medium for such cultural material. As Assmann reminds us, in a culture that was fundamentally oral, "it was anything but normal for a society to write down its oral tradition."[98] By all indications, writing in late ancient Arabia was primarily a simple pastime, a sort of sudoku of the desert. For comparison, we would note that for much the same reason—a lack of literacy— scholars have similarly excluded any possibility that the traditions of the New Testament gospels were written down soon after Jesus's death by eyewitnesses. Instead, they circulated orally for a few decades before they began to be written down. Yet Jesus's followers, in contrast to Muhammad's, were illiterate despite living within a highly literate culture that valued writing (Second Temple Period Judaism), and they lived in the shadow of a major Roman city, Sepphoris (less than two

hours' walk from Nazareth, and less than seven from Tiberias). The illiteracy of Muhammad's early followers seems only more certain, given their historical setting within a nonliterate, tribal society in a remote and desolate location. Given such conditions, "there was little reason or incentive, with regard to the population at large, to write down traditions as a matter of course."[99]

Accordingly, the doctrines that Muhammad taught his followers must have circulated among them for some time in a purely oral form; such a conclusion seems inescapable if we wish follow the Islamic tradition and locate Muhammad and his new religious movement in the central Hijaz. Most likely, the Qur'an only began to be written down after Muhammad's followers expanded northward and took control of Syro-Palestine and Iraq. As they soon found themselves among large numbers of Jews and Christians with their prominent and authoritative collections of written scripture, Muhammad's followers must have gradually felt the impulse to codify a scripture of their own based on what they remembered of Muhammad's teachings. Likewise, as the end of the world remained in abeyance, the eschatological convictions of Muhammad's followers would have correspondingly diminished, awakening them to the need to preserve Muhammad's words more accurately for future generations. Thus, they began to put the teachings of Muhammad into writing as they were able to remember them, in multiple efforts that were initially undertaken independently in the lands of conquest. The peculiar dialect in which the Qur'an is written seems to confirm that these were the conditions in which these sacred traditions were first put into writing: the Qur'an's dialect matches most closely the prestige form of Arabic used in the lands of the conquest during the early Umayyad period.

Presumably the Believers began by first making shorter collections drawn from the memories of various individuals and groups within the larger community following their conquests and the resulting encounter with widespread literacy in the newly occupied lands. These initial efforts to write down what Muhammad had taught arose both as the result of an increasing need for memory aids and also in order to manage a growing and diverse tradition. Nevertheless, these collections were almost certainly not yet considered closed and complete but were still open, flexible, and subject to influence from oral tradition: they were a work in process, steadily gathering

and forming the community's collective memory of its origins. These early compendia were then combined into larger and larger collections, along with additional traditions and revisions, one assumes, that would eventually emerge as the divergent versions of the Qur'an preserved in the regional "companion" codices, which likely still were not fully closed and static. Finally, the traditions of these regional versions, along with presumably other written and oral traditions, were fashioned into the imperial canonical codex under ʿAbd al-Malik's supervision, and this version was then progressively enforced as the only allowed version of the Qur'an across the empire. Ultimately, this version would displace all its rivals completely, establishing a consequent consistency and standardization of the Qur'anic text that could only be possible with such deliberate imperial intervention and policing. We will have more to say directly about this process of the Qur'an's move to a written form later in chapter 8.

Nevertheless, a number of scholars have maintained that the literary qualities of the Qur'an, as we now have it, preclude any possibility of such an extended oral transmission. The stylistic elements of the Qur'an, so they would argue, are simply not possible without written transmission. I would in fact agree that this is largely correct—the only questions are when, where, and by whom these stylistic elements were introduced. Many scholars of course insist that these features are the work of Muhammad himself, in dialogue with the other members of his new religious movement. Such an assumption is, as we have noted, essential for the synchronic literary reading of the Qur'an within Muhammad's lifetime that has recently become fashionable in some quarters—as opposed to the diachronic historical-critical study of the text, the approach that we have preferred. The proponents of this synchronic literary approach therefore insist that the Qur'anic text—in the form that it has come down to us—preserves the words of Muhammad, "the proclaimer himself, who ultimately gave the text its verbal and literary form."[100] Yet it is at the same time an assumption that, according to advocates of this approach, "can only be proven through the results of a literary description of the Qur'an," an endeavor that ultimately amounts to assuming in advance what one aims to prove.[101] For these scholars, "the most important goal" of Qur'anic studies is "an understanding of the suras themselves that meets the demands of literary critical

scholarship."[102] And so, in this approach, literary criticism holds pride of place, and all other methods stand in an explicitly subordinate position. Indeed, the confident attribution of the entire text of the Qur'an as we now have it to Muhammad himself effectively obviates any possibility of an historical-critical approach to the text. And not only does this literary approach effectively dispense with any genuine historical criticism, but it also is not even consistent with what the early Islamic tradition reports concerning the early history of the Qur'an. Accordingly, its advocates will insist that the various reports from the Islamic historical tradition relating the need to collect the traditions of the Qur'an "must therefore be considered a strong exaggeration."[103]

Yet Muhammad himself is, obviously, not the only possible source of these literary qualities, the presence of which no one would deny. For generations of Qur'anic research, innumerable scholars have held exactly the opposite understanding of the text—namely, that these features were introduced only later on, during the collection and codification of the Qur'an.[104] Wansbrough argues as much persuasively in his *Qur'anic Studies*, noting that only in their final redaction did the traditions of the Qur'an "achieve a kind of stylistic uniformity by resort to a scarcely varied stock of rhetorical convention." The originally independent pericopes were only sewn together at a later stage using this "limited number of rhetorical conventions," whose repeated use can "account both for the repetitive character of the document and for what is undeniably its stylistic homogeneity." Indeed, even the lengthiest of Qur'anic suras, sura 2, "The Cow," seems to have been produced in such a manner by joining a variety of older and shorter traditions using these rhetorical devices to fashion a more coherent whole.[105] These stylistic qualities are therefore secondary and superficial to the text and its traditions. This consensus has recently received strong validation from Andrew Bannister's effort to identify oral-formulaic elements in the Qur'an. Bannister's study of these features convincingly detects clear "breaks" within suras, using a computer-assisted analysis that largely validates the similar hypotheses about the Qur'an previously advanced by Richard Bell.[106] Bell and Montgomery Watt also understood the Qur'an to be a composite text fashioned from earlier, much shorter units of tradition, which are often found in a state of disjointed juxtaposition.[107] De

Prémare, too, has more recently articulated a similar model of the Qurʾan's composition out of many smaller fragments that initially circulated independently, a position that Harald Motzki identifies as in fact the prevailing view among scholars of early Islam.[108]

Therefore, if one seeks to identify the specific context in which the Qur'an's more unifying stylistic elements could have been added to the text, there are numerous other possibilities beside Muhammad himself. And, given the nonliterate context in which Muhammad lived and his movement took shape, the suggestion that he introduced these features is, prima facie, highly unlikely. What is far more probable is that these features were introduced to the Qur'an only during the process of systematically establishing a single, final, authoritative version, resulting in the imperial Qur'an produced and imposed under ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj. Although Bell and Watt believed that the Qur'an had been collected into its canonical form much earlier, under Uthman, they nevertheless also concluded that the elements of literary unity within the Qurʾān, such as they are, were introduced only later on during the process of weaving these smaller fragments together into larger units.[109] Many of these stylistic similarities in the Qur'anic text are not at altogether different from those that unite the Johannine corpus of the New Testament, for instance. Accordingly, one imagines the introduction of these literary features in a similar sort of context, a kind of "school" or "circle" marked by adherence to certain theological themes and styles.[110] Without a doubt, the group of scholars selected by ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj must have constituted such a theologically coherent group, whose work appears to have been closely supervised in order to achieve a certain standard. Finally, we should also note that the introduction of these literary qualities only in the process of moving from orality to writing receives strong validation from the anthropological study of oral traditions and oral transmission of texts in other contexts. As a general rule, it turns out, such elements of "greater architecture" present in the literary form of a text belong exclusively to the written form, rather than to oral poetry, and usually they find their way into a text precisely at the moment of its transition from orality to writing.[111] So, it seems, we should also understand the literary qualities of the Qur'anic text.

Thus, the most probable circumstances for understanding the early history of the Qur'anic text lead us to the conclusion that its contents circulated for a significant period of time in the absence of any written collection of Muhammad's teachings. The linguistic history of the Hijaz at the time of Muhammad leaves this all but certain. The community only began to write down Muhammad's words, as they had come to remember them, later on and primarily amid the broader context of the "sectarian milieu" of the late ancient Near East. No doubt these memories of Muhammad's teaching continued to change and grow even after they had begun to be written down: this is not at all uncommon, especially at the time when a community is making the shift from orality to writing. The Qur'an, therefore, only achieved its invariable, archetypal form sometime around the turn of the eighth century, it would seem. The circumstances of extended oral transmission and the existence of rival versions of the Qur'an establish a very high likelihood that the memories of Muhammad's teachings would have changed significantly during the period between his death and the establishment of their now canonical version. Oral transmission and human memory—individual as well collective—are highly malleable and fallible in many important respects, as we will now see in two following chapters. The deficiencies of both introduce the strong possibility that Muhammad's followers re-remembered his teachings in significant ways as they found themselves in a new context, surrounded by and in dialogue with Jews, Christians, and other religious communities of the late ancient Near East.

6

Remembering Muhammad

Perspectives from Memory Science

In the previous chapters we have been concerned primarily with identifying the historical conditions in which the Qur'an gradually developed into the now canonical and invariable form of the text that has come down to us. As we have seen, this achievement was most likely the result of efforts to produce a standard Qur'anic text initiated by the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik and his viceroy al-Ḥajjāj around the turn of the eighth century. Yet the Qur'an obviously had a history before it was finally fixed in writing to serve as a new sacred text for Muhammad's followers. Almost a century, then, it would seem, elapsed between the time when Muhammad first began to share what he believed to be divine revelations with the people of Mecca and the subsequent establishment of a definitive and authoritative written version of his teachings in the imperial Qur'an. Yet, even if we follow the traditional Nöldekean-Schwallian narrative, we must still reckon with the oral transmission of Muhammad's teachings largely from memory for a period of at least two decades. This means that in order to understand the circumstances of the Qur'an's origins we must fully engage the findings of modern memory science and the study of oral cultures. Already in the first chapter, we noted briefly some of the issues of memory and orality as they bear on the early transmission of the Qur'an; in the next two chapters, we will consider these topics in much greater depth.

Accordingly, in this chapter and in the following one, we will move away a little from our focus on the Qur'an and the seventh century. Nevertheless,

we do so in order to better comprehend the essential realities that memory science and anthropology bring to bear for understanding the Qur'an's transmission from Muhammad to the final composition of its canonical form around the turn of the eighth century. The present chapter focuses on issues specific to the nature and function of human memory, as determined by over a century of scientific study of the memory's capacities and limitations. This rapidly expanding field has brought remarkable new insight not only into understanding just how the memory works; it has also discovered that our memories operate with very high levels of fragmentation and fallibility. Indeed, over a very short period of time, amounting to no more than days or even hours, our reminiscence of an experience becomes significantly degraded in its quality and accuracy. On the whole, our memories turn out to be surprisingly inaccurate, particularly in the absence of any written record, to a much greater degree than we would generally care to admit. That is not to say that memory is completely unreliable—far from it. Despite its limitations, human memory generally functions very efficiently for the various things that we need it for from day to day. Indeed, without a certain level of reliability in our memories, it would be difficult to function individually or collectively in a complex society. But that should not lead us to overlook just how much and how frequently we misremember and forget in the process, in both personal and collective memory. Indeed, scientists have identified such regular forgetting and re-remembering as essential "adaptive properties" of memory, which make memory of more practical use for individuals and societies.[1]

Not surprisingly, the profound limitations and inaccuracies of the human memory as revealed by these scientific studies have so far not been a welcome partner in the study of the Qur'an's origins. This omission poses a substantial problem, since many, if not most, specialists on early Islam and the Qur'an remain unyielding in their insistence that the words of the Qur'an should be identified exactly with Muhammad's preaching in Mecca and Medina, as if the text were simply a transcript of what Muhammad said. Nevertheless, absent the fixation of the text in writing as Muhammad was teaching or under his supervision, as some admittedly would presume, the assumption that the Qur'an relates Muhammad's words as he said them strains belief. Some scholars would appeal to the remarkable capacity of preliterate peoples, and the Arabs especially, to remember oral teaching with

incredible accuracy—a topic we will address in the following chapter. Nevertheless, scientific investigation of human memory over the last century and a half has demonstrated time and again that this is simply not true, no matter how ardently some scholars may choose to believe it. Accordingly, scholarly study of the Qur'an must recognize that if we are at all dependent on human memory for our knowledge of the Qur'an, in the absence of a written version produced in part by Muhammad himself, very little of the Qur'an is in fact likely to be the actual words of Muhammad.

MEMORY LOSS AND RECONSTRUCTION

The capacities and limitations of individual memory, as they have now been identified by modern scientific study, should be fundamental to any subsequent investigations of the Qur'an's history. Above all, we must consider the significance of these findings for understanding the quality of the memories that Muhammad's earliest followers would have retained and then reproduced for later generations. These memories, as they formed in the minds of Muhammad's companions, are, rather obviously, the historical bedrock on which all subsequent memories of his deeds and teaching stand. Therefore, it is essential to determine just how much we can rely on the accuracy of these initial memories of Muhammad. These memories form the baseline of whatever historical knowledge we could possibly hope to recover about Muhammad, his religious community, and his teachings. Thus, as David Rubin rather obviously notes,

> When the recall of one person is the initial stimulus for that of another, the first person's recall is all that is transmitted of the original; there is no chance for a new context to recover information that was known by the first person, but was not told. The recall of the second person will be a product of the recall of the first person, the biases or style of the second person, and the conditions of the second person's recall.[2]

Therefore, the closest that we can possibly come to understanding Muhammad as a historical figure and his teachings depends entirely on the quality of the memories of his earliest followers. Unfortunately, the nature of human memory and its workings as revealed by memory science do not offer much cause for optimism in this case. The weaknesses of the human

memory lead us instead to the conclusion that already in this first generation of remembering a great deal of information and detail would have become lost or corrupted, even in a very short span of only a few days or hours.

The scientific study of human memory began with the field-defining work of a German psychologist named Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850–1909), who commenced his career by studying himself and his own memory. His initial experiments consisted of preparing a series of nonsense syllables, such as DAX, GUF, and NOK, which he would regularly memorize and rememorize. Then he would test his memory of these invented syllables at a variety of intervals after committing them to memory, in an effort to determine just how long the memory could contain accurate information and how quickly it would forget or alter this information. The drop-off turned out to be quite rapid: testing himself only nine hours after memorizing the syllables, he had forgotten around 60 percent of the sequence. Thereafter, the decay became much slower. After sixth months, he had forgotten a little over 75 percent of the original string of syllables: "not that much worse," as memory expert Daniel Schacter observes, "than the amount of forgetting at the nine-hour delay." Ebbinghaus's important discovery, "that most forgetting occurs during early delays, and then slows down at later ones, has been replicated in countless laboratory experiments."[3] Accordingly, his findings, known as the Ebbinghaus forgetting curve, have become a foundation of modern memory studies, which have determined that our memory loses an enormous amount of information very quickly after the events we seek to remember, within a matter of mere hours. Most of what we forget, then, happens almost immediately after the event that one later seeks to remember—more than half of what we might try to recall about a given morning is wrong or forgotten by dinnertime. The extension of the curve, however, indicates that a small core of memories that we have developed about an event after the first several hours can persist in approximately the same form for a significant amount of time thereafter. Nevertheless, these enduring memories generally recall only around 25 percent of the original events with any sort of accuracy. The rest is simply lost or replaced by erroneous recollections.[4]

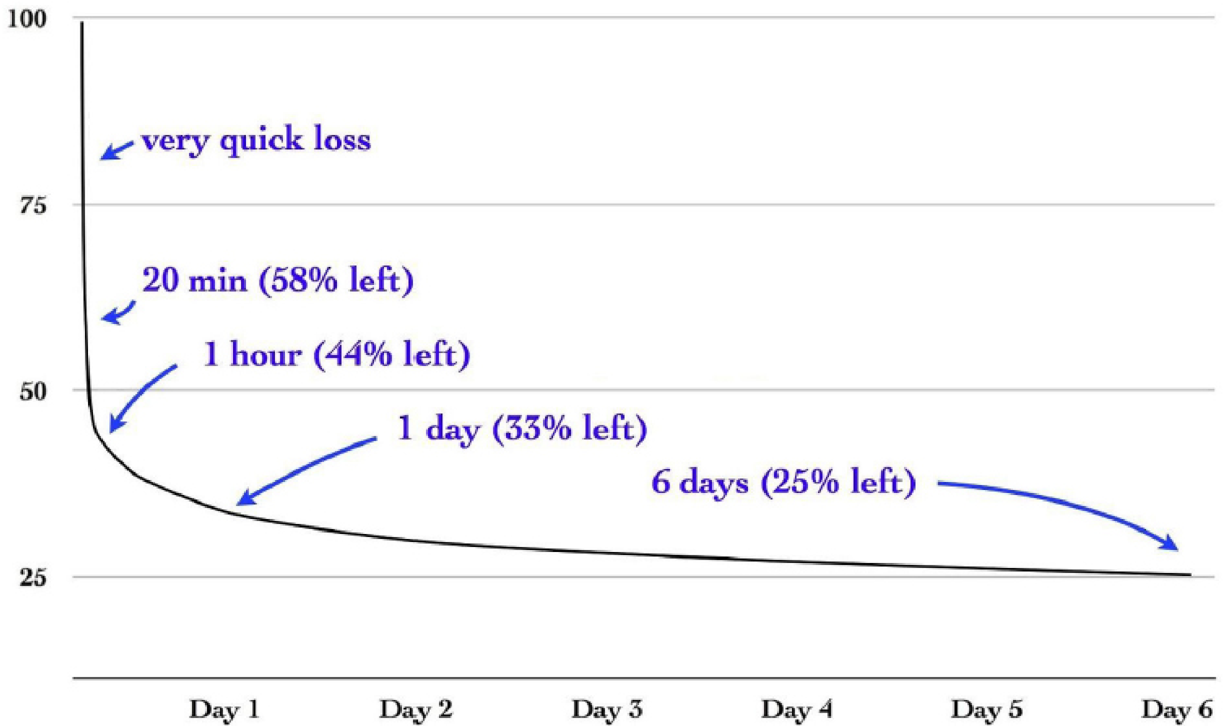

FIGURE 4. Ebbinghaus's Forgetting Curve.

The effect of the Ebbinghaus curve was soon studied beyond the laboratory and in the circumstances of everyday life. The results demonstrated that such rapid transience limits our ability to accurately recall even the recent past no less in our day-to-day affairs than for subjects in the lab.[5] Schacter helpfully summarizes the significance of these studies for understanding how our memories work as follows:

> With the passing of time, the particulars [of a memory] fade and opportunities multiply for interference—generated by later, similar experiences—to blur our recollections. We thus rely ever more on our memories for the gist of what happened, or what usually happens, and attempt to reconstruct the details by inference and even sheer guesswork. Transience involves a gradual switch from reproductive and specific recollections to reconstructive and more general descriptions.

The result, he continues, is that "when attempting to reconstruct past events based on general knowledge of what usually happens, we become especially vulnerable to the sin of bias: when present knowledge and beliefs seep into

our memories of past events."[6] This means that it does not require years or decades or even centuries for memories to become distorted. Significant forgetting and alteration set in within mere hours or a couple of days. This should give us great pause in considering the reliability of the various memories of Muhammad, his teachings, and the formation of his religious community that have come down to us. From hour to hour and day to day, memories of what had happened would have shifted significantly in the absence of their commitment to writing.

The next great pioneer of memory studies was Frederic C. Bartlett, Cambridge University's first professor of psychology, and his early works, together with those of Ebbinghaus, laid the foundations of modern memory science.[7] One of Bartlett's most significant contributions was to identify the basic process that our memories use to recall events from the past. Too often we are prone to thinking of our memories as simply recording devices or cameras that capture individual moments as we experience them and compile them into discrete files. These memory files are then stored away somewhere on the vast hard drive of the mind, to be recalled from storage at will, like some sort of repository of personal PDFs from the past. Yet it turns out that the brain does not work this way at all, as Bartlett's research discovered. As he writes, "The first notion to get rid of is that memory is primarily or literally reduplicative, or reproductive. In a world of constantly changing environment, literal recall is extraordinarily unimportant." That is, there is little practical value in being able to recall past experience with meticulous accuracy, and so our brains have adapted to forget a lot of needless detail. As Bartlett continues, "if we consider evidence rather than presupposition, remembering appears to be far more decisively an affair of construction rather than one of mere reproduction."[8] When we experience something, Bartlett's studies demonstrated, bits and pieces of the memory are broken up and stored separately in different parts of the brain. When we then later seek to remember something, the brain must assemble the various fragments of the memory in question from the different storage locations.

When we attempt to recall some past event, however, it turns out that some of the pieces of a memory—more often than not a lot of the pieces—are no longer there, and so in order to complete the memory for retrieval, the brain must fill in the missing gaps, using similar memory fragments drawn from comparable experiences in our past. Using this supplementary

data, the mind effectively pieces the memory back together to fit the way that we have come to expect things. In the process, bits from other memories associated with similar emotional states or sharing a similar visual pattern or having similar semantic associations can come along for the ride, conflating various memories into a new, altered recollection. Thus, Bartlett concludes,

> Remembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organised past reactions or experience, and to a little outstanding detail which commonly appears in image or in language form. It is thus hardly ever really exact, even in the most rudimentary cases of rote recapitulation, and it is not at all important that it should be so.[9]

Bartlett discovered these qualities of our memories by developing a new approach, different from the one established by Ebbinghaus, which dominated memory studies up through the 1960s: indeed, it was only in the 1970s that Bartlett's approach began to become influential in memory science.[10] As Bartlett progressed in his research, which initially followed the conventional pattern of Ebbinghaus's earlier work, he grew dissatisfied with the reigning paradigm's focus on the repetition of nonsense syllables. Instead, he decided to design experiments that used meaningful materials more reflective of the things that our memories encounter and remember from everyday life.[11] In his most famous memory experiment, he asked his subjects to read twice a short Native American folktale known as the "War of the Ghosts," a brief narrative of about three hundred words that would have been previously unknown and unfamiliar to the participants.[12] Bartlett then asked the subjects to recall the story later on after various intervals of time had elapsed. Fifteen minutes after their initial reading, the participants were asked to write down the story they had read, and then subsequent recall tests were administered at intervals of a few hours, days, weeks, months, and years thereafter. What he found in their repeated reminiscences led to the discovery of the constructive nature of our memories.

Bartlett discovered that even in the first reproduction, after only fifteen minutes, his participants showed a significant number of major and minor distortions in their memories of what they had read. Even more changes had

been introduced by the second reproduction. Subsequent recall, of course, did not improve the accuracy of their memories, although Bartlett found that a particular structural form of the memory, what we might call its "gist," had developed in the memories of the various individuals. That is to say, the narrative quickly took a fairly fixed form, unique to that individual, that would serve as the basis for all subsequent recollections. This mnemonic structure was not especially accurate, however, and very soon after reading the narrative, significant details vanished or were replaced with new information. Most often, the added information was drawn from the subjects' culture, Edwardian England, which allowed them to construct a version of the memory that made more sense and had more relevance in their own context. The overall style of the story and its verbiage were quickly lost and replaced by new formations produced by the memories of different individuals, and there was also a persistent tendency to abbreviate.

The results thus revealed that although there were bits and pieces of memory that were in fact taken from the story, when recalled, these had to be massively reconstructed by filling in significant gaps with supplementary details and vocabulary not actually taken from the text itself. As time went by, memories of the actual text continued to degrade even further, so that little beyond the basic structure that had formed in the initial reminiscences, which themselves were not entirely accurate, could be consistently recalled. The results clearly demonstrated, as Bartlett concluded, that after only a few months, "narrative recall consists mostly of false-memory reports," a finding that has been verified by subsequent replications of his experiments. In some cases, subjects would incorrectly reproduce a text even when they were allowed visual contact with the written source![13] The significance of Bartlett's discoveries for our purposes is clear: our memories of what we experience, and in this case, of textual material especially, degrade very rapidly. Within only fifteen minutes, our memories introduce a high number of distortions, many of which are significant, to our recollections. The results therefore offer conclusive confirmation of the Ebbinghaus forgetting curve that was obtained using a slightly different method. This initial degradation only worsens over time, as one would expect, so that within a few months our memories of an event or a text will consist primarily of false memories that recall the original experience—or words—with a high degree of inaccuracy. Accordingly, we must recognize that any memories of what

Muhammad said or did by his earliest followers would have likewise been subject to the same process of rapid distortion and decay—within mere minutes of the experience and becoming significantly worse after just a couple of months.

No less problematic (indeed, perhaps even more so) are Bartlett's related studies of what he called "serial reproduction"—that is, the function of memory when someone relates a memory of her or his personal observations to another person, who in turn relates the memory to another, and so on.[14] Bartlett based his experiments on very short texts, which should have been easy to recall and transmit. What he discovered was that memory of the original material became more and more distorted with each additional transmission, in light of which he concluded that it is

> perfectly clear that serial reproduction normally brings about startling and radical alterations in the material dealt with. Epithets are changed into their opposites; incidents and events are transposed; names and numbers rarely survive intact for more than a few reproductions; opinions and conclusions are reversed—nearly every possible variation seems as if it can take place, even in a relatively short series. . . . In fact, the one overwhelming impression produced by this more "realistic" type of memory experiment is that human remembering is normally exceedingly subject to error.[15]

We will have much more to say about the highly distorting impact of oral transmission on a tradition in the following chapter. Nevertheless, for the moment we should perhaps consider the fact that the subjects for Bartlett's experiments with memory were students at Cambridge: one imagines that individuals lacking the same intellectual training and mental discipline as these students had would hardly perform any better.

As Bart Ehrman rightly notes of these issues, we must consider these limitations of the memory as we try to understand how figures from the past, like Jesus or Muhammad, were remembered by those who knew them.

> People's perceptions will necessarily be partial (you simply can't observe everything) or in error (you misperceive some things); what they store in memory will be partial and sometimes in error, as will be what they construct when trying to retrieve the memory. If they tell and retell what they experienced soon after the event and frequently thereafter, their first

> recollection will tend to be how they tell it every time. If they do not tell it for a while, and retell it only infrequently, every retelling may be different.[16]

Given these issues with the function of human memory, then, Ehrman rightly asks in regard to the Jesus tradition,

> What, one might wonder, would happen to serial reproductions of, say, sermons of Jesus, or accounts of his life? One should not urge that these would not change much given the presence of eyewitnesses to guarantee their accuracy. . . . Nor should anyone think that a predominantly "oral culture" such as found in the early Roman Empire would effectively preserve traditions without changing them.[17]

We will take up this point again in the next chapter. The very nature of human memory and its transmission all but ensures that such recollections would be, to quote Bartlett, "exceedingly subject to error," errors that would have arisen almost immediately in the memories of Muhammad's followers. If we add to these limitations of memory the regularly terse, confusing, elliptic, and even downright nonsensical style of the Qur'an's words, it seems ludicrous to imagine that Muhammad's companions could have remembered them accurately. These qualities certainly do not lend themselves to any possibility of verbatim memorization and recall in the absence of a written document. Indeed, people today are able to memorize the Qur'an verbatim only *because* it has become a written document.

EYEWITNESS MEMORY

The quotation from Ehrman above also introduces another important issue in the scientific study of human memory—namely, the reliability of eyewitness testimony and its value for remembering past events. Eyewitness memory is a topic that often arises in considerations about our historical knowledge of the origins of a religious tradition, including the beginnings of Islam no less than those of earliest Christianity. In both cases one frequently meets with appeals, often made particularly by religious believers, to the supposed accuracy of eyewitness testimony as a means of validating reports from the past about Jesus or Muhammad. For instance, Evangelical and other conservative Christians will regularly invoke the reliability of

eyewitness testimony in efforts to shore up the historical reliability and accuracy of the memories of Jesus in the canonical Christian gospels. The claim advanced by these individuals, who generally are committed in advance to the authority of the biblical text, is that since these gospels were written by actual eyewitnesses who were Jesus's followers, then they must record with a high degree of verisimilitude what he actually taught and did.[18]

Nevertheless, the truth of the matter is that eyewitness testimony is, like other sorts of memory, highly unreliable. As much was known already thousands of years ago by Thucydides, who observed: "Different eyewitnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories."[19] Yet, although eyewitness testimony continues to be especially valued, no less for the historian than for a judge and jury, it is at the same time surprisingly undependable—much more so than most people would think. In the past few decades, psychologists and cognitive neuroscientists have brought intense scrutiny to bear on the reliability of eyewitness memories, particularly in light of the significance that eyewitness testimony traditionally has held in legal proceedings.[20] This research in the legal field has now unearthed a very troubling problem: although eyewitness testimony has been one of the most important types of evidence in a criminal proceeding, it is nonetheless highly "disturbing that such testimony is often inaccurate or even entirely wrong."[21] The same would be true, one has every reason to suspect, for the eyewitness memories of Muhammad's companions, no less so than for the followers of Jesus.

One of the earliest experiments involving this sort of memory was conducted well over a century ago, in 1902, by a famous German legal scholar, Franz von Liszt. One day, while von Liszt was giving a lecture about a particular book, a student suddenly shouted out in the hall, "I wanted to throw light on the matter from the standpoint of Christian morality!" to which another student immediately responded, "I cannot stand that!" The verbal confrontation between the two quickly escalated until the first student drew a revolver. Von Liszt then stepped in and grabbed the student holding the weapon by the arm, at which point the gun went off. The class erupted in a tumult, but when von Liszt restored order, he explained to the class that they had just become part of an experiment in memory. He then instructed a part of the students to write down what they had seen

immediately. Another group wrote down their memories the next day, and another group did so after a week. Finally, one last group was deposed and asked to give their memories under cross examination. Since the event had been carefully scripted in advance by the three actors, they identified a number of specific events from the scene that were to be sought in the student reports. It turns out that no single student was able to remember the event accurately. The single best report, taken immediately, recalled 26 percent of the events incorrectly, while the worst had erroneous memories of 80 percent of what they had witnessed.[22]

A fundamental problem with eyewitness testimony is that eyewitnesses very often develop false memories of what they believe they witnessed. Eyewitnesses regularly come to believe with conviction that they saw something with their own eyes or heard something with their own ears that is patently false. For this reason, such testimony, long a bedrock of criminal proceedings, has now come under considerable suspicion: false memories have often led to false convictions with devastating consequences. These deep-seated problems with eyewitness testimony and false memories first came to light through a series of criminal cases in the United States involving accusations of sexual abuse, especially at day care centers, remembered much later in life by adults who believed themselves to have been victimized. The sudden proliferation of these cases prompted many to wonder if such abuse had in fact been so disturbingly widespread or if, alternatively, there was some issue with the supposed eyewitness memories of the victims that was driving the rise in accusations. It turned out to be the latter, and while some of the accusers, to be sure, may have truly been victims, in most cases these memories of abuse had been unconsciously implanted in the alleged victims during the process of therapy.[23] Yet the failure of eyewitness memory is, unfortunately, not limited to these specific circumstances alone: indeed, anthropologists have verified the phenomenon broadly among different cultures and in a range of circumstances.[24] And, as further studies of eyewitness testimony have found such memories to be less and less reliable, an extremely troubling number of false convictions on the basis of eyewitness testimony has steadily emerged.

The scholarly literature on this topic has become vast, since, as it turns out, the phenomenon of developing false eyewitness memories that are believed with absolute conviction is very common, and “once activated, the

manufactured memories are indistinguishable from factual memories."[25] Therapy is of course not the only mechanism by which false memories can be implanted, and any number of different vectors can contaminate our memories of personal experiences. For instance, we may hear false information from someone else about a past event, even one from our own personal history, and it will subsequently become part of our memory of the event, even though it is entirely false. Alternatively, more recent experiences and the memories they produce can alter and distort other memories of things that we have witnessed in the past. As Bartlett was the first to demonstrate, it is in the very nature of remembering to produce memories that are syntheses of various individual experiences. Likewise, our current beliefs, particularly if they have changed significantly from the past, can also introduce false memories, so that we remember who we were and what we did in the past in a way that comports with what we believe to be true in the present. "Surely it must have been like this" soon becomes in the memory "It was so."[26] No matter how hard we may try, our memories are prone to changing our recollections of the past, without our explicit permission to do so: it is a pervasive and persistent quality of human memory. Yet frustrating though this may be, it is, once again, as many experts have concluded, a helpful adaptive feature that makes our memories more relevant and useful in our day-to-day lives in the present.[27]

Many readers will no doubt be able to recall instances where individuals —or perhaps they themselves!—have been embarrassingly led astray by such a false memory. One can identify, for instance, any number of public figures who in the recent past have fallen victim to false memories, as accounts of dramatic events from their personal histories have been shown to contradict the clear indication of more durable records. There was, for instance, Hillary Clinton's memory of landing under sniper fire in Bosnia in 1996, which became a flashpoint in the 2008 US presidential election and again in 2016, since video of her arrival in Bosnia with her daughter showed that nothing could be further from the truth.[28] Her account was widely viewed as dishonest, when, to the contrary, it was simply a very public example of a false memory of an event that had developed in her personal memory, which she believed with conviction and repeated publicly with certainty, since she believed it to be true. Another equally dramatic example from the public sphere concerns Brian Williams, a prominent news broadcaster for

the US network NBC. Williams frequently recalled for viewers during his broadcasts how his helicopter had come under fire while he was covering the Iraq war in 2003. Yet the soldiers who were with him told a very different story. Other questionable memories soon came to light concerning Williams's coverage of the hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans, and eventually Williams had to step down from his position as the anchor of NBC's nightly news. Yet Williams's unfortunate downfall was merely a consequence of having a relatively normal human memory. Although the discrepancy was scandalous in the moment, Williams's misfortunes have since had the very positive effect of bringing greater public attention to the fact that we all—entirely innocently—develop false memories about ourselves and our past actions even within the relatively short span of a decade or so.[29]

In addition to making such enhancements to actual memories from our past, some people will remember vividly and with conviction having experienced things that never happened at all, with no basis in reality. Perhaps the most notorious example is the many individuals who have detailed memories of being abducted by aliens, a phenomenon that seems to have emerged only since 1962, coinciding, not surprisingly, with the birth of space flight. In these cases, psychologists have determined that these invented memories arise from an imagined possibility that continues to be imagined vividly and frequently so that it eventually becomes a memory of something that never actually occurred.[30] For example, a famous experiment conducted at Wesleyan University has demonstrated this productive quality of the imagination. Several researchers at Wesleyan devised an experiment to determine if simply imagining an experience could led to the production of an actual memory that the event took place. The psychologists took forty students to a variety of places around their campus and asked them either to perform a certain task, to imagine themselves performing a task, to observe someone else performing the task, or to imagine watching someone else performing the task. The tasks ranged from the altogether ordinary—looking up a word in the dictionary, for instance, to the highly bizarre—proposing marriage to a Pepsi machine. When the participants were interviewed two weeks later, the researchers "found that imagining familiar or bizarre actions during a campus walk can lead to the subsequent false recollection of having performed these actions."[31] Many similar experiments

have subsequently verified their findings, that the invention of false memories through persistent imagination of an event is part of the regular functioning of human memory.[32]

On the other side of things, eyewitnesses will often fail completely to notice significant elements of an event if the details in question do not conform to what is expected in a given circumstance on the basis of previous memories. For instance, in another now famous experiment, which has been repeated many times, two psychologists showed a film, about one minute long, in which two groups of people, one wearing white, and the other black, passed a basketball back and forth. The researchers asked the participants to count the number of times that the group dressed in white passed the ball. About halfway through the short video, "a female student wearing a full-body gorilla suit walked into the scene, stopped in the middle of the players, faced the camera, thumped her chest, and then walked off, spending about nine seconds onscreen," a period of time amounting to around 10 percent or so of the entire video.[33] The subjects were initially asked how many passes were made, and then they were asked if they saw anything unusual or anything other than the players, and then finally, if they noticed the gorilla. About half of the participants did not see the gorilla and responded with disbelief, insisting that they must have seen a different video, since they surely would not have missed that. But they did miss it, because they were instructed to focus exclusively on something else. If we are looking intently for one thing, and not at all expecting another, we often tend to miss the unexpected thing entirely. Likewise, if something is not important to us, then odds are good that we will not bother to remember it. As the famous psychologist Alfred Adler observed, "There are no 'chance memories': out of the incalculable number of impressions which meet an individual, he chooses to remember only those which he feels, however darkly, to have a bearing on his situation."[34]

This fallibility of eyewitness memories is no less evident, one must also note, in the particular case of so-called "flashbulb" memories—that is "memories for the circumstances in which one first learned of a very surprising and consequential (or emotionally arousing) event."[35] For instance, an individual may not remember the slightest thing about what he or she was doing on November 22, 1963. But, if you ask older Americans what they were doing when they learned that US President John F. Kennedy

was assassinated, many people will profess vivid memories of that circumstance. Studies have determined that the high level of surprise, significance, and emotion associated with such events triggers the brain to store more details in a short span of time that it ordinarily would.[36] Yet, despite the uncharacteristically vivid and detailed nature of such memories, this by no means ensures their accuracy. To the contrary, such flashbulb memories are no less subject to the vagaries of human memory than other more ordinary memories. Although some readers will perhaps ardently wish to dispute this claim, particularly when it comes to their own memories, it has repeatedly been shown to be true.

The classic study to first demonstrate the fallibility of flashbulb memories was a study undertaken by two psychologists in the 1980s following the explosion of the US space shuttle *Challenger* on January 28, 1986. The day after this tragedy, the researchers asked 106 students in an Emory University psychology class to complete a questionnaire regarding the specific circumstances they were in when they first heard the news. The researchers followed up with about half of these students after eighteen months, and then again after two years. Perhaps the most startling result of this study is that 75 percent of the students who were given follow questions a year and a half later were absolutely certain they had never answered the questionnaire in the first place—and yet clearly, they had. Twenty-five percent of the students answered every single question incorrectly the second time, even though they were certain that their highly vivid memories were accurate. An additional 50 percent of the students could answer only two out of the seven questions correctly, when compared with what they had previously written on the day after the event. Just 7 percent of the students were able to remember the same circumstances that they recorded a year and a half earlier, although even then there were many mistakes in the details of their memories.[37] Six months later, the memories unsurprisingly did not improve, and when the respondents were confronted with the facts from their initial responses, despite being presented with a written record in their own hand, they remained insistent that their current memories were in fact correct. "No one who had given an incorrect account in the interview even pretended that they now recalled what was stated on the original record. . . . As far as we can tell," the researchers concluded, "the original memories are just gone."[38] Further research on this type of memory has only served to

substantiate these original findings, and it has now become widely agreed that "[flashbulb memories] are distinguished from ordinary memories by their vividness and the confidence with which they are held. There is little evidence that they are reliably different from ordinary autobiographical memories in accuracy, consistency, or longevity."[39]

It is even possible to introduce a false flashbulb memory, as illustrated by an experiment conducted in the Netherlands. On October 4, 1992, an El-Al cargo plane crashed into an eleven-story apartment building in an Amsterdam suburb shortly after takeoff, resulting in mass casualties. Not surprisingly, the story was widely covered in the Dutch news. Then, ten months later, in August 1993, three Dutch psychologists gave a questionnaire to around two hundred university faculty and students across the country. Among the questions was: "Did you see the television film of the moment the plane hit the apartment building?" Over half of those surveyed (55 percent) responded that they had indeed seen the film. The experiment was repeated with a group of around one hundred law students, and again the majority said that they had indeed seen the film of the accident on television. The only thing is, there was no such film, and indeed, given the lack of widespread video surveillance and cell phone cameras at this time, "very little critical sense would have made our subjects realize that the implanted information could not possibly be true."[40] And yet, when subsequently asked about the event, many of the participants remembered vivid details that they believed they had seen in the film. The power of authoritative suggestion from the researchers' questionnaire led them to believe that they had in fact witnessed the plane's impact on film, while their repeated imaginations of the event, based on expectations of what must have transpired, became a false memory shared by many in this group of mostly university faculty and graduate students. The study thus demonstrates "that people easily mistake post-event information, either from hearsay or from their own visualization, for first-hand knowledge. This is particularly easy when, as in our studies, the event is of a highly dramatic nature, which almost by necessity evokes strong and detailed visual imagery."[41]

REMEMBERING THE GIST?

If readers may be beginning to despair at the fallibility of human memory, there is, it turns out, some good news. Memory, of course, must have some usefulness or reliability; otherwise, we could not and would not rely on it. Indeed, some persistence and accuracy of memory is essential for human beings to live their daily lives and to have complex interactions with each other and with society as a whole. Most of the time, our memory functions very well to remember the broad outlines of what we have experienced. Thus, despite all its significant limitations, human memory excels at remembering the "gist" of what happened in the past, even as particular details and specific words fall quickly into oblivion. Our recollections are in fact organized in the memory and retrieved on the basis of such "gist information," a feature that "is adapted to retain information that is most likely to be needed in the environment in which it operates." This aspect of memory, as we have already noted, indicates that the many forgotten details and alterations of our memories actually "serve an adaptive role." Our memories have adapted to preserve what is essential, forgetting or changing the rest.[42] In fact, "the ability to remember the gist of what happened is also one of memory's strengths: we can benefit from an experience even when we do not recall all of its particulars."[43]

At this level, that of the "gist," we remember quite a lot: we can recall the general schema of many things that we have done and experienced, even if the details are usually quite mixed up. For instance, if one doesn't remember exactly what he or she was doing when learning that Kennedy was assassinated or first witnessing the 9/11 attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, one certainly remembers that these things happened and remembers hearing about them. Nevertheless, in identifying this quality of our memories, it is essential to consider just what we might mean when we refer to retention of the "gist" of a particular memory. For some memory scientists, "Memory for the gist . . . occurs when we recall the 'sense' of an original text in different words. To remember the gist of a story or a conversation is to be roughly faithful to the argument, the story line, the underlying sequence of ideas."[44] If this is the standard, then very often our memories in fact fail to retain the gist of an experience, and in reality we can recall no more than the general themes of past conversations or experiences. Of course, if we instead regard memory of these more general patterns to be

reflective of the “gist,” then our memories are quite good at preserving the gist.

One of the most important studies demonstrating the limitations of memory for retaining the gist, in this case defined as recalling an original “text” in different words, is based on the congressional testimony of John Dean, Richard Nixon’s White House counsel, in the Watergate proceedings. During the Senate hearings, Dean recalled with great detail his interactions with Nixon, often recounting dozens of conversations with him from his three years of service as if he were citing them verbatim. The senators were often skeptical concerning the precise level of detail that Dean claimed to remember, and they frequently pressed him on the specifics. Nevertheless, Dean maintained that he had an excellent memory, which his reputation seemed to confirm. Indeed, at the time of the hearings, some writers referred to Dean as “the human tape recorder,” so precise were his accounts of these conversations.[45] Within a year of his testimony, however, real tape recordings of their conversations made by Nixon in the Oval Office were released in the course of the investigation: Nixon allowed their release in hopes that their discrepancies with Dean’s testimony would discredit Dean. The release of the tapes has thus made it possible to compare Dean’s detailed recollections of his conversations with Nixon, which he read before the committee from a carefully prepared statement, with recordings of those same conversations. On the basis of these two sets of data, one can determine just how much Dean was actually able to remember and how accurate his memory of these conversations was when he was testifying. The results of this analysis are one of the most remarkable studies in the history of memory science—“John Dean’s Memory: A Case Study,” published by the famous memory researcher Ulric Neisser.

Neisser compared Dean’s testimony with transcripts of two recorded conversations between Dean and Nixon, one on September 15, 1972, and the other on March 21, 1973: these were the only two recordings available for comparison. One should note that these conversations took place only nine months and three months respectively before his Senate testimony began on June 25, 1973. The comparisons with the two transcripts yielded striking results, revealing some remarkable differences between Dean’s memory of the conversations and what actually transpired in the Oval Office. In general, Dean showed a tendency to elevate his own significance

in the events as he remembered them, but more importantly, his memories about many things, including some very big things, were simply wrong. Nevertheless, although his recollections were often inaccurate, none of what Dean said was false, since, if it were, he would have been convicted of perjury, which he was not. On the whole, Neisser's study revealed "that Dean recalls the 'gist' of some conversations and not of others," despite his confidence that his memory is entirely accurate.[46]

Comparison of the first meeting's recording with Dean's recollection "shows that hardly a word of Dean's account is true. Nixon did not say *any* of the things attributed to him here." Neisser concludes about this conversation

> that Dean's account of the opening of the September 15 conversation is wrong both as to the words used and their gist. Moreover, cross-examination [from the senators] did not reveal his errors as clearly as one might have hoped. . . . He remembered how he had felt himself and what he had wanted, together with the general state of affairs; he didn't remember what anyone had actually said. His testimony had much truth in it, but not at the level of 'gist.' It was true at a deeper level. Nixon was the kind of man Dean described, he had the knowledge Dean attributed to him, there was a cover-up. Dean remembered all of that; he just didn't recall the actual conversation he was testifying about.

Dean does in fact recall all the topics that were discussed, "but never reproduces, the real gist of anything that was said."[47]

The second meeting, on March 21, was arranged at Dean's request. He was not sure that Nixon fully understood the gravity of their circumstances as they had developed by this point in the coverup, and he wanted to discuss them privately, face-to-face. It was on this occasion that Dean uttered his most famous words, informing Nixon that "we have a cancer within, close to the presidency, that is growing." In this instance, comparison of Dean's testimony with the recording showed that he had "clear recall of the gist of what was said." Yet the greater accuracy of his memory for this meeting required some sharp clarification: one must realize "that the March 21 meeting was less a conversation than the delivery of a well-prepared report," and that for the first hour the meeting "stayed quite close to the script Dean had prepared for it in advance."[48] In this case, then, Dean was effectively remembering for the Senate hearings a report that he had memorized three months prior and had probably continued to rehearse in his mind since this

pivotal meeting. When Nixon's chief of staff, Bob Haldeman, later joined Dean and Nixon for the second hour of the meeting, Dean's memory suddenly became much less precise, presumably because he was no longer on script at this point. What is still more peculiar is that Dean barely mentioned anything at all from the second half of this meeting in his testimony. This absence is quite remarkable since in this portion of the conversation, the three men repeatedly discussed raising a million dollars to pay off the blackmail demands of some of the conspirators, a topic that Nixon had already introduced during the first half of the meeting. It is hard to imagine that Dean would have forgotten the president saying such things about paying out such substantial bribes, and it turns out he did not: he just assigned them to the wrong day, including them in his description of a meeting that took place the week before on March 13. Nevertheless, although this topic, the million dollars in blackmail money, was discussed in the March 21 meeting, it did not come up at all during the March 13 meeting, when Dean remembered having this conversation. Dean remembered the discussion of raising the money to pay the blackmailers; he simply misremembered the context in which it occurred.[49]

So what went wrong? Why did Dean's memory alter the account of what happened in the way that it did? Likewise, why did he get some things more or less right? In the first place, as already noted, many of the transformations in Dean's recollections serve to elevate his importance in the affair and to signal the president's personal approval of him. I think it is safe to say that he is not the only one whose memory frequently operates in this manner. All of us tend to remember our past in a fashion that makes us look good and important. Yet Dean's memories also seem to reflect the influence of certain memory scripts. That is, Dean was remembering his meetings with the president by filling in the gaps using a general memory pattern of what one would expect when meeting with the president in the Oval Office. Such mental schemata are stored and regularly employed by the mind for understanding and remembering many common events. Accordingly, in many instances, Dean's testimony relies on his memory of the sort of things that are typically said when one is in the Oval Office with the president.[50] He has reconstructed the memory from bits and pieces, in the manner that Bartlett identified, filling in gaps in an "imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active

mass of organised past reactions or experience."[51] As for the parts that he remembered with greater clarity, Neisser observes that these were the result of repetition by Dean himself as well as by others during the meetings, both before and after the meetings. These repetitions, rather than the events of a single episode, were the things that he was best able to recall the "gist" of. Yet in the end, even if Dean was not able to remember the gist of his conversations with Nixon, Neisser emphasizes that he was in fact telling the truth about what happened. As he writes, "John Dean did not misrepresent this theme [i.e., Nixon's corruption] in his testimony; he just dramatized it. In memory experiments, subjects often recall the gist of a sentence but express it in different words. Dean's consistency was deeper; he recalled the theme of a whole series of conversations and expressed it in different events."[52] In the broader sense of the "gist," then, which we suggested above, it would seem that Dean was able to accurately remember the gist of what happened, even if he could not remember the gist of the particular words that either he or Nixon actually said.

