

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 'Abd 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 Yuhannā [يحيى] or Yuhannan as Yahyā, taking the undotted *nūn* to be a *yā*. If they only had the ductus to go by, *yā* 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 Yahyā 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 Yuhannā, 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 *sijjil* 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, *ilāf*, 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 'Uthmān.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 Qur'ān, 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 Šālīḥ, 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 europaea*) 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 Qur'ân*, 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 Gêz (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 Qur'an 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.

A CHRIST FORSAKEN LAND

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 *Hijāz*" 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 Hira 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 Hijaz 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 Šāliḥ]. 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, Hira, or Beth Qatrayē."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 heterogeneous; 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 'Abd 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.