What can this study of John Dean's tell us more generally about how human memory works? Well, here we have a highly educated and intelligent individual, whose career had trained him to have a keen memory: his position, as White House counsel, demanded that he have a good memory for both the law and all the workings of a presidential administration. In the Senate hearings, he was charged with remembering several crucial and momentous personal conversations with the president—an auspicious occasion—at a distance of only three to nine months, having time to prepare a carefully recollected statement that he knew would be delivered before the senators. And yet, his memory failed on many levels to recall what happened and what was said, even as he remembered the broader themes of his interactions with the president as well as things he had presumably memorized in advance for their conversations. We find in Dean a fine-tuned memory working relatively well to recall the broader themes from past experience, while failing to remember even the gist of what was said and also misattributing certain conversations to incorrect circumstances. All things considered, this is not bad at all, and it seems to be about as much as we can expect of human memory without the aid of written materials, even if many of us—mistakenly—believe that our memories and those of others are more capable than this.

Accordingly, if such were the limits of Dean's memory in these conditions, it bears asking, what should we expect of more ordinary people, whose training and profession have not developed their memories to the same extent as Dean? Are we able to remember the gist of a conversation that we had two years ago, or even three months ago, with a colleague, a student, a health professional? Possibly. How about the general themes of the conversation? More likely. And what about a word-for-word account of what was discussed? Not a chance. Even if some people may believe they have such capacities, they do not. What about something that someone else told you about a conversation that a third person had some time ago? Would this reproduce what was said word for word? Certainly not. Let us go even further still: "what about a report written by someone who had heard about the conversation from someone who was friends with a man whose brother's wife had a cousin who happened to be there—a report written, say, several decades after the fact? Is it likely to record the exact words? In fact, is it likely to remember precisely even the gist? Or the topics?"[53] At best, in such cases we would be lucky if the gist of the topics discussed maintained some basic level of accuracy. More than that seems extremely improbable in the absence of written transmission.

It is of course possible to train the memory to accomplish remarkable feats, such as remembering a sequence of a thousand random numbers or the order of ten shuffled decks of cards. It is true that some people, thirty-six to be precise, have trained their memory and developed tricks to make such feats possible, at least for the short term.[54] Their memories are not supernatural, just trained: much in the same way that a body builder exercises regularly to bulk up, so these athletes of the mind regularly train to develop their memories. Anyone who committed to such training could theoretically attain the same capabilities. Yet one must note that the exploits of these memory champions, who indeed engage in competitions, involve short-term memorization of a very different sort from the long-term verbatim recall that would be necessary to remember conversations or lectures word for word or events from daily life with detailed accuracy. It is true, however, that there are individuals who, unlike these memory masters, are simply born with the ability to remember just about everything they experience in excruciating detail. Yet this capacity is extremely rare—it is literally preternatural, and thus it cannot be taken as evidence that

Muhammad's followers would have similarly been able to remember the text of the Qur'an word for word after hearing it from Muhammad. Moreover, this ability tends to be much more of a curse than a blessing for those extremely few individuals who possess it. As noted above, our forgetfulness is an adaptive quality that makes our memories functionally useful in the day-to-day affairs of our life. Without the ability to forget most of what we experience, it turns out to be very difficult to get through the day. As Schacter notes, "if all events were registered in elaborate detail" in our memory, "the result would be a potentially overwhelming clutter of useless details."[55]

Such was the case for the famous mnemonist Solomon Shereshevski, whom the Russian neuropsychologist Alexander Luria studied over three decades beginning in the 1920s. Shereshevski could recall lists of words, numbers, even nonsense syllables exactly still more than a decade after hearing them spoken once. As Luria concluded of his subject, "Shereshevski formed and retained highly detailed memories of virtually everything that happened to him—both the important and the trivial. Yet he was unable to function at an abstract level because he was inundated with unimportant details of his experiences—details that are best denied entry to the system in the first place."[56] Shereshevski's unique condition enabled him to remember almost everything that he experienced, yet this ability was debilitating: "The main problem for 'S' [Shereshevski] seemed to be that new information (such as idle talk from other people) set off an uncontrollable train of distracting memory associations for him. Eventually, 'S' could not even hold a conversation, let alone function as a journalist," his original profession.[57] Shereshevski possessed a truly supernatural memory, with abilities unknown in other human beings, capabilities that eventually made him dysfunctional, incapable of even making conversation. Accordingly, this singularly exceptional individual cannot validate a belief that Muhammad's followers could remember the Qur'an verbatim for decades after hearing it from him. Even in the entirely improbable case that one among Muhammad's followers may have had such a memory, Shereshevski's example shows that such a person would be effectively useless for the rest of the community, unable to even have a conversation with other members of the group.

There is another recently identified memory condition known as hyperthymesia or highly superior autobiographical memory, which was only identified in 2006. Individuals with hyperthymesia are able to remember dates and events from their lives with extraordinary accuracy, reaching back over decades. It is an extremely rare condition, which has only been identified in around sixty or so individuals in the world. But these individuals show extraordinary recall of personal experiences: often if you ask them what happened on a certain day, they can tell you what they had for lunch on that day as well as significant personal experiences or public events with incredible accuracy. What they remember and what they do not is seemingly random, but in almost all cases the things that are remembered are very personal, rather than shared, experiences. For instance, in the first case that was discovered, the individual, after being interviewed by two people for hours the day before, could not remember when asked what her interviewers had been wearing.[58] Nevertheless, again, while it seems highly implausible to assume that such an individual was among Muhammad's entourage, even if by some remarkable chance there were, this still could not guarantee the words of the Qur'an.

Moreover, and more importantly, although hyperthymesiacs frequently can remember their personal past with stunning detail and exactitude, they are just as often likely to remember things incorrectly; indeed, studies have shown that they are no less likely to do so than individuals who do not have this mnemonic ability. They are equally susceptible to all the influences and mechanisms that regularly distort or introduce false memories. One proposed explanation for this phenomenon is that once other memories of an event are introduced, they can easily replace the individual hyperthymesiac's memory of a particular event. What they tend to remember in great detail are things that only they would know or the dates of certain major events, memories that are not prone to divergent accounts or interpretations. Nor, as it turns out, are they particularly good at remembering texts and poetry in particular.[59] Accordingly, it seems unreasonable to postulate that this extremely rare memory condition, with all its attendant weaknesses, could possibly somehow guarantee that the Qur'an preserves verbatim accounts of what Muhammad taught.

Let us then consider what the well-documented limitations of human memory should mean for how we think about the early history of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is generally believed by both Muslims and most modern scholars alike to be an exact and faithful transcript of the words that Muhammad taught. As F. E. Peters maintains, for instance, "our copy of the Qurʾān is, in fact, what Muhammad taught, and is expressed in his own words." After Muhammad's death and before their collection under ʿUthmān, these words were transmitted by men who "were convinced from the outset . . . that what they were hearing and noting 'on scraps of leather, bone and in their hearts' were not the teachings of a man but the *ipsissima verba Dei* and so they would have been scrupulously careful in preserving the actual wording." Accordingly, Peters insists that one must recognize that "the Qurʾān is convincingly the words of Muhammad."[60] So also Rudi Paret insists that "We have no reason to assume that even a single verse in the entire Qur'an does not come from Muhammad himself."[61] Elsewhere Paret avers that the Qur'an "contains nothing but authentic sayings of the Prophet. The individual proclamations appear to have come down to us in an unfailingly verbatim transmission."[62] Angelika Neuwirth similarly maintains that the Qur'an must be understood as a "transcript" of Muhammad's "prophetic communications."[63] Such pronouncements regarding the fidelity of the Qur'anic text to what Muhammad taught are not at all uncommon, and ultimately they would all appear to harken back to Nöldeke, who long ago proclaimed that "the Qur'an contains only authentic material."[64] Nevertheless, in light of what we have just seen about the limitations of human memory, is there any reason to imagine that such judgments could possibly be warranted, despite their prevalence, in critical scholarship on the Qur'an and early Islam?

If we assume Muhammad's early followers to have been ordinary human beings without mnemonic superpowers, then we must accept that their memories of the words Muhammad spoke to them do not preserve "what Muhammad taught, and is expressed in his own words." Such accuracy is altogether impossible, no matter how many times it may be asserted in the scholarly literature, unless someone were taking dictation in the moment. Within hours of hearing him speak, the listeners would already have forgotten most of the specific words he said, as the Ebbinghaus forgetting

curve, a pillar of memory science, clearly indicates. When they later sought to retrieve memories of what they had heard, they would not have simply called up a faithful transcript from the archives of their memories. Instead, such recall involves the imaginative reconstruction and recomposition of the memory anew, based on some fragments that managed to make it into storage. But these fragments leave large gaps and must be supplemented by information drawn from "the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organised past reactions or experience."[65] Perhaps a few months or years after hearing Muhammad say something, one of his companions could recall a few scraps of the gist of what he said, but most of the memory would consist of supplemental filler provided from the relevant experiences amassed by this individual. The same holds no less true of Muhammad himself, whose ability to remember words that he had spoken months or years in the past would be similarly limited and prone to considerable omission and alteration. Here Neisser's observation that our memories work with fragments in the same way that paleontologists work with bones is particularly apt: given a few bits to work with, our memories have to reconstruct the whole animal, as it were.[66] Accordingly, what we have is not Muhammad's words, but a recomposition of them inspired by some gist memories that, like the paleontologist's bone fragments, have been highly reconstructed and expanded based on expected patterns in order to complete the whole.

The fact that some of Muhammad's earliest followers may have been eyewitnesses (or earwitnesses) to what they remember does not in any way validate the accuracy of their reminiscence. As we have also seen, eyewitness memories are highly fallible, no less so than any other kind of memory. Perhaps the fact that there would have been multiple eyewitnesses to confirm one another's memories can buy some reassurance? Not at all, and actually the opposite seems to be true. Memory science has learned that eyewitness memories are more often than not corrupted by influence from the accounts of others. Indeed, scientific study of "group memory" has demonstrated that the collaborative memory of several individuals working together generally amounts to less than the sum of its parts. For instance, given a dozen individuals who witnessed a particular event, if one interviews them individually, one will garner more information and greater accuracy than if the group is consulted as a whole. So, sharing memories

among individuals seems to degrade, rather than strengthen them, a point that leads to the topics of the next chapter: oral transmission and collective memory.[67]

Therefore, we should hardly expect Muhammad's followers to have remembered his *ipsissima verba*. Instead, in the absence of a written record, the best we might hope for is something along the lines of John Dean's capacity: the recall of the general patterns of thought that Muhammad expressed, along with a number of his key phrases and other things that were frequently repeated, perhaps with the occasional recollection of the gist of what he might have said, restated using different words. In effect, then, Muhammad's followers, and Muhammad himself for that matter, would be recomposing his words anew each time they remembered them, on the basis of bits and pieces of gist memory that may have survived. His companions would have to supplement these fragments heavily by adding new compositions fashioned on the basis of general memories of Muhammad and the broad patterns of his teachings that they could recall, as well as their present circumstances. This does not mean these individuals were lying or engaged in some sort of conspiracy to hide the true nature of Islamic origins, as again some scholars of early Islam like to insist is the only possible alternative to the absolute fidelity and credibility of the traditional accounts.[68] Rather, like John Dean, they were telling the truth as best they could, based on what their memories could provide them, notwithstanding the errors and imaginations of their recollections.[69] One must admit, of course, that it is certainly not impossible that some parts of the Qur'an are in fact rather close to something that Muhammad might have said to his earliest followers. Yet, as in the case of the words of Jesus, these rare instances would indeed be great exceptions and would need to be justified with careful arguments in each instance.

Once we move beyond the original generation of eyewitness, such memories would only become more removed from what actually happened or was said, having been recomposed multiple times with each recollection and each transmission to another individual. Only their commitment to writing can obviate these realities of human memory, which is no doubt why many scholars will insist—without much evidence—that Muhammad's revelations must have been written soon after he spoke them and under his supervision. Otherwise, once human memory intervenes, we are no longer

dealing with Muhammad's teachings in the words that he spoke them, but with multiple recompositions of his teachings under a range of individual, communal, and external influences as they passed through time and from individual to individual. This is all the more so once we recognize, as Nicolai Sinai again reminds us, "that during the age of the conquests the majority of converts were not sufficiently preoccupied with the interpretation of the Quran in community's order for the prophetic understanding of it to be fully preserved. As a result, later Muslims needed to rediscover and hermeneutically reinvent their scripture."[70] Indeed, once we factor in the process of oral transmission, the topic to which we next turn, the teachings ascribed to Muhammad become even more remote from what he may have actually said. At this stage, the memories of his words were being shaped by the nature of the community that he founded as it continued to develop its collective and individual needs, as well as the new contexts in which the memories are transmitted.

7

Re-Remembering Muhammad

Oral Tradition and Collective Memory

In chapter 5, we identified a very high probability, approaching near certainty, that the teachings of Muhammad, beyond perhaps a few bits and pieces at most, would not have been written down in his lifetime. Such, at least, is indicated by the reigning consensus regarding the conditions of literacy in the time and place in which he lived. Instead, his teachings were only gradually collected as part of an ongoing process that led ultimately to the composition of the Qur'an, lasting for several decades after his death, seemingly until the end of the seventh century. This means that Muhammad's divine revelations must have been transmitted orally from memory without a written basis among the community of the Believers for an extended period of time, much as the teachings of Jesus likewise circulated orally among his followers for several decades. Therefore, we must approach the Qur'an as a text that was composed and recomposed in the process of its recollection and oral transmission amid the various other religious cultures of western Asia during the seventh century. Accordingly, it is essential to consider the effects that the process of oral transmission would have had on the community's memory of Muhammad's teachings as they were told and retold in the time between their initial delivery in Mecca and Yathrib (presumably) and their commitment to writing decades later in the various centers of the emerging Islamic empire. In doing so, we will draw on a range of scholarship from the past century that has studied the

nature of oral cultures, their histories, their transmission of cultural memories, and the relation of these cultures to the written word.

Heightened attention to the role that orality played in the transmission and formation of the early Christian scriptures was one of the more important and productive developments in late twentieth-century biblical scholarship. Such considerations have been largely absent, however, from investigations of the Qur'an and its early history. Not surprisingly, however, perspectives gained from the study of oral cultures have much to contribute to understanding the Qur'an's oral transmission and its eventual transition to writing, particularly given the profoundly oral nature of the Qur'an as a text in the Islamic tradition up until the present day. Oral transmission, as we will see, is characterized by a high level of omission and alteration, and, with only a matter of a few repetitions, a tradition will change significantly from the "original," even if in some instances something of the original gist is maintained. Therefore, we may not simply assume, once again, that what eventually came to be written down in the Qur'an is identical with what Muhammad taught, any more than we can assume that the canonical gospels preserve the words that Jesus taught his earliest followers.

At the outset, one must note the existence of a widespread belief, often embraced by scholars no less than the broader public, that people in oral cultures have developed remarkable capacities for accurate memory that we, the children of a written culture, can barely even comprehend. Since these cultures lacked writing as a means to accurately preserve the culture and history of their community, individuals must have worked especially hard, so it is assumed, to increase the faculties of their memory. Likewise, they must have taken intense care to remember with great precision what they had heard and to pass it along without change from one person to the next. Yet, despite these frequently presumed qualities of memory and transmission in oral cultures, decades of scientific study of oral cultures have now shown that such assumptions are not only unwarranted; they are demonstrably false.[1] It is true, of course, that literate cultures rely on memory differently from nonliterate ones, with the consequence that in literate cultures "our minds are freed to do much deeper and sophisticated work. Thus, it is no accident that advances in science, technology, engineering, and math have always happened in highly literate cultures."[2] But the lack of a literate culture simply does not make human memories

more capacious or accurate in oral societies. In fact, scientific studies have shown the opposite to be true: that the acquisition of literacy significantly improves and strengthens verbal and visual memory, whereas the condition of illiteracy impairs these abilities.[3] Accordingly, despite what is often assumed, it seems that people in literate cultures actually have better memories than those in nonliterate cultures.

As a direct consequence of the functions and limitations of the human memory, material that is transmitted orally, as we saw in the previous chapter, turns out to be highly subject to change, frequently involving significant alteration of the original tradition. Oral transmission, as specialists have demonstrated, is not the rote transmission of a literary artifact from the past but is instead a constant process of recomposition as the tradition is recreated anew in each instance of transmission. As we will see, this fundamental property of remembering is no less true in preliterate cultures than literate ones, and obviously this finding bears tremendous significance for how we understand the formation of the Qur'an out of an originally oral context. Like the human memory itself, as we also saw in the previous chapter, oral cultures are often effective at preserving the bare bones "gist" of an event over time. Nevertheless, in the context of oral transmission, the skeleton of this gist is given new flesh each time, so that a tradition begins to be radically re-remembered from its very first repetition. And since we remember the past solely for the sake of understanding the present, as these memories are transmitted and the gaps are filled in, they are quickly reshaped according to the present concerns of those transmitting them.

The influence of the present as the context in which we inevitably produce all our memories brings us to the second topic of this chapter—that is, another kind of social memory known as "cultural memory," or as I prefer to call it, "collective memory." Memory is not something that belongs to individuals alone, but there is also a different sort of memory that is shared and shaped together by the members of a particular community or society. As Bart Ehrman writes of this phenomenon, "Society itself cannot function without a memory of the people and events that have bound and continue to bind it together. As a society we have to remember our origins, our history, our wars, our economic crises, our mistakes, and our successes. Without a recollection of our past we cannot live in the present or look forward to a

future."[4] Such cultural or collective memories are therefore essential to defining and maintaining a social group's identity and its cohesion. Collective memory generally will consist of a corpus of shared stories and symbols and interpretations of those stories and symbols that provide meaning and purpose for members of the community. The memory of a community's foundation and formation are often essential components of its collective memory, as are the biographies of its founders and great leaders, as well as the stories of its most detested villains and enemies. Certain events, symbols, and figures may remain persistent in a group's collective memory over long periods of time. Nevertheless, it is inherent to the nature of collective memory that the shared reminiscence and interpretation of the objects of collective memory will change across time and place—often very significantly.

The memories of Muhammad and the origins of Islam recorded in the early Sunni historical tradition are prime examples of such collective memories. As such, these sources remember their community's founding prophet and the formation of their faith not with perfect fidelity to what actually happened in the early seventh century. By the time these accounts came to be written down, most of what happened and what was then said would have been forgotten, simply as a consequence of the frailty of human memory. But many things from this past were also "forgotten" because they were no longer relevant to the faith of Sunni Muslims in the Abbasid Empire of the later eighth century. The Muslims of this age remembered the origins of their community and the life and teachings of their prophet in a manner that was suited particularly to their contemporary circumstances, which were quite different from those of early seventh-century Mecca and Yathrib. Likewise, these collective memories of the period of origins have been shaped so that they would exemplify and validate the religious beliefs and practice of eighth-century Islam, which seem to have been significantly different from those of Muhammad's earliest followers. Such transformations are typical of collective memory, and while it is widely acknowledged in scholarship that this type of communal memory has profoundly determined much of the early Islamic historical tradition, little consideration has been given to how collective memory must have also influenced the composition and canonization of the Qur'an.[5] Considering the impact of collective memory on the fluid nature of the Qur'an during its

oral transmission seems essential, since in an oral society like that of the early Believers, "changes in its cultural traditions are accompanied by the homeostatic process of forgetting or transforming those parts of the tradition that cease to be either necessary or relevant."[6]

The cultural and religious circumstances in which Muhammad's earliest followers found themselves were changing regularly and rapidly throughout the seventh century, and especially during the 630s and 640s. This religious movement that began in the nonliterate and isolated communities of the central Hijaz (assuming that is where the movement began) quickly found itself immersed within the highly literate, diverse, and developed cultures of late ancient Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Manicheanism, among other traditions. Indeed, despite their military dominance, one imagines that Muhammad's followers would have found themselves culturally overwhelmed in these new circumstances. According to our best estimate, the number of Muhammad's followers who initially entered western Iran and the Roman Near East in the mid-630s was somewhere between only thirty and fifty thousand men.[7] Thanks to their amazing success in battle, within ten years Muhammad's followers were spread across the conquered territories of the former Sasanian Empire and much of the Roman Near East, including Syro-Palestine, Egypt, and much of North Africa and eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus: the occupied Byzantine territories alone amounted to around one million square kilometers.

Thus, within a decade Muhammad's followers found themselves a small minority of around forty thousand fighting men scattered over hundreds of thousands of square miles and living among a religiously diverse and culturally sophisticated population of around twenty million.[8] As the Believers began to colonize these conquered regions, those in Iraq, as is well known, largely settled into separate garrison towns—notably, Kufa and Basra. Once some of the army's dependents began to settle in to these cities, we can estimate a population of around twenty thousand for Kufa, but only about one thousand for Basra at the start of ʿUthmān's reign.[9] In the following decades, these settlements grew quickly to around 350,000 combined by 670, about one-third of which were soldiers with the rest being their dependents.[10] Although the number of Muhammad's followers in the conquered lands had grown considerably by this point, they nevertheless

remained a vastly outnumbered minority community within the territories they ruled. The settlement of Syro-Palestine followed a different pattern, in that there Muhammad's followers preferred to take up residence in the already existing cities of this region. There they lived as a small minority alongside the many Jews and Christians of this region, interacting with them quite frequently, one imagines.[11]

Undoubtedly, these new social and cultural conditions would have determined swift and substantial changes in how Muhammad's followers understood their faith and remembered the history of their community. One imagines that these early Believers were constantly bombarded by the Abrahamic traditions of the majority Jewish and Christian cultures, particular in Syro-Palestine, which by 661 had emerged as the political and cultural center of the Believers' new polity. Regular exchanges with these fellow worshippers of the God of Abraham cannot but have influenced the Believers' understanding of their own traditions, which no doubt were adjusted and amplified as a result of these encounters. The profound importance of Jerusalem and the Promised Land for Muhammad's earliest followers would have fueled great interest in the traditions of this region in particular, many of which were clearly adopted by the Islamic tradition, as can still be seen today.[12] Moreover, we should expect that during these early decades, many former Jews and Christians had joined Muhammad's new religious community, bringing with them the full panoply of their Abrahamic religious traditions. Undoubtedly, they shared these traditions with their new coreligionists, whose memories of Muhammad's teaching would have been shaped by these new ideas. Accordingly, there can be little question that Believers' faith and collective identity continued to develop during their intensive encounter with the full wealth of the Abrahamic tradition in the new context of that very tradition's most sacred lands, Mesopotamia and Syro-Palestine. The historical study of religion (*Religionsgeschichte*) teaches us to expect nothing less during the formative period of a religious tradition. Therefore, we should also expect that the evolving nature of their religious faith and identity would inevitably have shaped how Muhammad's followers remembered the teachings of their prophet in these early decades, particularly while they were still circulating orally. And one should further note that at this point any knowledge they had of what Muhammad had taught ultimately depended entirely on the

memories of no more than a few dozen illiterate villagers who followed him in Mecca and perhaps a few hundred in Medina. By the time these memories of Muhammad's revelations were recorded and formally canonized into a new sacred scripture, seemingly at the turn of the eighth century, there is every reason to suspect that their contents would have changed considerably from what Muhammad had originally taught. The context of their early transmission within the diverse "sectarian milieu" of the late ancient Near East is certain to have shaped how Muhammad's followers remembered his words.

THE QUR'AN'S ORAL CONTEXT: THE STUDY OF ORAL CULTURES AND ORAL TRANSMISSION

Much like the science of human memory, the study of oral cultures and oral transmission witnessed significant advances over the course of the last century. For obvious reasons, the results of these investigations afford invaluable, if generally ignored, perspectives for understanding how the contents of the Qur'an developed during its initial oral transmission within an effectively nonliterate society. The bulk of this research on orality was conducted, not surprisingly, by anthropologists, who traveled the globe in search of various oral civilizations, from which they could learn how such cultures function differently from literate societies and how the process of oral transmission works. Nevertheless, some of the first and most significant work on this topic was done by scholars of ancient Greek literature, who sought in the study of contemporary oral cultures models and perspectives that could illuminate the oral culture of ancient Greek poetry, including the Homeric epics in particular. Thus, our approach in the first part of this chapter, using data from the study of contemporary oral cultures to understand an ancient one, has a long and distinguished pedigree. And since the faculties of the human memory appear to be consistent across time and space, the use of such evidence, obtained from a modern context, to illuminate the workings of an ancient oral culture, is fully warranted.[13]

There is strong consensus among scholars who have studied oral cultures that people living in them do not in fact have better memories than those of us in written cultures, and that people who live in oral cultures "generally forget about as much as other people."[14] A key difference between written

and oral cultures, however, is that when something is forgotten in an oral culture, it is obviously gone for good. For those of us in written cultures, we can always go back to a written text and look up what we have forgotten. Likewise, when a tradition changes in an oral culture, the original version vanishes, so that "Oral tradition destroys at least parts of earlier versions as it replaces them."[15] In a written culture, we can look back at past versions, at least if they were committed to writing. We can also check the accuracy of a memory of a text or a tradition by going to the written authority. In such a way, only in a written culture, ironically, can texts be truly memorized: repeated comparison with the written exemplar allows for regular correction and eventual mastery of the text in a way that simply is not possibly in an oral culture. Jack Goody, one of the most preeminent experts on oral tradition and cultures, describes the relation between writing and memorization as follows:

> It is rather in literate societies that verbatim memory flourishes. Partly because the existence of a fixed original makes it much easier; partly because of the elaboration of spatially oriented memory techniques; partly because of the school situation which has to encourage "decontextualized" memory tasks since it has removed learning from doing and has redefined the corpus of knowledge. Verbatim memorizing is the equivalent of exact copying, which is intrinsic to the transmission of scribal culture, indeed manuscript cultures generally.[16]

Oral traditions, by comparison, have been shown to change quickly, often, and substantially over the course of their transmission. It is a medium that, despite what many people may believe in ignorance of the scholarship on this topic, is inherently unstable and highly productive of alterations, omissions, and additions. Dependence on memory in oral cultures simply does not provide members of these societies with a preternatural ability to remember that is absent in written cultures. Quite to the contrary, "the human accomplishment of lengthy verbatim recall"—that is, the verbatim recall of a sequence of fifty or more words—occurs only when there is already "a written text and does not arise in cultural settings where text is unknown. The assumption that nonliterate cultures encourage lengthy verbatim recall is the mistaken projection by literates of text-dependent frames of reference."[17] Oral cultures also lack mnemotechnical devices of the sort studied by Frances Yates in her famous book *The Art of Memory*. Such

memory techniques, frequently used by the Greeks and Romans and in the Middle Ages, as well as by modern "memory champions," were invented by and belong to literate societies and are unknown in oral cultures.[18] If anything, then, it seems that memories are more capable in written cultures than they are in oral settings, as studies of nonliterate societies have repeatedly confirmed.

In a very real sense, the dynamics of oral transmission in nonliterate societies mirror precisely the operations and limitations of human memory. Such correspondence is hardly surprising, however, since the capacities of the human memory form the basis for what can be transmitted in an oral culture and likewise delimit the scope and function of oral tradition. It turns out that just as our memories are at their best when recalling the gist of an experience, so oral tradition also excels at transmitting the gist of a story or a poem. The actual content and details of the text change—significantly and often immensely—with every recitation and transmission, but the basic structure of the tale remains stable and is pretty much the same each time. Like our memories, oral cultures have adapted to embrace a significant amount of useful forgetting, since in most instances "the product of exact recall may be less useful, less valuable than the product of inexact remembering."[19] Each time a tradition is passed along in an oral culture, it is recomposed anew in the same way that our memories create a reminiscence from mere disconnected fragments of an experience, piecing them together by filling in large gaps with information drawn from general knowledge or an accumulation of other similar experiences. In each instance, the raconteur has ready a bare outline of the tradition, including certain key figures, events, tropes, and so on that must be included for the story to be the same. But in telling the tale or recalling a proverb or a proclamation, the narrator exercises a great deal of creativity and liberty in fashioning the story into a new form, suited to the immediate circumstances and audience—just like our memories adapt in the same ways in response to the specific conditions of the moment in which we remember.

Early Study of Oral Tradition: Homer, Parry, and Lord

The study of oral cultures began, so it would seem, with the work of Milman Parry, a classicist at Harvard University. Parry was an expert on the Homeric

corpus, and although he died at the very young age of thirty-three, his work revolutionized the study of both Homer and oral tradition. Parry was interested in understanding how the ancient poetry ascribed to Homer was initially compiled and transmitted in a nonliterate context. More fundamentally, he wondered how and even if such a large amount of poetry could possibly be memorized and transmitted accurately without writing. Parry decided to address these questions by studying the performance and transmission of lengthy epics in a contemporary oral culture. He would then use his findings from this living lab to better comprehend the nature of the Homeric writings, their production, and their transmission. To this end, Parry traveled in 1933 with his assistant Albert Lord to Yugoslavia, where there was a hoary tradition of singers who recited—from memory—extensive epic poems equivalent in length to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In studying their techniques for remembering and reproducing these epics, Parry discovered that the singers of Yugoslavia relied on certain methods and practices that also appeared to be in evidence in the written texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Parry made only two trips to Yugoslavia before he accidentally shot himself while packing a firearm and died, late in 1935. Nevertheless, his assistant Lord continued his work and would also follow him onto the Harvard faculty. The main fruit of their collective labors was Lord's field-defining study of epic poetry and oral tradition, *The Singer of Tales*.[20]

One of the main conclusions to emerge from Parry and Lord's fieldwork is that oral and written cultures have radically different ideas of what it means for an iteration of a text or tradition to be the same or accurate in relation to previous versions of the same cultural material. For most of us, in written cultures, an accurate transmission of a text or tradition is one in which there is no variation from its earlier exemplars. This simply is not so, Lord and Parry discovered, in oral cultures. The reason for this difference seems to be that in literate cultures one can check the written exemplars for variations in their oral recollections, an option not available in an oral context. Given the significant limitations inherent in the nature of the human memory, as seen in the previous chapter, in a nonliterate culture, no one would have the mnemonic ability to even detect such differences with any accuracy, let alone correct them. As Goody observes, "A detailed comparison of successive verbal inputs of this length and rapidity is quite

beyond the capability of the long-term memory of individuals in oral societies."[21] Therefore, while we might demand verbatim reproduction of a text in order to consider it accurate and the same as its preceding exemplars, oral cultures do not and simply cannot have a similar standard. Indeed, such verbatim repetition is not only impossible; it is not even the ideal in oral cultures. In these societies, a new version of a poem will be considered identical with its predecessors, even if significant changes are introduced in the performance.

Yet despite being considered always the same, the variations among a poem's many recitations are in fact quite considerable, at least from the perspective of a literate culture. In their research among the rhapsodes of Yugoslavia, Parry and Lord discovered that

> in a very real sense every performance is a separate song; for every performance is unique, and every performance bears the signature of its poet singer. He may have learned his song and the technique of its construction from others, but good or bad, the song produced in performance is his own. The audience knows it as his because he is before them. . . . His art consists not so much in learning through repetition the time worn formulas as in the ability to compose and recompose the phrases for the idea of the moment on the pattern established by the basic formulas. He is not a conscious iconoclast, but a traditional creative artist. His traditional style also has individuality, and it is possible to distinguish the songs of one singer from those of another, even when we have only the bare text without music and vocal nuance.[22]

Parry and Lord also discovered that the very same poet will regularly tell the same story in radically different fashion on different occasions, even as the performer will himself insist that in each case the tales were exactly the same. For instance, when Lord went back to Yugoslavia to follow up on his teacher's work, he returned to one of Parry's subjects several years later and had him repeat the same text that he had performed for Parry. The two versions were surprisingly different: the telling recorded by Lord amounted to 12,323 lines, while the same singer told the same story to Parry in a mere 8,488 lines. In another example, Parry once had two different bards recite the same tale. One version was nearly three times as long as the other, and yet, according to both narrators, their accounts were identical.[23] For the singer, then, what makes a particular tradition the same "does not include

the wording, which to him has never been fixed, nor the unessential parts of the story. He builds his performance, or song in our sense, on the stable skeleton of narrative."[24]

The very idea of a verbatim reiteration is foreign to this context; the oral poet stands removed "from any understanding of verbal accuracy in our sense" and "is psychologically incapable of grasping the abstract concept."[25] For the bard, such rote repetition is not even an ideal to be sought after. Rather, the goal is, on the contrary, to adapt the text to meet the present context and audience, so that, as Goody notes, "oral singers are often pushed toward variation, by their own ingenuity, by their particular audiences, or by the wider social situation." Creativity and adaptation are prized qualities in a performance, so that the reciter is as much a composer as a transmitter of poem. Poets are therefore encouraged to elaborate on the text in their recitations, and this "elaboration inevitably involves some contraction unless the recitation is to proliferate continuously. The result is continual change," so that "the whole concept of an original is out of place."[26] Even very short poems, such as ballads, which can be effectively memorized and passed along in relatively stable form, are subject to significant change during oral transmission. Comparison of the transmission of English and Scottish ballads to North America and Australia, for instance, demonstrates just how dramatically even these short poems will change, even as they retain their basic structure, over a relatively short period of time.[27] The constant repetition of such ballads, as Goody notes, "gives rise to a great number, indeed, an infinite number of variants."[28]

One should note that Andrew Bannister recently published a monograph advocating the wholesale application of Parry and Lord's paradigm of oral-formulaic analysis to the Qur'an.[29] The results are intriguing and demonstrate the potential promise of this method for studying at least some parts of the Qur'an, although I am not convinced that oral-formulaic analysis is equally useful for understanding the Qur'an in all its elements. Bannister offers only a limited and rather formal application of Parry and Lord's model, without broader consideration of other studies of oral cultures, whose perspectives seem essential for understanding the impact of oral transmission on the Qur'an. Bannister's analysis also focuses tightly on understanding the oral formation of the Qur'anic traditions during Muhammad's lifetime in the Hijaz, with little scope beyond these

traditionally received circumstances of the Qur'an's origins. There is no effort to consider how orality may have impacted the traditions of the Qur'an during oral transmission after Muhammad's death, which is unfortunate. Nevertheless, Bannister's study helpfully identifies certain features of the Qur'an indicating that the text we have today is product of oral transmission that was committed to writing only after an extended period of oral existence.

Anthropological Studies of Oral Cultures and Oral Transmission

The range of ethnographic data that has been accumulated over the last century regarding the nature of oral tradition and oral cultures affords an invaluable supplement to the early work of Parry and Lord. These anthropological perspectives on orality provide an alternative framework for thinking about the Qur'an's oral transmission that not only is less rigid in its application than oral-formulaic analysis but also was developed on the basis of a broader range of cultural traditions, beyond the recitation of long epic poems. In each instance, however, as the study of oral cultures has progressed to encompass a range of different societies from around the globe, the basic conclusions of Parry and Lord regarding the instabilities of oral tradition and its transmission have been repeatedly confirmed. With each reiteration, oral traditions will immediately and inevitably change, often substantially; and while the gist of the original tradition will sometimes survive a series of retellings, not infrequently, it turns out, even this gist will quickly be lost.

More than any other figure from the later twentieth century, Jack Goody led the vanguard in the study of oral cultures, and his prolific publications on this topic have largely defined the field. As noted above, Goody observed that in the absence of a written text or a recording, it is not possible either to judge if two versions of an oral tradition are identical or to memorize a text verbatim. Without such a fixed, material standard, it is simply impossible to maintain textual stability; only recourse to such documentation can correct any errors or changes introduced through the process of oral replication. We are quite fortunate in our case that Goody had occasion to consider the significance of these findings particularly as they relate to the Qur'anic text. "Indeed in oral cultures," he remarks, "it would be virtually impossible to

remember a long work like the Qur'ān." Only with the introduction of writing "as a tool to develop oral memory" is there any "possibility of a canonized text that has consistency over time and place," since "with a written text you could look back at it again and again and get it absolutely right."[30] Given the circumstances of a predominately nonliterate culture at the beginnings of Islam, then, we must assume that major changes were introduced to the traditions taught by Muhammad as they were remembered in the decades after his death, if not even already during his lifetime. Only the establishment of an authoritative and invariable written version could bring such constant change to an end.

Goody's primary fieldwork among the LoDagaa people in northern Ghana documented the constant fluidity of oral tradition with striking clarity, offering an extremely useful perspective for considering how oral transmission must have similarly affected the text of the Qur'an. Goody focused his analysis particularly on the transmission of a lengthy sacred text that circulated orally among the LoDagaa, known as the Bagre. The Bagre is an extended religious poem that is recited in rhythmic speech primarily in a liturgical context and the contents of which provide the basic structure for the LoDagaa's social and ritual practices. It is not a bad match, in effect, for the Qur'an, inasmuch as Neuwirth and many other scholars following her lead would describe the Qur'an in very similar fashion. When Goody began his studies of the Bagre, he assumed—naively, as he tells us—that "all the recitations [of the Bagre] were 'one,' the same (*boyen*)," in large part because the LoDagaa, like the bards of Yugoslavia, insisted that they were.[31] Goody knew that there would be differences in the wording, to be sure, but he assumed that at the very least he would find a "common frame" that characterized all the recitations, despite the myriad of variants in each narration. Yet he discovered that preservation of even a common framework stands beyond the limits of oral culture, and such basic consistency exceed its capabilities and those of its members. Instead, Goody found that "changes in a recitation can be very radical, in a generative way, leading to something 'other.' . . . The last version is always the starting point. To see this process as nothing more than transformations within a frame seems to me to underestimate their extent."[32] And herein, according to Goody, lies the primary significance of his findings "for social science and for the

humanities generally": his studies of the Bagre "show how great a measure of variation can exist in the performances of oral cultures; not in all their facets but in the case of long recitations I would be prepared to say 'has to exist.'"[33]

Goody documented the highly productive and transformative nature of oral transmission in nonliterate culture during two separate trips to northern Ghana, about two decades apart from one another. During his initial visit, in 1949 or 1950, Goody transcribed a version of the Bagre by dictation from a single source, which of necessity was done outside the Bagre's usual liturgical setting, since it took ten days for him to write it all down.[34] At the time he was convinced, under the influence of Claude Levi-Strauss and Branislaw Malinowski, that what he had documented on this first trip was in fact "a fixed recitation that people knew by heart and that was handed down in more or less exact form." In hindsight, he remarks, he "should have known better," noting elsewhere that he should have taken more seriously from the start Bartlett's experiments on "serial reproduction," which we discussed in the previous chapter.[35]

Then, in 1970, Goody returned to northern Ghana, this time equipped with a portable tape recorder, which made collecting data much easier and also allowed for recordings to be made of actual performances of the Bagre in its ritual context. Now, armed with a recorder, the anthropologist could easily collect multiple iterations of the same cultural text with ease, and over the course of the next several years, Goody and his associates made recordings of fifteen versions of one part of the Bagre, the "White Bagre," and nine recordings of a different part known as the "Black Bagre." What Goody discovered was astonishing and served to affirm and augment the earlier findings of Parry and Lord, demonstrating that the variations introduced during the process of oral transmission were generally even more frequent and significant than their pioneering fieldwork would suggest.[36] The differences in the various performances of the Bagre were great. "They were significant even when the same man recited on different occasions and greater still when different men recited on the same occasion (for the myth had to be recited three times at each ceremony). Between nearby settlements, only 16 kilometres apart, they are enormous. These differences have to do not only with length, i.e. whether some incidents have been included or excluded. The differences are of a transformative, generative kind."[37] Goody also found that some of the elements that he

initially considered most essential to the narrative were simply dropped from other versions.

Even the most formulaic and frequently repeated parts of the text were subject to extraordinary variability. For instance, the Bagre has a sort of short introductory prayer that Goody identifies as being more or less equivalent to the Lord's Prayer in Christian culture. This brief litany of roughly ten lines and no more than a few dozen words, which he calls "the Invocation," is known to everyone in the culture and repeated often on multiple occasions. Goody relates that

> Even when I had given up the idea that the Bagre was fixed, I still believed the Invocation to be rigid, because people would confidently begin to speak these lines, like reciting the Lord's Prayer. An elder would correct a younger man's version, and say, "no not 'hallowed be *your* name' but 'hallowed by *thy* name.'" However I have now recorded some dozen versions of these lines and none of them are precisely, word for word, the same as any other. If an elder corrects my recital, it is from his own memorized version, his personalized model, which differs slightly from that of others. Since there is no fixed text to correct from, variation is constantly creeping in, partly due to forgetting, partly due to perhaps unconscious attempts at improvement, at adjustment, at creation.[38]

The difference in stability between this invocation, which turns out to have "almost as many variants as speakers," and the Lord's Prayer is of course, as Goody elsewhere notes, determined by the fact that the latter is a written text, which allows it to be faithfully memorized.[39] Accordingly, we must assume that even the shortest of Qur'anic texts, such as the last thirty or so suras for instance, would likewise have been highly unstable and subject to alteration during the process of their oral transmission.

Goody's findings concerning the volatility and persistent transformation of texts in an oral culture have since been verified in any number of anthropological studies. At the same time, no study of either memory or an oral culture has emerged that would challenge these findings. There is simply no evidence that oral transmission, in the absence of a written document, can relay cultural material with any degree of accuracy beyond the most basic gist level of information. We find as much to be confirmed by another leading scholar of orality and oral cultures, Jan Vansina, whose work was contemporary with Goody's. Vansina's fieldwork also took place

among oral cultures in Africa, in his case primarily in Rwanda and Burundi. Yet unlike Goody, who studied the liturgical recitation of lengthy, unwritten religious texts from memory, Vansina instead chose to investigate the oral transmission of historical events from the recent past within these nonliterate communities.

In effect, Vansina's studies take the approach of Bartlett's earlier experiments with serial memory out of the lab and into the real world, where he observes the operation of memory in successive oral transmissions of a living cultural tradition, within an actual nonliterate community. Vansina's summary of his findings, based on many years of studying oral tradition in the field as well as numerous other published studies of oral cultures, is worth quoting at some length.

> A testimony [a report about the past] is no more than a mirage of the reality it describes. The initial informant in an oral tradition gives, either consciously or unconsciously, a distorted account of what has really happened because he sees only some aspects of it and places his own interpretation on what he has seen. His testimony is stamped by his personality, colored by his private interests, and set within the framework of reference provided by the cultural values of the society he belongs to. This initial testimony then undergoes alterations and distortions at the hands of all the other informants in the chain of transmission, down to and including the very last one, all of them being influenced by the same factors as the first.[40]

Indeed, the more times a tradition has been repeated and transmitted, the more often it will change in significant ways with each reiteration, so that "every time a tradition is recited the testimony may be a variant."[41]

Nevertheless, as Vansina also notes, the alteration of a tradition during the process of its oral transmission is not only a consequence of our rather limited abilities to remember things from the past with much accuracy. To be sure, the weaknesses of our memories play a decisive role in introducing significant modifications to the testimonies we are able to give of past events. Yet this corrupting factor is compounded by the fact that when individuals pass along a memory to others, their accounts are always determined by the circumstances in which they relate them. Such circumstances include, most notably, their reasons for wanting to pass the information along, the particular person(s) to whom they are telling their story, and the conditions in which they have chosen or been asked to

provide a testimony. For these reasons, Vansina observes that, depending on the circumstances and audience, "the same persons with regard to the same series of events will tell two different, even contradictory stories."[42] Consider the following example, suggested by Susan Engel, which helpfully highlights some of the ways that our recollection will shape a memory differently to meet specific conditions.

> Think back to some charged event in your own life. Perhaps the first fight you had with your spouse. Now imagine telling that story to your mate, many years later at the celebration of your twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, telling it to the divorce lawyer, telling it to your children now that they are grown up, writing it in a humorous memoir of your now famous life, or telling it to your therapist. In each case the person you are telling it to, and the reasons you are telling it, will have a formative effect on the memory itself.[43]

These sorts of influences, and not only the lapses of an individual memory, effect the transformation and distortion of a particular tradition each time that it is transmitted. Yet each individual or audience will have knowledge only of the particular version that they hear. Moreover, on many occasions an explanation or interpretation of the testimony may be offered, and then, on subsequent tellings, this element will become a part of the testimony itself.[44] The result is that with every iteration of the tradition, "each informant who forms a link in the chain of transmission creates new variants, and changes are made every time the tale is told. It is therefore not surprising to find that very often the original testimony has disappeared altogether."[45] This means that, in oral transmission, not even the gist of a memory always survives. Nevertheless, the context in which an informant relates a tradition seems to have even more control over its content that even Vansina recognizes: indeed, the listeners may have more influence in shaping the tradition than the actual speaker. As Elizabeth Tonkin notes, in an effort to further refine Vansina's model, the concerns of individuals in the audience or the specific moment will greatly shape how the tradition is received, while the indeterminacy of textual meaning also accelerates the process of change. Tonkin thus presents us with a model of oral transmission that is even more unstable than Vansina's observations would suggest. Even the term oral "tradition," she maintains, implies too much

stability and seems to smuggle ideas of print culture into our conceptualization of oral cultures.[46]

There is, of course, one must note, the oft-repeated claim that the Indian Vedic traditions were transmitted orally and without any written exemplars for centuries with verbatim accuracy. Somehow, we are expected to believe, the Vedic tradition poses a singular exception to the limitations of oral tradition and human memory as repeatedly verified by both memory science and anthropological study. In the main it is scholars of ancient South Asian languages who have advanced this position, no doubt because they wish to date the text of the Vedas as it has come down to us as early as possible.[47] In this way, they can imagine that its contents directly reveal the religious culture of the Indian subcontinent over two thousand years ago. One should note that not even all Indologists are convinced that this could be possible, and some—Louis Renou, for instance—have instead recognized that "the organisation of the Vedic canon is hardly conceivable without the help of writing," and furthermore that most likely from early on "the recitation of religious texts was accompanied by the use of manuscripts as an accessory."[48] One should also perhaps note that specialists on the closely related Avestan corpus of the Zoroastrian tradition, which also long circulated in oral transmission, are in general highly skeptical—as they should be—that such transmission could faithfully preserve a text without significant change over generations.[49] Nevertheless, the opinion that the Vedas were transmitted verbatim in the absence of any written version remains strongly held in some sectors of South Asian studies, even as it flies in the face of all evidence otherwise indicating its impossibility.[50]

Indeed, one of the most influential scholars of early India, Frits Staal, defended the Vedas' verbatim oral transmission by arguing—astonishingly—that we simply must set aside our cultural "prejudice that writing is more reliable and therefore better than memory."[51] Nevertheless, as we have seen, this is no mere cultural prejudice of the West; one thinks, for instance, of the Chinese proverb, "The faintest ink is better than the best memory." But more to the point, this fact has been repeatedly demonstrated by both memory science and anthropology, whose findings Staal seems to ignore completely. To the contrary, scholars with actual expertise in studying human memory, oral cultures, and oral transmission have regularly expressed thoroughgoing skepticism regarding this claim on behalf of the Brahmins, and rightly so, it

would seem. Belief in the verbatim transmission of the Vedas over dozens of centuries with no written exemplars is simply an Indian cultural myth that certain scholars have chosen to believe without any sufficient evidence because it serves their research interests. Scholarly assent to this cultural tradition is the real cultural prejudice in play in these debates, and it regularly defies and ignores compelling evidence to the contrary from other disciplines. Indeed, as Goody remarks, our prejudices in this matter seem to run in a direction counter to the one that Staal imagines: "As members of a written culture we tend to read back our own memory procedures onto oral cultures. We look at oral cultures through literate eyes, whereas we need to look at orality from within."[52]

Goody has most directly and definitively addressed the effective impossibility of verbatim oral transmission of the Vedas in the absence of a written version, although many other experts on oral cultures appear to have unanimously reached the same judgment. Goody catalogs a number of features inherent to the Vedas that are generally hallmarks of production within a written culture. Likewise, as noted above, he identifies the kind of specific memory techniques that the Brahmins today use to memorize their texts as belonging to literate, rather than nonliterate cultures, as is also the impulse to commit texts to verbatim memory itself, which seems to arise only with literacy. For these reasons and others as well, it is all but certain that the ancient Vedas were in fact "a written tradition being passed on largely by oral means."[53] Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Goody observes that prior to the existence of a written version of the Vedas, there is simply no way at all to verify the claim of exact oral transmission: "the proposition itself seems incapable of proof, or even support, before the advent of writing itself. Only then can we tell if we have a similar or identical work being transmitted over time."[54] Otherwise, like the bards of Yugoslavia and the LoDagaa, they would simply insist that every version was exactly the same, even when they were not. Ruth Finnegan, another leading scholar on oral tradition, underscores this same problem—that prior to the existence of written exemplars, we simply have no idea at all what the state of the Vedic texts was. Finnegan also emphasizes that the archaic style in which the Vedas are written affords no guarantee that they have been transmitted orally without alteration from great antiquity. Rather, it is quite common for

poetry and sacred texts to be expressed using an antiquated parlance that is culturally expected for these genres.[55]

Walter Ong, perhaps the most influential modern theorist of orality and literacy, also notes the fundamental improbability of these assertions that the Vedas were transmitted orally verbatim for centuries in the absence of writing. In particular, Ong notes the complete failure of those making such claims to engage at all with the findings of Parry and Lord in regard to oral "memorizations."[56] To this we should also add the decisive ethnographic evidence compiled by Goody, Vansina, Finnegan, and others. Ong helpfully summarizes the issues involved as follows:

> In the wake of the recent studies of oral memory, however, questions arise as to the ways in which memory of the Vedas actually worked in a purely oral setting—if there ever was such a setting for the Vedas totally independent of texts. Without a text, how could a given hymn—not to mention the totality of hymns in the collections—be stabilized word for word, and that over many generations? . . . Mere assertions, frequently made by literates, that such lengthy texts were retained verbatim over generations in a totally oral society can no longer be taken at face value without verification. . . . In point of fact, the Vedic texts—on which we base knowledge of the Vedas today—have a complex history and many variants, facts which seem to suggest that they hardly originated from an absolutely verbatim oral tradition.[57]

Yet, as important as the results of anthropological studies of contemporary oral cultures are, the decisive factor in this case comes from the scientific study of human memory. As noted above, memory science has demonstrated that lengthy verbatim recall of a text of fifty or more words in the absence of writing is effectively impossible and has never once been documented. Ever. Rather, such verbatim memorization "arises as an adaptation to written text and does not arise in cultural settings where text is unknown."[58] In the current state of our scientific knowledge, then, what many Indologists have maintained about the verbatim oral transmission of Vedas without a written text is simply not possible given the limitations of the human memory. Since, as Vansina notes, "so far there exists no proof that there is any inborn difference in the cerebral faculties between the various races of man," we must dismiss out of hand any claims that the Vedas were transmitted verbatim orally in the absence of a written tradition.[59] Evidence from both anthropology and memory science plainly

rebuts these claims, while the matter of the Vedas' exact transmission can only be assessed once we have written versions to compare with oral recitations. Thus, it would seem that, despite the wishful thinking of many South Asianists, this matter is effectively settled. Verbatim recall of a text of more than fifty words is beyond the capacity of the human memory, absent a written text. The burden of proof now falls on any Indologists who would persist in this claim about the Vedas to demonstrate that it is in fact possible. The same conclusion applies no less to any suggestion that the Qur'an could have been orally transmitted verbatim prior to the establishment of its canonical, written form: this hypothesis is simply an impossibility.[60]

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND EARLIEST ISLAM

We have already drawn attention to the considerable influence that the immediate context and audience will exercise on an individual's recollection of a tradition in an oral setting. As we begin to move further in this direction, away from the functions and limitations of individual memory and toward the influence of the community on memory, we quickly begin to approach the very closely related phenomenon of cultural, social, or collective memory. Cultural memory consists of the memories shared by members of a group about their collective history: it is, as Jan Assmann succinctly defines it, "the handing down of meaning."[61] For the most part, these memories were not experienced directly by individual members of the group themselves, but instead they are remembered by the community and imparted to its members. These collective memories give a group—a family, a tribe, a nation, an empire—cohesion, demarcating and reinforcing its self-identity, core beliefs, and values.[62] Collective memories are thus communally shaped memories of the past whose function is primarily to present an account of history that serves the social and cultural needs of a group in the present. Not surprisingly, religious beliefs in particular—a community's religious history and sacred memory—are regularly a vital part of a group's cultural memory. As a group progresses through time, its collective memory determines what is remembered, how it is remembered, and how memories of the past will change over time—often significantly. It is yet another aspect of memory that limits our direct knowledge of past events, even if at the same time it opens up extraordinary new perspectives for thinking about

how we study and remember the past, only a few of which we will be able to consider presently.

The single most important figure in the study of collective memory is the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, whom we have already had occasion to meet in chapter 2. It is striking just how much Halbwachs's understanding of how our memories work parallels Bartlett's contemporary findings regarding the reconstructive nature of memory, even as the latter was still in the process of making this discovery through his experiments. Like Bartlett, Halbwachs determined that "a remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered."[63] Halbwachs first published these views in his 1925 study *On Collective Memory*,[64] in time for them to be embraced wholeheartedly by Bartlett when he published *Remembering* seven years later in 1932.[65] Moreover, according to Halbwachs, it is largely thanks to our collective memories that we as individuals are able to produce memories. "There are no recollections which can be said to be purely interior, that is, which can be preserved only within individual memory."[66] Rather, prior to and undergirding our individual memories, "there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection."[67] Collective memory provides the structure that enables us to coherently recall events from the past; and therefore the past, even as we remember it individually, is a social construction.[68]

What individuals remember, then, is highly determined in advance by the collective memories that they have acquired from the various groups to which they belong. Yet a group's collective memory is largely, although not entirely, governed by the community's concerns and self-understanding in the present. Of course, one must acknowledge that much of a community's cultural memory has been determined by things that actually did happen in the past: it is not entirely a collective mythology grounded purely in the present. Nevertheless, despite this concession, the influence of present concerns looms exceedingly large in both collective and individual memories. As Halbwachs explains, "If, as we believe, collective memory is

essentially a reconstruction of the past, if it adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present, then knowledge of the original circumstances must be secondary, if not altogether useless, for the reality of the past is no longer in the past."[69] What is considered memorable in the present, and thus what is remembered, is not determined by what actually happened, but instead predominantly according to how the group has come to understand and represent itself: "In other words, historical events are worth remembering only when the contemporary society is motivated to define them as such."[70] And as Halbwachs highlights here, a group's religious convictions at any given moment will play a particularly active role in shaping its collective memory, so that as beliefs may change, memories of the past will readily change to meet them.

Collective memory is no less a feature of literate cultures than it is of nonliterate ones, and the powerful control that present concerns and conditions exert on the dynamics of a group's cultural memory is not hindered by the presence of the written word. Indeed, even with widespread literacy and easy access to the written word dramatic changes in collective memories of the past can take place. Perhaps one of the most famous examples concerns the memory of President Abraham Lincoln in the United States. Today Lincoln is remembered as the greatest of American presidents, by a wide margin. Yet Lincoln's contemporaries hardly considered him great in any way. As Barry Schwartz observes in his landmark study, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Identity*, "When Abraham Lincoln awoke on the last day of his life, almost everyone could find something about him to dislike."[71] Moreover, despite his opposition to slavery, Lincoln was in his day well-known as a white supremacist, and yet in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, he came to be remembered instead as a great champion of racial equality.[72] Christopher Columbus is another figure whose reputation has shifted decidedly in the opposite direction in the American collective memory. In the middle of the twentieth century, Columbus was still revered, as he long had been, for being a great explorer who "discovered" America and ultimately gave rise to the United States, serving also as an icon for the Italian American community. Now Columbus has become an intensely controversial figure, who is reviled in many quarters for introducing, through his "discovery," the widespread subjugation and genocide of Native American peoples. Even as I write these words, statues of

Columbus are being torn down by protesters across America, something unthinkable only fifty years ago.

One can cite examples from other cultures as well, one of the most famous being the changing status of Masada in the Israeli and Jewish collective memories. At Masada, a small force of Jews liberated this remote outpost from its Roman garrison during the First Jewish-Roman War and made a heroic last stand there against the Romans (in 73 or 74 CE): they ultimately committed collective suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Romans. Until the rise of Zionism and the birth of the state of Israel, the events of Masada were of little significance in the Jewish collective memory. Zionism, however, imbued the memory of this event with profound new significance, and for the past century, Masada has served as a principal site in Israeli collective memory. It serves as a symbol of "military valor and national commitment," in a nation where, "like the besieged and outnumbered defenders of Masada, contemporary Israelis find themselves surrounded by hostile and numerically superior forces."[73] Nevertheless, the myth of Masada in Israeli collective memory has been fashioned from a "highly selective representation of Josephus's historical record" that "reshaped the story and transformed its meaning" to better suit the circumstances of contemporary Israeli society and culture.[74] This is what collective memory does. It adapts reminiscence of the past so that it will comport with present experience.

Perhaps my favorite example comes from nineteenth-century England, in the Luddite movement. Between 1811 and 1817 there were a number of uprisings across England, occasioned by the introduction of new weaving technology that would make many jobs redundant. Although these insurrections were only loosely connected in their organization, they were united in protesting in the name of a certain "Ned Ludd," whence they drew their name. As the movement grew, Ludd became increasingly central to its identity, and the protesters drew inspiration from his actions and his angry letters expressing outrage at the workers' exploitation. Songs and poems were written about him, valorizing him as an army captain who became a general and was eventually proclaimed king: he even had a heroic son who fought in the United States during the War of 1812. All of this, and yet there is no record of any Ned (or Edward) Ludd ever existing at this time![75] The collective memory completely imagined him, his life, and even his writings

into existence in order to give meaning and coherence to their rebellion. This all happened, one should note, in a society with widespread printing and literacy levels approaching 50 percent.[76]

There is an important lesson here for scholars of early Islam who would insist that the only alternative to accepting the accuracy of the early Islamic historical tradition at more or less face value is to posit a massive, coordinated conspiracy to distort and disguise the actual facts of Islamic origins. Such arguments stand in total ignorance of how collective memory works. The examples above, and particularly the case of Ned Ludd, alert us to the creative and shifting nature of collective memories, even to the extent of inventing a person who never existed at all and composing writings in his name. There is simply no reason whatsoever to assume that the memories of Muhammad's earliest followers would have operated any differently. Although I have no doubts that Muhammad, unlike Ned Ludd, actually existed, we must recognize that his followers also would have rather "naturally" adjusted their memories of him and the foundation of their community, often quite radically, in order to meet new, changing circumstances. Just as other communities across the globe and the ages have adjusted the memories of their founders over time, Muhammad's followers surely ascribed to him deeds and words that he never said or did as their collective memory developed. No conspiracy required, only entirely ordinary and expected development in the group's collective memory.

Such changes are all the more to be expected given the nonliterate culture of Muhammad's earliest followers. In contrast to Lincoln, for instance, there is no written archive to search for evidence of how Muhammad was actually remembered during his lifetime. We have instead only the highly malleable collective memories formed by his earliest followers and passed down among them for decades in oral transmission. In oral cultures, collective memory is especially active in shaping and controlling what will be remembered.[77] Beginning even with the very first transmission, as we already noted, an informant will attempt to tailor his telling of a tradition to suit his audience, so that "some subjects will be glossed over, and mention will only be made of things which would have the approval of everyone present."[78] If some event or detail does not connect with the values or collective memory of the group, it either will not be remembered or will be spontaneously transformed into something more relevant for the group. The

group will remember what it needs to remember in the way that it needs to be remembered, and with no written records, once a memory has been changed in its retelling, in an oral culture, all earlier versions vanish into oblivion.

Indeed, "collective forgetting" is no less an essential part of any group's collective memory than remembering. In some cases, such collective forgetting can take the form of a "repressive erasure," in which the state takes action to ensure that something is forgotten.[79] In the case of early Islam, the deliberate destruction of the different early versions of the Qur'an constitutes a perfect example of this sort of forgetting. Likewise, there is a sort of collective forgetting that involves the repression and eventual elimination of memories of a community's past that are too embarrassing or shameful to remember.[80] Again, in the case of early Islam, one may consider the degree to which liberal Muslims, especially in the contemporary West, are determined to forget the enormous violence and the aggressive colonialism that was an integral part of the foundation of Islam. Yet for our purposes, the most relevant form of collective forgetting is what Paul Connerton names "forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity."[81] We witness this sort of forgetting frequently in the later Islamic tradition's memory of its origins: for instance, in regard to the troubling diversity of the early Qur'anic text in the community, the initial inclusion of Jews as Jews by the Constitution of Medina, the likely inclusion of some Christians as Christians within the community of the Believers, and the centrality of Jerusalem and its Temple for the early tradition. All these were aspects of Muhammad's new religious movement that his later followers have sought to forget—in these particular cases with less success than in many others, presumably. Their elimination was essential in the formation of a new Islamic sectarian identity separate from Judaism and Christianity, focused on an Arab identity, the Arabic language, an Arabic scripture, and an Arabian sacred geography.

These transformations in group memory can take place both deliberately and in real time. For instance, Maurice Bloch relates an episode from his fieldwork among the Zafimaniry people of Madagascar that illustrates perfectly the transformative role of collective memory and forgetting, on an oral tradition, even in a tradition's earliest recollection. Bloch tells the story of his return visit to a family living in a remote village, where he had been

conducting fieldwork periodically for twenty years. Since he had stayed with this particular family in the past, they welcomed him enthusiastically when he arrived and brought him inside. Immediately, they asked him for the details of his trip, the last bit of which had been difficult, and what he had been doing since he was last in their village. Once the family had interviewed him to their satisfaction, they invited the other villagers to come in and talk to their guest. The others also asked about the journey and his recent activities, which Bloch repeatedly described for the curious villagers. Yet each time he told the story, he was repeatedly interrupted by a senior member of his host family. He describes the situation as follows:

> What was very obvious to me as a participant was how the endless repetition of the interchange involved the building up of a received narrative account of my absence and return. . . . At every repetition what I could say and could not say became clearer and clearer, when I could answer or when I had to leave other senior members of the household answer for me became fixed. Rapidly we became experts at this performance and everything went extremely smoothly.[82]

In the course of its very first retellings, the narrative of Bloch's travels was reshaped to accommodate what was for the group

> an apparently inevitable and morally appropriate sequence. I could not come sooner because the university had been saving up money in order to be able to afford the fare; the year before, when I had intended to come, my parents had asked me not to come because they knew that there had been riots in the capital of Madagascar and because they had felt ill, . . . and so on.

As he continues to explain what happened, "the construction of the narrative abolished the specificity of time by reordering and making the past follow a predefined pattern, that, it did this by dissolving the specificity of events into a prototypical present."[83] Thus, Bloch's account of his journey and the period of his absence were very quickly accommodated to conform to patterns that served the collective memory and values of his host community. The version received by the community was ultimately poor in detail, but rich in moral value for the community, so that "*their* memory of his arrival had been manipulated to accord with local expectations of what made an appropriate story."[84] There is again no reason to assume that

Muhammad's earliest followers would have been immune to this same tendency. Without question, their memories of Muhammad and his teachings would have been quickly adapted to conform to their cultural expectations and collective memory.

Nevertheless, during the period in question, the middle of the seventh century, "Islamic" collective identity was still very much in the process of formation and constant reformation as the nature of the community and the circumstances that it inhabited were themselves rapidly changing. The main repositories of existing Abrahamic cultural memory available to members of the early community of the Believers would have come primarily from contemporary Judaisms and Christianities. Perhaps there were also collective memories, among the earliest followers at least, that had formed in the Hijaz on the basis of local cultural traditions before the expansion of the movement to encompass the Roman and Sasanian Near East. Yet the main collective memories that would have been active in shaping their new form of Abrahamic monotheism and its content would have come from these religious ancestors: there is no clear evidence of a generic, non-Jewish or Christian Abrahamic monotheism that was present in the seventh-century Hijaz that could have filled this role instead. Accordingly, we must recognize that the religious collective memory of the community of the Believers during much of its first century would have been profoundly determined by the traditions of Judaism and Christianity.

Moreover, during this period Muhammad's followers were at a cultural stage where the living memory of the community and its collective memory were not yet entirely differentiated, which would only make the latter even more volatile than it is in other more established communities. As both Halbwachs and Assmann note, a community's living memory, which Assmann terms its "communicative memory" (following Vansina), is very short lived and subject to rapid changes.[85] And as Vansina demonstrated, a group's communicative or living memory can at best recall about eighty years into the past, growing weaker the further back one goes from the present moment. Beyond this point, even the "gist" of what happened has become lost and extremely little at all can be recalled. In a well-established community then, the group's memory of events that took place over a century effectively evaporates. This memory loss is not a matter of accuracy or alteration; rather, the group has simply forgotten what happened that long

ago, and, after eighty years, "one finds either a hiatus or just one or a few names, given with some hesitation."[86] Nevertheless, when it comes to remembering the period of its origins, the community's memory, its collective memory in this case, becomes remarkably clear and detailed—not that it is accurate, but that it preserves a remarkably clear and detailed version of the memory of these events as they formed at a certain later point in time. Thus, as Vansina concludes, "Historical consciousness works on only two registers: time of origin [i.e., collective memory] and recent times [communicative memory]," with "recent times" including no more than the past eighty years.[87]

In the seventh century, Muhammad's followers had not been around long enough for a sharp differentiation to emerge between their living memory and the collective memory, so that the latter could have attained a degree of relative stability. Instead, as the Believers' living memory was constantly changing and adapting to new circumstances from moment to moment and place to place, their collective memory would also have been rapidly shifting and evolving. Here once again, comparison with similar studies of the early Christian tradition can help us to understand the dynamics of formative Islam. Halbwachs considered precisely this issue, the relation between living memory and collective memory, as it would have impacted formative Christianity during the first decades of its history. As he observes, at this time "Christianity was in effect still very close to its origins; it wasn't easy to distinguish what was remembrance from what was consciousness of the present. Past and present were confused because the evangelical drama did not yet seem to be at its end. The last act was still awaited."[88] The same could (and should) be said of Islam during its formative period. Until the turn of the eighth century, there would have been very little gap between the community's living memory and its collective memory, with the exception, of course, of those aspects of Jewish and Christian collective memory that Muhammad and his followers had appropriated. At this stage, the community of the Believers, like the nascent Christians before it, "did not yet oppose its message to contemporary collective thought as a relation of a past to a present that was not linked to it."[89] Instead, the Believers' faith "was immersed in the present and was in part conflated with the thought and spontaneous life of contemporary groups."[90] For this reason, Halbwachs further suggests that "in certain respects a Catholic living ten or fifteen

centuries later will understand the Gospels less well than a pagan, a Jew, an Oriental, or a Roman of the first two centuries."[91] One suspects that this is equally true, mutatis mutandis, of the Qur'an.

For most of the seventh century, then, Muhammad's followers had a memory that was still immersed in the social and cultural milieux of the late ancient Near East, from which they had yet to clearly differentiate themselves.[92] They eventually would do this in large part by developing a distinctive collective memory for their group, different from those inherited from Judaism and Christianity, a process that was no doubt delayed by their fervent belief that the world would soon come to an end, making such an endeavor rather pointless for a time. Only as the end continued to remain in abeyance, and the community's living memory grew ever distant from the time of origins did they develop a collective memory of their own. Yet, as Islamic collective memory began to evolve, one imagines that it initially took different shapes within the various pockets of Believers that were scattered across their empire. The basic elements of this nascent collective memory were, as Halbwachs says of the early Christians, "still dispersed among a multitude of spatially separated small communities. These communities were neither astonished, anxious, nor scandalized that the beliefs of one community differed from those of another and that the community of today was not exactly the same as that of yesterday."[93] Thus, we should expect to find a significant degree of diversity in religious faith and memory among the different early communities of the Believers, scattered and outnumbered as they were among the Jews and Christians of their burgeoning empire. Only with ʿAbd al-Malik's program of Arabization and Islamicization was a new, distinctively Islamic collective memory and identity concretized and established for this new religious community. It was a collective identity that was formed from the top down and imposed, at the expense of any other alternative collective memories, with the full power and backing of the imperial state.

CONCLUSIONS

By all indications, as we have seen, the Qur'an came into existence in a culture that was fundamentally nonliterate. For the first several decades of its history, its traditions circulated orally within the community, in the

absence of any definitive written version. Admittedly, it is certainly possible, if perhaps even likely, that some individuals had begun making limited notes and textual aids prior to its formal canonization. Yet the production of such rudimentary written materials does not mark a change from what was still a fundamentally oral culture in which the traditions of the Qur'an were transmitted orally.[94] Even as more substantial written collections began to be made in the main centers of the early Islamic empire, the absence of a single canonized version, authorized by central authorities and recognized by the community, meant that these collections would have remained relatively open to changes coming particularly from the Qur'an's oral usage and transmission. We will examine this topic further in the following chapter, as we consider the transition of the Qur'anic traditions from oral transmission to written versions. The Qur'an that we have is therefore not to be simplistically identified with what Muhammad taught his followers in Mecca and Medina, as so many modern scholars have been wont to assert. Given the conditions in which memories of his teachings circulated among his followers for decades, it is not possible that his exact words have been preserved.

In light of what we have seen in this chapter, we must assume that as Muhammad's followers were remembering and transmitting what he had taught them, these traditions would have been subject to alteration on a massive scale. They would have been recalled each time only as fragments of what had been heard in the previous instance, and the gaps in these fragments would need to be filled in with information drawn from general knowledge or an accumulation of other similar experiences. In each iteration, the transmitter must complete these lacunae in the memory according to his or her own predispositions and prejudices as well as the expectations of the audience. The concerns of the present circumstance, of both the speaker and the audience, would determine how certain details are recalled—if they are at all. As Werner Kelber nicely sums it up, "What is transmitted orally, therefore, is never all of the information available, but only the kind of data that are orally pliable and retrievable. What lives on in memory, moreover, is what is necessary for present life. Neither oral composition nor oral transmission can ever escape the influence of audience and social circumstances."[95]

Given the dynamics of oral tradition, as well as its limitations and regular distortions, searching for the original words of Muhammad is clearly a fool's errand. It is utterly implausible, not to say impossible, that we have them. Again, unless his teachings were taken down under his supervision while he was alive, which is not in evidence, to imagine that we today have the words of Muhammad in the Qur'an is either an act of religious faith, in the case of the devout Muslim, or a delusion, in the case of the modern historian. At best we can expect to find in the Qur'an some of the basic gist of what Muhammad taught his followers, as these teachings were remembered and retold again and again by his followers within the sectarian milieu of the late ancient Near East. This gist would include, presumably, monotheism, eschatological fervor, divine revelation through prophecy, piety before God, personal morality within the community of the Believers, concern to prepare for the final judgment, expansion of the community through conquest, Abrahamic identity, and embrace of the collective memory of the Abrahamic traditions (at least in parts). Muhammad's initial followers likely received this general religious framework from his teaching and were able to preserve an emphasis on these broad points, even as Muhammad's words and deeds became ever more faint, forgotten, and reimagined. The bearers of these oral traditions would have exercised immense freedom and creativity in their reproduction, giving little heed to the exact words or much at all beyond the basic outline of the gist and perhaps certain tropes and formulas, filling in huge gaps each time along the way. In very many instances, even the gist of what Muhammad had taught would quickly dissolve, falling victim to the fallibility of the human memory and the edits of oral tradition.

The realities of the human memory and its limitations, on the one hand, and of oral transmission in all its variation and adaptation on the other, can only lead us to the following conclusion about the text of the Qur'an. The Qur'an, as we have it, was simply not composed by Muhammad in Mecca and Medina. Rather, his early followers composed it while living in the newly occupied territories. In reality, the text of the Qur'an was continually recomposed, again and again, many times and in multiple circumstances by multiple individuals for multiple audiences as it was transmitted orally in the early decades of the Believers' movement. In each instance, the tradition being relayed would change to meet the moment, after having been already reshaped by the workings of the transmitter's memory and those coming

before him or her. Then the memories of those who heard the tradition would reshuffle the tradition, and when each of them retold it to another audience, there would be still more alteration.

After a few such transmissions, we would be lucky if even the bare gist were retained. Bartlett's scientific studies of serial reproduction indicate that we should be extremely skeptical that much of the original tradition would remain intact in such circumstances. Anthropological studies have confirmed that the patterns and limitations identified by memory science directly impact the oral transmission of culture in exactly the expected ways. Oral transmission is indeed extremely unstable in the absence of writing and remains so even with the introduction of limited efforts to take notes or record traditions in writing. So long as the primary medium of transmission remains oral, change will remain constant and considerable. Therefore, Muhammad's words would have been quickly lost, and even the general content of his teaching would have been substantially altered by his followers—in most cases without *any* intent or even awareness on their part—after just a few reminiscences and transmissions. What we have in the Qur'anic text today must be recognized, to borrow the words of Alan Kirk, "as *the artifact of memory*, the artifact of the continual negotiation and semantic engagement between a community's present realities and its memorialized past, with neither factor swallowed up by or made epiphenomenal of the other."[96]

Since we have observed that audience and context play a determinative role in the alteration of orally transmitted traditions, we must consider the particular circumstances within which Muhammad's early followers were seeking to remember and transmit what he had taught them. Within only a few years of his death, according to the traditional chronology at least, Muhammad's followers entered the religiously charged landscapes of Mesopotamia, Syria, and, especially, Palestine.[97] The Believers quickly took possession of Jerusalem and the Abrahamic Holy Land, which stood squarely at the center of their sacred geography during these early years, holding far greater significance, it would seem, than the Hijaz, Mecca, and Yathrib. For the Believers, seizing control of these lands, the Promised Land of their Abrahamic inheritance, was directly linked to their fervent eschatological expectations, and, in line with these beliefs, they restored worship to the site of the Jewish Temple almost immediately. Jerusalem held

enormous religious significance for Muhammad's earliest followers, to an extent that the later tradition is not always comfortable with remembering. Indeed, one can clearly see that steps were later taken in the collective memory to diminish Jerusalem's sacred preeminence and to transfer its sanctity instead to the Hijaz.[98] But since Jerusalem was such an important religious, cultural, and political center in the early Believers' movement, undoubtedly its ancient and illustrious religious traditions would have been irresistible to their religious imagination. We must consider, then, how this particular context would have influenced their repeated reminiscence and retelling of the things that Muhammad had taught them.

These were the places in which the Believers were initially remembering Muhammad's revelations, as they were living amid and engaging with the much larger Christian and Jewish communities around them. Given the operations and limitations of both memory and oral tradition, it would be completely naïve to imagine that the memories of Muhammad's teachings, which were grounded in Abrahamic tradition and identity, would remain sequestered and unaffected by the encounter with these older, larger, and more theologically developed Abrahamic communities. As Muhammad's followers learned the religious traditions of their Jewish and Christian neighbors, these would inescapably have colored their own memories and retellings of Muhammad's revelations. Even without individual awareness, the sacred traditions of the Believers would have adapted to encompass these new elements. Moreover, new traditions that the Believers learned from Jews and Christians about their Abrahamic heritage and faith would surely have been adopted in order to fill in gaps in their sacred tradition. Indeed, there must have been many such lacunae, since, at least according to Islamic tradition, Muhammad's new religious community initially formed in relative isolation from the main centers of Abrahamic culture and tradition.

Numerous historical and archaeological studies of Syro-Palestine during the decades following the invasion and colonization of the region by Muhammad's followers reveal a consistent pattern suggesting that they would have readily adopted religious traditions from their new subjects. These studies have demonstrated a remarkable degree of economic and cultural continuity across the transition from Christian Roman rule to the new polity of the Believers, including, as we have seen, the Believers' employment of the same local elites in their government that previously had

served the Romans.[99] One should note that these cultural, economic, and political continuities were obviously a result of Muhammad's followers assimilating to and adopting the patterns of the peoples whose lands they had come to occupy. One would only expect that this broader pattern of assimilative continuity would have applied just as equally to religious culture as to the many other elements of late ancient culture and society that they adopted once they had achieved dominion over the former Roman Near East.

Accordingly, we must recognize the very high probability that some significant parts of the Qur'an are likely not rooted directly in the revelations that Muhammad shared with his followers; instead, they were added only after coming into contact with the traditions of the Jews and Christians in Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean. For instance, such would seem to be the case particularly with the Qur'anic traditions of Jesus's Nativity and of Alexander the Great, among others. It seems highly improbable that the herdsmen of Mecca would have been familiar with the particular sources of these traditions, inasmuch as they did not circulate widely even among the Christians of the late ancient Near East.[100] Thus, it would appear that in the end John Wansbrough was basically correct in his hypothesis that the traditions of the Qur'an were formed largely in the "sectarian milieu" of Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia. Even if we must set aside his impossibly late date for the Qur'an's final composition, once we reframe things a little, he seems to have been largely right about the context of the Qur'an's genesis. This would also mean, as Wansbrough additionally suggested, that the origins of Islam as the distinctive new form of Abrahamic monotheism that has come down to us today are similarly the result of religious developments that took place among Muhammad's early followers within this Near Eastern milieu, rather than in the relative isolation of the Hijaz. It was also in this context that the earliest collective memory of their community's history formed, their "salvation history," as Wansbrough calls it, a term for religious collective memory that he borrows from biblical studies. Although Wansbrough's execution of his hypothesis may have been lacking in many respects, in part owing to the limited data available to him at the time, many of his instincts about the beginnings of Islam nevertheless appear to retain their merit, at least if we take seriously the linguistic and cultural setting in which the Qur'an first took shape. While I would by no

means embrace all the positions that Wansbrough advanced, in this regard, and in an unexpected way, he seems to have been largely correct. Indeed, as Gerald Hawting rightly observes, "the important work on early qurʾānic manuscripts since Wansbrough wrote may shorten the time span that he envisaged for this process, but does not invalidate his approach."[101]

The conditions and limitations of oral transmission should also oblige scholars of early Islam to turn away from the heavily philological models that have long reigned in the study of the Qur'an.[102] Although philology will obviously remain of some considerable importance in Qur'anic studies, it must be supplanted with new alternative approaches grounded in the oral context within which the Qur'an first circulated and developed. Perspectives from anthropological studies of oral cultures are certainly to be welcomed, but we also have at the ready a powerful tool kit for this endeavor. The various methods developed over the past century for studying the biblical traditions have been designed with full consideration of their originally oral transmission. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the period of oral tradition was of course both very long and ancient, and likewise the text itself was gathered together over an extended period of time. Such circumstances are admittedly rather different from those of the Qur'an, and so it is quite unfortunate that when scholars have ventured to consider the Qur'an in light of biblical studies, they tend to compare the Qur'an with the Hebrew Bible and its investigation. Since these two corpora are indeed so different, there has been an ill-informed tendency to dismiss the methods and approaches of biblical studies out of hand as not applicable to the Qur'an.[103] Yet Qur'anic scholars have regrettably overlooked the remarkable similarity in the circumstances that produced both the New Testament gospels and the Qur'an. The time frame, the eschatological conditions, the nonliterate context, the delay in writing things down—these are all nicely paralleled. For this reason, we should turn especially to New Testament form criticism for perspective, particularly since this method was designed specifically for studying the traditions of the gospels during the process of their oral transmission. The basic approach of this method holds enormous promise for studying the formation of the Qur'an, even if Qur'anic specialists may ultimately find it helpful to make certain adjustments in the approach that

are more suited to the Qur'anic material and the milieux in which it was circulating.[104]

Furthermore, given the vagaries of oral tradition, not to mention the limits of human memory, one must note that there is very little basis for placing much stock at all in the traditional Islamic accounts of the Qur'an's composition, contradictory and confused as they are. As we saw already in the first chapter, the tradition of ʿUthmān's collection of the Qur'an appears to have entered into circulation with al-Zuhrī, whose students were perhaps the first to write this tradition down. Al-Zuhrī was active around 730 CE, and his students made their collections a little later, seemingly in the middle of the eighth century.[105] This means that the tradition entered into circulation around eighty years after the events that it purports to describe and was committed to writing approximately one hundred years after the alleged events. Accordingly, even if there were actually some sort of a memory regarding ʿUthmān's actions in collecting a version of the Qur'an that originated during the time of his reign, it would have circulated orally for at least eighty years before reaching the form in which we have received it. Studies of both human memory and oral transmission have determined that even the gist of any actual memory would very likely have been long gone by this point. Likewise, the nascent Islamic collective memory will have been highly active in shaping all the various traditions about the collection of the Qur'an to fit its newly expected contours, so as to have the right people accomplish this in the right way at the right time. Indeed, it is entirely possible that in the formation of this collective memory during the eighth and ninth centuries, many, if not most, of the traditions about the Qur'an's origins were "invented"—unintentionally and even unconsciously—so that they would comport with the community's emerging self-identity and the memory of its collective past.

Certainly, in such circumstances, it would be a grave mistake to accept as historically factual the report of ʿUthmān's collection of the Qur'an in the absence of anything else that could confirm even its most basic elements. Yet not only is such corroboration lacking, but this account is contradicted by the many other traditions of the Qur'an's origins in the early Islamic tradition itself, most of which also will have been significantly altered, or invented, during decades of oral transmission. As we already noted, the

Qur'an is notoriously absent from early Islamic culture and also from any of the reports about Muhammad's followers and their religious faith in the contemporary sources. The tradition of ʿUthmān's collection of the Qur'an is therefore not only weak; given the unreliability of oral transmission, as well as the historical improbability in general that ʿUthmān could have accomplished what is attributed to him, it is highly suspect. The same is not true, however, of the tradition that ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj supervised the composition of the Qur'an into its canonical form around the turn of the eighth century. Not only were the historical circumstances highly favorable for ʿAbd al-Malik to accomplish the publication of a canonical version of the Qur'an, but we find external confirmation of this tradition in multiple sources close to the events in question. These qualities, in stark contrast to the ʿUthmānic tradition, make for a historically credible report that can be relied on as transmitting information with a high degree of historical probability.

Before moving to the next chapter, however, it is also worth emphasizing that the limitations of oral transmission apply even more so to the extra-Qur'anic teachings of Muhammad, the hadith, as well as to his early biographies. The traditions in these collections circulated orally from memory for at least a century before they finally began to be written down sometime around the middle of the eighth century.[106] By this time, these memories would have departed profoundly from the original events and experiences that inspired them, regularly introducing substantial changes to earlier accounts as they were transmitted and also adding new information to the accumulated tradition along the way. In her *Slaves on Horses*, Patricia Crone draws our attention to an exceptional instance in which we are able to compare written and oral transmission of the same tradition side by side. The Constitution of Medina, as we mentioned in chapter 5, is regarded by wide consensus as an agreement between Muhammad and the tribes of Medina, including especially the Jewish tribes, that was almost certainly written down at the time. This written version survives through its transmission in Ibn Isḥāq's early biography of Muhammad, from the middle of the eighth century, and also in the ninth-century *Kitāb al-amwāl*, the *Book of Revenue*, by Abū ʿUbayd.[107] Yet there are also any number of hadith that describe the Constitution of Medina in accounts written down much

later by the early collectors of hadith after more than a century of oral transmission. As Crone compares the two, she observes that

> Whereas written transmission exposed the document to a certain amount of weathering which it withstood extremely well, oral transmission resulted in the disintegration of the text, the loss of the context and a shift of the general meaning: the document which marked the foundation of the Prophet's polity has been reduced to a point about the special knowledge of the Prophet's cousin.[108]

A problematic tradition from the early community regarding the inclusion of Jews was thus effectively erased in the process of oral transmission and re-remembered according to the patterns of collective memory.

The lesson could not be clearer, confirming in effect everything that we have seen in this chapter: oral transmission from memory quickly distorts and changes the content of traditions, omitting and adding material in the process to conform with collective memory, with the result that, after a number of years, the original tradition has been so altered that it is often unrecognizable. Were this not so, then we would expect that these transmissions of the Constitution of Medina orally as hadith would be almost identical to the written versions by the time they themselves came to be written down. Thus, we are left with considerable and necessary doubts about the reliability of the early Islamic memories about the Muhammad and the period of origins, and the historical study of formative Islam must proceed accordingly, with great skepticism toward these traditional accounts.

Moreover, these same limitations of oral transmission apply no less to the tradition of so-called "pre-Islamic" poetry than they do to the Qur'an or the Vedas. The Vedas in fact raise an important point of comparison in this regard, since, as we noted above, many scholars have argued that these texts must transmit verbatim very ancient compositions, since the language in which they survive is antiquated. So, scholars of early Islam often have cited the linguistic archaisms of these early Arabic poems as proof that they must indeed preserve authentic and accurate exemplars of pre-Islamic Arabic literature and language. Yet such a conclusion on this basis alone is unwarranted, since, again as noted above, anthropological study has demonstrated that recourse to a special, archaic-sounding form of language

is a regular quality of oral poetry across a wide range of cultures.[109] One may assume, therefore, that the same phenomenon is responsible for the archaisms of "pre-Islamic" poetry. The linguistic style of these poems is not a sign of their actual antiquity but is rather a particular register of language that is expected for the expression of poetry. There is, therefore, every reason to assume that the corpus of so-called pre-Islamic poetry does not in fact preserve actual poems verbatim from the pre-Islamic period. The limitations of human memory and oral transmission militate against this supposition. There may well have been a tradition of poetry in the pre-Islamic Hijaz, and these poems were perhaps transmitted orally for centuries and possibly underlie the poems that were gathered into the corpus of pre-Islamic poetry much later on, in the eighth and ninth centuries and afterward. Yet no one should mistake the much later poems written into collections of poetry during the Abbasid Empire with actual words from Arabian desert poets in the sixth and earlier centuries.[110] To suppose accurate oral transmission of the words of these poets with any sort of fidelity is simply preposterous and is in no way validated by any supposedly "archaic" forms of language.

Whatever the context of their initial composition may have been, there is virtually no chance that these poems, as they have come to us in written form, preserve the words of actual pre-Islamic poetry, even if they may partly reflect—with profound and transformative changes—faint traces of earlier traditions. The human memory and oral tradition are simply not capable of this level of verbatim repetition. And once again, it is not a matter of a widespread, coordinated conspiracy to commit a massive forgery. Rather, these poems, like the Qur'an and other teachings of Muhammad, may have been inspired by earlier compositions from poets of the sixth and earlier centuries, and in the process of their oral transmission perhaps something of their original gist or a few strange words survived—or perhaps, just as likely, not. Similarly, it is not at all out of the question that they preserve memories of proper names, perhaps the names of some ancient poets themselves, or place names, or even gist memories of major events or disasters. Perhaps certain shorter poems reflect some of the greater stability that one finds in ballads, but even in this case there is considerable variation among different versions, and we cannot simply look to this corpus of poetry as if it preserved the words of pre-Islamic Arab poets.[111] Yet, as we have just seen, according to Vansina, Assmann, and others, even gist

memory rarely survives more than eighty years in an oral context. Accordingly, if we are interested in discerning the collective memory of Abbasid-era Muslims regarding pre-Islamic Arabia, then this corpus of poetry affords an invaluable resource. But if we seek texts from sixth-century Arabia or earlier still, memory science and the study of oral transmission teach us that searching through these poems for such material is, again, clearly a fool's errand. To maintain otherwise, would amount to nothing more than unwarranted special pleading.

8

The Qur'anic Codex as Process

Writing Sacred Tradition in Late Antiquity

Eventually, of course, the Qur'an left orality behind and became a written text and ultimately a published, standardized, and canonized book. Although it remains true that to this day the Qur'an is regarded by Muslims as a fundamentally oral text, whose written version serves merely to aid its recitation, the transition to writing necessarily brought significant changes to the Qur'anic text and traditions in the process. Yet this change in medium profoundly affected not only how the memory of Muhammad's teachings would be transmitted going forward; it also introduced substantial changes in how Muhammad's followers encountered and interpreted this emerging compendium of sacred traditions. Among other things, the move to writing obviously brings a new level of stability to a textual tradition, at least in comparison with the regular vacillations inherent in relying on memory and oral transmission alone. The effect of a transition to writing generally serves to narrow the scope of the existing oral tradition and to ensure the longevity of a particular version of this living tradition in a way that orality alone simply could not.

Nevertheless, the move to writing did not mean that orality simply disappeared as a medium in which the faithful experienced the Qur'an. The vast majority of Muhammad's early followers were almost certainly illiterate, as were the masses in the territories that they had come to occupy. Thus, even the early Believers could not, by and large, read the Qur'an for themselves but remained dependent on hearing its traditions orally, whether

from someone who could read from a written version or among themselves according to their own memories of what they had previously heard. Moreover, despite its capacity for improved control and stability, the shift to writing alone does not bring an end to changes in the text. On the contrary, studies of ancient book culture, as well as the formation and transmission of the biblical traditions, make clear that significant changes to a text, including additions and subtractions, continue to be made even after a tradition enters the written state. Indeed, only concerted institutional surveillance and control can limit the alteration of a written text in ways both major and minor as it continues to be used, interpreted, and transmitted in a variety of different contexts. Not coincidentally, then, such policing of the canonical text is exactly what we find in the early Islamic tradition, and only thanks to determined enforcement by the imperial authorities was the Qur'anic text eventually stabilized into the ne varietur form that comes down to us today. Again, as Michael Cook rightly observes, "The fact that for all practical purposes we have only a single recension of the Koran is thus a remarkable testimony to the authority of the early Islamic state."[1] Without direct and sustained intervention by the state in this instance, this degree of uniformity simply does not seem possible, based on what we find in other comparable circumstances.

In the last forty years, scholarship on the New Testament and early Judaism has grown increasingly attentive to understanding the significance of orality for understanding the formation of the biblical tradition. We may consider ourselves fortunate, then, that these numerous studies provide excellent models for investigating the fundamental role that orality played in the very similar formation of the Qur'anic traditions and text as they came to be written down. Still more recently, a number of scholars have brought important attention to understanding the process of how a text gradually transitions into writing over time, alerting us to the fact that the final, standard version of such a document is generally not a result of the first attempt(s) to commit it to writing. So it must have been also in the case of the Qur'an. Likewise, the simple act of writing a text down does not bring an end to changes in its content, often substantial in nature. Accordingly, scholars in biblical studies have recently underscored the necessity of understanding ancient writings not as fixed, published, authored texts, in the manner that we have become accustomed to think of books in our post-

Gutenberg culture. Rather, ancient writings, including even, if not especially, sacred writings, cannot be understood as stable, finalized documents; instead we must recognize that these texts very much remained open in their contents prior to their official publication and canonization, as a number of scholars have now demonstrated. An ancient text, therefore, should not be misunderstood as the static monument of an author's work; rather, it must be approached as itself an ongoing process of composition over many years and in various settings.

It seems quite obvious that we should consider the formation of the canonical Qur'anic text in light of these same dynamics, so that even after the move to writing the Qur'an remained a text in process.[2] Admittedly, the formation of the Qur'an is not in every way identical to the production of the New Testament gospels or the emergence of a biblical canon in late ancient Judaism. Nevertheless, the similarities, particularly in the case of the former, as we have already noted, are significant and sufficient to warrant the application of methods and perspectives from the study of the gospels to an understanding of the early history of the Qur'an. Moreover, if we wish to introduce more critical and comparative methods to the study of the Qur'an in order to integrate it and place it on par with the study of other scriptural traditions—which seems to be a major desideratum of the field, then we absolutely must allow the application of such methods to its study.

The text that eventually resulted from these efforts to collect various memories of Muhammad's teachings and commit them to writing would ultimately become revered by his followers as a distinctive new scripture for their religious community. Of course, if we leave it simply at that, then we have failed to understand the Qur'an as a literary product of the broader cultural and religious context that produced it. Here we must be careful, as David Brakke warns, as religious historians not to approach the process of the Qur'an's emergence as a canonical scripture by continuing "to tell a story with a single plot line, leading to the seemingly inevitable τέλος of the closed canon" of Islamic scripture that the Qur'an would eventually become.[3] In similar fashion, Jan Assmann explains that in contrast to textual criticism, which seeks to move from the latest form to reconstruct a text's "primeval" form, "the critique of canon works in the opposite direction: it uncovers the forces that motivate the development, growth, coming together, and sanctification of the texts" before they were edited into their

final authorized form. Once the text reaches this final state, Assmann observes, "the historical development of the text is forgotten"; or in the words of Wansbrough, "By the very achievement of canonicity the document of revelation was assured a kind of independence, both of historical traditions commonly adduced to explain its existence and of external criteria recruited to facilitate its understanding," the latter referring, it would seem, to the traditions of the late ancient religious cultures from which the Qur'an emerged.[4] Thus, it falls to the religious historian to recover as much of this process as possible. What, then, should we make of the "Qur'an" in this intermediate state, as it was beginning to be written down and in the process of becoming an Islamic scripture? Indeed, only by stepping back from understanding the Qur'an according to this predetermined historical outcome can we see this text, its traditions, and its formation in a very different perspective.

FROM ORAL TRADITION TO WRITTEN TEXT

The move from orality to writing was for the Qur'an, as it is for any other oral text, transformative, and this process seemingly came to a close only as a key part of ʿAbd al-Malik's larger program of cultural and religious self-definition. One must be careful, of course, not to overemphasize the divide between the oral and the written, particularly in pre-Gutenberg cultures. Nevertheless, at the same time, as Walter Ong has painstakingly articulated, the move from orality to writing brings with it enormous changes both for the group making the change and for the cultural traditions committed to this new format.[5] For one thing, from this point onward, the text of the Qur'an began to become much more stable and difficult to alter. Since ʿAbd al-Malik's establishment of a canonical written version of the Qur'an at the turn of the eighth century, the Qur'an's consonantal skeleton has shown extraordinary constancy over time. To be sure, the vocalization of the Qur'an was still in dispute for centuries after its canonization, but the fixation of its consonantal structure brought to an end the tremendous fluidity that memories of Muhammad's revelations must have experienced during their oral transmission in the early community.

The most sustained consideration of how a sacred tradition passes from orality to canonical scripture over a period of decades after the death of its

founder remains Werner Kelber's *The Oral and the Written Gospel*. As one might expect, Kelber's book offers much comparative insight for understanding the impact of this same transformation on the traditions of Muhammad's teachings. As Kelber notes, following the insights of anthropological study as we saw in the previous chapter, so long as a tradition remains primarily oral, informants will adapt traditions significantly to suit the audience and the circumstances of their delivery. Such fluidity and alteration will persist, he notes, even if some limited written notes and textual aids have begun to appear.[6] Moreover, the survival of oral traditions, as we have already observed, depends entirely on their social relevance and acceptability. Kelber therefore reminds us that "Not all the words of Jesus will have met with understanding, let alone full enthusiasm. There must have been a multitude of words, sayings, and stories that never appeared in the gospels."[7] This is because the oral tradition "will control the data to be selected, the values to be preserved, and therefore the kind of Jesus to be transmitted. Lest he be forgotten, he must comply with oral requirements."[8] Yet it is also possible that on occasion "the group retained words precisely because they were alien or even offensive to its experience."[9] The same, no doubt, is true of Muhammad and the Qur'an (as well as Muhammad's traditional biographies for that matter). Like Jesus, then, Muhammad "risked his message on the oral medium. . . . The thesis that he taught with a concern for posthumous *literary* longevity is very unlikely and smacks of modern projection"—all the more so given that Muhammad and his followers were from a nonliterate culture, were highly skeptical of writing, and clearly seem to have expected the end of the world in the immediate future.[10]

By committing these traditions to writing, however, their form and their content were no longer subject to the whims of individual performers and audiences. The particular words on the page now "acquire a new authority, pathos even, unobtainable in oral life. . . . Whatever their interpretation, they are guaranteed longevity if not perpetuity. Oral fragility has been overcome by the 'secret of making the word immortal.'"[11] Indeed, for comparison one should note Goody's observation that once he published a written version of the Bagre, members of the LoDagaa began to look to this written text as authoritative and to ascribe to it a "truth value that no single oral tradition possesses."[12] The textual closure of the Qur'an through writing

it down thus eventually brought to an end the early diversity with which Muhammad's revelations would have been remembered and expressed in the oral tradition. By displacing the complexity and fluidity of the primitive oral tradition in favor of a single, canonical form, the codification and standardization of the Qur'an serve, in effect, to obscure our knowledge of Muhammad's teaching and its memories in the early community even more severely. The purpose of producing a standard written version is, as Kelber notes, to "implode" the heterogeneity of the oral tradition. Committing the text to a standard, authorized version in writing is meant to control and limit the diversity of the preexisting tradition, in its constantly varying oral forms as well as in any rival written forms. The aim of canonization is thus "ultimately not the preservation of the remembrances per se but the preservation of the group, its social identity and self-image"—that is to say, it serves to establish and shore up the group's collective memory.[13]

It is surely no accident that the move to a standard written version of the Qur'an coincides with the emergence of the community's collective memory around the same time. Writing the text down leads to canonizing its authority within—and over—the community. As Assmann writes, "The canon, then, is the principle underlying the establishment and stabilization of a collective identity."[14] Canonization is a process that also relies on the actions of a more or less centralized authority that is sufficiently powerful and recognized in the community to officially elevate a text—which may already be viewed as sacred by members of group—as normative and authoritative. Ordinarily, for a text to achieve this status, it must be written down so that it can serve as an objective authority for the entire community to consult in (again, more or less) the same version.[15] The establishment of a written text also effects "a subversion of the *homeostatic balance*" that previously enabled continuous adaptation of the oral traditions to meet the immediate needs of the audience and the larger group. The written form is removed from the give-and-take of the oral exchange, and likewise, as a linguistic artifact, it moves beyond the control of the informant(s) who first committed it to writing, leaving it "open to an infinite range of readers and interpretations."[16]

Assmann comments at some length on the results of transforming an oral "sacred" text into a canonical written version in terms that are extremely helpful for understanding the early history of the Qur'an. As he explains,

> A sacred text is a kind of speech-temple, a presentification of the holy through the medium of the voice. It does not require any interpretation, but simply a ritually guaranteed recitation that scrupulously observes all of the prescriptions relating to time, place, and accuracy. A canonical text, however, embodies the normative and formative values of a community. It is the absolute truth. These texts must be taken to heart, obeyed, and translated into real life. That is why they need interpretation rather than recitation. They appeal to the heart, not to the mouth or ear. But such texts do not speak directly to the heart. The route from the listening ear and the reading eye to the understanding heart is as long as that from the graphic or phonetic surface to the formative, normative meaning. And so the canonical text requires the presence of a third party—the interpreter—to mediate between the text and the reader/listener, and to clarify the meaning hidden within the words. That meaning can only emerge through the threeway relationship between text, interpreter, and listener.[17]

Therefore, as Guillaume Dye also notes, when a text becomes canonical, not only does its status change, but the way in which it is read also changes dramatically: in the transition, a canonized text becomes at the same time both more than and less than it was in its precanonical state.[18]

Nevertheless, committing a sacred text to writing does not fully close off or even eclipse its enduring oral vitality within the community. With widespread illiteracy for many centuries after the Qur'an's canonization, the overwhelming majority of the faithful would have continued to experience the Qur'an primarily as an oral text. Much of the Qur'an's interpretation, necessitated now by its commitment to writing, would also remain predominantly oral for most individuals. The written and the oral are able to interpenetrate one another, even after the establishment of a canonical scripture and in a context where writing is privileged. Indeed, in the Christian tradition, for much of the second century, at which point the four canonical gospels had been written down, early Christian writers only rarely cited from these "scriptures" in their literal, written form. Instead, the tendency seems to have been to continue to use relatively free transmissions, maintaining the vibrancy of oral tradition even after the establishment of written texts.[19] One suspects that something similar was at work in the Islamic tradition in the century or so after ʿAbd al-Malik established the authoritative, canonical version of the Qur'an. Presumably, this is how we should understand the "thousands of textual variants" in the text of the

Qur'an encountered in classical Islamic literature and on early coinage.[20] As in the early Christian tradition, these variants are undoubtedly a sign that oral traditions and transmissions of the Qur'an's content persisted for some time even after the establishment of an invariable consonantal skeleton for the text, continuing to introduce textual variants even in the face of a written version.

As transformative as the shift to writing may have been for the Qur'an and its traditions, recent scholarship on the Christian gospels and early Judaism warns us against oversimplifying this process and exaggerating its impact. The comparative models that emerge from this scholarship alert us that the move from orality to writing almost certainly was neither sudden nor singular. Instead, we should expect that over time various collections of Muhammad's teachings began to be written down independently in different places. In this regard, one must always bear in mind just how dispersed and separated Muhammad's followers were across the expanse of their vast new empire. It bears repeating that Muhammad's followers constituted a small minority—albeit a ruling minority—among the far greater numbers of Jews, Christians, and others in the Near Eastern lands they had so swiftly subdued. These Believers were scattered in various small pockets as they had begun to settle in across the expanse of the emerging caliphate. Accordingly, as Muhammad's early followers sought to remember and transmit his teachings, they did so separately and in different locations. Moreover, we must also keep in mind that the number of Muhammad's followers who actually heard his teachings in Mecca and Medina must have been very few at this stage.

One imagines, given these conditions, that Muhammad's followers would have recalled his teachings with significant regional and local variation. Jonathan Brockopp captures this fragmentation well when he reminds us that in this early period "Muhammad's followers would consist of concentric circles of individuals, from a few close insiders to a large group of hangers-on, with many people in between," and that "devotion of these small groups to the now dead founder would be oral, ephemeral, and emotional," not to say, one would expect, highly varied and variable. And so, "Islam(s) are far more likely to have originated out of competing interpretations of the salient historical events, arising from several centers of political and intellectual activity. Further, in most cases these expressions of authority gained their

force as much from new applications of local usages as they do from anything specifically Islamic."[21] We must therefore recognize, as Brockopp puts it in the context of describing the Qur'an's formation, "that small communities of believers formed soon after Muhammad's death, spreading throughout the territories of the former Byzantine and Persian Empires, husbanding collections of Prophetic words (logia). These were cobbled together . . . after Muhammad's death into what we now know as the Qur'an."[22] Although it is certainly not entirely impossible that there may have been some limited exchange and interaction among these centers as the Believers began to write down some of their memories, given the conditions in which Muhammad's followers produced these early collections, we should expect that there must have been some significant variety among them.

We also must recognize again that the transition to writing does not preclude continued change within the tradition; nor does the use of this new medium erase the primacy of orality and its continued influence on the written. Even after the Qur'an was fully written, standardized, and canonized, the number of individuals who could read the Qur'an and had access to a written copy would have been extremely few. Everyone else would have been completely dependent on hearing the text read aloud and would have continued to share it among themselves, one imagines, orally from memory. Most of this will be fairly obvious, I think, to most readers. Much less obvious, I suspect, is the degree to which many, if not most, written texts in antiquity remained relatively open—open to various kinds of alteration, including addition and subtraction, not only but especially during the early stages of their transcription.

FROM MEMORANDA TO REGIONAL CODICES

Recent studies of book culture, both ancient and modern, inform us that we must understand the production of books as an ongoing process, one that involves frequent changes in the text.[23] Often this process comes to an end at some point, with the authorization, publication, and replication of a final standard version, whose stability and ubiquity are enabled only by the actions of certain influential institutions and authorities. Yet in the case of some written texts, such closure never arrives. One of the most salient examples of such open literature are the various biblical apocrypha of the

Jewish and Christian traditions. Indeed, we continue to find innumerable examples of such open sacred writings well into the Middle Ages. These apocryphal writings represent a kind "living" biblical literature, whose contents remained open to ongoing modifications and additions by the communities that used them.[24] And the Qur'an itself, in the early decades of its existence, seems to have been something very much like such a biblical apocryphon, as I have previously explained elsewhere. Ultimately, the main difference between this particular late ancient Arabic apocryphon and so many other such compositions is that, like the Book of Mormon, for example, a religious group eventually elevated it to a new scriptural authority.[25]

Yet with regard to the formation of scriptural traditions in the late ancient Near East, we are particularly well served by a trio of recent monographs adopting the approach of open textuality and texts as processes in seeking to understand how the Jews and Christians at the beginning of this era produced their sacred writings. The patterns that emerge from these studies, by Eva Mroczek, Matt Larsen, and Chris Keith, seem to offer the best and most applicable models for understanding how Muhammad's teachings moved along a similar path from sacred protoplasm to canonical scripture. Mroczek's work engages the literature of Second Temple Period Judaism, and, as such, it addresses a very different context from ours, one in which there is a surplus of sacred writing rather than the sprouting of a scriptural germ. Nevertheless, Mroczek's monograph on *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* deserves much credit for helping to inspire this processual turn in the study of early religious writings. Mroczek draws our attention in particular to the numerous conceptual obstacles that modern scholars face when they try to understand the very different conditions in which texts were produced, circulated, and utilized in the late ancient Near East. As she notes, modern categories of text, authorship, and publication persistently stand in the way. All these things had different meanings and functions in antiquity, so that we should not expect to find closed, stable texts with unique authorship that have been uniformly distributed in this format to a broad audience. Instead, texts generally remained open and changeable, with complex and often anonymous authorship and variation in presence and presentation according to location. These variables were resolved and removed not at the moment of

production, but only, again, through a diachronic process of standardization, canonization, and promulgation by some effective authority, an authority that ultimately serves in essence as the text's author. Accordingly, we must, Mroczek explains, develop a model "for describing the textual production of ancient scribes as 'projects'—open-ended and multigenerational—rather than 'books.'"[26]

More immediately relevant for our task of understanding the formation of the written Qur'an are the recent studies by Keith and Larsen, the latter in particular, on the formation of the written gospel traditions during the early decades of the Jesus movement.[27] Both these scholars brilliantly build on the work of Mroczek and others to develop a paradigm for understanding the complex process of a sacred tradition's transition from orality to an open written tradition to a—more or less—fixed version of scripture. "Rather than viewing texts as static," as Keith explains, "scholars should view texts as free-flowing, open tradition processes," in which there is no "original text"; rather, following Brennan Breed, the earliest versions of a sacred text must be conceived as "nomads," with no clear origin or endpoint.[28] Echoing Brakke, Keith likewise cautions that "the ingrained assumption that what did happen was what inevitably had to happen, can lead us to underappreciate developments in that sequence that were far from pedestrian."[29] Larsen and Keith both expand and refine the attention to orality introduced to New Testament studies by Kelber, correcting and adding needed subtlety to some of the broad strokes with which his work introduced the importance of the oral/written divide in the history of the gospels. Among their most important contributions is to diminish the notion of an abrupt and qualitative distinction between written and oral traditions: Kelber, as Keith notes, "consistently referred to the differences between 'fluid' oral tradition and 'fixed' written tradition, offering negative qualitative assessments of the media transition," which, in relation to the original oral tradition, Kelber considered "disruptive," "disjunctive," "destructive," and a "disorientation."[30]

Keith and Larsen instead propose a more gradual continuum between the two in which writing does not simply displace the oral, which remains highly active and influential in tandem with this new medium. Likewise, they discover that the introduction of writing does not completely eliminate the instabilities and variations that pervade oral tradition, even as it

contributes significantly greater stability and uniformity in comparison with orality. "The written texts were simultaneously aural texts," as Ruben Zimmerman observes, "that did not finalize memory culture so much as set it in motion."[31] The function of writing such traditions down is not to bring orality to an end but rather to extend its memory capacity.[32] Accordingly, these written reminders of the oral tradition remained subject to revision and adaptation into new written versions of the same traditions, a process that effectively explains both the similarities and differences of the early gospel traditions, as well as their reception and use by later Christian readers and scribes. Mark's first written gospel, therefore, "enabled an open-ended reception history for the Jesus tradition when he shifted it into the written medium," such that we find in early Christian studies a "growing recognition that manuscript tradition often functioned similarly to oral tradition."[33] Even some New Testament text critics, whose discipline has shown conservative and positivist tendencies in the past, have moved to embrace an understanding that the search for an original version is pointless, and that the textual tradition must be understood as a "living text."[34]

Larsen advances Mroczek's observations on the problematic nature of authorship and publication as well as the open and processual nature of ancient texts to apply them more specifically to circumstances in which a particular scriptural tradition, that of the gospels, was first taking written form out of an earlier oral tradition: precisely the conditions that we face in seeking to understand the origins of the Qur'an. Larsen's model of the early gospel traditions, which has influenced Keith significantly, views the first written texts, including the Gospel of Mark specifically, effectively as drafts, open texts that were not regarded as closed by their producers or users. Larsen carefully and convincingly mines late classical, early Jewish, and early Christian literature to bring before us the particular genre of *hypomnēmata*, or *hypomnēma* in the singular, a type of writing that proves to be extremely helpful for understanding the process of moving an oral tradition to written form. Literally, *hypomnēma* means "reminder," or perhaps better, "memorandum," terms that give a fairly apt sense of what this written genre was.

Hypomnēmata were notes written to serve as memory aids, and very often specifically to help individuals remember things that had been heard orally in order to aid with their reproduction on a later occasion.[35] These

memoranda recorded things that had been heard, so that the hearer could better remember them later on for his or her own benefit or to share them orally with someone else. They served as "physical extensions" of memory, assisting the survival of the living voice of oral tradition after the speaker was finished and no longer present.[36] We also find some instances where the term is used to describe notes or drafts for a work in progress, compiled by someone with the intent of seeing the notes turned into a more formal literary document at some later point, perhaps even by another person. Thus, we have here a common kind of writing that is used primarily to write things down that were learned orally, in order that they might be more faithfully recalled at some later point. Likewise, this type of reminder document was understood as being by definition an open text, whose composition remained ongoing process, so that its contents could be adjusted—things changed, added, deleted—as additional memories were inventoried or older ones corrected in light of more recent developments.

There was, then, in late antiquity a familiar type of writing ready at hand to serve the process of gradually committing an oral tradition to written form. Initially these writings were subordinate to the oral tradition itself, and they served primarily as memory aids for what had been heard and would later be taught. "*Hypomnēmata* were textual objects with a specific purpose. At their root, they are about remembering the already known, not informing about the not yet known. They seek to capture the already said, to collect what has already been heard."[37] They were flexible, and it was expected that their content would change over time as the written record was steadily improved. The format was ideal for beginning to transfer memory of the oral Jesus tradition to the first written records, not with the intent of displacing oral tradition, but in order to better preserve it. And so, as Larsen explains, the Gospel of Mark was written down in a context "when the gospel is still primarily a speech genre" and is "still oral, still pliable, still open."[38]

This established format of making written memoranda was equally ideal for progressively writing down the oral traditions that Muhammad's followers had accumulated on the basis of their memories of his teachings and other sacred traditions that they had acquired in the interim. Eventually, in the case of both earliest Christianity and Islam, as memories of oral tradition grew ever frailer and dimmer, these memoranda emerged

ascendant, as the most reliable source for knowledge of these older traditions. Orality did not suddenly cease to be an important and in many cases primary medium, but over time the gravity slowly began to shift toward the written word. In the Christian tradition, the now-canonical gospels would develop out of these early memoranda, while in the Islamic tradition, one imagines that various early written memoranda grew into the regional collections known in the tradition as the "companion codices." Moreover, it is typical of such memoranda that as they develop, "the movement is from rough, unordered, unfinished literary raw material toward a more finished and polished text, and an important part of that movement is adding order to the rough draft," a quality that maintains consistency with our understanding that the Qur'an's literary qualities were introduced only at later stages in its history.[39] ʿAbd al-Malik and al- Ḥajjāj presumably had such *hypomnēmata* of the early oral tradition at their disposal when they initiated their project to produce a new standard written version of the Qur'an, which they then imposed as the canonical sacred text for all of Muhammad's followers by imperial authority.

This model is extremely useful, and it helps us to understand a number of things about the Qur'an and its formation. In the most basic sense, we find here a culturally and contextually relevant format and process for the writing down of oral tradition, the inherent flexibility of these early memoranda, and likewise their use in producing more formal and finished types of writing over time. Having established that the earliest written records of the early Jesus tradition seem to fall within this tradition of producing *hypomnēmata*, Larsen then proceeds to consider how the mutability of such writings and their revision to produce new more polished texts can illuminate the Synoptic Problem—that is, the clear evidence of literary dependences among the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Larsen's deft analysis of these textual relations on the basis of this model provides a well-grounded and extremely useful example for investigating the somewhat similar "synoptic problem" in the Qur'an: namely, how we can account for and understand the numerous instances where the Qur'an repeats, often on multiple occasions, the same tradition in different form, sometimes with only minor differences, but often with significant contradictory elements.[40]

Larsen follows the most accepted position in study of the Synoptic Problem in identifying the Gospel of Mark as the first written collection made from the oral Jesus tradition. Yet, as he understands this gospel, it was not produced as a book to be circulated and read but was instead something much more "like a teacher's script for teaching or preaching the good news, with a set of notes for each unit of teaching."[41] Larsen then seeks to understand the Gospel of Matthew's revision of this earlier text in light of the phenomenon of the production and use of *hypomnēmata*. "What does it mean," he asks, "to talk about the 'Synoptic Problem' without recourse to ideas like books, authors, and textual finality?" First, he rightly notes that we should recognize that "a first- or second-century reader of the texts we now call the Gospel according to Matthew and the Gospel according to Mark would not have thought of them as two separate books by two different authors. Rather, they would have regarded them as the same open-ended, unfinished, and living work: the gospel—textualized."[42] Ancient readers would not have recognized one as the "original" version and the other as something more "final": the very notion of identifying an "original" version is a "chimera," and the "initial text may not be a text at all, but a moving, growing constellation of textual traditions."[43]

In this sense, then, the Gospel of Matthew's revisions and additions to the Gospel of Mark do not amount to a new text but are instead best understood as "an act of macrolevel revision of an open textual tradition."[44] The Gospel of Matthew includes something on the order of 90 percent of the Gospel of Mark, which itself accounts for about 60 percent of the former's content. It is well known that the Gospel of Matthew appears to correct and improve many of the rough edges in the Gospel of Mark, introducing more narrative and structure to the more "draftlike" nature of its source. It also adds a number of new traditions, including the appearances of the risen Lord, which were absent from earlier versions of the Gospel of Mark, although various endings of this sort were eventually supplied for Mark by the later tradition. In general, the Gospel of Matthew "aims to narrow ambiguities in the Gospel according to Mark . . . , supplying essential yet previously unspecified information," a phenomenon that also belongs to the process of revising and adapting *hypomnēmata*.[45] The Gospel of Matthew thus simply continues "the same unfinished textual tradition of 'the gospel' more broadly understood, adding stories to a textual tradition that help that tradition

conform better to ancient readers' expectations about what should be in a story about an individual."[46] Accordingly, "when considered in a first- or second-century context, the textual difference and overlap between the two textual constellations fit comfortably within the framework of finishing, continuing, or otherwise altering the same unfinished and still fluid textual tradition."[47]

The early efforts by Muhammad's followers to record their memories of his teachings in writing similarly seem to fit the category that most inhabitants of the late ancient Near East would have recognized as *hypomnēmata*. They were memoranda from a primarily oral tradition, inscribed as a memory aid on palm branches, stones, camel bones, that were made by individuals who were attempting to preserve their recollections of sacred tradition against the limitations and ravages of increasingly failing memory. Based on what appears to be some of the most reliable information from the Islamic tradition's memory of the Qur'an's formation, then, we can assume that such written reminders of the oral tradition were produced separately in Medina as well as in the main centers where the Believers had settled in the occupied territories. These independent early collections, as we have suggested, would eventually yield the competing textual traditions that the later tradition would name the "companion codices," and it is primarily in the context of this process of compiling memoranda of the sacred tradition that we can find explanations for the parallel traditions of the Qur'an's "synoptic problem." Therefore, by joining some of the most probable data from early Islamic memories about the Qur'an's origins with this well-documented late ancient practice of gradually committing oral tradition to writing through continued revision, we identify a productive approach, grounded in the relevant sources, for investigating the early history of the Qur'an's formation as a written document. It is a method that many specialists in Qur'anic studies may initially see as an unwelcome "foreign" import, but it is grounded in both late ancient literary culture and evidence from the early Islamic tradition. And of course, if we wish to better integrate study of the Qur'an with biblical and religious studies, this transition will, of methodological necessity, demand the development and deployment of models capable of studying many different kinds of material, including the basic toolkit of historical criticism and the range of methods and theories available for the historical study of religion.

One possible explanation for the recurrence of many closely parallel traditions in the Qur'an is that these were a product of the diversity of oral transmission, in which their minor differences arose through the constant retelling and recomposition of these traditions. Such is the view, for instance, favored by John Wansbrough. According to Wansbrough, these divergent parallels should be understood, in conjunction with ideological differences within the early community, as "independent, possibly regional, traditions" that arose as a result of the Believers' abrupt expansion across western Asia and North Africa, which left the community of the Believers scattered across a vast expanse. The similarities and differences of these passages, he concludes, suggest "not the carefully executed project of one or of many men, but rather the product of an organic development from originally independent traditions during a long period of transmission."[48]

Another explanation, favored particularly by Neuwirth and others of her coterie, finds the solution in a manner similar to the Islamic tradition, while also maintaining the integrity of the Qur'an as a writing produced by Muhammad himself, together with the members of the earliest community. According to this view, the differences in these traditions reflect the shifting concerns of the emergent community and were introduced to meet changing circumstances during the lifetime of Muhammad. Nevertheless, when properly understood from this perspective, one finds that they harmoniously advance the same basic message that Muhammad taught his followers across the traditions of the Qur'an. Accordingly, this approach adopts a number of the same strategies already deployed by the Islamic tradition: it seeks to account for these variants within the Qur'anic text by harmonizing their differences and explaining them according to specific contexts that Muhammad and his followers encountered.[49] It is a bit like a modern version of the traditional *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the "occasions of revelation" identified in the later Islamic tradition. Thus, this approach does not in effect depart greatly from the solutions afforded by the Islamic tradition, which it also mirrors in insisting that the entire Qur'an, including all these variants, must find its origin within the span of Muhammad's lifetime.

A third alternative understands these variants as the result of written revisions that were undertaken by Muhammad's followers after his death. Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann has made the most systematic use of this approach in his *Die Entstehung des Korans*, which convincingly argues that some of the variants evident among these passages seem to demand revisions to an already existing written text.[50] More recently, this approach has been extended by Dye in several recent studies, which make similar arguments for a written medium in the case of various other Qur'anic parallels. Dye also develops some earlier observations by Frank van der Velden regarding the apparent efforts reflected in certain Qur'anic passages to find theological convergence with contemporary Christians.[51] These revisions similarly could seem to imply changes made to an already written text.

Nevertheless, we should also note that many of the traditions considered by Dye and Pohlmann are Christian traditions; and, given the complete lack of any evidence for a Christian presence in the central Hijaz, we are left to conclude that these traditions almost certainly were adopted by Muhammad's followers after they began their occupation of the Roman and Sasanian Near East. The same can also be said more or less about the parallel traditions concerning Noah, Moses, and Iblis/Satan, since, as Joseph Witztum and others have convincingly argued, even traditions concerning figures and events from the Hebrew Bible seem to have reached the Qur'an through Christian, rather than Jewish, sources.[52] Accordingly, given the content of these synoptic elements of the Qur'an, we should expect that they belong in all their variations to a later stage in the Qur'an's history, after Muhammad's followers encountered and engaged with the Christian communities of Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia and their cultural heritage.

In light of all these factors, the best approach for investigating these Qur'anic parallels would seem to be a combination of the first and the final options. Witztum, in his thoughtful article on the problems and opportunities posed by these inner-Qur'anic variants, himself recommends that some combination of the available approaches seems to offer the best avenue forward, and in this we would agree. Witztum himself draws on elements of what he names "contextual and diachronic readings," but in reality these appear to be two sides of the same coin, mirroring the Berlin school's attention to context and diachrony within Muhammad's lifetime.[53] Yet, if we take the model for understanding the New Testament's Synoptic

Problem developed by Larsen, and apply it to the Qur'anic synoptic problem, we find ourselves well positioned to account for and understand these variant passages both in terms of oral tradition and written revisions. Some of these variants, particularly in their earliest forms, may well have entered the written tradition independently after having formed already during oral transmission in different locations. Accordingly, some of these competing variants may have been present already in the earliest written reminders of the sacred tradition, reflecting the diversity of the oral tradition that these collections were produced to bolster.

TABLE 5. Side by Side Comparison of Parallels in in Qur'an 55.46–76

(55:46) But such as fears the Station of his Lord, for them shall be two gardens	(55:62) And besides these shall be two gardens
(55:48) abounding in branches	(55:64) green, green pastures
(55:50) therein two fountains of running water	(55:66) therein two fountains of gushing water
(55:52) therein of every fruit two kinds	(55:68) therein fruits, and palm-trees, and pomegranates
(55:54) reclining upon couches lined with brocade, the fruits of the gardens nigh to gather	(55:70) therein maidens good and comely
(55:56) therein maidens restraining their glances, untouched before them by any man or jinn	(55:72) houris, cloistered in cool pavilions
(55:58) lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral	(55:74) untouched before them by any man or jinn
(55:60) Shall the recompense of goodness be other than goodness?	(55:76) reclining upon green cushions and lovely druggets.

A prime example of a variant produced in the oral tradition occurs in Qur'an 55:46–76, where two versions of the same tradition are juxtaposed one after the other. We give them side by side for easier comparison (see

table 5 above).[54] I see little reason to doubt, as Wansbrough similarly concludes, that these are two variants of the same tradition whose differences are the result of recurrent oral reproduction.[55] A written model is neither necessary nor all that helpful in seeking to understand the relations and differences between these two versions. Clearly, we have here alternate versions of a single tradition that were produced in the process of oral tradition and then were recorded in writing independently—originally in separate collections one imagines, before being joined together one after the other, following very conservative editorial principles. One assumes, moreover, that these early collections would continue to be expanded and altered in light of the enduring oral tradition, as well as the changing experiences of the community and its expanding knowledge of the traditions of Abrahamic monotheism. Additional variants may have continued to develop alongside the written text in the oral tradition, possibly entering and/or influencing the written tradition as it was still developing.

Presumably, these written reminders of the sacred tradition did not remain completely siloed within the contexts that initially produced them. Undoubtedly, some of these early collections were merged together to form larger documents, particularly as writing was increasingly seen as the more reliable reservoir of memories and began to assert is prominence against the oral tradition. New editions of these regional collections were made, in the same manner that the Gospel of Matthew's memorandum of the oral Jesus tradition adopted and adapted the earlier memorandum that now goes under the name of the Gospel of Mark. Such growth and development of the Believers' written sacred tradition in a manner analogous to the formation of the early Christian gospels is only to be expected in the parallel formation of the Qur'anic text. Just as Matthew rewrote certain traditions from Mark even as Mark's original version remained a part of the sacred tradition, we should expect similar developments within the Qur'anic text. Indeed, many of the Qur'an's variant traditions do seem to be best explained according to a process of revision to a written text, as Pohlmann and Dye have proposed. One should note, however, that not all their arguments to this effect are equally persuasive. In some cases, the patterns of word-for-word agreement between the passages in question are substantial and seem to require a written context. Nevertheless, in other instances, only a few stock phrases

are shared, and while these may have been drawn from some common written fragment, a written medium does not seem necessary to clarify the relations between the two versions, many of which are better explained as deriving from an oral context.[56] From these early collections, again, would eventually emerge the regional codices recalled by the early Islamic tradition, which themselves likely already contained some parallel versions of the same tradition, produced in the process of gradually committing the oral tradition to writing and continuing to revise and expand these written collections.

We may take as an example illustrating the need to combine both oral and written approaches the various Qur'anic traditions concerning the pre-Islamic prophet Shuʿayb. As one can see through a comparison of the parallel traditions in the following table, some of the differences are most readily understandable as reflecting the process of oral tradition while others seems to require a written model.[57] The two reports in the first column, cited one after the other from Qur'an 26:176–90 and 29:36–37, have every appearance of variants written down directly out of the oral tradition: there is no need for any recourse to a written text to explain the differences in these two passages or their relations with those of suras 7 and 11. Nevertheless, the stories of Shuʿayb in the two latter suras clearly show a degree of dependence that requires a written model, as does their arrangement within a block of larger material concerning the pre-Islamic prophets that was clearly a written composition.[58] Nevertheless, the form of Shuʿayb's story that was used to produce that written document was undoubtedly also drawn directly from the oral tradition: there is no reason to assume that it made use of the material in either sura 26 or 29. The improved structure, detail, clarity, and style of this longer version are all symptoms of the move to writing, which allows greater stability for this more complex version. Nevertheless, it is not at all obvious that one of the versions in either sura 7 or 11 served as the immediate source of the other. Instead, it is entirely possible that both versions depend on a no longer extant, earlier written model shared by both that has been independently altered even after the transfer to writing, perhaps with some continuing influence from oral traditions in each case.[59] Any efforts to understand the history of these traditions and their development within earliest Islam

should proceed on such a basis, viewing them as resulting from a mixture of oral and written transmissions.

TABLE 6. Side by Side Comparison of Parallels in Qur’an 7:85–93, 11:84–93, 26.176–90, and 29.36–37

Q 26:176–90 and 29:36–37	Q 7:85–93	Q 11:84–93
(26:176) The men of the Thicket cried lies to the Envoys (26:177) when Shuaib said to them, Will you not be godfearing? (26:178) I am for you a faithful Messenger, so fear you God, and obey you me. (26:179) I ask of you no wage for this; (26:180) my wage falls only upon the Lord of all Being. (26:181) Fill up the measure, and be not cheaters, (26:182) and weigh with the	(7:85) And to Midian their brother Shuaib; he said, O my people, serve God! You have no god other than He; there has now come to you a clear sign from your Lord. So fill up the measure and the balance, and diminish not the goods of the people; and do not corruption in the land, after it has been set right; that is better for you, if you are believers. (7:86) And do not sit in every path, threatening and barring from Gods way those who believe in Him, desiring to make it crooked. And remember when you were few, and He multiplied you; and behold, how was the end of the workers of corruption. (7:87) And if there is a party of you who believe in the Message I have been sent with, and a party who believe not, be patient till God shall judge between us; He is the best of judges. (7:88) Said the Council of those of his people who waxed proud, We will surely expel thee, O Shuaib, and those who believe with thee, from our city,	(11:84) And to Midian their brother Shuaib; he said, O my people, serve God! You have no god other than He. And diminish not the measure and the balance. I see you are prospering; and I fear for you the chastisement of an encompassing day. (11:85) O my people, fill up the measure and the balance justly, and do not diminish the goods of the people, and do not mischief in the land, working corruption. (11:86) Gods remainder is better for you, if you are believers. And I am not a guardian over you. (11:87) They said, Shuaib, does thy prayer command thee that we should leave that our fathers served, or to do as we will with our goods? Thou art the clement one, the right-minded. (11:88) He said, O my people, what think you? If I stand upon a clear sign from my Lord, and He has provided me with fair provision from Him – and I desire not to come behind you, betaking me to that I forbid you; I desire only to set things right, so far as I

straight balance,
(26:183) and diminish not the goods of the people, and do not mischief in the earth, working corruption.
(26:184) Fear Him who created you, and the generations of the ancients.
(26:185) They said, Thou art merely one of those that are bewitched;
(26:186) thou art naught but a mortal, like us; indeed, we think that thou art one of the liars.
(26:187) Then drop down on us lumps from heaven, if thou art one of the truthful.
(26:188) He said, My Lord knows very well what you are doing.

unless you return into our creed. He said, What, even though we detest it?
(7:89) We should have forged against God a lie if we returned into your creed; after God delivered us from it. It is not for us to return into it, unless God our Lord so will. Our Lord embraces all things in His knowledge. In God we have put our trust. Our Lord, give true deliverance between us and our people; Thou art the best of deliverers.
(7:90) Said the Council of those of his people who disbelieved, Now, if you follow Shuaib, assuredly in that case you will be losers.
(7:91) So the earthquake seized them, and morning found them in their habitation fallen prostrate,
(7:92) those who cried lies to Shuaib, as if never they dwelt there; those who cried lies to Shuaib, they were the losers.
(7:93) So he turned his back on them, and said, O my people, I have delivered to you the Messages of my Lord, and advised you sincerely; how should I grieve for a people of unbelievers?

am able. My succour is only with God; in Him I have put my trust, and to Him I turn, penitent.
(11:89) O my people, let not the breach with me move you, so that there smite you the like of what smote the people of Noah, or the people of Hood, or the people of Salih; and the people of Lot are not far away from you.
(11:90) And ask forgiveness of your Lord, then repent to Him; surely my Lord is All-compassionate, All-loving.
(11:91) They said, Shuaib, we do not understand much of what thou sayest. Truly we see thee weak among us; but for thy tribe we would have stoned thee; for thou art not strong against us.
(11:92) He said, O my people, is my tribe stronger against you than God? And Him—have you taken Him as something to be thrust behind you? My Lord encompasses the things you do.
(11:93) O my people, act according to your station; I am acting; and certainly you will know to whom will come the chastisement degrading him, and who is a liar. And be upon the watch; I shall be with you, watching.

(26:189) But they cried him lies; then there seized them the chastisement of the Day of Shadow; assuredly it was the chastisement of a dreadful day. (26:190) Surely in that is a sign, yet most of them are not believers. (29:36) And to Midian their brother Shuaib; he said, O my people, serve God, and look you for the Last Day; and do not mischief in the land, working corruption. (29:37) But they cried lies to him; so the earthquake seized them, and morning found them in their habitation fallen prostrate.

Such an understanding of the Qur'an's formation as an ongoing process, starting with oral traditions and moving increasingly to written versions provides a model and a basis grounded in both the relevant source material and the history of religion for understanding how the traditions of the Qur'an continued to develop after the death of Muhammad and across much, if not most, of the seventh century. From such a vantage, for instance, we are much better positioned to comprehend the clear interpolation of Qur'an 3:144, which the Islamic tradition itself unmistakably identifies as a later addition to the Qur'anic traditions.[60] Likewise, the fluidity of this model of the Qur'an as a text in process, continuing to be shaped by orality, clarifies what appear to be minor alterations to a number of eschatological pronouncements to make them comport with the unexpected and lengthy delay of the eschaton's arrival.[61] Another sort of example can be found in certain passages of the Qur'an offering moral instruction: 23:1–11 and 70:22–35.[62] Only three verses from these parallel passages agree word for word, whereas the remaining verses exhibit significant variation. Any similarities in these other verses are limited to the occurrence of a demonstrative adjective, a relative pronoun, or a form of the verb "to be": such commonly used words cannot establish dependence. Thus, we have here a circumstance where perhaps two traditions found their spark in a brief three-line text that had been written down at an early stage. But the traditions themselves, and their differences, are just as likely to be the result of oral transmission based on this short early document, yielding two rather different traditions that eventually came to be written down themselves and that were preserved separately within the canonical version of the Qur'anic text.

THE MAKING OF A NEW CANONICAL SCRIPTURE

Conceiving of the origins of the written Qur'an along the model of the *hypomnēmata* of late antiquity also positions us to better comprehend the peculiar arrangement—or the distinct lack thereof—of the Qur'an's contents. The organizational principles of such an open collection of notes are of course different from that of a finished, published literary work or a narrative. Its structure is guided above all by practical principles that will aid the leaders in using its contents in guiding the community: "As a narrative is

expected to have a particular literary arrangement (*taxis, suntaxis*), an unfinished note collection would also be expected have its own type of order or organization."[63] Attention to use of the Qur'an's precursors as memoranda of the oral tradition for use by the community's leaders may help us to better understand the nature of its present organization. Obviously, more detailed studies of both the Qur'an as a whole, as well as of individual passages, from this new perspective are certainly to be desired, but inasmuch as our purposes here are primarily to articulate theoretical and methodological principles for studying the Qur'an, now is not the occasion, unfortunately, for such an in-depth analysis. For the moment, Richard Bell's idiosyncratic analysis and translation of the Qur'an afford the best example of how such an approach to the text would operate, even if we may not agree in every instance with all Bell's ideas concerning the antecedent fragments that ultimately were brought into unity in the final version of the Qur'an.[64]

There is another analogue from Larsen's study that is particularly illuminating for understanding this stage of the Qur'an's history. As he notes, the production of *hypomnēmata* was not unique to early Christianity and the late classical tradition, but such open written memoranda of sacred traditions are also known in early Judaism as well, even if they are not called by this Greek term. In particular, Larsen draws our attention to the library from Qumran and one of the most important documents discovered there, known as the *Rule of the Community*.[65] Two different versions of this community charter were found at Qumran, and despite the authoritative nature of the writing, these two versions differ in significant ways. In the most general terms, one is longer and seemingly older, while the apparently more recent copy is shorter and more fragmentary. Scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls have debated which of the two copies best reflects the earliest, "original" tradition, without reaching any sort of consensus. Larsen, however, proposes that such a linear approach to the problem is misguided and unlikely to yield a meaningful solution, Instead, he proposes, we are much better served by dispensing with any notion of either an original or final version and instead viewing the *Rule of the Community* as a writing that is by its very nature open and in process. Likewise, despite its authority over the affairs of the community, we must recognize that the *Rule of the Community* is a text without an author in the sense that we are accustomed to think of the term. Instead, it was authorized in a different manner.

According to the *Rule* itself, it is "a text 'for the instructor' (*lemaskil*) of the community, which could mean that the book belongs to an instructor or that it is intended for his use as leader of the community, or . . . both."[66] It is not inconceivable that other members of the community may have had access to the document, but given the severe limitations of literacy and material costs, it is unlikely that this text was widely known beyond the handful of literate elites within the community, according to the most generous interpretation. Furthermore, as Larsen additionally notes, "what is striking about the *Rule of the Community* is how much it demands of its reader or user. A good deal of prior knowledge is assumed, without which it is surprisingly unhelpful, and perhaps even frustrating. . . . The community rules serve more as reminding field guides than an instructional how-to manual for new or anonymous readers."[67] These allusive, skeletal qualities are certainly reminiscent of the Qur'an's similarly elliptic style, and they suggest the *Rule*'s use more as a script for extemporizing than as a text to be read verbatim before the community: might this have been how the early written reminders of the Qur'anic traditions were also used? In both cases, we should imagine that these memory aids, despite their written form, are still not completely removed from the authority of oral tradition.[68] For this reason, as Sarianna Metso concludes, "the existence of contradictory regulations in compilations like the Community Rule is not so surprising."[69] Again, could this also be so in the case of the Qur'an?

It is certainly possible that the differences in the two versions of the *Rule of the Community* from Qumran reflect changes introduced by the leadership of the community to a living, open text that defined the nature of the community. Yet John Collins has alternatively proposed that perhaps we should understand the different versions of the *Rule* as products of different groups within the network of a larger religious "community" to which the Qumranites belonged.[70] On this basis, Larsen concludes that we should think "not of one location with a 'final' version of the *Rule of the Community* (even if final was only final, until it was updated again), or of an 'original' version from which others deviate or are contaminated, but, rather, of many locations each with its own modified and provisionally 'final' instantiation of a community Rule, which would differ in big and small ways from the Rules of other local units of the organization." As he continues to explain,

> Rather, there were local iterations of the Rule, subject to alteration by the local authority, being authorized both by their connection to the larger community and by the local leadership of the community. Each local iteration of the Rule would likely have contained older material, which had been brought into a new and different spatial and geographical context, along with their own additions reflecting local traditions and experiences. No one version would have been more authentic than another. Likewise, it would be something of a fool's errand to try to trace the origin and its contaminations.

Instead, what we have are

> different, equally authorized versions or performances of the rules of various local communities. Likely some knew of other versions out there, but the one in their local community for all practical intents and purposes was *the Rule* for that community. . . . From place to place, textual difference is to be expected; in fact, a lack thereof would be surprising. The more they are used, the more they evolve and develop—and the only way to stop evolving is to fall out of use or be destroyed. . . . And if new and better information, or new ways of dealing with issues, comes to their attention, it is the local leaders' prerogative and perhaps even their bound duty to modify it.[71]

We have quoted Larsen here at some length because his conclusions regarding the variations of the *Rule of the Community* seem perfectly apt for thinking about how the Qur'an was developing in its earliest stages as a written document. Like those of its Qumran counterpart, many of the Qur'an's traditions are directed toward establishing the order of the community and defining proper behavior and ritual action, even though, as we noted in chapter 2, the Qur'an and its traditions are astonishingly absent from the religious life of Muhammad's followers for most of the first century of their existence. Both are highly allusive texts intended for use seemingly by leaders of the community, whose knowledge of a broader, primarily oral tradition could bring to life these rather skeletal written memory aids. Likewise, we are dealing in both cases with writings that were subject to significant regional variations, determined by the individual communities that put them to use in different places. These collections were also in a constant state of being updated and improved, one expects, as they continued to be in regular use and as new traditions and circumstances were regularly encountered by the community and its leadership.

In contrast to the early Christian tradition, which was content to allow the diversity and distinctiveness of its initial collections of the oral tradition to stand in the canonical fourfold gospel tradition, the Islamic tradition determined to produce a single scriptural harmony on the basis of these antecedent collections. This, it seems, was the task that ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj took up around the turn of the eighth century. Yet the impulse toward the harmonization of tradition was not completely unknown in early Christianity, and most notably it produced the second-century gospel harmony of Tatian, the Diatessaron. Inasmuch as this Diatessaron was the preferred version of the gospels among Syriac-speaking Christians up until the fifth century, the notion of a harmonized scripture was certainly not foreign to the Christians of the late ancient Near East.[72] In any case, the editorial process adopted by ʿAbd al-Malik's initiative to standardize and canonize the Qur'an was clearly a very conservative one in that it preserved these variants of the same tradition even in the face of their repetition and difference, as well as outright contradictions among them in some cases.

We find similarly conservative and inclusive principles at work in the compilation of various texts in the Hebrew Bible, including the Pentateuch most notably, as well as in the Christian New Testament, with its varied and often contradictory fourfold gospel tradition. Or, moving in the opposite direction from the turn of the eighth century, we may look to the example of the *Book of Common Prayer* in the early years of the English Reformation. Disputes over the Real Presence in the early English Reformation led to the rapid issue of two prayer books with very different versions of the words of administration, spoken by the priest to the communicant. The first version, from 1549, affirmed the Real Presence, while the second, published in 1552, removed this profession and instead provided a memorialist interpretation of the sacrament. Yet when Elizabeth I came to the throne, she had a new prayer book published in 1559, which, as a comprise, included both versions of the words of administration, so that the priest would speak both and the communicant could hear them as he or she wished.[73] Such inclusive redaction was essential for religious unity, and no doubt this same phenomenon was operative in producing the canonical version of the Qur'an, resulting in its variant parallels.

At this point one might rightly ask, what prompted ʿAbd al-Malik to undertake the standardization and canonization of the Qur'an, along with a concerted effort to enforce this new standard and purge his empire of its rivals? Once again, the work of Assmann proves helpful for understanding this development in the Believers' sacred tradition. As Kelber aptly sums up Assmann's position, "The need for canonicity, [Assmann] reasons, arises out of the experience of an excessive textual pluralism and lack of ideational uniformity that threaten the *raison d'être* of the tradition. In that situation, the canon responds to 'the need to rein in the principle that "anything goes"; we fear loss of meaning through entropy.'" Canonization privileges certain texts by authorizing them at the expense of others; it likewise seeks to control their content, in order to limit the growth of entropy within the tradition and tame the disruptive phenomenon of variance. It marks an effort "to cope with pluriformity and variability by selectivity and exclusivity."[74] If we listen to the early Islamic tradition, it would seem that these concerns were paramount: discrepancies among the regional collections of sacred tradition had reached such a level that they were threatening to cause serious divisions within the community if no action were taken. Presumably, there is much truth in these reports—even if we are skeptical about any role played by ʿUthmān in establishing the canonical version of the Qur'an. Given the dynamics of memory, transmission, and recording that we have considered so far, it stands to reason that there would have been some significant differences in memories of the sacred tradition. ʿAbd al-Malik thus intervened to establish a single authoritative version of the Qur'an in order to stave off the threatening divisions within the faith of the Believers and his bourgeoning empire that such variance in the tradition seemed to invite.

Equally important is Assmann's concept of the *Traditionsbruch*, which he identifies not only as an impulse toward the writing down of oral tradition but also the creation of a canon. Once again, we return to the limitations of both human memory and oral transmission for preserving a tradition over an extended interval of time. As we noted in the previous chapter, Assmann, following Vansina, observes that within a span of roughly eighty years, memories of events begin to degrade profoundly, to the point that nearly all memory of what happened before is soon erased. In the case of memories of

a community's foundation and its defining religious beliefs, such a loss would ultimately lead to the community's dissolution. Accordingly, in order to prevent this devastating loss, a new medium for remembering must be sought, not only to ensure the preservation of these essential memories but of the community itself. For this reason, Assmann observes, in contexts where writing is available, after around forty years there is an increasing move to preserve the oral tradition in writing so that it will not be lost. Forty years, according to Assmann, approximately comprise the interval at which the most reliable bearers of the living tradition, those who had been eyewitnesses, have largely died off. The growing break within the tradition demands the move to a more durable medium: unless such a text is written down and institutionalized, it runs "risks of being forgotten."[75]

The end result of this process is the canonization of a formally authorized version of these written materials, which enduringly bridges the *Traditionsbruch* for the community and serves as a foundation for the community's emergent collective identity. The latter effect would contribute significantly to ʿAbd al-Malik's deliberate campaign to consolidate both a powerful collective Arab cultural and linguistic identity as well as a distinctive religious identity for the Believers as Muslims, in his coordinated program of Arabization and Islamicization. Establishing a new canonical Arabic and Islamic scripture for the Believers was certainly an instrumental part of this process, even if it was also a response to an emerging *Traditionsbruch* within the community. A *Traditionsbruch*, one should note, can also result from some sort of trauma experienced by the community, and the events of the Second Civil War, which held strong religious charge, no doubt provided ʿAbd al-Malik with the inspiration to consolidate the community's collective memory and to standardize and centralize religious authority within his empire.[76] One final consideration is also the rise of the authority of the religious scholars, the *ulamā*, around this same time, as we noted in the first chapter.[77] The resulting shift from the direct religious authority of the caliphs to a new configuration that located such authority instead in scholars' knowledge of Muhammad's religious teaching can partly explain the formation of a canonical scripture and its newfound importance at this point. In this regard, the following comments from Assmann seem highly relevant: "Where there is a king, one of whose main duties is to issue

laws and put them into effect, no legal code is required: that would improperly restrict the king's own legislative competence."[78] It is an explanation, one should note, that also does double duty in explaining why the authority of Muhammad and the Qur'an are so strikingly absent from the early Islamic tradition for most of the seventh century.

CONCLUSIONS

In seeking to understand the Qur'an's emergence within its late ancient literary environment, a number of different models help us to appreciate how its originally oral sacred traditions made the shift to written format. Firstly, we should expect that this process of transition to writing was gradual rather than sudden, beginning primarily as memory aids to assist with recall of the oral tradition. Moreover, the emergence of written documents does not immediately eclipse the value and authority of the oral tradition, which generally remains operative and even ascendant alongside the written memoranda. Yet the introduction of writing to the tradition occurs, as Assmann explains, with some regularity after several decades have elapsed since the sacred tradition's originating event. At this stage in the history of a community and its oral tradition, memories have begun to fade significantly, and considerable diversity has entered into its sacred tradition as a result of repeated oral transmission. Writing is introduced to serve as a bulwark against both these threats: the loss of forgetting and increasing variance within the tradition.

Nevertheless, even as we note that the written tradition began to proliferate and steadily emerged as a more authoritative and reliable medium for tradition, we must not allow ourselves to be deceived into thinking that the tradition suddenly became fixed and stable. Recent scholarship on the formation of Jewish and Christian sacred tradition has drawn our attention to the fact that such written collections remained open and fluid before the imposition of a canon, particularly in their early stages. The ongoing process of addition, subtraction, and revision to these early collections also provides us with an invaluable model for understanding the Qur'an's inclusion of numerous variants reporting different versions of the same tradition. Such parallels likely emerged as revisions made to existing traditions, while others were new discoveries added to the collection to

ensure completeness. We must also bear in mind that in the early stages of writing down the Qur'anic tradition, collections were being made independently across the vast empire that the Believers controlled, in the main areas that they colonized.

From these early collections would eventually emerge the various regional codices, identified by the early Islamic tradition. Although the later authorities report only relatively minor variations among these regional codices, it seems clear that their differences were much greater than they were either willing or able to recall. Indeed, these competing codices were so diverse that their differences appear to have occasioned disruptions within the early community, such that it became necessary to produce a single, imperial authorized version that would replace them and provide the community with a primary foundation for its emerging collective identity. This was the task that ʿAbd al-Malik undertook, with the assistance of al-Ḥajjāj, with the direct aim of eliminating these regional codices and replacing them with a new, imperially imposed, canonical version. As a result, the Qur'an has come down to us today with remarkable uniformity; nevertheless, one must recognize that this was no accident but was the result of concerted imperial enforcement and policing.[79] Absent such direct actions, there is no chance that the Qur'an could have possibly achieved such strict uniformity. Yet, prior to this decisive development, the various collections of Qur'anic tradition would have remained, like their early Jewish and Christian counterparts, fluid and open to change.

Of course, one might object that, in contrast to the early Jews and Christians, the Believers had before them the model of a written, closed, canonical scriptural tradition. Yet, as we have already noted, the evidence indicates that the Qur'an and Muhammad's teaching in general seem to have held little significance in the religious lives of his followers for most of the seventh century. Likewise, we must recall Brakke's necessary warning that we should not approach the Qur'an's emergence as a canonical scripture by continuing "to tell a story with a single plot line, leading to the seemingly inevitable τέλος of the closed canon."[80] As historians, we must avoid at all costs the "danger of judging matters with too much regard for the present," as if history were a simply linear process predetermined to reach the present condition, so that "people of earlier times already had the same goal as us,

but were simply not yet so close to it."[81] In order to understand the Qur'an's early history during the first decades of the Believer's movement, we must free our investigations from the constraints imposed by understanding the Qur'anic traditions according to their current status, as canonical Islamic scripture. Likewise, we must eliminate any notion that the materials under consideration were somehow destined to eventually become a canonical scripture. Only from such a perspective can we discover how the Qur'anic traditions relate to their late ancient cultural environs and similarly how they ultimately would develop into a new sacred scripture for a new religious community.

Therefore, for much of the seventh century, while canonical status remained in abeyance for the Qur'anic traditions, we should expect that they remained subject to the "*mouvance* of tradition" that characterized those of the early gospel before their canonization and that continued to govern the transmission of biblical apocrypha. Such is the terminology that Kelber borrows from Paul Zumthor for describing "the dynamics of the phenomenon of textual variability and pluriformity" that characterize ancient media realities in general and "the nature of the Jewish and Christian biblical traditions, especially in their respective initial stages."[82] Like these other precursors and counterparts to canonical scriptures, we must similarly view the Qur'anic traditions during the early decades of their history as fluid and open, prone to change and developing in conversation with contemporary biblical and extrabiblical traditions.

9

The Qur'an's Historical Context According to the Qur'an

Based on what we have seen so far, there is not much reason to place a great deal of confidence in the Islamic tradition's account of the Qur'an's origins, and we are left overall with little conviction in its reports concerning the Qur'an's historical matrix. Indeed, the evidence considered to this point strongly indicates a very different historical setting—multiple settings, in fact—for the Qur'an's gradual development into the now canonical version of the text that has come down to us. The Islamic tradition, of course, confidently locates the Qur'an's genesis entirely in Mecca and Yathrib and within Muhammad's lifetime, and this same tradition provides abundant information regarding this historical context and the precise circumstances in which Muhammad received his revelations. Nevertheless, without exception, all the Islamic historical tradition's detailed "knowledge" about the central Hijaz during the early seventh century was first recorded at least one hundred years, if not many more, after the fact. Accordingly, there is widespread consensus among critical historians of early Islam that these accounts of Mecca and Yathrib's history before and during Muhammad's prophetic career are little more than pious fictions, with effectively no basis in any genuine historical memories.

Of course, to be clear, there is little doubt concerning a number of basic facts about Muhammad's prophetic career—for instance, that he existed, that he began a new monotheist religious movement in the Hijaz, the important influence of eschatology in shaping the movement, its connection to the Abrahamic tradition, and its emphasis on piety and conquest.[1] Yet

most of the specific information in the later Islamic tradition concerning the history of Mecca and Yathrib during Muhammad's lifetime is widely considered as being historically unreliable by critical historians. And even in the rare case that these reports may preserve traces of some distant memory drawn from actual events, by the time these memories had passed through oral transmission for a century or two, they would have borne little to no resemblance to the historical conditions that inspired them. Simply put, we cannot place much stock at all in what the Islamic historical tradition relates about the Qur'an's provenance. Not only are the sources themselves highly problematic and unreliable, but the historical conditions of the Qur'an's oral transmission in the religiously complex milieu of the late ancient Near East direct us to expect something rather different from what they relate.

Likewise, it is well known that the Islamic tradition recalls the life of its founding prophet with extraordinary detail, so much so that historians in the nineteenth century were seduced by it into believing that we could know "year by year the fluctuations of his thoughts, his contradictions, his weaknesses."[2] Yet, since the beginning of the last century, critical scholars have come to recognize that the Islamic biographical traditions of Muhammad, even more so than the rest of the historical tradition, amount to little more than a devout reminiscence that developed over the centuries after his death as an essential component of the community's collective memory. Although, to be sure, there may occasionally be some valuable nuggets of actual information from the early seventh century buried within these massive compendia of sacred history, these are extremely few and far between and must be exhumed with great care.[3] Nevertheless, this abundant biographical tradition stands front and center in the Islamic tradition when it comes to interpreting the Qur'an, providing essential context for determining the meaning of this often obscure text. This approach affords, as I have previously noted elsewhere, a textbook example of Michel Foucault's "author function," in which Muhammad's life and personality present a coherent metanarrative within which one can find and fix the meaning of the text.[4] Yet, given the highly artificial and unreliable nature of these biographical traditions, no critical scholar would venture today to interpret the Qur'an through the lens of what amount to much later Islamic hagiographies of Muhammad.

With these twin anchors lost, we quickly find ourselves and also the Qur'an very much at sea. According to tradition, the Qur'an hails from the central Hijaz of the seventh century, a region that we know very little about during this time. Nevertheless, what we can discern about the Hijaz in this era does not fit very well with the production of a text like the Qur'an. By all indications the tribal states of the Hijaz appear to have been nonliterate as well as culturally insulated, and there is no evidence of any significant cultural contact between the peoples and civilizations of this region and the broader worlds of Mediterranean late antiquity and Sasanian Iran.[5] This is not altogether surprising, given the fact that Mecca and Yathrib were some seven hundred to one thousand kilometers distant from even the borderlands of this cultural area, separated by a vast and punishing desert. Both settlements had very small populations and possessed limited economic significance, providing little occasion or encouragement for broader contact and cultural integration with this region. Moreover, given the nonliterate nature of the societies in this region, they would have effectively had no means to receive the sophisticated cultures of Mediterranean and Iranian late antiquity.

One suspects that the inhabitants of the central Hijaz likely knew of the Roman and Sasanian empires far to their north, but there is no indication that there was any reciprocal interest at all in the cities of the central Hijaz coming from the Roman and Sasanian side. To be sure, some individuals from Mecca may have traveled to the marches of the Roman Empire to trade their leather goods. Likewise, as we noted in chapter 4, trade caravans may have occasionally passed through Yathrib, which seems to have possibly stood at a crossroads. Nevertheless, again, inasmuch as Yathrib in the pre-Islamic period was not even a town but little more than "an oasis comprising a somewhat looser collection of disparate settlements" focused on the cultivation of dates, it is hard to imagine that these caravans had any business there beyond perhaps acquiring some basic provisions before moving on to the next stop.[6] And, as Crone rightly notes, once trade from South Arabia switched to sea transit around the first century CE, it is hard to believe that any overland route that may have passed through Yathrib "survived this competition for long."[7] Trade, then, cannot provide any meaningful evidence for this region's cultural integration with the world of Near Eastern late antiquity. Indeed, even the Jewish community of Yathrib

very tellingly is never mentioned once in any Jewish source from antiquity (or any source outside the Islamic tradition for that matter): the Jews of late ancient Rome and Mesopotamia thus seem to have been completely unaware even of this community's existence.[8]

This isolation, together with the lack of literacy, one must admit, does not provide a very suitable context for producing the Qur'an. To the contrary, the Qur'an seems to demand an audience that is steeped in the biblical—and extrabiblical—traditions of the late ancient world. Given the information that we have about the seventh-century Hijaz, there is no reason to suppose that the inhabitants of seventh-century Mecca and Yathrib could have possessed the deep, extensive knowledge of Jewish and especially Christian tradition needed to comprehend much of what the Qur'an has to say.[9] The paucity of Jewish but more critically Christian culture in the Qur'an's alleged Hijazi context impels us to look beyond its confines in order to understand how the Qur'anic text, as it has come down to us, came to be. Indeed, the absence of any Christian presence is itself a strong indicator of how marginal the Hijaz was in relation to the broader world of late antiquity. By the seventh century, Christianity had literally surrounded the central Hijaz, yet there is no evidence that it had made any significant inroads there at all—and it is not as if the Christians would have been waiting for an invitation to evangelize the region. Its absence from the Hijaz affords yet another telling sign of the region's disconnection from the surrounding cultures. Moreover, these cultural constraints are not the only aspect of the seventh-century Hijaz that does not seem compatible with the Qur'anic text. As it turns out, there are fundamental problems in reconciling the environmental conditions implied by parts of the Qur'an with the barren, inland location of Mecca and Yathrib. Its frequent references to seafaring and farming suggest a very different context.

Nevertheless, there is a high degree of probability, I think, that at least some, and perhaps much, of the Qur'an's content was inspired by Muhammad's preaching in the Hijaz during the early seventh century. This is not to say that we have any of the actual words that he taught in the Qur'an, which, for reasons that we have already seen, is well-nigh impossible unless they were almost immediately committed to writing. What we have now instead in the Qur'an is the result of the constant, repeated recomposition of traditions that, while they may have their origin in

Muhammad's teaching, were subsequently reimagined, rewritten, and augmented during their transmission by his followers. Therefore, even traditions that possibly originated with Muhammad himself must be recognized in their present form as effectively new compositions produced on the basis of his ideas by his later followers in the very different circumstances of the newly conquered territories of the former Roman Near East and the Sasanian Empire. These two regions, and the former in particular, with its massive Christian population, provide one of the most important, if not the most important, historical contexts in which the Qur'anic traditions were formed. Indeed, it was in early "Islamic" Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia that the traditions of the Qur'an, as we now have them, seem to have been forged. These milieux exerted an influence on the final text of the Qur'an at least equal to, it would seem, if not even greater than, the cultural traditions of the seventh century Hijaz, whatever they may have been. Some parts of the Qur'an, including especially its traditions of Jesus's Nativity and those of Alexander the Great, for instance, almost certainly derive from a post-Hijazi context.[10] It is extremely improbable that these traditions, among others, could have been widely known to the inhabitants of the early seventh-century Hijaz in the manner that the Qur'an invokes them. Instead, their presence in the Qur'an can only be satisfactorily understood as a result of broader contact with the Christian traditions of the late ancient Mediterranean world after Muhammad's followers had seized control and settled into this area.

At the same time, there are traditions in the Qur'an that appear to have originated possibly before Muhammad ever began his prophetic mission, a point that we have already noted more than once. These traditions are distinguished primarily by their utter lack of intelligibility for early Muslim commentators. The inability of these early medieval interpreters to make any sense of these passages from the Qur'an seems to indicate that they were not passed down orally within the community on the basis of Muhammad's teachings. If this were the case, then we would expect these passages of the Qur'an to be understood with much greater clarity, since the community would have been responsible for their transmission, their recomposition, and for securing their ultimate intelligibility. How these passages could have become so incomprehensible in the custody of the community's oral transmission seems inexplicable. Nevertheless, there is the possibility that, as

others have suggested, these traditions were already written down when Muhammad and his earliest followers encountered them, in a form and perhaps even dialect (or language) that they understood only partly but not completely. For whatever reason, Muhammad and his coterie of followers must have revered the words of these ancient writings, so much so that they eventually found their way into the canonical Qur'an, even in the absence of a complete understanding of their contents and meaning. It is a possibility that we certainly must consider in investigating the formation of the Qur'anic text. Yet in such case, where and when any pre-Muhammadan Qur'anic traditions may have arisen, and what their original context was, remains anyone's guess.

THE QUR'AN BEFORE MUHAMMAD?

Let us begin then, however briefly, with the possibility that some passages now in the Qur'an may derive from traditions, presumably written, that antedate Muhammad and his prophetic mission. This problem was first introduced, it would seem, by James Bellamy, whose work we briefly mentioned in chapter 3 when considering the very early (pre-Muhammad) radiocarbon datings of several Qur'anic manuscripts. As Bellamy noted, in the received text of the Qur'an, there are more than a few unintelligible words, which the later commentators not only did not understand, but they frequently did not have any idea how they should be vocalized. According to Bellamy's count, there are "more than two-hundred" such instances, which "prove that there was no oral tradition stemming directly from the prophet strong enough to overcome all the uncertainties inherent in the writing system."[11] Or at least, such would seem to be the case for these particular passages. Bellamy suggests that these difficulties in the text are a result of copyists' mistakes, and the fact that they are universally present in all manuscripts of the Qur'an as it has come down to us indicates that these witnesses must go back to a single copy, or perhaps better stated, a single version. In such a case, this prototype would almost certainly be the canonical version produced under ʿAbd al-Malik's supervision at the turn of the eighth century. Nevertheless, there are other possible explanations for these confounding loci of the Qur'anic text beside scribal errors, and likewise these passages do not entirely preclude the existence of an oral

tradition in the early community. Rather, they stand only as evidence that—for whatever reason—the vocalization of these particular lexemes in the Qur'an remained a mystery and did not find a solution in the oral tradition.[12]

Patricia Crone made some similar observations regarding these puzzling elements of the Qur'an, which ultimately seem to have led her to abandon her earlier view of the Qur'an as a relatively late composition and to posit instead its early fixation in something very close to its present form.[13] For example, she noted that in some cases the exegetical tradition will form its interpretation of certain passages by reading a particular word quite differently from the actual form that is given in the text. This practice of substituting different words for what is written in some instances, she proposes, suggests there was an early fossilization of the consonantal text that could not be adjusted to reflect how the text was actually being read later on. Likewise, many important legal terms in the Qur'an, it turns out, were completely unintelligible to the early commentators, a point that receives validation also from David Power's illuminating studies of inheritance law—a weighty matter that would require, one would expect, a great deal of clarity.[14] Of such terms, Larry Conrad observes, "Even words that would have been of great and immediate importance in the days of Muhammad himself are argued over and guessed at" in the legal and exegetical traditions.[15] In an unpublished paper Crone further identifies, following up on an observation by D. S. Margoliouth, the very telling example of the form of John the Baptist's name as it appears in the Qur'an. It is highly revealing, she observes, that

> the believers unanimously read the ductus for Yuḥannā [] or Yuḥannan as Yaḥyā, taking the undotted *nūn* to be a *yā*ʾ. If they only had the ductus to go by, *yā*ʾ is of course as good a guess as any. The significance of the example lies in its demonstration that it *was* all they had to go by. Whoever first read Yaḥyā in the five passages in which the name occurs cannot have had an oral tradition preserving the sound of the name. Nor can they have had prior knowledge of Yuḥannā, since they would in that case have found it easy enough to recognize him on the basis of the internal evidence.[16]

Michael Cook briefly identifies similar issues in Qur'an 7:163–66, which includes three words whose vocalization and meaning were completely

uncertain to the early exegetes.[17] Likewise, in sura 105 the meaning of the word *sijjīl* remains a mystery, as does that of *ṣamad* in sura 112.[18] Yet perhaps the single best example of this problem is Crone's compelling analysis of Sūrat Quraysh (106) and its interpretation in *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. There she demonstrates just how confounded later interpreters were by this short, four-verse sura: their inability to identify the meaning of a key term, *īlāf*, gave rise to an extraordinary array of diverse interpretations. In regard to this term, Crone concludes, "It is thus clear that the exegetes had no better knowledge of what this sura meant than we have today. . . . The original meaning of these verses was unknown to them."[19] The exegetes thus found themselves confronted with a text whose words and meaning they were incapable of understanding. It is indeed difficult to reconcile the total ignorance of these later interpreters with a conviction that Muhammad taught this sura about the Quraysh tribe, to which he and many of his followers belonged. The early readers of this sura simply had no memory that could enable them to understand it, and instead they had to invent various meanings for it.

What, then, does such confusion and uncertainty mean for understanding the origins of the Qur'anic text? Admittedly, the answer is not entirely clear, and a number of different explanations are possible. Among these, however, one will not find the traditional Islamic memory of the Qur'an's origins. Nicolai Sinai nevertheless attempts to argue that these linguistic irregularities should be taken as evidence that the Qur'anic text must have stabilized very quickly, so that these "rough edges" became fossilized during its early collection, presumably, in his judgment, under ʿUthmān.[20] Yet it does not seem possible to reconcile these difficulties with the received narrative of the Qur'an's careful transmission from the lips of Muhammad by those closest to him, those who quickly committed these words to writing, even while persisting in a primarily and fundamentally oral recitation of the text. If this tradition were accurate, it is hard to imagine how such ignorance and error (in the case of John's name) could have arisen. Even more problematic in this regard is Neuwirth's conviction that the Qur'an was written down during Muhammad's lifetime and under his supervision.

What these linguistic and grammatical infelicities signal, then, is not the Qur'an's early standardization but instead the very conservative editorial process that was employed in its production. As Cook rightly observes, "those responsible for the final redaction of our text seem to have had a minimalist approach to editing. . . . In short, the final editing of the text was very conservative. To scholars this is a godsend. It means that rough edges have not been smoothed out; and rough edges in a text can be valuable clues to an earlier state of the material it contains."[21] This sort of minimalist editing is typical in the compilation of scriptural traditions; or at least, the same conservative editorial tendency is evident in the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible. In the case of the latter especially, we can see that many such "rough edges" were preserved in the text, even over the course of several centuries of repeated editing. Indeed, as Cook notes of the Qur'an, these difficulties afford important indication of possibly older material that has been preserved within a more recent edition. Editing and compiling a scripture are necessarily very conservative processes, since one wants to preserve as accurately as possible the inspired words of God that they contain, without any human intervention. Accordingly, the Israelite priests did not take it on themselves to correct and ameliorate difficult biblical traditions, many of which were hundreds of years old when they produced the final version of the Pentateuch while in exile in Babylon. Rather, they seem to have sent forward these traditions as they found them, in all their complexity and confusion.

Crone suggests instead that these textual difficulties are not a sign of the Qur'an's early standardization; they instead bear witness to traditions in the Qur'an that are older than both Muhammad and the Qur'an itself. The uncertainty and wild guessing of the early exegetes, she proposes, are difficult to comprehend "unless at least part of the text was old when the Muslims first came across it, wherever or whenever they did so. What we have to deal with seems to be material which was copied before the rise of Islam and which reached the Muslims as text without context."[22] Yet, as she notes, this finding blatantly contradicts the Islamic tradition's insistence on the oral transmission of the Qur'an at least until the middle of the seventh century, if not even longer. How could both things be true? As she often does, particularly in her later work, Crone refrains from giving us the answer, allowing the problem to linger, although one can clearly read

between the lines here and elsewhere to discern that she seems to favor an understanding of these passages as most likely pre-Muhammadan.

Michael Cook, however, proposes two possible explanations for these linguistic uncertainties. On the one hand, he suggests—along the same lines as Crone—the possibility "that much of what found its way into the Koran was already old by the time of Muhammad." On the other hand, such confusion could instead reflect the fact "that the materials which make up the Koran did not become generally available as a scripture until several decades after the Prophet's death, with the result that by the time this happened, memory of the original meaning of the material had been lost." Most importantly, however, he notes that "the two approaches do not exclude one another," and I think that this is almost certainly the correct solution.[23] The dynamics of the Qur'an's formation reveal that parts of the text may possibly preserve some fragments or phrases that were already written down and were significantly older than Muhammad and the foundation of his new religious movement. For whatever reason, these textual scraps must have been highly esteemed and even revered, such that they ultimately found their way into the Believers' sacred text. But this hypothesis in no way contradicts the parallel existence of an oral tradition based on Muhammad's teaching, or the relatively late standardization of this orally transmitted corpus in writing around the turn of the eighth century. Indeed, the complete invisibility of the Qur'an until the end of the seventh century, both among the Believers themselves and among all our external witnesses, strongly favors Cook's second hypothesis. Given what we have seen in previous chapters about the nature of memory and oral transmission, there is every reason to imagine that over a span of nearly eighty years, some elements of the Qur'an's meaning could certainly have been lost, as Cook suggests. Yet, as Cook rightly notes, either possibility or both requires us to abandon most of the traditional Islamic narrative of the Qur'an's formation.[24]

It is true that the Qur'an is regularly unintelligible, well beyond the two hundred or so passages that Bellamy and others have in view, and this quality certainly should inform any investigation its origins. As Gerd Puin observes, "The Koran claims for itself that it is 'mubeen' or 'clear.' But if you look at it, you will notice that every fifth sentence or so simply doesn't make sense. Many Muslims—and Orientalists—will tell you otherwise, of course,

but the fact is that a fifth of the Koranic text is just incomprehensible."[25] So, too, Gerald Hawting observes that the text, taken on its own, is often completely unintelligible, filled with "grammatical and logical discontinuities."[26] Even the Qur'an itself acknowledges that its contents are often utterly obscure, a quality that invited problems with its authority over the community:

> It is He who has sent this Scripture down to you. Some of its verses are definite in meaning—these are the cornerstone of the Scripture—and others are ambiguous. The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble and to pin down a specific meaning of their own: only God knows the true meaning. Those firmly grounded in knowledge say, "We believe in it: it is all from our Lord"—only those with real perception will take heed (3:7).[27]

At the same time, however, the Qur'an's truly confounding passages, the ones that completely stumped the early exegetes, are relatively few in number, amounting to around ten printed pages altogether, including their immediate textual context. Accordingly, I think that for the moment at least, our best model for approaching the Qur'an remains one that understands its content as rooted largely in Muhammad's teachings, albeit with the possible inclusion of archaic and imperfectly understood textual materials, and likewise with a considerable amount of change introduced in the process of transmission along the way to a final canonized, written scripture.

THE QUR'ANIC CONTEXT ACCORDING TO THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an itself gives us many clues regarding the circumstances in which it was produced, and no small number of these, it turns out, indicate a very different context from the Qur'an's putative birthplace of Mecca and Yathrib. Much of the Qur'an, admittedly, seems quite at home within this traditional arena, and this content may very well ultimately originate in Muhammad's preaching there in the early seventh-century. Yet there is a great deal of material in the Qur'an that is simply not compatible with this historical context and that must have arisen in a very different milieu. And in contrast to the mysterious words and passages considered in the previous section, the amount of Qur'anic material seemingly incompatible with a Hijazi matrix is

quite considerable. Some of these Qur'anic passages refer to economic and environmental conditions of their audience in ways that are simply impossible to connect with the central Hijaz. Others seem to imply a proximity to locations that are clearly well outside the Hijaz. But the overwhelming bulk of this extra-Hijazi material consists in the massive amount of Christian tradition present in the Qur'an that must have been, by implication, well known among the members of its audience. By all indications, there was no Christian presence in the Hijaz in the early seventh century or any time prior. Therefore, we must look to a different location altogether to find the source of these Qur'anic traditions: some of these traditions clearly entered the Qur'anic corpus somewhere well outside Muhammad's Hijaz.

One of the most notorious elements of the Qur'an that obviously cannot be situated within the Hijaz is its mention of seafaring and fishing in a manner that assumes its audience is familiar with these activities. Mecca and Yathrib both sit well inland, some one to two-hundred kilometers from the Red Sea respectively, in the middle of a vast, barren desert. Yet the Qur'anic story of the "sabbath breakers" in 7:163–66, for instance, describes these reprobates as violating the Sabbath by fishing, an activity that must have been almost entirely foreign to the inhabitants of Mecca and Yathrib. Why were these individuals described as fishing, rather than as engaged in some other activity that would have been more immediately familiar to the Qur'an's desert-dwelling followers? It is a strong clue that the tradition may have entered Qur'anic lore elsewhere, in a location where fishing—and sabbath observance!—would have been more immediately significant. As Crone notes, "one would take this story to be about Jews, and perhaps addressed to them as well, though the sura is classified as Meccan": there is no evidence for any Jewish presence in Mecca.[28]

References to seafaring are much more prevalent and thus all the more suggestive of a provenance somewhere near the sea, where sailing and navigation were familiar activities to which the Qur'an's audience could readily relate—somewhere relatively far away, it would seem, from the desiccated landscapes around Mecca and Yathrib. Crone has inventoried these seafaring traditions and considered them at some length in her seminal study, "How Did the Quranic Pagans Make a Living?" The evidence adduced from the Qur'an in this article is simply devastating for the

historicity of the traditional narrative of Qur'anic origins, for which reason it has been routinely ignored in most Qur'anic scholarship. Crone was not the first to observe the significance of these passages. Well over a century ago, Charles Cutler Torrey noted that the "references to sailing and the sea are both numerous and vivid" to such an extent that one would almost assume Muhammad himself must have frequently been out to sea.[29] Of course, in the case of the historical Muhammad, this presents an extreme improbability, given his desert confines. Even his mercantile sojourns were by every indication strictly land journeys, and Muhammad's traditional biographies, problematic as they are, bear no indication of his seafaring. The Qur'an likewise does not make any connection between these maritime activities and trade.[30] Instead, these passages seem to reflect a context wherein sailing is an ordinary and relatively frequent part of day-to-day life. The Qur'an reflects a milieu in which people regularly traveled on ships (e.g., 23:22, 40:80, 43:12) and were accustomed to navigating by the stars (6:97; cf. also 10:22).[31] One must admit that this profile is a very poor match for the inhabitants of Mecca and Yathrib, most of whom likely never even saw the sea, let alone sailed on it.

The Qur'an also addresses an audience that is engaged in a variety of diverse agricultural activities, as Crone demonstrates even more forcefully, following up in this case on an earlier study of agriculture in the Qur'an by David Waines.[32] As Waines quite plainly concludes, "Agriculture and vegetation figure prominently in the Qurʾān, reflecting their significance in the environment in which the text was revealed."[33] Indeed, the Qur'an persistently refers to its opponents, the *mushrikūn* or "associators," as they are called, in terms clearly indicating that they made their living as agriculturalists and not, as the Islamic tradition might suggest, as traders, even as there is some indication that members of the Qur'an's community engaged in basic practices of simple trade. According to sura 36:33–34, for instance, these associators were cultivating grain and grapes (cf. 56:63–64, 2:261, and 2:266). They made offerings from the first fruits of their "diverse produce," which included grain, olives, and pomegranates, as well as offerings from their cattle, among which were sheep, goats, camels, and also cows and oxen (6:136–45). They also raised horses, mules, and donkeys to serve as beasts of burden (16:8). Three of the Qur'an's parables (68:17–33,

2:261–66, and 18:32–44) presume an audience accustomed to gardens and irrigation: the last parable, one should note, bears a striking similarity to the New Testament parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21). Likewise, earlier prophets in the Qur'an who had been sent to the forerunners of the Qur'an's community, Hūd and Ṣāliḥ, addressed people who were similarly engaged in agriculture, with abundant springs and gardens, and cattle and fields full of crops (26:133–34, 26:146–48). In accordance with these accounts, the Qur'an describes the land of its birth as a place where the ancient inhabitants tilled the land (30:9). Yet the intensive agriculture of the associators hardly seems at all compatible with Mecca's arid location, which had very poor water supply and only between two and three inches (60–70 mm) of rainfall each year, most of it coming in the winter months when it would cause torrential flooding.[34]

We can see, then, that the Qur'an demonstrably addresses a milieu where not only is seafaring a common experience but the inhabitants are engaged in agriculture on a broad scale, growing pomegranates, date palms, grapes, grain, and olives, and raising sheep, goats, cows, oxen, camels, mules, donkeys, and horses. How is any of this compatible with Mecca and Yathrib in the Hijaz? It is perhaps a little easier to conceive of some degree of agriculture in Yathrib, which was a sizable oasis, yet by all indications Yathrib's agriculture, as that of western Arabia more generally, was monocultural, being tied almost exclusively to the cultivation of dates.[35] Nevertheless, these agrarian "pagan" opponents of Muhammad, the associators or *mushrikūn*, were, according to the traditional narrative of Islamic origins, inhabitants of Mecca, which was barren and completely incapable of sustaining such cultivation and husbandry. The Islamic tradition itself offers no explanation for this contradiction: it simply was not an issue that troubled medieval interpreters. Crone suggests the possibility that one might imagine the Meccans growing crops in nearby Ta'if, which sits more than 1,600 meters above Mecca and some eighty kilometers to the east. Could the Meccans have had their plantations there? Crone notes that while it would have been theoretically possible to grow pomegranates, date palms, and grapes there, cultivating grain and olives would be impossible. Olives in particular are an issue and would not have been possible to grow in Yathrib either, since, as Crone remarks, "in its cultivated form, the olive

(Olea europaeana) is a tree adapted to Mediterranean conditions. . . . The cultivated olive has the disadvantage, from an Arabian point of view, of requiring winter chill in order to flower and fruit. It could not have produced much of a crop in either Mecca or Medina." Nor, for good measure, could the arid landscape of Mecca support the range of livestock mentioned in the Qur'an.[36] Indeed, "not only Mecca but the entire Ḥijāz is described in the modern literature as patchy in terms of agriculture, poor in terms of pasture land, and generally quite unproductive."[37]

There is, therefore, no easy, obvious solution to reconciling these features of the Qur'an with the desolation of Mecca's inland environs, or even with the only slightly more favorable conditions of Yathrib. Once again, Crone does not provide us with an answer, leaving the question hanging to be pondered by the reader. Knowing that she was, as has already been mentioned, favorable to the idea that much of the Qur'an was perhaps pre-Muhammadan in the later stages of her career, one suspects that the aim of this article was likely to identify evidence that would lead readers in this direction. In any case, it seems clear that these Qur'anic traditions must have been composed in conditions where the economy and climate were quite different from what they were in Mecca or really anywhere in the central Hijaz. We should expect to find a home for them elsewhere, somewhere by the sea where grain and olives grew in abundance and there was ample pastureland for herds of livestock, in a landscape that could support the cultivation of "diverse produce."

One possibility, to be sure, is that Muhammad may have adopted these traditions from an older, already extant sacred writing that had been produced outside the Hijaz in a location that matched this profile. Yet if we wish to maintain a connection between these parts of the Qur'an and Muhammad's preaching in Mecca and Yathrib, then we would need to understand these references to agriculture and seafaring as additions made by his followers in the process of transmitting his words orally from memory. The Believers found themselves, after all, within only a few years after Muhammad's death, masters over the very lands where agriculture had been invented, dwelling in the "land of milk and honey" and on the shores of the Mediterranean, where they were trying to figure out how to meet the Roman navy on its waves. Again, given what we have seen regarding the

dynamics of memory and oral transmission, it is certainly not out of the question that Muhammad's followers would have introduced these elements from their contemporary experiences to complement their memories of his teachings. One would only expect them to recall and retell what Muhammad taught them in a manner more befitting their current circumstances, with no conscious or active intent for introducing changes but rather as a perfectly ordinary consequence of remembering and retransmitting these sacred teachings in an oral setting.

I must admit a personal preference for this latter solution, which perhaps will come as no surprise in light of previous chapters. Nevertheless, at this stage in the investigation of the Qur'an's early history, we certainly should not close off the possibility that these references to seafaring and agriculture may derive from an older, pre-Qur'anic writing. Certainly, if we combine these details concerning the Qur'an's inferred milieu with the indiscernible linguistic features considered in the previous section, one possible explanation for both elements would be the Qur'an's appropriation of an older text or even texts. Any such writings would have been originally composed elsewhere, among farmers and sailors, and likewise would have used words that were completely unknown in the Arabic language of Muhammad's early followers. At the same time, however, there is no pattern evident in the Qur'an itself that would suggest linking these two sets of data. The only overlap occurs in the story of the "sabbath breakers" in 7:163–66, and yet this passage is already a strong contender for an extra-Hijazi origin on several accounts, including its focus on both fishing in the sea and the importance of strict sabbath observance. Otherwise, there is no clear link between these two puzzling Qur'anic phenomena.

One should add that the Qur'an also refers to the story of Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah in terms that clearly suggest its composition somewhere well outside the Hijaz. In 37:133–38, the Qur'an reminds its audience that day-by-day they pass by these places, Sodom and Gomorrah, in the morning and in the night. So, too, Qur'an 11:89 says that those hearing its words were living not far from where the people of Lot once dwelled. Yet these locations are not anywhere near Mecca or Yathrib: as Crone rightly observes, "One would not have guessed from this remark that the Meccans had to travel some eight hundred miles to see the remains in question."[38] Sodom was widely believed to have been in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, and so this part

of the Qur'an was, apparently, composed to address people living near the traditional sites of Sodom and Gomorrah, presumably somewhere in greater Palestine. These passages therefore assume both a location and "landscape of memory" for the Qur'an's audience that appears focused, at least in these instances, on the Holy Lands of the biblical tradition.[39] The lands in question, surrounding Sodom and Gomorrah, for what it is worth, are said by the Bible to be well-watered and fertile, like the Garden of Eden or the land of Egypt (Gen. 13:10).

Michael Cook suggests the possibility of connecting this passage with a well-known report from the fifth-century Christian historian Sozomen. According to Sozomen, there were some Saracens living on the borderlands of the Roman Empire that "rediscovered" their common descent with the Jews and "returned" to the observance of Abrahamic monotheism by observing the laws and customs of the Jews.[40] This combination of monotheism and Abrahamic identity among a group of Arabs could possibly, he suggests, provide a potential matrix for the composition of pre-Muhammadan traditions that would have eventually found their way into the Qur'an.[41] It is a speculative hypothesis to be sure, and Cook is rightly tentative about it, but if one were to posit the existence of pre-Muhammadan material in the Qur'an, a group such as the one that Sozomen describes would be a likely source. Alternatively, however, it is easy to imagine that, again, in the course of the Qur'an's oral transmission and even as it began to be written down, Muhammad's followers, particularly those living in the Holy Land, would have been influenced by their own proximity to the location of Lot's story when recalling Muhammad's earlier discussions of Lot's role as a messenger of God.

Furthermore, the Qur'an's regular employ of a large number of foreign terms, more than three hundred, borrowed from dozens of ancient languages, also must inform our search for the Qur'an's context. The most important catalog of these Qur'anic loan words remains Arthur Jeffery's *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān*, published in 1938, which is a masterpiece of Semitic philology.[42] Some of the words identified by Jeffery, to be sure, and especially those taken from South Arabian or Syriac may have already permeated the Arabic vocabulary before Muhammad began his mission. Nevertheless, in any instances where such judgments regarding the history

of the Arabic lexicon have been reached on the basis of comparison with "pre-Islamic" poetry, we should certainly set these to the side, since we cannot presume that the verbiage of this corpus accurately reflects the language of pre-Islamic Arabic. The bulk of these foreign terms have been adopted from Aramaic, including especially Syriac, as well as Hebrew, which together account for more than three-quarters of the borrowed words, although a sizable number have also been drawn from Ge'ez (ancient Ethiopic) and South Arabian.[43]

As Nicolai Sinai rightly notes, these foreign terms reveal that the Qur'anic corpus—at some point and in some fashion—had "profound linguistic contact with the Fertile Crescent."[44] The Qur'an, therefore, developed within a context that was permeated with the languages and cultures of Judeo-Christian Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia. Is this a good fit with Mecca and Yathrib in the early seventh century? Not so much, it would seem, at least judging from the evidence that is presently available. One can hardly imagine that these small, remote, and insignificant settlements possessed any sort of culture that was so deeply polyglot in this way. It is true that Yathrib, according to the Islamic tradition, had a significant Jewish community that was initially for some time an important part of Muhammad's community of the Believers. Thus, these early Jewish members of Muhammad's new religious community provide a credible vector for the transmission of Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic terms, as well as Jewish religious lore, into the Qur'anic tradition. Nevertheless, the Jews of Yathrib cannot account for the abundant Jewish material found in many parts of the Qur'an that—so many scholars would have us believe—were traditionally composed in Mecca.[45] According to the Islamic tradition, there were no Jews in Mecca, whose inhabitants were strictly "pagans" or "associators." By all available indications, Mecca appears to have been no less devoid of Judaism than it was of grain and olive cultivation. Where are we to believe, then, that this Jewish material came from or, perhaps even more important, who in Mecca could have possibly understood it as it is cryptically presented in the Qur'an?

Even more problematic in this regard is the fact that neither Mecca nor Yathrib had any Christian presence at all, as evidenced not only by the Islamic tradition but also by contemporary sources from the Christian tradition itself. How, then, are we to explain the enormous amount of

material in the Qur'an that has been drawn from the Christian tradition, borrowings that extend well beyond the mere appropriation of foreign religious terms from Syriac, as significant as these are in their own right? Where did this vast knowledge of Christian lore come from? Without the presence of substantial and well-developed Christian communities in the Hijaz, it is truly unthinkable that the Qur'an, or at least a great deal of it, could possibly have been composed in Mecca and Yathrib. Indeed, the highly allusive nature of the Qur'an's references to earlier Jewish and Christian traditions demands an audience that was well versed, even steeped, in Jewish and Christian lore. The Qur'an regularly invokes these earlier Jewish and Christian traditions in a highly elliptic and compressed manner, requiring its audience to fill in the gaps based on an already existing deeper knowledge of these traditions.[46] It assumes its audience knows the Jewish Torah and the Christian gospels and many extrabiblical traditions as well: indeed, the Qur'an responds directly to accusations coming from its audience that it has done little more than plagiarize these antecedent scriptures, which, apparently, were well known within its milieu (e.g., 6:25, 8:31, 10:37–40, 16:24, 25:4–6, 68:15, 83:13).

Thus Sidney Griffith observes, "the most basic thing one notices about the Qurʾān and its interface with the bible is the Islamic scripture's unspoken and pervasive confidence that its audience is thoroughly familiar with the stories of the biblical patriarchs and prophets, so familiar in fact that there is no need for even the most rudimentary form of introduction."[47] And yet, there is no evidence of any Jewish presence at all in Mecca, and a clear absence of Christianity in the central Hijaz altogether. This Christian void is all the more significant since, as we noted in the previous chapter, Joseph Witztum and others have convincingly argued that the Qur'an's presentation of many figures from the Hebrew Bible derives directly from Syriac Christian traditions, and not, as one might expect, from contemporary Jewish traditions.[48] Moreover, the Qur'an's anti-Jewish rhetoric and its demonology depend on earlier Christian traditions, while a number of passages seem to address Christians directly.[49] How, then, can we possibly imagine the composition and ritual use of the Qur'an, which requires an audience deeply knowledgeable of Jewish and Christian biblical and extrabiblical traditions, in a context where Judaism was unknown, in

Mecca, and from which Christianity was altogether absent, in Mecca, Yathrib, and the entire central Hijaz?[50]

Yet if, as Sinai concludes, we are truly dealing with "profound" influence from the religious cultures of the Fertile Crescent, should we not instead understand these terms and traditions as entering the Qur'anic corpus after Muhammad's followers had settled in these lands, quite soon after his death? The sectarian milieu of the late ancient Near East was of course saturated with biblical lore, and there one can readily imagine the Qur'an's sparse and allusive style of invoking these traditions falling on welcome and receptive ears that were capable of receiving them in this highly compressed format. Only in this context, and not in the Hijaz, would the Qur'an find a significant audience possessing the intimate and wide-ranging knowledge of biblical and extrabiblical lore that, as Sinai also acknowledges, is absolutely essential for anyone to understand a great deal of the Qur'an—at all.[51] Accordingly, should we not understand that it was almost certainly in this context, in the Fertile Crescent, that the vast amount of Jewish and—especially—Christian tradition entered the Qur'anic corpus?

Given what we have seen of the conditions in which the early Qur'an was transmitted, it is easy to comprehend how this would have taken place. While they were still transmitting their sacred traditions primarily in oral format, Muhammad's followers were a small minority living among much larger communities of Jews and Christians throughout the Near East. In such circumstances, one expects that terms and traditions from Judaism and Christianity would spontaneously penetrate their recall and retelling of Muhammad's teachings. By comparison, in the fundamentally nonliterate cultures of the central Hijaz, it is difficult to envision such a saturation of language and religious culture from Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia. Mecca, in particular, was, as we have seen, by all measures a small and desolate outpost, with no evidence of any significant connection to the broader world of the late ancient Near East, and the circumstances were not much better in Yathrib. Indeed, a great deal hinges on the presence of a sizeable and vibrant Christian community in the Qur'an's immediate milieu, a matter to which we will now turn our focus. In the absence of a strong Christian presence, we really must find another home for much of the Qur'an's content.

Although Christianity had literally encircled the central Hijaz by Muhammad's lifetime, there is no indication whatsoever of a Christian community in either Mecca or Yathrib, or anywhere in their vicinity for that matter.[52] Despite the fact that some scholars of early Islam and Near Eastern Christianity will routinely assert that Christianity had penetrated the Hijaz by the seventh century, this is generally assumed as a matter of convenience and does not have any evidentiary foundation.[53] And no matter how many times it may continue to be repeated, there is simply no evidence to support the existence of any significant Christian presence in the Qur'an's traditional Hijazi milieu, from either the Islamic or the Christian tradition. It is true that the early biographies of Muhammad will occasionally refer to individual Christians living within Muhammad's orbit, such as his first wife's cousin Waraqa, whom the tradition remembers as having been a Christian convert.[54] Nevertheless, Waraqa and his Christian faith in particular seem to have been introduced to the traditions about the onset of Muhammad's revelations, the only occasion when Waraqa appears, to serve an apologetic function. When Muhammad is confused by these awesome experiences, Waraqa explains to him that he has begun receiving a revelation (*nāmūs*) like the one received before by Moses. Yet one should note that Waraqa is entirely absent from the earliest versions of this episode, which merely relate Muhammad's receipt of "visions, resembling the brightness of daybreak, which were shown to him in his sleep" and caused him to crave solitude.[55] Waraqa was no doubt contrived and added to later accounts of the onset of revelation in order to provide Christian validation for the veracity of Muhammad's teaching.[56] Accordingly, there is no reason to believe that Muhammad actually had such a Christian relative in Mecca, not only in light of the fabulous unreliability of the early biographies of Muhammad in general, but also given the clear apologetic intent of introducing a Christian witness to this scene in its later versions.

Yet even if we were to take these reports more or less at face value, which hardly seems advisable, they afford no evidence of a Christian community in Mecca and Yathrib, but only anecdotes concerning at best a few individual converts.[57] Indeed, it is rather telling that, as John Wansbrough observes, any Christian characters appearing in the narratives of Islamic origins are

"always from outside the Ḥijāz" and their introduction "is always gratuitous, and their alleged place of origin suspect."[58] The Islamic tradition is thus quite unambiguous and consistent in presenting the central Hijaz of Muhammad's lifetime as devoid of any meaningful Christian presence. Indeed, given the very small size of these settlements and their very limited cultural and economic significance, it is hardly surprising to find that neither Mecca nor Yathrib had any Christian population worth mentioning. And a handful of isolated converts, even in the unlikely chance that these existed in the first place, does not provide anything near the level of Christianization required to account for the many passages of the Qur'an that invoke various Christian traditions. The knowledge of Christian tradition that the Qur'an expects of its audience well exceeds the sort of casual, piecemeal knowledge that might come from conversations with one's neighbor or in the marketplace. Even if we were to assume that some missionaries had previously visited Mecca and Yathrib—to little avail—this would not suffice to account for the depth of knowledge that the Qur'an assumes of its audience. It is certainly possible that cultural diffusion from Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia to the Hijaz can account for the spread of big ideas and major ideological trends, such as imperial eschatology or the idea of a Promised Land belonging to the descendants of Abraham, from the world of late antiquity to that region. Nevertheless, only a sizable and well-established Christian community in the Qur'an's immediate milieu can effectively explain its detailed engagement with more specific elements of the Christian tradition.[59] Anything less would not supply an audience with the innate knowledge of the breadth and depth of Christian culture required for these passages to connect.

The Qur'an's Christian content is effectively incomprehensible in Mecca and Yathrib without the presence of a large and highly literate Christian community, such as we find in Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia—something along the order of Edessa, Nisibis, or Antioch, as Guillaume Dye rightly notes.[60] From what we have seen regarding the nature of Mecca and Yathrib in the lifetime of the prophet, in chapters 4 and 5, it is quite clear that neither settlement can provide anything remotely approaching such a context. The Qur'an also shows clear influence from contemporary Christian liturgical patterns, which seems to demand its composition in a context

where Christians prayed together regularly in significant numbers.[61] A half dozen or so nonliterate, isolated Christian believers simply would not suffice either to generate or to comprehend the Qur'an's sophisticated appropriation of Christian lore, literature, and liturgy. Accordingly, even if one were to grant Juan Cole's fanciful and completely unwarranted conjecture that Muhammad summered in Bostra and Damascus, where he frequently visited "Christian monasteries, eldritch shrines, Jewish synagogues, and Neoplatonist salons," such cultural tourism alone cannot account for these features of the Qur'an: for the Qur'an's audience to have understood its allusive style, they would have to have had an equally cosmopolitan formation.[62] Indeed, Cole's imaginary peripatetic prophet illustrates well the absurd and baseless speculations that scholars often must resort to in order to somehow square the traditional view of Muhammad's authorship of the Qur'an with the cultural privation of Mecca and Yathrib.

To be sure, the simple absence of evidence alone is not evidence of absence, and it is certainly not impossible that a vibrant and highly literate Christian community existed in Muhammad's Hijaz and quickly vanished without leaving any trace whatsoever. Yet in this particular case, the range of evidence that we have relevant to the question of Christianity's status in the central Hijaz strongly indicates that there was, in fact, no meaningful Christian presence anywhere near Mecca and Yathrib. For instance, as we have already noted, the Islamic historical tradition is unwavering in its blanket identification of Mecca's inhabitants—at least, those who did not follow Muhammad—as polytheist "associators." There is no mention of any Christian community or anything Christian at all, other than, as we have noted, a few stray individual converts, whose Christianity is of dubious historicity.[63] The same pattern holds true for Yathrib, where, we are told, there was some sort of a Jewish community that was initially a part of Muhammad's new religious movement, but there is no indication of any Christian presence at all. But since much of the Qur'an's "Jewish" material appears to derive, as noted, from Christian rather than Jewish traditions, the Jews of Yathrib also cannot explain the Jewish and Christian lore that the Qur'an so regularly—and tersely—echoes.

Of course, it not entirely inconceivable that there may have been significant numbers of Christians in Mecca and/or Yathrib, and, for whatever, reason, the Islamic historical tradition has expunged any and all

memory of their existence to suit some sort of apologetic or theological purpose in the Islamic collective memory. Nevertheless, it is not at all clear what ideological purpose such complete erasure of these Christians would serve, all the more so since the Islamic tradition clearly had no issues with remembering the Jews of Yathrib—in all their messy detail and despite the pointed questions that they raise about the nature of the earliest community.[64] Why, then, would the tradition obliterate any memory of Mecca and Yathrib's Christians when it was entirely willing to remember the Jews of Yathrib and their pivotal role in early Islamic history? Clearly, the easiest explanation is that there were in fact no Christians to erase. Yet, if in fact there was a significant Christian presence in Mecca, then one would expect that, given the settlement's small size, the entire town must have been highly Christianized. Only such a sizeable Christian community could account for the significant depth of knowledge of the Christian tradition that the Qur'an expects from its audience, not to mention the strong imprint of Christian liturgical patterns evident in the Qur'an. If this were the case, a hypothesis that I do not endorse, then we must assume that the later Islamic tradition has deliberately falsified the Meccans' Christian faith for apologetic purposes, in order to hide the fact that Muhammad's new religious movement developed directly out of the Christian tradition. Günter Lüling, for instance, advanced exactly this hypothesis, and if Mecca was indeed a deeply Christian city, then something along the lines of what he argues—namely, that the Qur'an is a revision of an older Christian text—suddenly becomes quite likely.[65]

Still, many scholars stand quite ready to invent a vibrant and culturally sophisticated Christian presence in Mecca and Yathrib, even when the evidence so clearly indicates otherwise. Strict fidelity to the traditional narrative of the Qur'an's origins entirely in the central Hijaz effectively requires them to believe this in denial of all evidence to the contrary. Yet no arguments or pieces of evidence are adduced; nor in such cases is there even any hint of acknowledgement that this is a problematic issue. It is simply assumed without comment as if it were an entirely obvious and well-established fact that large numbers of Christians were in the Qur'an's Meccan and Medinan audiences.[66] It is certainly worth noting, however, that many of these very same scholars are quick in other instances to object against any departure from the received narrative of Islamic origins, arguing

that such suspicions would only be valid if there had been some sort of massive, coordinated effort to deceive and to disguise the true nature of Islam's formative history.[67] Well, in the case of Christianity in the central Hijaz, it would seem that only such a broad-ranging and mendacious conspiracy to eradicate any trace this vital religious presence in Muhammad's milieu from the historical record could possibly explain the state of our evidence, a conspiracy so vast that it must have affected our Christian sources as well. Where, one must wonder, in this instance are the frequent outcries against hypotheses challenging the Islamic tradition that (allegedly) can only be explained by deliberate falsification?

One must also consider the fact that we have ample evidence for the presence of significant Christian communities elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula. It is abundantly clear that there were Christians in Yemen, at the southern tip of the peninsula, a region that was closely connected with Christian Ethiopia across the Red Sea, and also all along the Persian Gulf, where the Christian communities were a vital part of the (Nestorian) Church of the East in the Sasanian Empire, as were the Christian Arabs of Ḥīra in southern Mesopotamia. In these places, a broad range of evidence converges to indicate a Christian presence: inscriptions; the remains of churches and monasteries; mentions of bishops from these areas in synodal acts; and hagiographical accounts of figures from these regions.[68] Likewise, in the far north of the Hijaz on the Roman frontier, the remains of a Christian monastery have been found at Kilwa, and near Tabuk, there are pre-Islamic inscriptions that bear witness to generic monotheist belief—although these are not specifically Christian.[69] Yet one must note, Tabuk is more than five hundred kilometers (more than three hundred miles) north of Yathrib, and Kilwa is over six hundred kilometers (almost four hundred miles) away: indeed, both are solidly within the orbit of the Roman Empire and the Nabatean kingdom and quite far removed from Mecca and Yathrib. Likewise, Yemen was not only nearly seven hundred kilometers from Mecca (over four hundred miles), but, as we already noted, this region was culturally, socially, and linguistically quite distinct from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, and its inhabitants "did not view themselves as Arabs before the coming of Islam and neither should the modern scholarship call

them that."[70] The Persian Gulf is, of course, farther still and separated by a vast and punishing desert.

In stark contrast to these other areas, the Hijaz, with the exception of its northernmost fringes along the Roman frontier, is devoid of any evidence of a Christian presence. While various Christian individuals may possibly have passed through the region on occasion, Joëlle Beauchamp and Christian Robin's conclusion from over four decades ago remains valid: there was "no true Christian community" in the region of Mecca and Yathrib.[71] The same is true of Spencer Trimingham's early work on the subject, which concludes in regard to the Hijaz that "Christianity in any of its available forms could have no influence upon its inhabitants," and "Consequently, Muhammad imagined Christians, for there was no available Christian community to observe."[72] So also Theresia Hainthaler recently affirms that "there are no indications of a real indigenous Christianity in Mecca" and "no indications of an ecclesial organization in this region," so that "Muhammad could not get reliable dogmatic information on Christian faith."[73] As Harry Munt observes, "Considerable effort in modern scholarship has been devoted to trying to establish the existence of Christians in the Ḥijāz around Mecca and Medina, but it has to be said that the evidence usually offered for their presence in that area remains poor."[74] Indeed, many scholars have desperately sought any evidence that could possibly reconcile the Qur'an's immense Christian content with its traditional origins in the Hijaz to no avail. At best they can appeal to the evidence for Christianity hundreds of miles away elsewhere in Arabia, pleading that on this basis we should assume that Christianity must have similarly established itself solidly in the central Hijaz, despite the complete absence of any evidence for this and also the enormous distances involved.[75] Or, better yet, as one very senior scholar once insisted to me, "the Qur'an itself is the unmistakable evidence" of a Christian presence in Mecca and Yathrib. But of course, such logic begs the question completely and avoids entirely the tricky matter of trying to discern where the Qur'an took shape as the text that we now have.

There is no mention in any literary source of a bishop in the central Hijaz; nor is there any reference to any other Christians there, beyond the handful of individuals briefly identified in the much later Islamic tradition. We have the acts of numerous synods and councils for the various churches of the late ancient Near East, and while bishops are regularly identified for

those areas in which we otherwise have evidence of a Christian community, there is never any mention of Mecca, Yathrib, or any other location in the central Hijaz. There are no archaeological remains of any Christian church, monastery, or monument in this region, although, admittedly, it has not been possible to excavate in and around Mecca and Medina. The fact remains, to quote François Villeneuve, that "to the south of a line passing noticeably at the latitude of Aqaba, there is quite simply almost no trace of Christianity—from any era, for that matter." The recent epigraphic surveys of western Arabia further bear this out: among thousands of graffiti to have emerged lately from this region, there are "neither Christian texts nor crosses." The only exceptions to be found are "four to six short Greek graffiti with or without cross, lost among thousands of other graffiti, on cliffs at caravan crossing points, north of Hegra [Madā'in Ṣāliḥ]. Statistically it is practically nothing, and these reflect people who were in passing, not people fixed in place."[76] This profound dearth of evidence cannot be owing to chance, Villeneuve observes; nor should we imagine that the Saudi Arabian government has somehow covered up any traces of a Christian presence. By contrast, north of the line between Aqaba and Kilwa, there is plenty of evidence for Christianity, from the fifth century on.[77] For comparison, one should note that there is at least some inscriptional evidence, even if it is hardly abundant, to indicate a minor Jewish presence in this part of the Hijaz, confirming the witness of the early Islamic tradition in this regard.[78] Yet even in this case, one must note that all the inscriptions are either from the oasis towns far in the north of the Hijaz or in South Arabia, not the central Hijaz itself.

Even the presence of crosses on graffiti should not be taken as evidence of a Christian community. Not only were the markings in question made in this case, as Villeneuve notes, by passersby, but one does not need to be a Christian to appropriate this symbol—particularly if, as we noted in chapter 5, these desert doodlers seem to have learned their art from watching literates write. Moreover, one can readily imagine that non-Christians would have borrowed the symbol of cross, even if they did not believe that Jesus Christ defeated death for all by dying on it. Rather, many non-Christians presumably saw the cross as a potent symbol revered by many for having sacred power: there are regular reports in late ancient literature, for instance,

of individuals being healed by the sign of the cross. That reputation alone could account for its adoption by people who may have known very little at all about Christianity. It is certainly not uncommon for individuals to appropriate sacred symbols from other religious cultures, even as they may not fully embrace the tradition in question or be a member of a religious community. One thinks, for instance, of contemporary appropriation of the Ankh or the Hamsa, or even crosses worn today by non-Christians, for whatever reason. Indeed, not every car with a "Namaste" bumper sticker will have a Hindu driver behind the wheel. Absent other more meaningful indicators, a few graffiti with crosses are not sufficient to indicate the presence of a sizable Christian community.

This Christian void in the Qur'an's traditional birthplace certainly makes it difficult to accept the standard narrative of the Qur'an's origins entirely in Mecca and Yathrib during the lifetime of Muhammad. The cultural deprivations of the central Hijaz make it effectively impossible for a text so rich in Christian content, like the Qur'an, to arise strictly within the confines of this evidently Christ-barren milieu. In the absence of a vibrant and literate Christian community, it is difficult to imagine where Muhammad, or anyone else in Mecca or Yathrib, would have acquired such a vast knowledge of Christian lore. Likewise, without an audience steeped in Christian traditions, one wonders who would have been able to understand these parts of the Qur'an. Indeed, the Qur'an's sharp incompatibility with this alleged context leaves us with very few options for understanding its genesis. One proposed solution for this disconnect, favored by certain scholars, is to suppose that even though there were no Christians in Mecca or Yathrib, the inhabitants of these settlements were nonetheless well versed in Christian culture through intermittent contact with other regions where there were Christians. Their knowledge of Christianity would derive, then, from oral transmission of Christian lore in the community from individuals—such as, perhaps, Muhammad—who had traveled to Christian lands. As attractive as this hypothesis may seem, it cannot sufficiently explain the deep familiarity with Christian tradition that the Qur'an demands from both its author(s) and audience.

Even if Muhammad's hypothetical travels may have brought him some acquaintance with the Christian tradition, one would hardly expect him to have acquired more than a very superficial knowledge during any business

trips he took to Christian lands. As Dye rightly notes, “nothing allows us to imagine Muhammad as a travelling polymath, who would have studied in the academies or monasteries of Syro-Palestine, Ḥīra, or Beth Qaṭrayē.”[79] More importantly, however, the provincial inhabitants of Mecca and Yathrib, who presumably were not so well traveled, could not be expected to share this knowledge base, which they would require to understand the Christian elements of the Qur’anic corpus. Nor can simple word of mouth explain those sections of the Qur’an that seem to reflect an ongoing dialogue with Christians if there were no actual Christians in the Qur’an’s immediate vicinity. One would almost have to imagine Muhammad conducting a Christian Sunday School on the side, imparting the inhabitants of Mecca and Yathrib with a deep knowledge of the Christian tradition so that they could understand his proclamations.

Moreover, any notion that Muhammad and his Meccan followers had available to them “literary macroforms that corresponded, more or less, with one or another of the canonical versions of Jewish and Christian Late Antiquity—with the ‘actual’ Bible, to put it bluntly,” frankly strains all credulity.[80] Not only does the absence of literacy make this effectively impossible, but so too does the absence of any Jewish and Christian communities in Mecca. Indeed, if there had been, one would need to presume, as we have suggested before, that Mecca must have been highly Christianized at the beginning of the seventh century. One might also add the stark reality that bibles were in general very expensive and extremely rare in any context before the sixteenth century, let alone one as barren and remote as late ancient Mecca. Even most Christians of this era would have never laid their eyes on a complete Bible; nor would they have ever even been in the same room with a book containing the scriptural canon. Bibles were scarce because books were scarce, and expensive. The simple fact is that most churches in late antiquity and the Middle Ages would not have owned a Bible, so that it seems really farfetched to imagine a copy of the biblical text in Mecca (in Arabic?) that would have been available to Muhammad and his followers.[81] If there was no sizeable Christian or Jewish community in Mecca, how can we possibly expect a copy of the Bible to have been there?

The absence of Christianity and Christian culture in the central Hijaz effectively leaves us with only two real options for understanding the

composition of the Qur'an. One possibility is to remove Muhammad and his prophetic mission from this isolated region, which does not seem to have had significant interaction with the world of Christian late antiquity, and to locate the origins of Islam instead in some other more fecund cultural matrix with a significant Christian presence. Such was the solution advanced by Wansbrough, for instance, and in a slightly different fashion by Cook and Crone in *Hagarism* and—somewhat more cautiously—by Hawting.[82] The Qur'an's frequent references to seafaring and agriculture invite a similar relocation to somewhere else much closer to or even in the Mediterranean world. Yet if we remove Muhammad and the Qur'an completely from the Hijaz, from Mecca and Yathrib, it is admittedly difficult to understand why these locations eventually came to have so much significance in the later Islamic tradition. According to Wansbrough, Muhammad's followers chose this region to be their land of origins only after their faith had emerged within the sectarian milieu of Mesopotamia. The Hijaz afforded them with what amounted to a blank slate, onto which they could inscribe a memory of the origins of their community unimpeded by any preexisting traditions. The relative cultural isolation of the Hijaz further allowed them to insist that their religious faith had not been formed primarily in the crucible of late ancient Judaism and Christianity but came instead directly from on high.[83]

Wansbrough is certainly right to note that Mecca, Yathrib, and the Hijaz do not seem as important in the earliest faith of the Believers as they do in the later tradition, but this does not mean that there was no historical connection between the beginnings of Islam and the Hijaz. Instead, it seems more likely that although many of Muhammad's earliest followers may have hailed from the Hijaz, the Promised Land with Jerusalem and its Temple Mount stood at the center of their sacred geography. Only somewhat later, as they began to differentiate themselves more sharply from the biblical monotheisms of Judaism and Christianity, did they turn increasingly away from the biblical Holy Land in order to invent a new Islamic Holy Land for themselves in the Hijaz. Accordingly, while it is true that the Hijaz does not appear to have been the original center of the Believers' sacred geography, it nonetheless seems difficult to understand the history of this religious community unless there was some sort of primitive connection to the Hijaz. Therefore, while the possibility of removing the beginnings of Islam completely from Mecca and Yathrib and relocating it in a more favorable

cultural and economic environment is not completely without some merit, this hypothesis is too radical, in my opinion, to account for the eventual importance of Mecca and Medina in the later tradition.

Our remaining option, and also our best option it would seem, is to introduce some degree of separation between the Qur'anic text—in the form that it was canonized and has come down to us today—and Muhammad's prophetic career in Mecca and Yathrib.[84] It would be extreme and unnecessary, I think, to detach the Qur'an *entirely* from the historical figure of Muhammad. Some elements of the text can be well understood as having developed in Mecca and Yathrib under his tutelage—all the more so once we understand the degree of changes that almost certainly were introduced to its content during the process of transmission. Therefore, we should envision a model in which some material in the Qur'an almost certainly derives from Muhammad's teaching in Mecca and Yathrib, although these traditions have been heavily redacted according to the interests and contexts of those transmitting them—that is, the Believers of the seventh-century Near East. Yet even this understanding cannot account for all the material in the Qur'an. We must also allow that new elements must have been added to the Qur'anic corpus after Muhammad's followers entered the Roman and Sasanian Near East, traditions that were drawn from this new context and from encounters with the thriving Christian and Jewish communities in these regions. In some cases, the Believers have possibly added blocks of textual material that had already been given written form in a different religious context somewhere outside the Hijaz. The incorporation of such written traditions would explain the parts of the Qur'an that were incomprehensible to the members of the early community, as well as those elements, such as seafaring and farming, that are incompatible with a Hijazi origin.

Philip Wood articulates a similar hypothesis in his article on "Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula." Since there was no meaningful Christian presence in the Hijaz at the time of Muhammad's prophetic mission, he suggests that "it was within the Roman empire, rather than through far-flung missions, that Arabs likely came into contact with Christian institutions and symbols," at various "fixed points" on the Roman frontier. In these settings, Wood proposes, the encounter of Arabic speakers with Christian culture could have inspired the composition of "Christian

proto-Qur'anic material," and later on, whether during Muhammad's lifetime or shortly thereafter, these traditions entered the Qur'anic corpus. But one must note, in such a case any proto-Qur'anic Christian materials would have been produced outside the Hijaz, in regions where Christianity was prevalent, and before Muhammad's lifetime.[85] At the same time, however, we must allow that entirely new traditions were composed by Muhammad's followers in response to immense riches of the Abrahamic religious culture that they met with when settling into the late ancient Near East. Given the relative cultural isolation of the central Hijaz, one suspects most of these traditions were previously unknown and therefore would have provoked an engaging and creative response from Muhammad's followers, who would have wanted their sacred tradition to encompass the panoply of Abrahamic tradition. Such a dynamic and multivalent model seems essential for understanding the early history of a text as complex and cryptic in its nature as the Qur'an.

CONCLUSIONS

The case of the Kathisma church and the Qur'anic Nativity tradition in 19:22–28, which I have discussed elsewhere in some detail, leaves little question that we must approach the Qur'anic text as a corpus of traditions that remained open even beyond Muhammad's lifetime and was continuing to absorb Jewish and Christian traditions in the decades after the Believers conquered and occupied the Near East.[86] In these seven verses, the Qur'an gives a highly compressed account of the birth of Jesus that depends on a distinctive combination of Christian Nativity traditions that is uniquely found—outside the Qur'an—only in the liturgical practices of a particular Marian shrine just outside Jerusalem, the Kathisma church. In the vast world of late ancient Christianity, it is only at this church that we find combined the two early Christian traditions that appear in the Qur'an's account of the Nativity: Christ's birth in a remote location (rather than in Bethlehem) and Mary's refreshment by a miraculous palm tree and spring. For good measure, one must add, the liturgical traditions of this same shrine also explicitly name Mary as the sister of Aaron, just as in the Qur'an's Nativity account, at last providing a clear solution to this "well-known puzzle" of the Qur'an.[87] The correspondence between this Qur'anic passage

and the traditions and liturgical practices of the Kathisma church is simply too close to be mere coincidence: clearly the Qur'an knows, and expects its audience to know, this particular configuration of Christian Nativity traditions.

Nevertheless, there is no evidence that this peculiar fusion of traditions was known even among Christians who lived outside Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It is therefore hard to believe, if not entirely unthinkable, that this unique combination of traditions achieved at the church of the Kathisma would somehow have been widely known among Muhammad's nonliterate followers in the central Hijaz, so that they could have had any chance of understanding the compressed and elliptic reference to them in Qur'an 19:22–28. Indeed, it boggles the mind to imagine that somehow this distinctively Jerusalemite combination of Nativity traditions could have been widely known and understood by the hundred or so illiterate herdsmen in the remote desert village of Mecca (since this is alleged to be an early Meccan sura), particularly when we find no evidence of any knowledge of this particular configuration of traditions anywhere else in late ancient Christianity—other than the Kathisma.[88] The suggestion that somehow this distinctive mixture of traditions could have reached Muhammad and the citizens of Mecca, and them alone, in their barren, isolated hamlet strains credibility in the extreme.

Likewise, it cannot simply be a matter of Muhammad knowing about the church and its traditions. Perhaps, as some might implausibly suggest, he had visited it on a merchant trip to Palestine. This certainly is not entirely out of the question, even if it seems highly unlikely. But as these traditions are presented in the Qur'an, there is a clear expectation that they are already well-known to the audience—otherwise, the passage is not really comprehensible at all.[89] Should we assume, then, as was suggested above, that Muhammad taught his early followers, in addition to the traditions of the Qur'an, a kind of ongoing Religions of Abraham 101 class, in which he instilled the Meccans and the Medinans with the extensive knowledge of the Jewish and Christian traditions, including this one in particular, so that they could understand his revelations? I think this is highly unlikely, if not entirely preposterous. The easiest and most probable explanation is instead that the traditions of the Kathisma inspired the Qur'an's Nativity traditions, which were added to the corpus only after Muhammad's followers took

control of the Holy Land. The fact that the early Believers turned this Christian shrine into a mosque with decorations referencing the Qur'anic Nativity story soon after their conquest and also modeled the Dome of the Rock after it seems to verify the connection between this shrine and the Qur'an.

Therefore, we must allow for the possibility that the contents of the Qur'an were still open well after Muhammad's death and into the middle of the seventh century, if not beyond. We need a model for approaching the formation of the Qur'an that can account for its complex history in this and other ways. It is increasingly clear that we cannot simply view the Qur'an as words spoken by Muhammad to his followers in Mecca and Yathrib that were faithfully and perfectly preserved in memory and oral transmission until they were eventually written down. Any words that he spoke would have been altered significantly in the process of individual remembrance and oral recreation along their way to being recorded in writing. These traditions would have been adapted to suit the contours of the Believers' collective memory, as this was quickly evolving and shifting in line with the rapid changes in their experiences during the seventh century. Other Qur'anic traditions, as we have seen, clearly address ecological conditions and an economic context that are incompatible with the central Hijaz: how could these parts of the Qur'an have arisen during Muhammad's mission in Mecca and Yathrib? Either they must have been composed before his activity or after his followers had reached very different lands more compatible with their backdrop of seafaring and intensive agriculture. And then there are the passages that later Muslims could not understand or even pronounce. These puzzling difficulties belie any simple notion of an oral tradition reaching back to Muhammad and suggest instead the possible appropriation of materials that had already been committed to writing in some other context before they were added to the Qur'an.

What all of this means is that we must embrace an understanding of the Qur'an as a fundamentally composite and composed text that, in the form in which it has come down to us, does not have a singular origin in Muhammad's teaching. Rather, the various components of the Qur'an derive from a range of different historical contexts and have been brought together by the early Islamic tradition into a single canonical text that was reified as a new scripture for Muhammad's followers at the close of the seventh century.

Indeed, Cook and Crone both noted many years ago that "there is some reason to suppose that the Koran was put together out of a plurality of earlier Hagarene religious works," and even that "the Koran itself gives obscure indications that the integrity of the scripture was problematic."[90] To be sure, I think it is right to insist that the Qur'an has significant roots in the teaching of Muhammad to his followers in Mecca and Yathrib. Yet even this material has been highly modified in the process of its transmission and has been supplemented significantly with new traditions that his followers encountered after conquering and occupying the lands of the Roman and Sasanian Near East. The Qur'an therefore has many different sources, as indicated no less by the literary character of the Qur'an itself. As Cook and Crone rightly observe of the text that has come down to us, "The book is strikingly lacking in overall structure, frequently obscure and inconsequential in both language and content, perfunctory in its linking of disparate materials, and given to the repetition of whole passages in variant versions. On this basis it can plausibly be argued that the book is the product of the belated and imperfect editing of materials from a plurality of traditions."[91]

In this regard, it is hard to improve on the framework for approaching the Qur'an recently articulated by Guillaume Dye, since this charts a path for how we must approach the Qur'an moving forward, if we wish to study it from the perspectives of historical criticism and the history of religions. "The Qur'an," Dye writes,

> is not a *book*, but a *corpus*, namely the gathering of texts: 1) which were not originally intended to be put together in a codex, nor composed with this goal in mind, 2) which are heterogeneous: they belong to a variety of literary genres, and sometimes express divergent ideas (even if there are also ideas and concerns that come up throughout the corpus in a coherent and systematic way), 3) which are, in some cases, independent, and in others, dependent on one another: there are thus numerous parallel passages in the Qur'an—certain passages reuse other passages, often rewriting them, correcting them, or responding to them. . . . The Qur'an appears therefore as a work that is both *composite* and *composed*. Composite because it brings together texts that are partly independent and heterogenous; composed because they have been put together using techniques of composition that generally come from a scribal, literate context, and not just oral spontaneity or haphazard collection, even if these elements can also often be found.[92]

This final layer of literary polish came only after decades of oral transmission and constant adoption and adaptation of traditions and it was ultimately achieved in the final composition of the canonical text of the Qur'an, under the supervision and coordination of ʿAbd al-Malik. This is the Qur'an that we have today: an imperially produced and enforced version that brought uniformity and order to the muddled and diverse history of the Qur'anic text that preceded it. Thanks to this effective exercise of raw political power, much that we would like to know about the complexity of Qur'an's prior history is shrouded in mystery, requiring us to proceed cautiously and skeptically, guided always by the hermeneutics of suspicion, historical criticism, and the historical study of religions.

Conclusions

> The Qur'an was revealed in three places: Mecca, Medina, and Syria.
>
> —AL-SUYŪṬĪ, *AL-ITQĀN FI 'ULUM AL-QUR'AN* 1

> To do justice to the literary character of the Qurʾan, we need to pursue its development as both a monotheist proclamation, an oral message, a *Verkündigung*, voiced by a messenger, and at the same time as a successively growing text reflecting a community's construction of identity.
>
> —ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH[1]

Al-Suyūṭī is admittedly a rather late author, who wrote in only the fifteenth century, and yet, based on what we have seen in this book, we must regard this tradition, which he brings on the authority of al-Ṭabarāni, as *ṣaḥīḥ*. Although the Qur'an seemingly has deep roots in the preaching of Muhammad to his earliest followers in Mecca and Medina, the text that we have today was composed no less, it would seem, in Syria—that is, in al-Shām or Syro-Palestine—as well as in Mesopotamia. Numerous reasons and a vast array of evidence lead us unmistakably to this conclusion. The bewildering confusion and complexity of the early Islamic memory of the Qur'an's formation, as we saw in the first two chapters, only reaches some level of clarity once we recognize ʿAbd al-Malik as the primary agent responsible for producing and enforcing the canonical *textus receptus* of the Qur'an. Under his supervision, a team of scholars wove together and honed the various sacred traditions that had entered circulation among Muhammad's followers during the seventh century, creating a new imperial Qur'an that was imposed across the caliphate, displacing its antecedents in the process, often by force. The evidence of the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts and the efforts to date them using radiocarbon analysis also support this

conclusion, at least when the data are interpreted carefully and with the degree of relative imprecision that they demand. Likewise, the social and economic conditions of late ancient Mecca and Yathrib seem too impoverished to have singularly given rise to a compendium of religious lore as complex and sophisticated as the Qur'an.

The linguistic evidence relevant to the Qur'an's formation identifies its traditions as initially forming and circulating in a fundamentally oral and nonliterate context for decades, before being written down in Umayyad Syro-Palestine, as the particular dialect in which the Qur'an is written seems to indicate. Major advances in the scientific study of memory and oral transmission over the past century, as well as important research on collective memory, alert us to the fact that Muhammad's followers would have constantly revised and recomposed any teachings that they had received from him—inadvertently and unconsciously—to meet their current social and cultural circumstances. No less would they have readily adopted and adapted new traditions that they encountered from the rich Abrahamic religious lore of their new Jewish and Christian neighbors. Even after the gradual move to writing began, the Qur'anic text and traditions would have continued to be adjusted to meet the needs of the community along the way to final canonization. And as we have seen in the preceding chapter, much of the Qur'an is incompatible with a provenance in the central Hijaz, including almost all the Qur'an's Christian material, given the apparent lack of any significant Christian presence in the region.

The Qur'an, therefore, is not only a product of Muhammad's preaching in Mecca and Medina; it is also a product of Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia, where his early followers remembered his words and amplified them according to the new traditions and changing circumstances that they constantly encountered during their early decades. The quotation from Angelika Neuwirth above is thus an entirely apt summary of how we must approach the Qur'an as a historical document: it began as an oral tradition inspired by Muhammad's teachings that was then largely shaped by his early followers during its transmission in order to fit the changing contours of their communal and religious identity as they settled in alongside the other more developed monotheists of the Fertile Crescent. As Neuwirth elsewhere observes, the Qur'an as we now have it is the product of "a continuous communal rethinking," which "is evident from the textual phenomenon of

the later additions made to many of the earlier sūras in order to update them; that is, to align them with successively acquired new theological insights of the community": it is "primarily an oral scripture, the charter of a prophetic communication open to continuous communal rethinking."[2] Of course, in Neuwirth's view, any such changes to the text or developments in the community's construction of its identity must be strictly confined to the lifetime of Muhammad and the city limits of Mecca and Medina. For whatever reason, she and many others remain shackled to the traditional Islamic account of the Qur'an's origins on these points. Therefore, according to Neuwirth, any legitimate understanding of the Qur'an as a historical document must approach it as "the *transcript* of a prophetic communication" that cannot in any way be "dissociated from the ministry of Muḥammad and isolated from his community."[3] If only scholars would dare to let go of this artificial tether, which of course remains essential for Muslim views of the Qur'an as revealed scripture, it would enable understanding and investigating the Qur'an fully within the world of Near Eastern late antiquity that gave it birth.

Such views of the Qur'an, it would seem, are deeply linked to certain apologetic efforts—not so much for Islam but for the Qur'an itself. I mean this as no insult but as a simple observation of the persistent stance that one finds in much scholarship that is determined to defend the Qur'an against any diminution or detraction. There is concern not only to demonstrate that the Qur'an is a work with a high degree of literary subtlety and sophistication but also to advocate it as a theologically brilliant and erudite work of sui generis scripture that demands equal consideration alongside the Bible in both Western culture and religious tradition. Indeed, some scholars have even advocated the Qur'an's introduction to contemporary Jewish and Christian theological debates, which they view as essential for "reclaiming the Qur'an's universal significance, to remind of its message as *raḥmatan li'l-ālamīn*, as addressed ultimately to all mankind," and "to reclaim the Qur'an as bearing intellectual and aesthetic significance in our present day culture across the confessional boundaries."[4] In many respects one must note that this cultural and theological elevation of the Qur'an is frequently enlisted in the service of what scholars of religious studies identify as "protectionist" discourse, which in this case aims to shield the

Qur'an from the rigors of historical-critical analysis.[5] Indeed, such scholars will openly question whether it is ever at all appropriate to approach the Qur'an using the perspectives of historical criticism, asking whether we are "entitled to focus on these texts as such—in isolation from their recipients, and moreover, in isolation from present day concerns."[6]

Likewise, many scholars consider it unacceptable to analyze the material that the Qur'an appropriates from other religious traditions in order to better understand its position within the history of late ancient religious culture. Focus on these antecedents of the Qur'an bears the taint, so it is maintained, "of aiming to demonstrate that the Qur'an is nothing but a rehash of earlier traditions in order to discredit the Islamic faith and assert Western cultural superiority."[7] Such interest in the Qur'an's dependence on earlier religious culture is, so these scholars would profess, inevitably designed to reinforce the Qur'an's subordination to the Bible, in relation to which it is considered merely a poor epigone.[8] Holger Zellentin, for instance, identifies any notion of cultural influence as a "problematic paradigm" and avers that we must "conceive of this shared world mostly, if not entirely, within the framework of a shared oral culture and reject any notion of 'textual influence' unless strong evidence suggests a more intimate textual relationship, which is rare."[9] Michael Pregill, too, has recently offered an extended critique of what he names "the influence paradigm," directed primarily at the work of Abraham Geiger and its influence, suggesting in the process that the search for antecedent traditions to the Qur'an is not "a self-evidently worthwhile scholarly enterprise."[10]

This critique is certainly a valid one, but only to a point, and unfortunately it often seems deployed to proscribe a full historical-critical investigation of the Qur'an's origins. Indeed, it would seem that much of Qur'anic studies is currently in the midst of an excessive overcorrection, a reaction against an approach that was largely characteristic of nineteenth-century scholarship, rather than twenty-first. I more than suspect that this overcorrection will itself soon be corrected, since it has moved so far in the opposite direction as to hinder study of the Qur'an in its full historical context. The influence, and I think we may rightly use this term, of antecedent religious traditions on the Qur'an is historically significant, telling us not only a great deal about the context in which the Qur'an itself must have developed—one with a lot of Christians, for instance—but also

about the broader, general history of religion in the late ancient Near East. It is unquestionably important to investigate how the Qur'an makes use of the traditions that it adopts from Judaism and Christianity and transforms them into something distinctively new. Yet at the same time, we may not simply push aside the investigation of these influences—in their own right and for their own purpose. We cannot leave them to languish on the margins of Qur'anic studies, as if their pursuit were some sort of questionable scholarly endeavor.

There is no denying that it would be an intellectual failure only "to regard the Qur'an merely as a passive beneficiary of Late Antique culture; rather the need is to focus the Qur'an as a vital and creative player in the Late Antique debates." Although we certainly would not go so far as to elevate the Qur'an as "the climax" of these late ancient debates,[11] we must of course take every opportunity to examine such points of contact in order to appreciate the creative ways that the Qur'an transforms these earlier traditions into new theological expressions, in those cases where it does, which will not necessarily be always.[12] Moreover, along these same lines we must resist any notion that merely discovering the cultural roots of the Qur'an, or any other religious phenomenon for that matter, should somehow define and explain it. I have made this same point, for instance, in my previous studies of the emergence of Marian piety in late antiquity. All too often one finds in the historiography of early Christianity judgments that various Christian practices, and among them especially devotion to the Virgin Mary, are simply "pagan" survivals that disrupt the purity of the otherwise biblical foundation of the Christian faith.[13] Similarities between Christian devotion to Mary and the worship of various goddesses from the ancient Mediterranean world are frequently adduced as if merely naming these parallels were all that needed to be said and somehow they could account for and explain Christian devotion to Mary. Nevertheless, while we certainly must not allow these antecedents to Marian piety to control the interpretation of this centerpiece of Christian devotion, we also cannot simply disregard their obvious influence. These parallels between Marian devotion and ancient Mediterranean goddess traditions are invaluable data for investigating the history of religions, and therefore they should not be marginalized or ignored. Rather, they must be given their proper place in seeking to understand how early Christianity emerged in relation to its

immediate context, even if these parallels are not given the final say in how we understand devotion to the Virgin as a Christian practice.[14]

The same holds true in the case of the Qur'an. Although we should not allow the Qur'an's appropriations from its broader religious milieu to exert complete control over how we approach and interpret this text, we must nonetheless invite them to inform our historical understanding of the Qur'an in its formative context and also allow them to illuminate just what the nature of that context was. While we certainly do not wish to be crudely reductive of the Qur'an by focusing solely on its derivatives from other late ancient religious traditions, Patricia Crone rightly insists that it is absolutely essential

> to resume the study of the relationship between the Qurʾān and earlier religious books so as to pinpoint the religious milieu in which the book took shape. Once a flourishing branch of study, this approach was discarded in the sixties as diffusionist, lacking in explanatory potential, and offensive for its alleged derogation of the "originality" of Islam. Scholars studying the sources of Shakespeare's plays would be astonished to learn that they are engaged in the pernicious task of detracting from Shakespeare's originality, and there is in any case something peculiar about the implicit view of history as a competition for prizes for originality, with modern scholars in the role of adjudicators. (Who writes about the originality of Jesus or the Buddha?) The study of the relationship between texts certainly will not explain why Islam arose, but it might tell us something about where and how it did so, which would put significant constraints on explanations offered on the basis of other evidence. It would be a major step forward.[15]

Therefore we reject any mandates insisting that scholars must somehow make a choice between either of the two approaches, so that "they thus have to decide: are they going to explore the Qur'an as a new identity document of a historical community or are they to explore the Qur'an as a material source for the early Arabic reception of Christian tradition?"[16] I hope most readers will instantly recognize the utter fallacy of this alleged either/or. There is no reason, as I see it, why we cannot have both/and, which seems to be the preferred option. Interest in understanding how the Qur'an transforms its antecedent traditions does not mean that we must correspondingly abandon the study of the history of religions. It is true that for scholars of early Islam, "the Qur'an as a new identity document of a

historical community" may be of primary concern, while for the historian of late ancient religion, the text's connections with its broader religious context will likely hold the greatest interest. But there is no reason why we cannot simultaneously concern ourselves with both. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, for what it is worth, have been routinely scoured for their connections with antecedent religious cultures, which is one of the most important aspects of their critical study. Nevertheless, this approach in no way prevents us from simultaneously being able to investigate how these writings reveal the formative identity of particular religious groups: indeed, such an approach seems essential for understanding the text itself and its emergence as the identity document of a new religious community, neither of which developed in a cultural vacuum.

Scholarly concerns to protect the theological originality and literary brilliance of the Qur'anic text by segregating it as much as possible from these antecedent traditions seem largely directed toward shielding the Qur'an from the theologically challenging perspectives of *Religionswissenschaft*. At the same time, there appears to be an effort among scholars adopting these positions to identify an alternative approach to the Qur'an that will ultimately be acceptable to more liberal and Westernized members of the Muslim world. For a particularly telling example, one may look to an interview that Neuwirth did several years ago for the series on *Jesus and Islam* produced by the European television network ARTE in 2015. In the final episode, on "the Book of Islam," Neuwirth is asked to comment, as were others in the documentary, on who wrote the Qur'an, to which she replies by naming God—in addition to Muhammad and the community—as the Qur'an's primary and ultimate author. For good measure, she explicitly rejects the suitability of any sort of secular approach grounded in the values of the Enlightenment for studying the Qur'an. Unless we accept the Qur'an's divine authorship, she maintains, then the Qur'an itself is in fact trivial (*eigentlich belanglos*), as simply the product a particular group engaged in theological disputes under the leadership of a prophet. Without recognition of God as the Qur'an's author, she avows, we cannot understand the Qur'an; nor can we explain how this religious group could have such a significant impact on world history.[17] One often finds a version of the latter argument voiced, mutatis mutandis, by conservative Christian apologists in defense of the New Testament and the historicity of Jesus's bodily resurrection. Yet in

both cases, such apologetics and supernaturalism are entirely inappropriate in the academic study of religion.

There is, to be sure, nothing inherently wrong with seeking an irenic approach to studying the Qur'an in a manner that can be done alongside believing Muslims. Likewise, there is nothing the least bit inappropriate in taking a theological or even apologetic approach to the Qur'an and early Islamic tradition, so long as one is up front in acknowledging the differences between this sort of approach and the very different approaches advanced in historical criticism and religious studies. Neuwirth's conceptualization of the Qur'an is in this case openly theological: it seeks to embrace Islamic views of the text's inspiration while at the same time directly rejecting many of the critical approaches of religious studies. Such a stance, when judged on its own terms, can certainly be a legitimate undertaking and can in fact be scholarly, but one must not in any way confuse such confessionally based approaches with *Religionswissenschaft* or historical-critical study. And so once again we must invoke Bruce Lincoln, with his thirteenth and final thesis on method in the study of religion: "When one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood, suspends one's interest in the temporal and contingent, or fails to distinguish between 'truths,' 'truth-claims,' and 'regimes of truth,' one has ceased to function as historian or scholar. In that moment, a variety of roles are available: some perfectly respectable (amanuensis, collector, friend and advocate), and some less appealing (cheerleader, voyeur, retailer of import goods). None, however, should be confused with scholarship."[18]

Herein lies a fundamental divide between many more traditional approaches to the Qur'an and the one advanced in the pages of this book. It has been our goal to articulate a model for understanding the Qur'an's formative history that does not rest on fidelity to the Islamic tradition or require divine agency but is grounded, as Lincoln directs, "in the temporal and contingent." It views the Qur'an as indeed the product of a particular religious group that engaged in certain theological disputes under the leadership of a prophet and eventually carved out a distinctive identity as a new religious community. The religious faith of this community was almost immediately fused to the political power of a vast worldly empire, and this synergy brought great success to both on the world-historical stage. Yet the truth of the matter is, as Crone observes, "that we do not know how, where

or when the Qurʾān originated and that all the evidence we have to go by is the Qurʾān itself," and so "we need to pursue the Qurʾānic evidence wherever it takes us, without trying to fit it into the historical mould created for it by the Islamic tradition."[19] From this vantage, the Qur'an's history is certainly messier and more complicated than the Islamic tradition would suggest. Nevertheless, this perspective better enables us to understand the Qur'an's development as a new sacred scripture for a new religious faith in a process that was far more deeply integrated with the worlds of Jewish and Christian late antiquity than the traditional Islamic narrative of the Qur'an's origins would allow. Therefore, we strongly agree with the recent trend toward understanding the Qur'an as a product of the religious cultures of Near Eastern late antiquity. The only matters of disagreement concern just when and where this encounter with the world of late antiquity would have taken place.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Robinson 2005, 103.

2. Neuwirth 2007a, 115, 117. Ironically, however, Neuwirth herself does not, in my opinion, escape the firm guidance of Islamic tradition in her conceptualization of the Qu'ran, following, as she does, faithfully in the tradition established by Theodor Nöldeke. Yet she goes even further than Nöldeke in her acquiescence to the Islamic tradition: as we will note in the conclusion, she is on record as publicly identifying God as the Qur'an's primary author.

3. Shoemaker 2012a, 125. See also the extended discussion of this matter in Hughes 2008, 33–71.

4. See, e.g., Qur'an 12.102, 21.107.

5. Lincoln 2007, 167.

6. Smith 1959, 59; Smith 1976, 146, 152. See also Smith 1981.

7. Smith 1976, 31.

8. See, e.g., Aitken and Sharma 2017. This accommodationist and apologetic tendency of much scholarship on Islam has been criticized rather forcefully in Hughes 2008 and Hughes 2014.

9. Smith 1959, 52n41.

10. Hughes 2008, 63.

11. Hughes 2014, esp. 1–5.

12. See, e.g., Rudolph 2005. See also Lüdemann 1996; Lüdemann and Schröder 1987.

13. Otto 1917; Otto 1926; Schleiermacher 1799; Schleiermacher 1996.

14. See especially the founding treatise of Pietism, Spener 1676; Spener 1964.

15. See especially Eliade 1959, and also Eliade 1958.

16. McCutcheon 1997, 42. My comments on Eliade, religion as sui generis, and the emphasis on private experience have been heavily influenced by McCutcheon's book.

17. Ibid., 14

18. Smith takes things one step further, arguing that, in light the primacy of private experience and the ensuing marginalization of the historical accidents of its individual expression, it would be best to abandon the category of religion entirely in academic study. If personal encounter with the

transcendent truly amounts to the ultimate reality of this phenomenon, then a study of the historical accretions that has produced seems rather pointless. Religion is, after all, a relatively modern category with a parochial origin. Nevertheless, as Wayne Proudfoot rightly observes, the categories of "culture" and "economy" are no less constructed than religion, and yet we do not reject these as useful concepts for organizing academic study. See Proudfoot 1985, 198. As Jonathan Z. Smith similarly acknowledges, the category of religion is in fact "solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious." See Smith 1982, xi.

19. See the excellent discussion in Hughes 2008, 33–51.

20. On these points, and especially on the importance of the academic context, see Rippin 2020.

21. Orsi 2005, 192.

22. Hughes 2008, 51.

23. On these points, Hughes (2014) offers a particularly trenchant critique.

24. Orsi 2005, 183.

25. Ibid., 183.

26. Ibid., 185–86.

27. Ibid., 188; see also 189.

28. Ibid., 191.

29. Ibid., 180–83, 188.

30. With respect to the question of "real" Islam in particular, see ibid., 7, 179, 189.

31. Smith 1982, xi, xiii. With specific regard to the study of the Qur'an, see now Rippin 2020, esp. 28, 31.

32. Hughes 2014, esp. 3–5. On this point, see also the important critique by Daneshgar 2020a, and Daneshgar 2020b.

33. Said 1978, 240.

34. See, e.g., ibid., 300–301; Strenski 2015, 229–30.

35. Preus 1987, esp. ix–xxi.

36. Ibid., x.

37. McCutcheon 1997, ix–x.

38. Ibid., x.

39. See Clark 2005; Lincoln 2005, 59–62.

40. Lincoln 1996, 225–26. In a more recent article, Lincoln reiterates his affirmation of these theses. See Lincoln 2007.

41. So, for instance, the traditional account of Uthman's collection could make it seem. See Cook 2000, 121.

42. In an article published just as we were going to press, Tesei (2021) advances a similar argument, albeit much more briefly.

1. THE TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE OF THE QUR'AN'S ORIGINS: A SCHOLARLY SUNNISM

1. In al-Bukhārī 1862–1908, 66 Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān, bāb 3, 3:392–94. One can find several other summaries of this traditional account in a wide range of sources. See, e.g., Welch 1986; Dye 2019c, 865–61; Motzki 2001; Gilliot 2006. On the importance of the inclusion of this version in al-Bukhārī's collection for its subsequent status, see especially de Prémare 2004, 70–73. See also the extensive catalog traditions concerning the Qur'an's collection in Comerro 2012.

2. Neuwirth 2019a, 145.

3. De Prémare 2004, 70–72.

4. Ibid., 70–71.

5. Nöldeke 1860, esp. 189–233. For Nöldeke's dependence on the Islamic tradition's view of the Qur'an's history, see Rippin 2020, 31–32.

6. Higgins 2008. For Nöldeke's appropriation of basic structures identified by Weil, see Shoemaker 2012a, 129; Stefanidis 2008.

7. See, e.g., Dye 2019b.

8. Crone 1992, 239.

9. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:iv; Nöldeke et al. 2013, xxi.

10. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:11–27; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 223–34. See also Schwally 1915. Schwally was partly influenced on this point by the earlier critique of the Abū Bakr tradition in Caetani 1905–26, 2: 739–54.

11. Neuwirth also notes this change in position: Neuwirth 2019a, 141; Neuwirth 2010, 238.

12. "Dafs der Qorân zu des Propheten Lebzeiten noch nicht gesammelt war, berichtet uns eine unzweideutige Ueberlieferung, und geht aus den Angaben über Zaids Sammlung mit Sicherheit hervor" (Nöldeke 1860, 189).

13. Ibid., 189–90.

14. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:20; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 230.

15. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:1–4; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 209–11. Claude Gilliot has published a number of articles in which he considers the possible collaboration of Muhammad with his scribes in producing the Qur'an, and he assumes that writing is involved in the process from the beginning. Nevertheless, most of the evidence that Gilliot relies on comes from much later sources and is therefore of dubious value for understanding the actual circumstances of early seventh century Mecca and Medina. See especially Gilliot 1998; 2004; 2007; 2010.

16. Burton 1977, 174, also 226, 234.

17. See, e.g., the discussions of such traditions in Shoemaker 2012a, 73–117; Shoemaker 2009–11. See also Powers 2020, which argues that a particular episode from Muhammad's traditional biographies has been shaped by his followers' encounter with and accommodation to the theological political ideologies of the Roman Empire. John Burton argued systematically that the Qur'an was originally collected by Muhammad, understanding the various, confused reports of the later tradition as an effort to hide this fact. See Burton 1977.

18. On the latter point see, e.g., Robin 2010; Macdonald 2010, esp. 21–22 as well as chapter 5.

19. Keith 2020, 77 and esp. n18.

20. See, e.g., Nöldeke et al. 2013, xiii; Dye 2019b, 743–55. Among the most significant exceptions are the studies by Casanova, Wansbrough, Crone, de Premare, Gilliot, Dye, Powers, Reynolds, among others.

21. Mingana 1917, 223.

22. Burton 1977, 117.

23. See Welch 1986 (404–5), where one will find the cited passages.

24. Repeated most recently in Sinai 2014b, 509–13. See also Schoeler 2009, 11.

25. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:15–17; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 226–27.

26. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:8–11; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 219–21.

27. In al-Bukhārī 1862–1908, 66 Fadā'il al-Qur'ān, bāb 6, 3: 395.

28. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:8–11; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 219–20.

29. De Prémare 2004, esp. 48–54; see also Comerro 2012, 204.

30. Ibn Shabba 1979, 2:705–12.

31. Ibid., 3:990–1017.

32. De Prémare 2004, 77.

33. Ibid., 78.

34. Ibn Saʿd 1904–28, 2.2:112–15.

35. Again, see, e.g., Robin 2010; Macdonald 2010, esp. 21–22, and chapter 5.

36. Ibn Saʿd 1904–28, 3.1:119–56.

37. Ibid., 3.1:36–59.

38. Ibid., 3.2:62.

39. Ibid., 2.2:113.

40. Another tradition, in Ibn Saʿd's biography of Ibn Masʿūd, who was the author of one of the early codices, relates that Ibn Masʿūd refused an order to bring his text into conformity with Zayd's codex. Nevertheless, as de Prémare correctly notes, such an order could just as easily have come from ʿUmar as ʿUthmān. See de Prémare 2004, 78.

41. Ibid., 79.

42. Ibn Saʿd 1904–28, 3.1:202, 212.

43. Ibid., 2.2:113–14.

44. De Prémare 2004, 80.

45. Regarding Sayf and his value as a historian, see Landau-Tasseron 1990.

46. Sayf ibn ʿUmar 1995, 49–50 (no. 50). Regarding Sayf's sources, see de Prémare 2004, 81.

47. See, e.g., Shoemaker 2012a, 83–86; 2009–11; Rubin 1995b, 234–60; Cook 1981, 107–16; Cook 1992, esp. 35; Crone 1987b, 122–23n53.

48. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:50–53; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 253–56. See also the important study of Comerro 2012, esp. 5–7, which studies the differences of the various accounts that are ultimately ascribed to al-Zuhrī, where she also criticizes on this basis the relative simplicity with which Motzki proposed to resolve the issue of the Qur'an's origins.

49. Motzki 2001, esp. 15–29.

50. Amir-Moezzi 2016, 54; see also de Prémare 2002, 317–21.

51. Cited in Amir-Moezzi 2016, 54

52. Cook 1981, 16–17.

53. De Prémare 2002, 319–20; de Prémare 2001, 181–83.

54. Graham 1977, esp. vii and 9–39.

55. Burton 1977, 225, 229

56. De Prémare 2002, 282.

57. Gilliot 2006, 46.

58. See, e.g., Ehrman 2014, 49–52, and more recently Larsen 2018, 150. See also Wolter 1988.

59. Sinai 2014a, 291.

60. See, e.g., Ehrman 2011.

61. See Jeffery 1937.

62. De Prémare 2010, 208.

63. Jeffery 1937, 10.

64. See, e.g., Donner 1986; Hoyland 2006; Hoyland 2015, 98–102.

65. Noth 1973, 72–80, esp. 72–73; Noth and Conrad 1994, 78–80.

66. See also de Prémare 2004, 66–67.

67. See, in addition to Ehrman 2014, 49–52, also Kümmel 1972, 95–97, 120–21, 147–50, 234–46.

68. For further discussion and details of the early Shi'i view of the Qur'an, see especially Amir-Moezzi 2016, esp. 62–65, 166, 168–69; Amir-Moezzi 2019, 921–33. See also Modarressi 1993; Terrier 2013, esp. 405–8; and the excellent lengthy review of Amir-Moezzi's book in van Reeth 2013.

69. Nöldeke 1860, x; Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:93–100; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 288–93

70. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:93–94; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 288.

71. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:94–95, 97–98; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 289, 291.

72. Amir-Moezzi 2016, 162.

73. Ibid., 162.

74. The classic study remains Bauer 1964; 1971 (translation).

75. Amir-Moezzi 2016, 163, 165.

76. Sinai 2014b, 510, echoing points previously raised in Donner 1998, 26–28. For Donner's more recent position, see Donner 2008, esp. 41–43; and Donner 2018.

77. Cook 2000, 124.

78. Hamdan 2010, 798, 829.

79. Sinai 2014b, 521.

80. Ibid., 521.

81. Robinson 2005, 101–2.

82. Neuwirth 2010, 50, my translation. The English translation of this passage fails to capture the specific reference to the history of religions as a discipline, rendering it instead "religious history," which is rather vague and does not note the importance of this particular approach to the study of religion. See Neuwirth 2019a, 20.

83. Comerro 2012, esp. 197.

84. Crone and Hinds 1986, esp. 1–3. See also Robinson 2005, 81–95; and Crone 2004, 33–47. Marsham 2018 brings some additional nuance to this topic but does not call into question the conclusions reached by Crone and Hinds.

85. Crone and Hinds 1986, 43–57.

86. Ibid., 37–40.

87. See, e.g., Tannous 2018, 278–301; Sinai 2014a, 289.

88. Ibid., 24–26.

89. Robinson 2005, 102. As Robert Hoyland recently notes, "it has become almost a dogma now that the pre-ʿAbd al-Malik Muslim state was very decentralized," that is, "a weak state" (Hoyland 2006, 398). Hoyland seeks to add some nuance to this view, pointing to accomplishments and innovations under previous rulers; nevertheless, the various exceptions that he identifies, while interesting, do not fully undermine the striking differences in the Islamic polity before and after ʿAbd al-Malik. In any case, Hoyland identifies nothing that would suggest the reign of ʿUthmān was in fact capable of producing and enforcing the standard text of the Qurʾān, and moreover, his conclusions reinforce the idea that the thorough Islamicization of the state was indeed ʿAbd al-Malik's innovation (Hoyland 2006, 410).

2. ʿABD AL-MALIK, AL-ḤAJJĀJ, AND THE COMPOSITION OF THE QUR'AN

1. Robinson 2005, 103. On ʿAbd al-Malik's role in the consolidation of Islam and its fusion with the state, see also Hoyland 1997b, 551–56.

2. De Prémare 2002, 292–95; Amir-Moezzi 2016, 57–58.

3. See Casanova 1911–24, 103–42; Mingana 1916; Mingana 1917.

4. Hamdan 2010, 795. See also Hamdan 2006, of which the article provides the most salient parts in English.

5. In addition to Robinson and myself, other scholars embracing this understanding of the Qur'an's canonization include Donner 2010, 206–8; Déroche 2014, 94–95; Amir-Moezzi 2016, 57–60; Powers 2009, 160–61; Dye 2019c, 902–4; Tesei 2013–14; Tesei 2018; Tottoli 2012; Bori 2009; Neuwirth 2007b, 18*–22*; 2019a, 7, 147–49.

6. In the interest of brevity, we will not introduce all these witnesses in the present context; interested readers should turn to Hamdan's studies for much of this data. See Hamdan 2006; Hamdan 2010. Note, however, that Hamdan's interpretation of these traditions is based on a commitment to the traditional Sunni(-Nöldekean-Schwallian) narrative of the Qur'an's origins, and so readers must approach these studies with this issue in mind.

7. De Prémare 2002, 296, 458–60; Blachère 1959, 71–102. See also George 2015, 6.

8. Nöldeke 1860, 306–8; Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 3:260–62; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 593–95. See also Hamdan 2010 and Sinai 2014a, 279–85.

9. De Prémare 2002, 294–96.

10. Ibid., 299–300; Déroche 2014, 96–97.

11. Déroche 2014, 138. See also George 2015, 6; Cellard 2015; Cellard 2019, esp. 693–700; Small 2011, 165–66.

12. De Prémare has carefully analyzed the relevant reports in his many publications on the topic, and here we will effectively summarize their information, leaving readers more interested in the details to consult his works.

13. First attested in Balādhurī 2001, 586; translation from de Prémare 2010, 201. Mingana, however, cites this passage from other sources, including the thirteenth-century Syriac Christian historian known as Bar Hebraeus. See Mingana 1916, 230. See also de Prémare 2002, 462.

14. See the various reports of this event in the tradition in de Prémare 2010, 204–5; de Prémare 2002, 460–61.

15. Hamdan 2010, 823.

16. Ibid., 829.

17. First reported in Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam 1922, 117; translation from de Prémare 2010, 205. For other references, see Hamdan 2010, 824.

18. Hamdan 2010, 824.

19. Ibn Abī Shayba 1979–83, 1: 7; translation from de Prémare 2010, 204.

20. De Prémare 2010, 206.

21. Ibn Saʿd 1985, 233; de Prémare 2010, 202–3, which also includes a translation of the passage. See also de Prémare 2004, 92–93.

22. Robinson 2005, 38; Hoyland 1997b, 552–56; Hawting 1993, 36–39; Rubin 1999, 36; Donner 2010, 205; Madelung 1981, 294. See also John bar Penkaya, *Riš Mellē* (Mingana 1908, 155*), trans. Brock 1987, 64.

23. Crone and Hinds 1986, 32.

24. Anthony 2020, 132–36.

25. Ibid., 137.

26. Ibid., 137.

27. Ibid., 136–37.

28. Borrut 2011, 45–48, 57–58, 74; Borrut 2018, 278.

29. Larcher 2010, 266; Larcher 2020, 62.

30. Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj 1991, Kitāb al-ḥajj, bāb 50, 2:942; al-Bukhārī 1862–1908, 25 Kitāb al-ḥajj, bāb 138, 1:438. The translation is from de Prémare 2010, 206.

31. *Pace* Sinai 2014a, 283, *allafa* is never used in the sense of "to recite." See the extended discussion on this point in Dye 2015, 90–93; and Dye 2019c, 894–97.

32. Al-Sijistānī 1936, 120; Ibn ʻAsākir 1995–2000, 12:160.

33. Tillier and Vanthieghem 2022. I thank Guillaume Dye and Mathieu Tillier for sharing this information with me.

34. John of Damascus, *On Heresies* 100. The text is most easily accessible in PG 94, 764A–773A; see also LeCoz 1992, 210–27. For a brief, general discussion of this part of John's writings, see Louth 2002, 76–83.

35. Taylor 2015, 200; Hoyland 1997b, 488–89; Dye 2015, 93–95. See also de Prémare 2005, 186–99; de Prémare 2010, 195–97.

36. See, e.g., Schadler 2018, 99–100; Griffith 2016.

37. Schadler 2018, 101, 98. Here Schadler rightly corrects Sidney Griffith, whose earlier work falls somewhat short in its full acceptance of the Islamic tradition's view of its own early history. See Griffith 1997, 256; Griffith 1987, 84.

38. PG 94, 769B–772D.

39. See, e.g., Khoury 1957–58, 52–62; Schadler 2018, 234–38.

40. De Prémare 2010, 195.

41. Schadler 2018, 113.

42. De Prémare 2010, 196–97. See also the excellent discussion in Schadler 2018, 132–40. See also the intriguing attempt to reconstruct this ancient Arabian myth in Stetkevych 1996.

43. Taylor 2015, 229

44. Ibid., 193, 224

45. Roggema 2009, 282–85.

46. See, e.g., See Conrad 1990, 43; Conrad 1992, 322–48; Conrad 1999, 91–94; Hoyland 1997b, 400–405; Palmer 1993, 96–98.

47. One can read the respective reports in Hoyland's attempt to reconstruct the contents of this now lost chronicle in Hoyland 2011, 215–16. For the original text, see de Boor 1883–85, 399; Vasiliev 1910–15, 503.

48. Schadler 2018, 126. So also Hoyland 1997b, 496. For a more thorough discussion of these texts, their relation, and their dating, see my more extended discussion of them in Shoemaker 2012a, 59–64. There I focus more on the letter of ʿUmar and its apparent implication that Muhammad was still alive at the time his followers began to invade the Roman Near East.

49. Ezeantsʿ 1887, 45–98; translation Jeffery 1944, 281–330; Arzoumanian 1982, 72–105.

50. Schadler 2018, 126–28. Cecilia Palombo has recently argued for a dating in the middle of the eighth century, but I find Schadler's arguments for a slightly earlier date persuasive, particularly in light of the reference in Theophilus's now lost chronicle. See Palombo 2015.

51. Gaudeul 1984, 134–36.

52. Ezeantsʿ 1887, 63. The translation is my own, but cf. Jeffery 1944, 297–98; Arzoumanian 1982, 82.

53. Hamdan (2010, 801) locates the beginning of this project in 703–4, but there is little reason to believe that the project had not begun well before this time.

54. Hawting 2000, 58.

55. Hamdan 2010, 798.

56. On this point, see Marcuzzo 1986, 97–120.

57. Ibid., 330–31.

58. Regarding the date, see Thomas and Roggema 2009, 887–88. Al-Kindī's account of the Qur'an's origins is found at al-Kindī 1885, 75–90; al-Kindī 1887, 22–33.

59. Al-Kindī 1885, 78. My translation, but cf. al-Kindī 1887, 24.

60. Al-Kindī 1885, 82. My translation, but cf. al-Kindī 1887, 28.

61. Sinai 2014a, 285, 278.

62. Motzki 2001, 14.

63. Sinai 2014a, 282.

64. Motzki 2001, 14.

65. Dye 2015, 88n121; Dye 2019c, 893n2

66. Al-Kindī 1885, 83; al-Kindī 1887, 29

67. Sinai 2014a, 282.

68. For a discussion of the importance of this particular criterion in historical Jesus studies, see Porter 2000, 82–89, 102. See also the following representative examples: Meier 1991, 174–75; Theissen and Merz 1996, 116–17; Ehrman 1999, 90–91.

69. Conrad 2007, 15.

70. Shoemaker 2012a, 153.

71. Sinai 2014b, 516.

72. See Donner 2002; Donner 2010.

73. Donner 2002, 9. See also Cook 2001.

74. Donner 2002, 10–11; Donner 2010, 87.

75. See, e.g., Humphreys 2006, 61, 63, 97; Donner 2010, 176–77, 182; Hoyland 1997b, 690–92.

76. Regarding this dynamic, see, e.g., Donner 2010, 203–14; Comerro 2001; van der Velden 2007; van der Velden 2008; Shoemaker 2018b.

77. Sinai 2014a, 282.

78. Ibid., 283–84.

79. See, e.g., Motzki 1991, 3–4, 6–7, 9; Motzki 1998, esp. 32n44, 63; Donner 1998, esp. 25–29, 283, 287; Versteegh 1993, 48. For more on this point, see Shoemaker 2012a, 85–86, 195–96.

80. Perhaps the best example in this case is Neisser 1981.

81. Schacter 2001a, 1–40, esp. 9; Fernyhough 2013, 1–19.

82. Draaisma 2004, 226.

83. Halbwachs 1992, 119; Halbwachs 1925, 300.

84. See, e.g., Goody 1987, 78–109.

85. See, e.g., Brown 1977, 513–16, 547–56; Meier 1991, 214–16; Ehrman 1999, 36–49.

86. See, e.g., Ehrman 1999, 91–94; Meier 1991, 168–71. In the study of early Islam, this principle was perhaps first and most influentially articulated by Goldziher. See Goldziher 1889–90, 2:29–30; Goldziher 1967–71, 2:39–40. Note that Sinai explicitly rejects this well-established principle, which has a long history in biblical studies: "It seems questionable to maintain, as a matter of principle, that when confronted with more than one adequate way of explaining our evidence we ought to choose the more iconoclastic one" (Sinai 2014a, 284–85). There is, in fact, a rational basis for privileging such a principle, even if there is some debate about its application. See also my discussion of this method, its value, limitations, and application in Shoemaker 2012a, 5–6, as well as 33, 79, 136, 159–60, 166, 171, 173–74, 176–77, 191, 206, 220, 223–24, 230–31, 236–37, 315n82.

87. Robinson 2005, 91.

88. Sinai 2014a, 288.

89. Ibid., 283.

90. De Prémare 2002, 287–88; de Prémare 2004, 83.

91. De Prémare 2004, 85–90

92. See Cook 2000, 118–22; Welch 1986, 404b (which refers to “thousands of textual variants” in classical literature).

93. As first proposed by Whelan 1998. So also Milwright 2016, 228–29. Sinai (2014a, 278) rejects my assessment of this hypothesis as “worryingly cavalier.” To my mind this judgment is exaggerated and unwarranted. I maintain that the hypothesis in question asks for a special exception in order to achieve the desired outcome, and this assessment hardly merits such a curt dismissal. It is true that Whelan gives an example of a twelfth-century inscription from a mosque that links snippets from various Qur’anic passages together, but this is not the same thing as the sort of variants that we find in the Dome of the Rock inscriptions, nor is it of the same significance. See Whelan 1998, 6n22. Furthermore, Sinai notes that Hoyland has identified evidence for combining fragments of the Qur’an in some early graffiti (Hoyland 1997a, 87–88), but again, variants in the desert scrawlings of random passersby should hardly be comparable to these official, imperial inscriptions on the earliest and most important early Islamic monument, in my judgment. At the same time, however, should we not recognize that such mixed-up citations themselves are evidence that the Qur’anic text has not yet been established? See also, on this topic, de Prémare 2010, 190–93.

94. Donner 2002; Donner 2010. See also Hoyland 2006, 409; Hoyland 1997b, 554–55; Hoyland 1995; Borrut and Donner 2016; Shoemaker 2012a, 198–240; Shoemaker 2021b, 15–23.

95. See, e.g., Wellhausen 1927, 215–16; Robinson 2005, 103. See also Hoyland 2006, 397, 409–10.

96. Tannous 2018, 394–95n158, 278–301, esp. 278 and 300.

97. As first demonstrated convincingly in Schacht 1950 (esp. 224). See also Sinai 2014a, 289; Crone 1994; as well as the excellent discussion of this matter in Dye 2019b, 883–94

98. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:7; translation from Nöldeke et al. 2013, 217.

99. Cf. Welch 1986, 405.

100. We would note in addition to de Prémare, who seems to have pioneered the revival of this hypothesis, the following: e.g., Robinson 2005, 102; Donner 2010, 206–8; Powers 2009, 155–96, 227–33, esp. 227; Cook 2000, esp. 121; Amir-Moezzi 2016, 57–60; Dye 2019b; 2019c, 902–4; Small 2011, 165–66 ; Radscheit 2006; and even Neuwirth 2007b, 18*–22*.

101. Déroche 2014, 94–97.

102. Ibid., 34. See also Déroche 2009.

103. As Fred Leemhuis recently notes, “a few qurʾānic manuscripts have been attributed by some specialists to the seventh century, but as yet no extant manuscript has been unequivocally dated to a period before the ninth century on the basis of firm external evidence” (Leemhuis 2006, 146).

104. Robinson 2009, esp. 212–14.

105. Déroche 2014, 35. See also on this point Déroche 2007, 22.

106. Powers 2009, 155–96, 227–33, esp. 227.

107. Small 2011, 166.

3.RADIOCARBON DATING AND THE ORIGINS OF THE QUR'AN

1. My thanks especially to Guillaume Dye for his help and advice regarding some of the materials covered in this section, and also to Alba Fedeli as well.

2. The following summary of the method of radiocarbon dated is based on the descriptions of this method in Macdougall 2008 (72–100) and Taylor and Bar-Yosef 2014 (19–60), where more detailed discussions can be found.

3. Youssef-Grob 2019, 179.

4. Damon et al. 1989, 614.

5. Nongbri 2018, 65.

6. Macdougall 2008, 77.

7. Déroche 2014, 14.

8. Sadeghi and Bergmann 2010.

9. Puin 2008; Puin 2009; Puin 2010; Puin 2011; Puin 2014; Puin 1996; Hilali 2017.

10. On the ethical problems of working with and publishing unprovenanced artifacts, see, e.g., Brodie 2006; Brodie 2011; Brodie 2016.

11. Sadeghi and Bergmann 2010, 350, 353.

12. A good example of such simplistic reliance on these radiocarbon datings to reach this desired conclusion can be seen in van Putten 2019 (276–79), which mistakes the radiocarbon dates for bare facts. In this article, van Putten examines fourteen Qur'anic manuscripts and determines, based on the form of a particular word, that they all derive from a common written archetype. Fair enough. He then assumes that this standard must have been established under ʿUthmān, citing the radiocarbon datings of certain manuscripts as solid evidence of this fact. Nevertheless, these C-14 datings cannot do for his argument what he assumes here. If one were to date some of these the texts a little later than their radiocarbon dating, which in fact seems more accurate, then one has clear evidence instead for an archetype produced under the auspices of ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj. The two manuscripts whose C-14 dates he cites, the Tübingen Qur'an and MS Qāf 47 from Cairo, are discussed below and reasons are given as to why they clearly seem to be more recent than their published radiocarbon dates would indicate. This is particularly the case with the Tübingen Qur'an, which contains folios with a significantly later C-14 dating. Therefore, what van Putten's article appears to demonstrate is that all these early Qur'ans derive from a single written archetype; however, in light of the best interpretation of the data that we have for the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts, that archetype appears much more likely to be the imperial Qur'an established and imposed by ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj.

13. In her preface to her posthumously published collected studies, Crone (2016a, xiii). See also Crone 1987a, 203–14; Crone 2015; as well as her unpublished typescript.

14. On this point, see Fedeli 2022.

15. Published in Robin 2015b, 65. Noted also in Déroche 2014, 13.

16. Déroche 2014, 13.

17. Robin 2015b, 65n134. Robin suggests that the early dating from the Lyon lab could be the result of a contamination of the sample, but this can hardly explain the inconsistent range of dates. The other uncalibrated dates for this folio, by the way, are 1437 ± 33 BP for Zurich, 1515 ± 25 BP for Kiel, and 1423 ± 23 BP for Oxford. I record these dates particularly in view of false reports spread by some careless scholars on Twitter that the raw dates were not given for these analyses. They were published online, and here they are. The Lyon results are available online through the Banque Nationale de Données Radiocarbone pour l'Europe et le Proche Orient of the Lyon Laboratory, accessed January 31, 2022, https://www.arar.mom.fr /banadora/. The Oxford data are available at the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit Database, accessed January 31, 2022, https://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/database/db.php. The new IntCal calibration data has recently been published: see Reimer et al. 2020. The main differences from IntCal13 for our purposes concern changes in calculation for materials from the eighth century CE; this can occasionally impact the dating of these early Qur'ans significantly. I thank Guillaume Dye for bringing this new publication and new standard to my attention. The dates were calculated using OxCal 4.4.2. See Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit Database, accessed January 31, 2022, https://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/oxcal/OxCal.html.

18. Badea et al. 2008, 17; Badea, Della Gatta, and Usacheva 2012; Badea, Della Gatta, and Budrugeac 2011.

19. Sotheby's, sale of October 22–23, 1992, lot 551.

20. Fedeli 2022.

21. Taylor and Bar-Yosef 2014, 30, 137.

22. Déroche 2014, 48–56.

23. Cellard 2018, esp. 1111–14; see also Cellard 2021, 2n9.

24. Déroche 2014, 54, 137, 139; Sadeghi and Bergmann 2010, 359.

25. Déroche 2014, 53; Fedeli 2005, 305, 315; Puin 2010, 235; Sadeghi and Goudarzi 2012, 17. Asma Hilali has proposed that the earlier version of the Qur'an was perhaps a writing exercise, which is a possibility, but no consensus has been reached in this regard: see Hilali 2017. Déroche instead persuasively explains the original Sanaa Qur'an, in its lower text, as having been commissioned by someone at great cost, despite its imperfections. See Déroche 2014, 55.

26. Déroche 2014, 139.

27. Sinai 2017, 46. See also Sinai 2014a, 275 and 276n21, where he concludes that "it seems preferable for the time being to rely on Sadeghi and Bergmann's results," although he allows that further testing would be helpful.

28. In addition to the publications mentioned in the previous note, see also, e.g., Sinai 2014b; Sinai 2010; and Sinai 2009.

29. Déroche 2014, 132–33

30. “Rarität entdeckt: Koranhandschrift stammt aus der Frühzeit des Islam: Ein Pergament der Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen konnte dank naturwissenschaftlicher Methoden auf das 7. Jahrhundert zurückdatiert werden,” November 10, 2014, https://uni-tuebingen.de /universitaet/aktuelles-und-publikationen/newsfullview-aktuell/article/raritaet-entdeckt - koranhandschrift-stammt-aus-der-fruehzeit-des-islam/. The data from the radiocarbon analysis has now been published in Marx and Jocham 2019, 202.

31. Fedeli 2022. See also Cellard 2019, 674n1.

32. Marx and Jocham 2019, 206.

33. Ibid., 206.

34. Youssef-Grob 2019, 174, 176.

35. Marx and Jocham 2019, 207.

36. Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Universitätsbibliothek (website), Kufisches Koranfragment, enthaltend Sure 17, 37–36, 57 (p. 1r), accessed January 31, 2022, http://idb .ub.uni-tuebingen.de/opendigi/MaVI165.

37. Déroche 2014, 75–133, esp. 94–97, 101, 132–33. See also Déroche 2009, 165–67; and Cellard 2019, 670.

38. Marx and Jocham 2019, 215, 208.

39. Youssef-Grob 2019, 179.

40. On this manuscript see especially, Fedeli (2022), whose analysis underlies my own.

41. Higham et al. 2018, 634.

42. Reynolds 2018, 14–15

43. See Fedeli 2022; Fedeli 2018.

44. Fedeli 2015, 182.

45. Ibid., 182–83.

46. Déroche 2014, 69.

47. Reynolds 2018, 15.

48. See, e.g., Dye 2019b, 815–22.

49. Bellamy 1993, 563; Bellamy 2001, 1, 2, 6.

50. See, e.g., Cook 2000, 137–38; Crone 1987a, 203–14; Crone 2016a, xiii.

51. Marx and Jocham 2019, 201.

52. Corpus Coranicum, Gotthelf-Bergsträßer-Archiv: Kairo, Nationalbibliothek: qāf 47 (website), accessed January 31, 2022, https://corpuscoranicum.de/handschriften/index /sure/2/vers/282/handschrift/73.

53. Hamdan 2010, 824.

54. Cellard 2018, 1111–14. See also Déroche 2014, 67n97.

55. Reynolds 2018, 15.

56. See, e.g., Sinai 2017, esp. 46, 56n35.

57. For the dates, see Robin 2015b, 65; Marx and Jocham 2019, 216.

58. Marx and Jocham 2019, 205.

59. See ibid., 215. The number 1355 is indeed the average of the three raw datings.

60. As determined using OxCal 4.4.2 using IntCal 20: see https://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/oxcal/OxCal.html.

61. Déroche 2014, 12. Déroche claims that "the difference still amounts to fifty-four years, that is to say half a century," but by my math, this is an error in calculation.

62. Ibid., 12–13.

63. The following information was also confirmed in writing in a personal email from February 11, 2019. I note this particularly in light of the concerns about memory to be raised in chapter 6.

64. Reimer et al. 2020. The main differences from IntCal13 for our purposes concern changes in calculation for materials from the eighth century CE, which can occasionally impact the dating of these early Qur'ans significantly.

65. See, e.g., Taylor and Bar-Yosef 2014, 50–55.

66. McCormac et al. 2004; McCormac et al. 2008.

67. Reimer et al. 2013, 1883; Talma and Vogel 1993, 322.

68. Stuiver et al. 1998, 1045–46.

69. Stuiver 1982, 15, 17–19, 23.

70. McCorma et al. 1995, esp. 405.

71. See, e.g., Frink 1994, 19–20.

72. Published especially in Shortland and Bronk Ramsey 2013.

73. See the discussion in Youssef-Grob 2019, 144–45, 157–58. Presumably the same adjustment should apply to non-plant-based organic materials from Egypt, since they would have obtained their radiocarbon levels from consuming local plants. Yet it is not clear whether the datings of the early Qur'ans from Egypt given by Marx and Jocham have been adjusted to account for this feature of the Egyptian biosphere.

74. Manning et al. 2013, 141.

75. Manning et al. 2020; and Manning et al. 2018.

76. Manning et al. 2018, 6143.

77. Ibid., 6144–45.

78. McRae 2018.

79. Notice, for instance, the absence of any discussion of this different in the first edition of Taylor and Bar-Yosef (1987). The revised edition of 2014 includes the distinction between the hemispheres as a fundamental methodological practice, nicely illustrating this change: see Taylor and Bar-Yosef 2014, 32, 55–57.

80. McCormac et al. 2004, 1087.

81. Hogg et al. 2009, 1177.

82. Taylor and Bar-Yosef 2014, 57.

83. Adapted from Vita-Finzi 2019, 131.

84. See, e.g., Hua, Barbetti, and Rokowski 2013. See also the study currently underway on "Reconstructing Atmospheric 14C across the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone Using Tropical Tree Rings from South America and Central Africa," which began on July 15, 2019, under the direction of Guaciara dos Santos at the University of California, Irvine. See "Collaborative Research: P2C2—Reconstructing Atmospheric 14C across the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone Using Tropical Tree Rings from South America and Central Africa," Award Abstract #1903690, June 21, 2019, https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch /showAward?AWD_ID=1903690&HistoricalAwards=false.

85. The dates were determined using OxCal 4.4.2: see Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit Database, accessed January 31, 2022, https://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/oxcal/OxCal.html. A new calibration curve for the Southern Hemisphere has also been prepared and is used in calculating the dates in the chart above: see Hogg et al. 2020.

86. An excellent summary of the results can be found in Taylor and Bar-Yosef 2014, 38–41.

87. Bonani et al. 1992, 843, 847–48. See also van der Plicht 2007, 87.

88. Nongbri 2018, 67.

89. Kottsieper 2019, 180.

90. Ibid., 183.

91. Dutton 2017, 44–46.

4. THE HIJAZ IN LATE ANTIQUITY: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN THE CRADLE OF THE QUR'AN

1. Van Sivers 2003, 3.

2. In the case of the Yathrib oasis, the many studies by Michael Lecker are certainly far more critical than those of Watt, for instance, and yet for the most part they are persuasive only if one is willing to grant the much later accounts of the early Islamic historical tradition an unwarranted amount of veracity. See, e.g., Lecker 1995.

3. So, for instance, Glen Bowersock's chapter on "Late Antique Mecca" in his recent study (Bowersock 2017, 48–63) is as surprising as it is disappointing for its persistent and knowing

acquiescence to this outdated and fully controverted myth of the Meccan economy and society in late antiquity, not to mention various other pious memories derived from the later Islamic tradition. One doubts that he would write about the origins of Christianity with similar fidelity to the later Christian tradition.

4. Anthony 2020, 59–82.

5. See, e.g., Watt 1953, 3. Watt, as noted above, adopted this view from Lammens, who was its main initial propagator. See Lammens 1924.

6. Stein 2010, 269.

7. Crone 1987a, 7. See also Crone 1980, 22–23.

8. Crone 1987a, 160.

9. Donner 1981, 15. On this point, see also Bulliet 1975, 105.

10. According to Dagron 1979, 29, a town should have a population of at least one thousand as well as a more specialized and diverse economy.

11. Robinson, forthcoming. I thank Dr. Robinson for sharing this article with me in advance of its publication. The calculations are based primarily on genealogical data. Although as a general rule one should consider reports from the early Islamic tradition with a great deal of skepticism, perhaps one might argue that surely these genealogies are accurate, since, after all, many of us can remember the names and birthplaces of our ancestors a few generations back. For those inclined to find some value in the Islamic historical tradition, I would imagine that this genealogical information would inspire a high degree of confidence. Nevertheless, the study of oral cultures (and after all that is what we are dealing with in this instance) demonstrates that genealogies are among the most frequently manipulated elements of individual and cultural memory, since successfully claiming the right ancestor can instantly bring considerable social status and legitimacy. In our case, however, the effect of such a tendency would only mean that Robinson's numbers in fact overshoot the actual population of early seventh-century Mecca. To be sure, it is hard to imagine someone with an actual ancestor from Muhammad's Mecca altering their lineage to disguise this fact, while at the same time, it is relatively easy to imagine others who lacked such a lineage "remembering" a Meccan ancestor from the early seventh century as a mechanism to enhance their social status. On the matter of genealogies in oral cultures, see especially Henige 1982, 97–102; and Vansina 1965, 153–54.

12. Anthony 2020, 78.

13. Crone 1987a, 114, 149.

14. Peters 1988, esp. 16; Donner 1977, 254.

15. See Serjeant 1990; and Crone 1992.

16. Peters 1994a, 24–25, 32.

17. Simon 1989 presents a more sophisticated version of the Lammens/Watt version of Meccan long-distance trade in luxury goods but one that ultimately founders on the lack of reliable evidence.

Simon's work was initially published in Hungarian in 1975, and only in this English translation in 1989. Accordingly, it was written prior to Crone's *Meccan Trade* and is not informed by her devastating critique of the sources and the evidence for any long-distance trade in luxury goods. Crone, however, does directly engage Simon's work and successfully counters its arguments before this English translation appeared (by focusing especially on his article from 1970, which contains core elements of the book's argument): see Crone 1987a, 10, 125, 130, 138, 143–47, 168. As for Ibrahim 1990, this work completely ignores Crone's work and proceeds more or less as if nothing has changed in advancing a new version of the older Lammens/Watt model. The only thing it adds to this now outdated model is considerable speculation.

18. Bulliet 1975, 105; Crone 1987a, 6.

19. Crone 1987a, 114, emphasis in the original.

20. Crone 2007, 86.

21. Crone 1987a, 99.

22. Al-Azmeh 2014, 162. My thanks to Sean Anthony for directing me to the recent emergence of this topic in the study of early Islamic history.

23. Power 2014, 124.

24. De Jesus et al. 1982, 63. See also identical findings in Zarins et al. 1980, 27–29; Zarins, Murad, and al-Yish 1981; Kisnawi, de Jesus, and Rihani 1983; and Hester et al. 1984, 130, which also only find evidence of mining in the Abbasid period or much earlier, in the first centuries BCE. My special thanks to Dean Walton, the geology subject librarian at the University of Oregon, for his help in obtaining some of the more difficult to procure sources relevant to ancient mining in the Arabian Peninsula.

25. Heck 1999, 381.

26. Morony 2019 (176–77) follows Heck to this mistaken conclusion. The other relevant sources that Morony cites, which he appears to have taken from Heck's article, do not support his claim regarding Gold mining in the time of Muhammad whatsoever: see Zarins et al. 1980, 28–29; al-Rāshid 1986, 5, 14. Al-Rāshid merely notes the presence of mining sites near al-Rabadhah, without any indications concerning their activity.

27. Heck 1999, 381; Heck 2003, 57, 262. Here Heck cites in addition, and apparently with specific reference to this radiocarbon evidence, Zarins, Murad, and al-Yish 1980 (28–29), which nonetheless unambiguously identifies these sites as Abbasid-era operations, a finding that the report's authors note is in fact confirmed by the C-14 datings, while affording no evidence or indication at all that they were in use earlier.

28. Luce, Bagdady, and Roberts 1976, 1. Al-Rāshid 1980 (98–99) also reports a date of the eighth and ninth centuries for mining activity at the site. Al-Rāshid (128–29) notes some references to the

mine by later Islamic historians but does not provide any archaeological evidence of its functioning in the sixth or seventh centuries.

29. Zarins, Murad, and al-Yish 1980, 27–29, 32; De Jesus et al. 1982, 63, 71, 74, 76–78; Zarins et al. 1981, 34; and Hester et al. 1984, 130, 135

30. Sabir 1991, 4. See also Twitchell 1958, 247.

31. Heck 2003, 262. Sabir refers to Roberts et al. 1975 in toto, without a specific page number. Nevertheless, I could not find this data anywhere in the Roberts report, even by searching an OCR version of the text. For the date actually given by this report, see ibid., 26–27.

32. Hilpert, Roberts, and Dirom 1984, 3. Why the CE dates are given as 430 CE–830 CE rather than 450 CE–850 CE, is not clear, but it would appear that Heck has taken these numbers from this study, which interprets the radiometric data as equivalent to "A.D. 430 to 803" in one instance (a typo?), and then on the same page "A.D. 430 until 830." This study is also the only source that I am aware of that has clearly published the raw data from the radiometric analysis.

33. Heck 1999, 381, which cites Ackermann 1990, 27.

34. Schmidt et al. 1981, 1, 54, 59.

35. Ibid., 1; see also 22, 54. Heck also repeats the claim in Heck 2003 (57), where he adds the claim that "testing at the al-Nuqrah gold and copper mine, in turn, indicates that mining activities took place in the A.D. 675–835 period." He documents both of these claims with reference, again, to Schmidt et al. 1981, this time along with Hilpert, Roberts, and Dirom 1984, 3; and Luce, Bagdady, and Robert 1976, 1–2. Nevertheless, the two latter references have nothing at all to do with either Jabal Mokhyat or al-Nuqrah, the two sites for which the note in question is supposed to provide documentation. I have not come across anything else in the various reports that I have read to support this claim. It may be to some degree accurate (the radiocarbon dates probably need to be calibrated), but Heck does not lead us to any source.

36. Schmidt et al. 1981, 59.

37. Ibid., 59. See below for the calibrated date range, based on raw data indicating 1315 + 250 years B.P.

38. Shanti 1976, 2–3: 1214 ±6 8 BP and 1188 ± 57 BP. The results of the radiocarbon analysis apparently derive originally from the unpublished report in Quinn 1964, 14–16.

39. Theobald 1970, 20; also Roberts et al. 1975, 26–27, 29. These radiocarbon dates appear to be based on the same data recorded by Quinn's unpublished report, so presumably the broader range given above is more accurate.

40. Ackermann 1990, 27.

41. Schmidt et al. 1981, 59; and Collenette and Grainger 1994, 62. The latter reproduces the data from Donzeau 1980, 27. The dates above have been calculated according to the most recent IntCal 20 calibration curve.

42. The best consideration of this boom to date is Morony 2019, the errors regarding pre-Islamic mining in the article, largely occasioned by following Heck, notwithstanding.

43. Among those who have been misled in this way are, in addition to al-Azmeh 2014, 162, Hoyland 2001, 112; Munt, 218–21; Cole 2018, 13; Shahîd 2010, 49–50; Morony 2019, 176, 187; and Anthony 2020, 79.

44. Montgomery 2004, 45.

45. Power 2013, 4519.

46. Power 2014, 85.

47. Power 2013, 4519.

48. Montgomery 2004, 45.

49. Crone 2007, 64–65.

50. Crone 1987a, 114, 149–51, 157, 160. See also Crone 1992.

51. Watt 1953, 3. On the ubiquity of this assumption, see Crone 1987a, 168n4.

52. Crone 1987a, 173.

53. Wellhausen 1897, 79–84. Also Crone 1987a, 172–76; Hawting 2018b, 10, 14–17; Hawting 2018a, 100–110.

54. See, e.g., Hawting 2018b, 16.

55. Hawting 1999; Crone 2010.

56. See Crone 1987a, 185–95.

57. The single best discussion of this particular issue is Hawting 2018a, where the quotation is on 105.

58. Ibid., 104.

59. Ibid., 106, 109.

60. See, e.g., *CdH* 2:154; Hawting 1999, 25; Crone and Cook 1977, 21–22; Shoemaker 2012a, 250.

61. Alter 2007, 371–72. See also Hossfeld and Zenger 2005, 348–58; Cohen 1962, 275; Peters 1920; Mowinckel 1962, 1:170–71, 2:107; Kittel 1929, 279; Gunkel 1926, 368; Schmidt 1934, 159–60; Kraus 1989, 748; Böhl 1946, 2:151; Maillot and Lelièvre 1966, 205; Hauge 1995, 38, 41.

62. Ḥakham 2003, 2:268–69.

63. See, e.g., Hossfeld and Zenger 2005, 349; Robinson 1974, 378–79. See also Frants Buhl in Singer 1901–6, 2:415; Loersch 1993, 19.

64. See, e.g., Lumbard 2006, 112–13; Sardar 2014, 1–5.

65. See, e.g., Neuwirth 2017b, 175–81; 1998, 305–12.

66. See Shoemaker 2021b, 11–15, 65–66, 71–79, 106–7, 116–17, 124–25, 140–43, 146–49, 164–67, 173–84, 230–34; Shoemaker 2012a, 241–57; Shoemaker 2018a, 154–68. *Pace* Anthony, who misreads and misrepresents the information from the non-Islamic sources, in my opinion, as confirming the Islamic tradition's location of the Qur'an's shrine in Mecca, when it unquestionably does no such thing

(see Anthony 2018, 35–39). Also, one should note that Anthony cites as evidence in this article Ananias of Shirak's *Geography*. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the mention of Mecca and its shrine in this text are later additions to the text, which has a very complex transmission history. For instance, the same text also refers to Kufa and Basra, which had yet to be founded when Ananias wrote: surely the reference to Mecca is a similar interpolation. Moreover, this text also identifies Mecca with Pharan in Sinai, which, according to biblical tradition, is where Ishmael and Hagar were sent into exile. Clearly this must be a later gloss. See Ananias of Shirak, *Geography* 25, 27 (Soukry 1881, 37–38); see also the translation and commentary in Hewsen 1992, 27, 71, 71A, 235 n. 15, 265nn190A and 191A, 321.

67. Munt 2014, 49–50. I thank Professor Munt very much for his help with tracking down information about Yathrib/Medina in Muhammad's lifetime. See also Makki 1982, 28–29. One should perhaps note in this instance the recently discovered inscription Murayghan 3 in Yemen, from the reign of the Axumite king Abraha (535–65): "King Abraha *Zybmn*, king of Saba', of dhu-Raydān, of Hadramōt, and of Yamnat, and of their Arabs in the Upper-Country and on the Coast, has written this inscription when he returned from the Country of Maʿaddum, when he seized the Arabs of Maʿaddum taken at [Mu]dhdhirān, chased out ʿAmrum son of Mudhdhirān, and seized all the Arabs of Maʿaddum[, Ha]garum-and-Khatt˙, Ṭayyum, Yathrib, and Guzā(m)." See Robin 2015a, 168–69. Note, however, despite the inscription's claim of sovereignty over Yathrib, this mere assertion offers no guarantee that Abraha actually took control of Yathrib—such monumental propaganda from antiquity frequently includes boasts of a great realm whose boundaries extend beyond a given ruler's current domain. Nor is this phenomenon limited to antiquity—I recall having seen official maps in Syria, for instance, that included not only Antioch and Lebanon but Palestine as well. Indeed, perhaps the more sober conclusion to draw from this inscription is to follow Glen Bowersock, who notes instead that Abraha "greedily assumed the whole range of titles that the kings of Himyar had displayed in the past, titles to which the Ethiopian rulers had long aspired even when they had no legitimate claim to them" (Bowersock 2017, 20). Quite likely, the boast of authority over Yathrib in a monument from south Arabia amounts to little more than that. Were the inscription found in Axum, that would be a different matter, and it would show evidence that Yathrib was indeed on the minds of those in the Axumite court. But its presence to the north of Najran, in the northernmost part of south Arabia, is a different matter altogether—there, awareness of and interest in Yathrib is much more to be expected.

68. Watt 1953, 141.

69. Michael Lecker, for instance, identifies thirteen settlements by name in Lecker 2010 and Lecker 2009. Makki 1982 (29) indicates eighteen individual settlements.

70. See, e.g., Simon 1978.

71. Popenoe 1913, 173.

72. The most important study of these papyri and the world that they reveal is Esler 2017.

73. Broshi 1992, 232–33.

74. Esler 2017, 77–82: in contrast to those at the lowest end of the economic scale, she and her family enjoyed some minor economic surplus from their farm, but the amounts were in fact very minimal, as one might expect from a small farmer who owned her land.

75. Ibid., 74–77.

76. King 1994, 189–91, esp. 190.

77. Crone 1987a, 134–37; Crone and Cook 1977, 22, 24–25. It is now quite clear that the Macoraba mentioned by Ptolemy is not to be identified with Mecca: see Morris 2018.

78. Gadd 1958, 79–84; Robin 2015a, 168–69. See also Ptolemy, *Geography* 6.7.31 (Stückelberger and Grasshoff 2006, 2:630–31); Billerbeck and Zubler 2011, 258–59; ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Theeb 2002, 168, 269, 317 (inscription no. 163).

79. For instance, Potts 1988 (148) finds its evidence for trade between Yathrib and Syria in interviews conducted by J. G. Wetzstein with contemporary Arab informants in the mid-nineteenth century! See Wetzstein 1865, esp. 444. De Maigret considers evidence for such trade in the centuries BCE, for which there is indeed some such evidence, but concludes regarding our period, when similar evidence seems to be lacking, that "Cette route—mieux connue sous le nom de 'route caravanière de l'encens'—a été empruntée jusqu'à l'avènement de l'Islam, son usage s'atténuant toutefois à partir du premier siècle de l'ère chrétienne, lorsque la découverte du régime des moussons (par le navigateur grec Hyppalus, semble-t-il) entraîna l'ouverture d'une voie commerciale par la mer Rouge" (de Maigret 2003, 4). The convergence of many roads on Medina during the early Islamic era is easily attributable to its important status in the new faith and polity of Muhammad's followers.

80. Crone 1987a, 12–50, esp. 24; so also de Maigret 2003, 4. Bukharin 2009 attempts to argue that the caravan traffic did nevertheless survive, and that Mecca was in fact on a major trade route. The argument is fully unpersuasive, however, since it relies on later evidence from the Islamic tradition and frequent, improbable speculations.

81. *Khuzistan Chronicle* (Guidi 1903, 38); *Byzantine Arab Chronicle of 741* 34 (Gil 1973, 1: 12). A possibly earlier reference to Mecca occurs in the *Edessene Apocalypse*, which many scholars date to the very end of the seventh century, although its direct dependence on the *Apocalypse* of Ps.-Methodius, which most scholars date to 692, gives considerable reason for doubting such an early date. For the text, see Suermann 1985, 88–89, 174, and also Martinez 1985 (218–19), which argues for a significantly later date, in light of which the question still seems unsettled.

82. Neuwirth 2014b, xxi–xxii; Neuwirth 2015b, 167.

83. Pregill 2020, 32.

84. For example, in Crone and Cook 1977; Wansbrough 1977; Hawting 1999.

85. So, for instance, Neuwirth 2019a (e.g., 107–8); Neuwirth 2010, 186–88; Neuwirth 2015b; Neuwirth 2017b. See also Sinai 2017, 62–65. It is noteworthy, I think, that Neuwirth does not engage

the work of Macdonald or questions of literacy or linguistic context, which we engage in the following chapter, even in her article on "The Discovery of Writing" (Neuwirth 2015a, 2016a, 2017a). Nevertheless, see now her recent publication Neuwirth 2020, which we will discuss in the following chapter. Sinai cites some of Macdonald's work but misses his important conclusion regarding literacy.

86. Pregill 2020, 30–33.

87. Neuwirth 2015a, 9–10; Neuwirth 2016a, 40; Neuwirth 2017a, 122; Neuwirth 2020, 68. Her failure to cite specific page numbers in these references is quite telling, I think. I find it especially odd that she would claim in this article that Larry Conrad made a "forceful plea for the assumption that such late antique cultural diversity in the Ḥijāz should be accepted as the backdrop of the genesis of the Qur'an" (e.g., Neuwirth 2017a, 122), referring to Conrad 2007. Conrad's notice in this article of contact between Ethiopia and the Yemen in the later sixth century, which is well known, hardly amounts to a plea that Mecca and Medina were imbued with late ancient culture.

5. LITERACY, ORALITY, AND THE QUR'AN'S LINGUISTIC ENVIRONMENT

1. My thanks especially to Michael Pregill, for a series of conversations that inspired the inclusion of this chapter on the linguistic context of the Qur'an.

2. See Larcher 2014, esp. 53; Larcher 2020, 31.

3. Neuwirth 2019a, 8.

4. Ibid., 4, 77.

5. Ibid., 58.

6. Ibid., 143. Sinai also maintains the same position: see Sinai 2017, 48–51.

7. Madigan 2001, 23; also 26–27. See also, e.g., Graham 1987, 89.

8. In her review of Burton's book, Neuwirth criticizes the legal basis on which he makes the bulk of his arguments, but she is otherwise sympathetic to the view that much of the Qur'an had begun to be written down during the lifetime of Muhammad, although she thinks the suras that she identifies as "Medinan" were probably not yet in their final form, at least when she was writing this review. See Neuwirth 1981, 377–79.

9. Gilliot (2004), for instance, argues that Muhammad began a collaborative process of composing the Qur'an with his informants and scribes. Gilliot places an enormous amount of confidence in the reliability of the early Islamic tradition, when it suits his hypotheses, which leaves the argument less than fully persuasive, even if it is informative. Most significantly for our purposes, however, Gilliot reads his selection of sources as describing the Qur'an's formation as beginning with traditions that were composed by Muhammad and his collaborators, without writing them down. These

collaborators then "incubated" those traditions and transmitted them orally, only eventually putting them into writing "little by little" (222).

10. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 1:44; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 35–36. Cf. Nöldeke 1860, 34. Ibn Hishām 1858–60, 1:226. The English translation mistakenly reads "dictated entire verses to a scribe" here.

11. See, e.g., Shoemaker 2012a, 73–117; Shoemaker 2009–11; Shoemaker 2018c; Shoemaker 2019.

12. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:1; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 209.

13. Neuwirth 2019a, 4, 68–80. See also, e.g., Sinai 2006, 120–26; Retsö 2003, 42–47, and *CdH*, 2:442–44.

14. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 2:1; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 209.

15. Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–19, 1:45–46, 2:1; Nöldeke et al. 2013, 36–37, 209.

16. "Daſs der Qorân zu des Propheten Lebzeiten noch nicht gesammelt war, berichtet uns eine unzweideutige Ueberlieferung . . . wenn sie aber den ganzen Qorân gesammelt hatten, warum bedurfte es denn später so groſser Mühe, denselben zusammenzubringen?" Nöldeke 1860, 189–90. See also the same conclusion in Schoeler 2009, 31 and Gilliot 2006, 44.

17. Hawting 2018b, 8.

18. For example, de Prémare 2004; de Prémare 2005; Neuwirth 2010; Neuwirth 2019a; Sinai 2014a; Sinai 2014b; Sinai 2017; Gilliot 2004; Déroche 2019; Donner 2010; Reynolds 2010; Pregill 2020; Dye 2019b; Dye 2019c; Amir-Moezzi 2016; Witztum 2011b.

19. For example, *CdH*; *QHC*; Reynolds 2012; Rippin and Mojaddedi 2017; McAuliffe 2006; Zellentin 2019; Neuwirth and Sells 2016; *QIC*. Only the latter volume includes an essay by Peter Stein (2010), which unfortunately focuses on the evidence for South Arabia. Yet, to the extent that it engages with Macdonald's analysis of the situation relevant to Mecca and Medina and elsewhere in Arabia, it concurs that there is almost no evidence for any significant level of literacy. Likewise, Hoyland (2008) engages with Macdonald's work on early inscriptions, but he does not consider at all the question of literacy in Mecca and Medina in the lifetime of Muhammad, focusing instead on materials from further north, in the Nabatean sphere.

20. One happy exception is Al-Jallad 2020b, which acknowledges the authority of Macdonald's earlier findings regarding language and literacy in this region.

21. Stein 2010, 270. Nevertheless, at the beginning of this article, which focuses overwhelmingly on evidence from South Arabia, Stein proposes "From the situation prevailing in South Arabia, extrapolations concerning other, and less extensively documented, regions can then be made, provided of course that a comparable level of social and economic organization can be assumed" (257). His own words caution against doing so, and yet perhaps the caveat "provided of course that a comparable level of social and economic organization can be assumed" is of the essence. It certainly was not the case that Mecca, Medina, and their environs knew similar levels of social and economic

organization, as seems to be widely acknowledged: see, e.g., Robin 2012, 247–54; Hoyland 2001, 2–7, 36–57.

22. Griffith 2013, 43.

23. Robin 2010, 1. It is true that in an earlier article Robin gives a slightly different assessment of writing:

> De cette injonction, ils déduisent qu'il faut proscrire toute mise par écrit de la Tradition et que les savoirs religieux et profanes doivent être impérativement transmis par un enseignement oral. Cette aversion apparente pour l'écriture aux origines de l'Islam a été considérée par certains chercheurs, comme Patricia Crone ou Jacqueline Chabbi, comme un héritage de la période préislamique, qui se caractériserait par l'isolement, la misère intellectuelle et la prédominance de l'oralité. Une telle affirmation est contredite par l'ampleur du corpus épigraphique légué par l'Arabie préislamique, qui prouve que l'écriture n'était pas l'objet d'une aversion générale, mais que, bien au contraire, elle a été utilisée durablement dans de nombreuses régions (surtout en Arabie du Nord-ouest et du Sud-ouest). (Robin 2006, 321)

Yet at the same time, Robin concedes just a few lines further along on the same page, "On notera l'absence totale de textes littéraires, de chroniques, de traités, de pièces poétiques, de mythes ou de rituels"—in other words, any cultural artifacts, among which one would obviously include the Qur'an or any parts thereof. The only examples of writing that Robin is able to adduce in this regard are monumental inscriptions, which he himself has noted do not exist in Mecca, Medina, or their environs (Robin 2019, 79–80), graffiti, which will be further addressed below, and "les documents de la pratique," among which he includes "correspondances, contrats, listes, aide-mémoire, etc." One suspects that Macdonald's work on the desert graffiti and his explanation of their coexistence alongside a fundamentally nonliterate, oral society may have changed Robin's significantly views between these two publications. It is also certainly possible that more rudimentary, practical writings were produced, but one should note that Macdonald's conclusions and Robin's more recent remarks certainly do not appear to have even these sorts of documents in view.

24. Stein 2010, 269.

25. Macdonald 2010, 22.

26. Neuwirth 2020, 66.

27. Macdonald 2010, 21.

28. Macdonald 2005, 45. See also Macdonald 2015, 29.

29. Macdonald 2015, 8–9.

30. Macdonald 2005, 52–60.

31. Macdonald 2010, 7.

32. Macdonald 2005, 71.

33. Macdonald 2010, 15–16; see also Macdonald 2005, 75–78.

34. Macdonald 2005, 78.

35. Neuwirth 2020, 66.

36. Macdonald 2010, 14–15. This same point is echoed, in effect, concerning the same region in Al-Jallad 2020b, esp. 117. It is true that in this instance Macdonald makes arguments for the existence of writing based on the evolution of the shapes of certain letters, but the careful reader will again note that all of his examples in this instance concern only inscriptions from these northern oases in the period BCE. Likewise, he later refers to developments in the Nabatean script that indicate writing, but these are all located far to the north in Nabataea proper during the fourth through seventh centuries (21) and were only later adopted by Muhammad's early followers for writing in "Arabic." One can see as much clearly from the passage quoted from this same page above, concluding that there was a lack of literacy despite these developments.

37. Macdonald 2010, 22. See also Macdonald 2000, 36, 49, 57–59.

38. Robin 2019, 79–80; see also Stein 2010, 266.

39. Macdonald 2000, 57; cf. Hoyland 2001, 203: "Old Arabic was widely spoken throughout the region. Nevertheless it remained primarily a vernacular, employed by nonliterate peoples."

40. Al-Jallad 2020b, esp. 116–17. Following Macdonald, Al-Jallad also attributes a measure of literacy to the societies of the large oasis towns of northwestern Arabia (as well as South Arabia), who were in contact with the kingdoms to the north of them on the edges of the Mediterranean basin. Nevertheless, like Macdonald, whose work he cites on this point, he makes clear that this finding applies only to these major settlements along Arabia's northern reaches, including, one assumes, the areas of Jafnid/Ghassanid influence, and likewise in the period before the Common Era, long before Muhammad and the Qur'an. Al-Jallad's citation of Macdonald 2010 (9–15) to validate this point makes this limitation of scope abundantly clear, since Macdonald's analysis here, which he cites as the basis for his own statement, exclusively concerns these northern oasis towns in the centuries BCE.

41. Brown 2011, 3.

42. Hoyland 2001, 113–17. See also Watt 1953, 4–10; Crone 1980, 22–26.

43. For example, Tonkin 1992, 13; Gluckman 1965, esp. 81–122.

44. For example, Bellah and Bellah 2011, 117–74; Johnson and Kraft 2017. On the unlikelihood of Mecca and its shrine as the focus of pilgrimage, see Wellhausen 1887, 75–91; and Crone 1987a, 173–77, 185, 196.

45. See, e.g., Gluckman 1965, passim; see also Dowler and Galvin 2011.

46. Such trade, by the way, seems to have given my home state, Oregon, its name. See, e.g., Byram and Lewis 2001; Brooks 2002

47. Crone 1987a, 94, 149.

48. Robin 2006, 321–22. See also, Stein 2005, 151, where this is inferred on the basis of evidence from South Arabia, in conjunction with the much later witness of the Islamic tradition: "Daß sich dieser südarabische Befund wiederum zumindest ansatzweise auf die nördlich angrenzenden Stadtkulturen des Ḥiǧāz übertragen läßt, wird durch die Angaben der arabischen Traditionsliteratur zur unmittelbar vor- und früh islamischen Zeit bestätigt." Robin also invokes the later Islamic tradition in support, although its historical value on this as on so many other points is highly suspect.

49. For example, Robin 2006, 321; Robin 2001, 568.

50. Stein 2010, 268–69, 273; Stein 2005, 152.

51. Stein 2005, 152.

52. Macdonald 2005, 53–54, 64, 67, 74.

53. Neuwirth 2015a. Republished twice as Neuwirth 2016a; Neuwirth 2017a. See also Neuwirth 2017d, 78–79.

54. Gilliot 2006, 44.

55. Schoeler's various studies on such questions are most easily accessed in Schoeler 2006, where one can also find references to the original German articles that have been published in translation in this volume, as well as in Schoeler 2009.

56. Macdonald 2005, 60, 88; cf. Macdonald 2010, 7.

57. Macdonald 2010, 21. Note especially the exception for the Qur'an's "eventual" commitment to writing, which was a notable change introduced in the culture during these early centuries.

58. Schoeler 2006, 23, 73–74; Schoeler 2009, 30–37.

59. Schoeler 2010a, 204–5. Schoeler, however, does allow that some rough notes may have been kept during the interval.

60. See, e.g., Schoeler 2006, 21–23, 87–110; Schoeler 2009, 18–22; Schoeler 2010b, 121–22; see also Dutton 2012, 34. See also Bannister 2014, 43–64, esp. 48–49, 58, which also makes clear the fundamentally oral nature of early Islamic culture signals that we should also understand the Qur'an within this context as, at least in its origins, also a fundamentally oral text.

61. Robin 2006, esp. 321–22.

62. For a survey of these rather limited early witnesses to writing in Arabic, see Hoyland 1997b, 688–95.

63. Hoyland 2017, 64–66; Hoyland 2006, 396, 399, 401–2; Hawting 2000, 37, 42.

64. Hoyland 1997b, 695; Hoyland 2006, 395–96.

65. For the text, translation, and analysis of the most important version, see Lecker 2004. See also Watt 1956, 221–60; and Donner 2010, 227–32.

66. There are indeed multiple versions and variants of the text, which seems to exclude the possibility of a transcript of the original document. See Lecker 2004, which aims to provide a critical edition for the variants.

67. Assmann 2006, 107.

68. Shoemaker 2012b; Shoemaker 2012a, ch. 3; Shoemaker 2014; Shoemaker 2018a, chs. 5 and 6.

69. Al-Jallad 2020b, 121–24.

70. See Robin 2012, 247–54; Hoyland 2001, 2–7, 36–57; Lindstedt 218, 160, 169: "The Yemenites did not view themselves as Arabs before the coming of Islam and neither should the modern scholarship call them that."

71. Al-Jallad 2015, 13n17.

72. Al-Jallad 2018b, 23–24; Al-Jallad 2018a, 326.

73. Al-Jallad 2020c, 12.

74. For example, Gen. 25:3; Isa. 21:13; Jer. 49:8; Ezek. 27 and 38.

75. See Fiema et al. 2015, 409; Macdonald 2000, 61.

76. Al-Jallad 2020c, 30–31; Al-Jallad 2020a, 6.

77. Al-Jallad 2018b, 23–24.

78. Ibid., 24.

79. Ibid., 24; see also Al-Jallad 2020a, 61.

80. Al-Jallad 2020a, 61–62.

81. Larcher 2020, 15. I thank Guillaume Dye for this reference.

82. See, e.g., Al-Jallad 2020a, 69–70.

83. See the Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia, Dadanitic Corpus JSLih 384, accessed February 2, 2022, http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0035802.html; and AH 203, accessed February 2, 2022, http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0033212.html.

84. Crone and Cook 1977, 23–24.

85. Al-Jallad 2020a, 65–66.

86. Al-Jallad 2017b; Al-Jallad 2017a.

87. Al-Jallad 2020a, 47–52.

88. Al-Jallad 2017b, 105.

89. Ibid., 106–7.

90. Ibid., 107, also 120.

91. See, e.g., Browning 1983.

92. Al-Jallad 2020a, 49.

93. Durie 2018. Note that Durie's suggestion on the basis of this linguistic evidence that the Qur'an itself and Muhammad's career should possibly be located in Nabatean areas seems a bit farfetched and is not at all necessary if one takes a more dynamic view of the Qur'an, as we have proposed, rather than insisting that our current version must be identical with the very words that Muhammad himself spoke to his followers. See also Al-Ghul 2006, which argues that the phonetics of

transliterated Arabic papyri from Petra closely resemble the so-called Hijazi dialect and the Damascus Psalm fragment in particular, along with other Levantine texts.

94. Al-Jallad 2017b, 153.

95. Crone 1992, 237–38.

96. See, e.g., the discussion of this topic in Hoyland 2012a, 1069–72; Hoyland 2007.

97. Robin 2010, 1.

98. Assmann 2011, 242n18.

99. Keith 2020, 11.

100. Neuwirth 2019a, 17.

101. Ibid., 5.

102. For example, see Sinai and Neuwirth 2010, 9–10; Neuwirth 2019a, esp. 17–25, quotation at 24; Neuwirth 2010, 45–58, quotation at 56–57; Neuwirth 2015b, 162–67.

103. For example, Neuwirth 2019a, 140–41; Neuwirth 2010, 237–38.

104. See, for instance, Bell and Watt 1970 (38–39, 75–82, 89–98), whose work has long served as an effective *status quaestionis* on the Qur'an in the Anglophone world.

105. Wansbrough 1977, 18–19, 47.

106. Bannister 2014, esp. 278.

107. Bell and Watt 1970, 75–82.

108. De Prémare 2004, 29–45; Motzki 2006, 63.

109. Bell and Watt 1970, 38–39, 89–98.

110. The literature on Johannine Christianity and the Johannine school is vast, but see, e.g., Attridge 2006; Culpepper 1975; Brown 1979. In regard to the Qur'an, see Kropp, 144; and Dye 2019b, 805.

111. Goody 1987, 99–100.

6. REMEMBERING MUHAMMAD: PERSPECTIVES FROM MEMORY SCIENCE

1. See e.g., Schacter 2001b, 10–11 and 184–206; Schacter 1999, 196–98.

2. Rubin 1995a, 130.

3. Schacter 2001b, 14.

4. Ebbinghaus 1885; Ebbinghaus 1913. I have based my summary on Schacter 2001b, 13–15, but see also the more detailed survey in Schacter 1995. For a very brief summary of Ebbinghaus's work, his curve, and their significance, see Foster 2009, 8–11.

5. Schacter 2001b, 14.

6. Ibid., 15–16.

7. For a very brief summary of Bartlett's work, see Foster 2009, 11–23. On the primary significance of these two figures and their research in establishing the fundamentals of memory science, see ibid., 1, 17.

8. Bartlett 1932, 204–5.

9. Ibid., 213. See also Fernyhough 2013, 6–16.

10. Schacter 1995, 9; Brainerd and Reyna 2005, 21.

11. Bartlett 1932, xvii. See also Brainerd and Reyna 2005, 17–18.

12. The procedure and results of this experiment were published in Bartlett 1932, 63–94.

13. Brainerd and Reyna 2005, 21; see also Schacter 1995, 9–13. Similar experiments have been done by New Testament scholars using material from the Jesus tradition with identical results: see McIver and Carroll 2002; and DeConick 2008. In DeConick's experiments, many subjects could not accurately reproduce the text in question even while having visual contact with the written source.

14. The procedure and results of this experiment were published in Bartlett 1932, 118–76.

15. Ibid., 175–76.

16. Ehrman 2016, 136–37.

17. Ibid., 138.

18. The most recent example of a serious, scholarly attempt to mount such an argument can be found in Bauckham 2006.

19. Thucydides, *History* 1.22 (Boehme and Widmann 1894, vol. 1, 24); translation Allison 2010, 1–2.

20. The amount of research and publications on this topic is vast but see Loftus 1979; Loftus 2003a; Loftus 2003b; Loftus and Ketcham 1991; Schacter 2001b, 81–82, 92–97, 112–23, 130–37. From a rather different, but no less relevant, point of view, see also Muggeridge 1961.

21. Crombag, Wagenaar, and Van Koppen 1996, 95.

22. Loftus 1979, 20.

23. See McNally 2003.

24. For example, Tonkin 1992, 40–41, 86–87; Vansina 1985, 4–5.

25. Loftus 1993.

26. Allison 2010, 4.

27. See, e.g., the survey in Schacter 2001b, 88–160. See also Loftus 2005; Loftus 2003b, 231; Loftus 2003a; Loftus, Coan, and Pickrell 1996; Brainerd and Reyna 2005; Hirstein 2005; Roediger and McDermott 1995; Roediger and McDermott 2000; Schacter 1995, as well as the other essays in Schacter 2000.

28. Kessler 2016; see also Dobbs 2008.

29. See, e.g., Parker-Pope 2015. One may also listen to Malcolm Gladwell's excellent podcast on this topic: Gladwell 2018.

30. For example, Clancy 2005, esp. 62–66.

31. Seamon, Philbin, and Harrison 2006, 755.

32. Schacter 2012, esp. 10.

33. Chabris 2010, 6. A more technical presentation of this research has been published in Simons and Chabris 1999.

34. Adler 1931, 73.

35. Brown and Kulik 1977, 73.

36. Draaisma 2004, 52.

37. Neisser and Harsch 1992. See also the summary of this experiment in Draaisma 2004, 52–54.

38. Neisser and Harsch 1992, 21.

39. Talarico and Rubin 2008, 92. See also Talarico and Rubin 2003: the title of the article seems to say it all.

40. Crombag, Wagenaar, and Van Koppen 1996, 103.

41. Ibid., 103.

42. Schacter and Addis 2007a, 778; Schacter and Addis 2007b.

43. Schacter 2001b, 192.

44. Neisser 1981, 3.

45. Ibid., 2, 4–6.

46. Ibid., 6.

47. Ibid., 14–15.

48. Ibid., 15.

49. Ibid., 17–18.

50. Ibid., 10, 19.

51. Bartlett 1932, 213.

52. Neisser 1981, 21.

53. Ehrman 2016, 147.

54. For example, see Foer 2011, esp. 14.

55. Schacter 2001b, 190; Schacter 1999.

56. Schacter 2001b, 190.

57. Foster 2009, 133.

58. Parker, Cahill, and McGaugh 2006, esp. 42

59. Patihis et al. 2013.

60. Peters 1991, esp. 293–95.

61. Paret 2007, 5.

62. Paret 2005, 166.

63. Neuwirth 2013, 193; Neuwirth 2015b, 163.

64. Nöldeke 1892, 56.

65. Bartlett 1932, 213.

66. Neisser 1967, 285.

67. See, e.g., Thompson 2008.

68. See, e.g., Motzki 1991, 3–4, 6–7, 9.; Motzki 1998, esp. 32n4, 63; Donner 1998, esp. 25–29, 283, 287; Versteegh 1993, 48. For more on this point, see Shoemaker 2012a, 85–86, 195–96.

69. Neisser 1981, 3, 12–13, 19.

70. Sinai 2014a, 291.

7. RE-REMEMBERING MUHAMMAD: ORAL TRADITION AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

1. See, e.g., Finnegan 1992, 139–40; Finnegan 2012, 16; Goody 2010, 65; Ong 2012, 57.

2. Ehrman 2016, 181. The work of Jack Goody in particular has focused on this consequence of the move from orality to literacy: see Goody 1977; Goody 1986; Goody 1987; Goody and Watt 1963.

3. Ardila et al. 2010, esp. 689, 699–700.

4. Ehrman 2016, 4.

5. In this regard, an outstanding example is Borrut 2011.

6. Goody and Watt 1963, 344.

7. Donner 1981, 221.

8. An occupied population of around nine million for the former Byzantine territories is determined by the demographic studies in Charanis 1972 (2) and Treadgold 2001 (236). Unfortunately, I can find no comparable estimate for the Sasanian Empire, although James Howard-Johnston's thorough comparison of the Sasanian and Roman empires in this period provides a sound basis for concluding that the population of the Sasanian Empire was roughly equivalent to the Roman Empire in this period: see Howard-Johnston 2003.

9. Donner 1981, 229–30.

10. Morony 1984, 244, 250.

11. Donner 1981, 245. We do not have any good estimates for the number of Believers in this region after the initial invasions, but one would imagine that the numbers were similar to those for Iraq.

12. See, e.g., Shoemaker 2012a, ch. 4; Shoemaker 2003; Shoemaker 2018a, ch. 6; Shoemaker 2022a; Shoemaker 2022b

13. See, e.g., Vansina 1965, 40.

14. Henige 1982, 5.

15. Ibid., 5.

16. Goody 1987, 189.

17. Hunter 1985, 207.

18. Goody 1987, 180–81. See Yates 1966.

19. Goody 1987, 178.

20. Lord 2019. See also Lord 1991.

21. Goody 1987, 170

22. Lord 2019, 4–5.

23. Lord 1956, 323, 327. Both examples are noted and discussed in Goody 1987, 84–86. See also the discussion in Lord 2019, 13–29.

24. Lord 2019, 105.

25. Parry 1966, 188.

26. Goody 1987, 87, 104, 170.

27. Finnegan 1992, 148–49. Finnegan gives several comparisons of different versions of such ballads, in which she concludes that they show remarkable similarity: see ibid., 135–48, 150. To my mind, the variations exhibit, to the contrary, extraordinary differences: only the most basic structural elements remain recognizable. Certainly, if one were to take the profound differences apparent in these dissimilar versions of the same ballad as evidence of what we should expect to have happened to the text of the Qur'an during its oral transmission, we have no reason to supposed that our current version of the text bears much similarity to the version that was initially put into circulation.

28. Goody 1977, 29. One should note that David Rubin is a bit more sanguine than some others about the abilities of oral tradition to reproduce short counting rhymes and ballads than most other scholars: see Rubin 1995a, ix. Nevertheless, when it comes to verbatim recall of a text of any length without a written exemplar, Rubin fully agrees with the consensus of memory scientists that "the whole concept of verbatim recall requires a written record other than human memory" (ibid., 6).

29. Bannister notes that Alan Dundes was seemingly the first scholar to move in this direction, but since he was not a specialist on early Islam and did not know Arabic, his study can be characterized as, at best, intriguing and impressionistic, inasmuch as it lacks the necessary scholarly rigor and detailed knowledge of early Islam to be of much more than probative value. See Dundes 2003.

30. Goody 2007, 142, 141; Goody 1998, 83–86.

31. Goody 2010, 3.

32. Ibid., 3.

33. Goody and Gandah 2002, xiv; reprinted in Goody 2010, 97.

34. Goody gives two different years for this fieldwork in two different publications published within five years of one another: Goody and Gandah 2002, xiii; and Goody 1998, 86.

35. Goody 1998, 86–87; Goody 1987, 178.

36. On the transformative nature of this new technology for anthropological fieldwork, see Goody and Drouet 2005.

37. Goody 1998, 87–88. See especially the chart on page 88 for remarkable differences in the length of the "White Bagre": different recitations ranged from 1,204 words to 6,133 words, with all sorts of variants in between.

38. Ibid., 90.

39. Goody 1986, 9.

40. Vansina 1965, 76.

41. Ibid., 43.

42. Vansina 1985, 65.

43. Engel 1999, 12.

44. Vansina 1965, 44–45.

45. Ibid., 109. See also the much earlier work of van Gennep (1910, 267–71), to which Vansina here refers.

46. Tonkin 1992, esp. 83–94.

47. For example, Staal 1961, 14–15; Staal 1986.

48. Renou 1954, 170.

49. See, e.g., many of the essays in Cantera 2012, including especially Skjærvø 2012.

50. See, e.g., Falk 1990, which sharply critiques Goody on detailed points of the history of early South Asian scripts (Falk's area of expertise) and offers an argument based in South Asian philology that completely leaves aside the decisive evidence against his position from ethnography and memory studies. This is a persistent problem in such arguments for the fidelity of the Vedas's oral transmission over centuries.

51. Staal 1986, 27. See, however, especially Bronkhorst (1989), whose criticisms of Staal's positions in this study seem apt: "Arguments are clearly not present in great numbers in Staal s book; it does, on the other hand, contain a number of suggestive, and sometimes misleading, statements" (307).

52. Goody 1998, 85.

53. Goody 1987, 114–16, 118–19, 122. This chapter is a slightly revised version of an earlier publication—namely, Goody 1985. See also Goody 1998, 93–94; Goody 2010, 46; Goody 2007, 145.

54. Goody 1987, 111, 117.

55. Finnegan 1992, 151, also 109–18, esp. 109–12, 171.

56. Ong 2012, 64–66.

57. Ibid., 65–66.

58. Hunter 1985, esp. 207. See also Hunter 1984; Rubin 1995a, 6; Dow et al. 1956, 117; Bowra 1952, 368–70.

59. Vansina 1965, 40.

60. Accordingly, François de Blois's comparison of the Qur'an with the Vedas in this regard is simply misplaced and inaccurate. See de Blois 2010, 619.

61. Assmann 2011, 6.

62. "Cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity" (Assmann 1995, 130).

63. Halbwachs 1980, 69; Halbwachs 1968, 57.

64. "[Memory] does not preserve the past but reconstructs it with the aid of the material traces, text, and traditions left behind by the past, and with the aid moreover of recent sociological and social data, that is to say, with the present" (Halbwachs 1992, 119). See also Halbwachs 1925, 300.

65. Bartlett 1932, 294–96.

66. Halbwachs 1992, 169; Halbwachs 1925, 371.

67. Halbwachs 1992, 38; Halbwachs 1925, ix.

68. On this point, see also Assmann 2011, 21–23.

69. Halbwachs 1941, 7.

70. Schwartz, Zerubavel, and Steiner 1986, 149, commenting on the same passage from Halbwachs cited above.

71. Schwartz 2000, 31.

72. In his own words, just two years before being elected as president, "I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races . . . and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality" (Baslery 1953, 3:145–46).

73. Schwartz, Zerubavel, and Steiner 1986, 151.

74. Ben-Yehuda 1995, 13–14.

75. See the excellent summary in Crook 2013, 68–70.

76. Lloyd 2007.

77. Vansina 1965, 77.

78. Ibid., 92.

79. Connerton 2008, 60–61. See also Erdelyi 2008, which confirms Connerton's anthropological observations with perspectives drawn from the study of human psychology.

80. Connerton 2008, 67–69.

81. Ibid., 62–64.

82. Bloch 1998, 104.

83. Ibid., 105.

84. Kloppenborg 2012, 108.

85. Assmann 2011, 34–41, 48.

86. Vansina 1985, 23.

87. Ibid., 24.

88. Halbwachs 1980, 94; Halbwachs 1925, 264. See also Assmann 2011 (48–49), which discusses this part of Halbwachs's study.

89. Halbwachs 1980, 94; Halbwachs 1925, 264.

90. Halbwachs 1980, 97; Halbwachs 1925, 268.

91. Halbwachs 1980, 95; Halbwachs 1925, 266.

92. Halbwachs 1980, 112; Halbwachs 1925, 291.

93. Halbwachs 1980, 94; Halbwachs 1925, 265.

94. Kelber 1983, 91.

95. Ibid., 15.

96. Kirk 2011, 820.

97. On the divergent chronologies of Muhammad's death in the historical tradition, see Shoemaker 2012a, 18–117.

98. On the importance of Jerusalem and the Holy Land for Muhammad's early followers, see especially Shoemaker 2012a, 197–265; regarding the importance of the Temple, see also Shoemaker 2021b, esp. 11–15.

99. There have been many such recent studies, but an excellent summary of their collective findings can be found in Walmsley 2007.

100. On the specific Christian sources of these Qur'anic traditions, see Shoemaker 2003; Shoemaker 2022b; Dye 2012; Dye 2022; van Bladel 2008; Tesei 2013–14.

101. Hawting 2018b, 9.

102. Excellent examples of this highly philological approach, ones that show many of its strengths as well as weaknesses, can be found in Witztum 2011b and Witztum 2011a.

103. See, e.g., Neuwirth, *Wie entsteht eine Schrift in der Forschung und in der Geschichte? Die Hebräische Bibel und der Koran*. In this case, the subtitle says it all.

104. On the relation between Qur'anic and Hebrew Bible studies, and the potential value of New Testament form criticism and other methods from New Testament studies for investigating the early history of the Qur'an, see Shoemaker 2012a, esp. 138–46.

105. Goldziher (1889–90, 2:210–11) determined that al-Zuhrī himself did not write either a history of early Islam or a biography of its prophet. Schoeler, however, is more confident that al-Zuhrī was one of the first scholars to commit traditions to writing, suggesting that his notes may have been available to other later scholars. See Schoeler 1989a, 227–31; Schoeler 1996, 32–37. Nevertheless, Michael Cook is more careful in noting the very contradictory nature of the evidence regarding al-Zuhrī role in producing written materials: see Cook 1997, 459–66. See also Robinson 2002, 25. Al-Zuhrī's biography is, like everything in the early Islamic tradition, complex and contradictory, but we

seem to be on the firmest ground in associating his teaching on that tradition with the reign of the caliph Hishām (r. 724–43 CE). See Anthony 2020, 132–40.

106. See Cook 1997; Schoeler 1985; Schoeler 1989b; Schoeler 1989a; Schoeler 1992; Schoeler 2006. Schoeler identifies the middle of the eighth century as the moment when these traditions, which had long circulated only orally from memory, first began to be written down. In regard to the early biographies of Muhammad and the canonical narratives of Islamic origins in particular, see Anthony 2020, 129–50.

107. The two versions have been published together in Lecker 2004.

108. Crone 1980, 6.

109. See, e.g., Finnegan 1992, 109–18, esp. 109–12, 150, 171.

110. As is often widely assumed: see, e.g., Lecomte 1993; Sinai 2011; and more recently, Sinai 2019. Repeating the same rhetorical move that he makes in his article on the collection of the Qur'an, Sinai maintains in the latter work (p. 25) once again that the burden of proof lies on those who think a particular element of this poetry is inauthentic to prove its inauthenticity. Nevertheless, let it be noted that the collective findings of memory science and the study of oral cultures have indeed effectively proved the wholesale inauthenticity of this poetry as preserving the actual words of any pre-Islamic poets. Now, the burden rests entirely on the other side to make better and much more difficult arguments for authenticity on a case-by-case basis.

111. The best discussion of this corpus of poetry in dialogue with studies of orality remains Zwettler 1978.

8. THE QUR'ANIC CODEX AS PROCESS: WRITING SACRED TRADITION IN LATE ANTIQUITY

1. Cook 2000, 124. See also Omar Hamdan's comment on the interventions of the imperial authorities to enforce a standard version of the text: "The results were so extensive that one could only wonder in disbelief if after the second *maṣāḥif* project any remnant of a differing recension were to come to light" (Hamdan 2010, 829).

2. In contrast to Sinai 2010, which, despite its promising title for the present context, remains true to the principles of the Berlin school in understanding the process of the Qur'an's development as a text entirely within the lifetime of Muhammad. This article presents in English some of Sinai's larger German monograph, which follows the same principles: see Sinai 2009. Many of Sinai's insights concerning the processual nature of the Qur'an's composition would find a more plausible home, I would suggest, within a framework that allowed for the Qur'an's development beyond the lifetime of Muhammad and beyond the confines of the Hijaz.

3. Brakke 2012, 265.

4. Assmann 2006, 64–65; Wansbrough 1977, 1.

5. See Ong 2012; and Ong 1967.

6. Kelber 1983, 15, 23–24, 91.

7. Ibid., 28.

8. Ibid., 71.

9. Ibid., 25.

10. Ibid., 19.

11. Ibid., 105, citing here Havelock 1963, 140.

12. Goody 1987, 298–99.

13. Kelber 1983, 31, xxiii.

14. Assmann 2011, 108.

15. With regard to the Qur'an, see the excellent discussion in Dye 2019c, 950–56.

16. Kelber 1983, 92.

17. Assmann 2011, 79.

18. Dye 2019c, 853.

19. Koester 1957.

20. See Cook 2000, 118–22; Welch 1986, 404b.

21. Brockopp 2015, 145–46.

22. Brockopp 2016, 32–33. Although Brockopp attributes this latter position to Wansbrough, rather than himself, it is hard to see how such an understanding of the Qur'an's formation does not follow from Brockopp's model of the earliest communities of the Believers. Wansbrough's very late date for the Qur'an's standardization—around the end of the ninth century—has been largely refuted (we have for this reason omitted the word "centuries" in the ellipsis above), but this aspect of his analysis, which again, seems to follow necessarily from Brockopp's own model, has not been refuted at all; instead, it remains completely viable, albeit within a shorter time period.

23. Among the most important works engaging the modern context, which we will not consider here, is Bryant 2002.

24. Regarding this descriptor, its origins in the study of liturgy, and its application to biblical apocrypha, see Shoemaker 2006, 60–61.

25. Shoemaker 2021a. In addition to the example afforded by biblical apocrypha, with respect to open texts in medieval Judaism, see Ta-Shma 1993. For an excellent example concerning apocryphal texts, see, e.g., Baun 2006, or, for that matter, see also Shoemaker 2001; Shoemaker 2002; Shoemaker 2005; Shoemaker 2009; Shoemaker 2010; Shoemaker 2011.

26. Mroczek 2016, esp. 4–5, 9, 18, 18–20.

27. Larsen 2018; Keith 2020.

28. Breed 2014, 203.

29. Keith 2020, 11.

30. Ibid., 81.

31. Zimmermann 2010, 140.

32. Assmann 2006, 66, 85.

33. Keith 2020, 13, 91.

34. Particularly influential in this regard have been Ehrman 2011, esp. 331–64; and Parker 1997.

35. On the nature of *hypomnēmata*, see Larsen 2018, esp. 11–57, and also Larsen and Letteney 2019, esp. 385–407.

36. Larsen 2018, 90.

37. Ibid., 112, citing Foucault 1997, 211.

38. Larsen 2018, 148.

39. Ibid., 93.

40. For a helpful introduction to this feature of the Qur'an and various efforts to account for it, see, e.g., Witztum 2014.

41. Larsen 2018, 134.

42. Ibid., 4.

43. Larsen 2017, 365, 377.

44. Ibid., 379.

45. Larsen 2018, 111.

46. Ibid., 114.

47. Ibid., 106.

48. Wansbrough 1977, 21, 27, 47.

49. For examples, see Neuwirth 2007b; Neuwirth 2019a; Sinai 2009; Sinai 2010; Sinai 2018. Regarding the harmonizing and contextualizing aspects of this approach, see Witztum 2014, 10–12.

50. Pohlmann 2015.

51. Dye 2020; Dye 2022; Dye 2021. See also van der Velden 2007; van der Velden 2008.

52. See Witztum 2011b; Witztum 2011a; Witztum 2014. See also Paret 1968; Minov 2015; Dye 2019b, 765–66.

53. Witztum 2014, 45.

54. Cited from Arberry 1955. Note that we have removed the recurring refrain, "O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?" which is undoubtedly a secondary addition to both versions of the tradition. Another similar example is the account of the Seven Sleepers at the beginning of sura 18, which also seems to have combined two independent versions of this story that seem to have arisen in oral tradition and do not show evidence of parallels that would indicate a written context. See, e.g. Reynolds 2010, 169; Bell 1991, 1:483.

55. Wansbrough 1977, 25–27.

56. For instance, in Pohlmann's study, a written context for the Moses traditions emerges as more persuasive on this basis than Pohlmann's treatment of the Iblis tradition, in my opinion. Dye's comparison of two of the Iblis traditions, however, more persuasively points toward a written context: see Dye 2020. Less persuasive on this point, in my opinion, is Dye 2022, where the similarities between the traditions are most easily explained as coming from the Christian traditions that were being used as a source. Regarding the arguments advanced in Dye 2019a, see the brief comments on the relevant traditions below.

57. Cited from Arberry 1955.

58. See, e.g., Pohlmann's commentary on sura 7 in *CdH*, 2:271–334, esp. 296–310.

59. See also the analysis of these traditions in Wansbrough 1977 (21–25), where he judges the version of sura 7 to be "the most coherent."

60. Shoemaker 2012a, 178–88.

61. Ibid., 163, 168.

62. Cf. Dye 2019a.

63. Larsen 2018, 123.

64. Bell 1937–39.

65. Larsen 2018, 59–69. For other evidence of such collections in early Judaism, see also ibid., 52–57.

66. Ibid., 61.

67. Ibid., 61–62

68. Ibid., 63–66, where Larsen introduces evidence indicating that the *Rule* was used in this fashion, from both Philo of Alexandria and the manuscript tradition itself.

69. Metso 2007, 70.

70. Collins 2010.

71. Larsen 2018, 67–69.

72. For example, Vööbus 1954, 22–27.

73. MacCulloch 1990, 30.

74. Kelber 2010, 124, referring to Assmann 2011, 87–110, and esp. 104–5.

75. Assmann 2011, vii, 36, 193–95; Assmann 2006, 64, 118.

76. Assmann 2011, 36, 194.

77. Crone and Hinds 1986, esp. 1–3, 37–57. See also Crone 2004, 33–47.

78. Assmann 2006, 66.

79. Again, one can consult Cook 2000, 124 and Hamdan 2010, 829 on this point.

80. Brakke 2012, 265.

81. Graf-Stuhlhofer 1988, 84; translation from Barton 1997, 16.

82. Kelber 2013, 421; Kelber 2010, 117–18. See also Zumthor 1972.

1. So also, Dye 2019b, 754.

2. Renan 1851, 1025; translation Renan 2000, 129.

3. See, e.g., Shoemaker 2012a, 73–117; Shoemaker 2009–11; Shoemaker 2018c; Shoemaker 2019.

4. Foucault 1984, esp. 111–12, 118–20. Similarly, without reference to Foucault, Tommaso Tesei rightly observes in a recent article that "scholars should not attempt to reconcile internal Qurʾānic inconsistencies and should refrain from harmonizing the contradictory picture that often emerges when cross-referencing information in different parts of the text. Indeed, this approach merely reproduces the *modus operandi* of classical Qurʾān exegesis to explain the text as reflecting the life events of a single man or community of men in a specific historical context" (Tesei 2021, 187).

5. See, e.g., Montgomery 2004, 50. Montgomery's arguments in this article, attempting to prove the contrary, are not persuasive. The main evidence introduced, a mythologized biography of Imruʾ al-Qays from the tenth century(!) and poetic references to a body chain alleged to be indicative of Aphrodite's veneration in the pre-Islamic Hijaz do not add up to much, particularly when, as we noted at the end of chapter 7, there is no basis for assuming that the so-called "pre-Islamic" poetry provides any reliable historical evidence relevant to pre-Islamic Arabia, beyond perhaps the memory of some proper names or obscure vocabulary.

6. Munt 2014, 49–50.

7. Crone 1987a, 24; see also de Maigret 2003, 4.

8. Hawting 1999, 14–16. See also Wansbrough 1977, 50–51; Wansbrough 1978, 5–6, 17–22, 39–49; Bell 1926, 42–43; Peters 1994b, 1. There are, of course, a few inscriptions now from the broader region that confirm some degree of Jewish presence, although these are all from the far north of the Hijaz or South Arabia, it seems: see Hoyland 2012b.

9. See, e.g., Crone 1980, 23.

10. Again, see Shoemaker 2003; Shoemaker 2022b; Dye 2012; Dye 2022; van Bladel 2008; Tesei 2013–14.

11. Bellamy 1993, 563; Bellamy 2001, 1, 2, 6; Bellamy 1991; Bellamy 1996.

12. A helpful anthology of many of the main words and passages can be found in Warraq 2002, 42–52.

13. Compare, e.g., Crone and Cook 1977, 3, 17–18, 30, with Crone 2016a, xiii.

14. Crone 1994. See also Powers 1982; and more recently, Powers 2009, 197–224. See also Larcher 2020, 31–45; and Larcher 2014.

15. Conrad 2007, 13.

16. Crone unpublished typescript, 6–7; cf. Margoliouth 1925, 343. Nevertheless, see also Dye and Kropp 2011, 182–83.

17. Cook 2000, 97–98.

18. Rosenthal 1953; Cook 2000, 136.

19. Crone 1987a, 203–14, esp. 210. See also Larcher 2020, 36–38; Larcher 2014.

20. Sinai 2014b, 519–20.

21. Cook 2000, 132–33.

22. Crone unpublished typescript, 8–9.

23. Cook 2000, 137–38.

24. Ibid., 138.

25. Quoted in Lester 1999, 54.

26. Hawting 1999, 46.

27. Translation from Abdel Haleem 2004, 34.

28. Crone 2005, 396.

29. This was noted first in Torrey 1892, 2n1. See also Barthold 1929. The quotation is from Crone 2005, 395.

30. Crone 2005, 395. See also Anthony 2020, 81. Anthony suggests that perhaps an explanation for this seafaring language can be found in an imitation of the Psalms; here he cites Speyer 1931, 448, where a parallel between 10:23–24 and Ps 107:23–28 is suggested. I am not persuaded that this is sufficient to explain the Qur'anic passage; likewise, there are no parallels indicated for the many other references to seafaring. Anthony also cites in this connection Neuwirth 2008. While this article raises the general issue of the Qur'an's adaptation of material from the Psalms, there is nothing specific to any of the passages here in question, even if there is a brief, although not very illuminating, comparison between Qur'an 55:24, another passage to mention seafaring not noted above, and Ps. 104 (pp. 178–79). Moreover, the idea that the Psalms influenced these passages would require that the Psalms were in circulation in Muhammad's Mecca (in Arabic?) and likewise supposed influence from the Psalms cannot explain why the Qur'an here would decide to focus on traditions from this corpus that would have been of no relevance whatsoever to a Meccan audience? (I thank Guillaume Dye for these two observations.) Anthony also suggests that perhaps the Qur'an's repeated mention of seafaring should be connected with Jacob of Edessa's report at the end of the seventh century that Muhammad had traded in Tyre and Phoenicia—a highly speculative, but not entirely impossible, hypothesis.

31. For a complete inventory of these seagoing passages and further discussion, see Crone 2005, 395–96.

32. Ibid., 387–95.

33. Waines 2001, 40.

34. See, e.g., King 1994, 186.

35. Munt 2014, 50; see also King 1994, 188.

36. Crone 2005, 393–94.

37. Crone 1987a, 159.

38. Ibid., 163.

39. Regarding the notion of "landscapes of memory," see Nicklas 2016.

40. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* (Hussey 1860, 2:671–72).

41. Cook 2000, 139.

42. Jeffery 1938. See also Fränkel 1886.

43. Carter 2017, esp. 135; and Kropp 2008.

44. Sinai 2017, 62.

45. See also, e.g., ibid., 63.

46. Wansbrough 1977, 1, 40–43, 47–48, 51–52, 57–58; Wansbrough 1978, 24, 127. See also Adams 1997, 87. An excellent example of how this hermeneutic operates can be found in Dye 2019b, 762–63.

47. Griffith 2013, 57.

48. See Witztum 2011b; Witztum 2011a; Witztum 2014. See also Paret 1968; Minov 2015; Dye 2019b, 765–66.

49. See, e.g., Dye 2019b, 766–69.

50. Tesei (2021) also seeks to address this problem by concluding that the Qur'an was not composed solely within the lifetime of Muhammad in the Hijaz.

51. Sinai 2017, 62.

52. Even Bell was forced to acknowledge this problem in his rather ironically titled *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*: "there is no good evidence of any seats of Christianity in the Hijāz or in the near neighbourhood of Mecca or even of Medina" (Bell 1926, 42–43). Likewise, Peters 1994b, 1: "there were Christians at Gaza, and Christians and Jews in the Yemen, but none of either so far as we know at Mecca." See also Hawting 1999, 14–16.

53. For example, Moffett 1992, 279–81; Gillman and Klimkeit 1999, 82–86. Griffith notes, concerning the spread of Christianity into the Ḥijāz, that "while the documentation for this activity is sparse, it is not nonexistent" (2008, 8). Nevertheless, Griffith does not provide any references here to such evidence outside inference from the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition.

54. See, e.g., Anthony 2014, 14–15.

55. Ibn Hishām 1858–60, 151; translation Guillaume 1955, 105. See also ʿUṭāridī's version in Ibn Isḥāq 1978, 120 and 132; and Tirmidhī 1983, 5:257.

56. On this point, see Shoemaker 2009–11, 303–21.

57. Osman 2005.

58. Wansbrough 1978, 18, 22; see also 5–6, 17–20, 40, 43.

59. Andrew Rippin also notes the significance of this difficulty: see Rippin 2020, 34.

60. Dye 2019b, 772. In this regard one should note the fascinating study by Daniel Beck, which is brimming with all sorts of insight: see Beck 2018. Nevertheless, I find it impossible to reconcile Beck's readings of the Qur'an with a context in either Mecca or Medina. Instead, his interpretations of the text, which find the Qur'an in intensive dialogue not only with Christian but also with Manichaean and Zoroastrian traditions, require a culturally sophisticated and complex context such as Edessa. It is inconceivable to me in the present state of our evidence that we could assume such a context in the Hijaz. Beck's interpretations of the text also seem to assume a very early written tradition, effectively in the lifetime of Muhammad, which is not currently in evidence. Of course, if one were to let go of the myth of the Qur'an's exclusively Hijazi origins (and Beck is already halfway there in effectively eliminating the Meccan tradition), then such influences become extremely interesting possibilities for development of the tradition as it was being transmitted during the mid-seventh century in the sectarian milieu of the late ancient Near East.

61. Baumstark 1927.

62. Cole 2018, 32–34.

63. There are *much* later reports that the Ka'ba contained images of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, but there is no reason to assume that there is any historical reality behind these reports. See Azraqī 1858, 110–11.

64. See also Tesei 2021, 188.

65. Lüling 1974; Lüling 2003. Yet even in such cases, which I do not judge likely, Lüling's additional proposals regarding the role of non-Trinitarian "Jewish" Christianity in the Qur'an's formation remain highly unlikely. On the German academy's scandalously unfair and malicious treatment of Lüling, particularly at the hands of Anton Spitaler, who also enlisted his then student Angelika Neuwirth to torpedo Lüling's work, see Lüling 1996, esp. 101; and Donner 2017. As Donner remarks, Lüling's mistreatment "stands as a dark stain on the record of the German academic establishment of his time" (233).

66. For example, Neuwirth 2009, 411–14; Neuwirth 2010, 24–27; Neuwirth 2019a, 4–6; Neuwirth 2014a, 56–66; Neuwirth 2014b, xxi–xxiii; Neuwirth 2015b, 167–68; Neuwirth 2017b, 166, 179; Neuwirth 2011, 497. Sinai, to his credit, both acknowledges the problem and attempts to find evidence supporting a Christian presence. Yet, when the evidence is not sufficient, he concludes, using a series of unwarranted conjectures, that there was a strong Christian presence in the central Hijaz anyway: see Sinai 2017, 62–65.

67. For example, Sinai 2014a, 282.

68. See, e.g., Dye 2019b, 773, and the various studies referenced there.

69. Farès 2011.

70. See Robin 2012, 247–54; Hoyland 2001, 2–7, 36–57; Lindstedt 218, 160, 169 (where one finds the quotation).

71. Beaucamp and Robin 1981, 45–46.

72. Trimingham 1979, 258, 266. Trimingham is more willing than most to accept rather questionable reports concerning Christianity from the early Islamic tradition, which makes his general conclusions all the more significant.

73. Hainthaler 2012, 42–43; Hainthaler 2007, 137–40.

74. Munt 2015, 252–53.

75. See, e.g., Sinai 2017, 63–64.

76. Villeneuve 2010, 227–28.

77. Ibid., 227–28.

78. For example, Hoyland 2012b.

79. Dye 2019b, 779, 768–69.

80. Pregill 2020, 29.

81. See, e.g., van Liere, 45; Marsden 2012, 1; Tannous 2018, 24–29.

82. Crone and Cook 1977, 3–26; Hawting 1982; Hawting 1980; Hawting 1984.

83. Wansbrough 1977, esp. 43–84, 122–27; Wansbrough 1978, esp. 15–24, 38–45, 98–129. See also Rippin 1985, 153–63; Adams 1997, 78–89; Berg 1997, 4–11; Hawting 1997, 29–36.

84. Here we largely agree with the conclusion reached in Dye 2019b, 784–90.

85. Wood 2022.

86. Shoemaker 2003; Shoemaker 2022b. See also Dye 2012; Dye 2022.

87. Quoting from Crone 2016b, 11.

88. So Neuwirth and Sinai would seemingly have us believe: see Neuwirth 2009, 214–16; reprinted in Neuwirth 2014b, 328–58; Sinai 2017, 48.

89. See Dye 2019b, 778–79.

90. Crone and Cook 1977, 17.

91. Ibid., 18.

92. Dye 2019b, 785–86.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Neuwirth 2017b, 167–68. See also Neuwirth 2017c, 129, where the same quotation appears with only very slight changes. These two articles, one should note, are almost identical with the exception of a few passages.

2. Neuwirth 2015b, 166–67.

3. Neuwirth 2013, 193 = Neuwirth 2015b, 163, emphasis is mine.

4. See, e.g., Neuwirth 2013, 189–96 quotations at 189, 190, and 192 = Neuwirth 2015b, 159–65 quotations at 159, 160, and 161–62; also 177; Neuwirth 2010, 22–24, 34–35, 39; Neuwirth 2019a, esp.

3–4, 10–11, 13–14; 2014b, esp. xix–xx, xxvi–xxviii; Neuwirth 2016b, 178 and 201n2; Neuwirth 2017b, 170–71, 183–84; Neuwirth 2017c, 127.

5. I thank Guillaume Dye for suggesting the relevance of this category from the critical study of religion for characterizing this approach. For an excellent discussion of "protectionist" approaches to the study of religious culture, see Proudfoot 1985, 190–227.

6. Neuwirth 2013, 189–91 = Neuwirth 2015b, 159–60. Note that this article is based on a lecture originally given to the Faculty of Divinity of Ankara University.

7. Sinai and Neuwirth 2010, 4.

8. See esp. Neuwirth 2010, 31–32, 42–44; Neuwirth 2019a, 9, 15–16; Neuwirth 2014b, esp. xix–xx, xxvi–xxvii.

9. Zellentin 2019, i, 154.

10. Pregill 2020, 36.

11. Neuwirth 2013, 192–93, 196 = Neuwirth 2015b, 162, 169.

12. In addition to Neuwirth 2019b see, e.g., the essays by Zellentin, Saleh, Sinai, Dayeh, and Witztum in Zellentin 2019.

13. For example, Smith 1990; Brown 1981, 4–22.

14. For example, Shoemaker 2016, 11–14.

15. Crone unpublished typescript, 10.

16. Neuwirth 2013, 193 = Neuwirth 2015b, 163.

17. *Jesus and Islam* 2015, between minutes 31:00 and 35:00.

18. Lincoln 1996, 227.

19. Crone unpublished typescript, 10.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
CdH	Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad Ali, and Guillaume Dye, eds. 2019. *Le Coran des historiens*. 3 vols. Paris: Les éditions du Cerf.
DA	Ohlig, Karl-Heinz, and Gerd R. Puin, eds. 2005. *Die dunklen Anfänge. Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*. Berlin: Hans Schiler.
EI^{2}	Bearman, P., Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. von Donzol, and W. P. Weinrichs, eds. 1960–2002. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 2nd ed. 12 vols. Leiden: Brill.
HOI	Ohlig, Karl-Heinz, and Gerd R. Puin, eds. 2005. *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*. Berlin: Hans Schiler.
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JESHO	*Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*
JIQSA	*Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JQS	*Journal of Qur'anic Studies*
JSAI	*Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*
JSHJ	*Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*
MTSR	*Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*
OHLA	Johnson, Scott F., ed. 2012. *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
QHC	Reynolds, Gabriel Said, ed. 2008. *The Qurʾān in its Historical Context*. New York: Routledge.
QIC	Neuwirth, Angelika, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, eds. 2010. *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu*. Leiden: Brill.

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