

Qad kunna lā naʿbudu ʾllāha wa-lā naʿrifuhu.
ON THE PROBLEM OF THE PRE-ISLAMIC
LORD OF THE KAʿBA

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This article deals with the problem of the pre-Islamic Lord of the Kaʿba. An attempt is made to critically review the accepted theory that Allah had been the main deity of this shrine long before Islam was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad. The evidence of scripture and our other sources suggests that the heathen Arabs may have been not particularly familiar with the notion of Allah as the greatest deity reigning over a swarm of lesser idols. Deities other than Allah were apparently greatly revered in the Kaʿba, and their role as lords of the sanctuary cannot be easily discarded. As for the concept of Allah as the main deity in the Kaʿba, the evidence seems to stem from the early Islamic period, when the monotheistic notion of God prevailed and brought with it a new understanding of history as a sequence of monotheistic prophecies beginning with the very creation of the world. This concept appears to be mainly responsible for the emergence of the belief that Allah was present in people’s faith from the days of Adam until the final reincarnation of His religion in Muḥammad’s *daʿwa*.

I. The Koran includes two remarkable verses, which refer to the deity of the Kaʿba before Islam. Neither mentions the sanctuary’s god by name. In Koran 27:91 he is named “the Lord of this territory”: *I have only been commanded to serve the Lord of this territory, which has He made sacred; to Him belongs everything. And I have been commanded to be of those that surrender.*¹ In Koran 106:3 he is referred to as the “Lord of this House (or abode)”: *So let them serve the Lord of this House who has fed them against hunger. And secured them from fear.*² In both cases there arises the question to what extent Allah might be assumed to have been the Lord of the Kaʿba before Muḥammad.

II. We possess a profuse body of accounts which trace the history of the Kaʿba back to the time of Creation or even prior to it. This chronological

¹ Trans. A. J. Arberry. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor J. N. Bell for his assistance with the last drafts of this article.

² Trans. A. J. Arberry.

back projection introduces an inextricable link between the very existence of the sanctuary and the veneration of Allah. One of the legendary accounts reported by al-Azraqī on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih asserts that Allah told Adam shortly after his banishment to Earth that the sanctuary had been present in His intention prior to the act of creation.³ Then He chose the place of it on the day the Moon and the Earth were created.⁴ Further Allah stresses that the Ka^cba will be favored over all other sanctuaries on Earth for it will be named after God and made to elicit His mightiness.⁵ According to Mujāhid, Allah had created the Ka^cba two thousand years before anything came into existence on Earth.⁶ In another story, with an *isnād* going back to ʿAlī b. Ḥusayn, Allah entrusted angels with building for the people on Earth a sanctuary to Him akin to the heavenly abode that He created to be circumambulated by the angels.⁷ In a further report it is stated that angels built only the basement of the Ka^cba,⁸ and that every angel descending for some matter to Earth goes to ask Allah for permission to circumambulate the Ka^cba.⁹

In other instances, Adam is represented as the one who erected the sanctuary at the command of Allah. Adam was ordered to circumambulate it as the angels did the Lord's throne.¹⁰ The circumambulation rites present another important hint regarding the possibility of Allah being the "Lord of the Ka^cba." According to some reports, during his pilgrimage to Mecca,

³ *Wa-qabla dhālika qad kāna fī buḡhyatī* (al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka* [Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, n. d.], 1:46).

⁴ *Fa-innī ʿkhtartu makānahu yawma khalaqtu ʿs-samāwātī wa-l-arḍ* (al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:46). It seems that al-Azraqī wanted to confirm the authenticity of this report by adducing *isnāds* to the effect that there were inscriptions discovered on the *Maqām Ibrāhīm* or one of the basement stones of the sanctuary, which proved that the Ka^cba was created on the day of the creation of the Sun, Moon, Earth, and Heavens (al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:78–79).

⁵ *Wa-ūthiruhu ʿalā buyūti ʿl-arḍi kullihā bi-smī fa-usammīhi baytī wa-unṭiquhu bi-ʿaẓamatī* (al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:46).

⁶ Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:32; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʿwīl āy al-Qurʿān* (Cairo, 1954), no. 1688 on Koran 2:127, no. 5866 on Koran 3:95, no. 28125 on Koran 79:29. During that period angels were performing the *ḥajj* rites (*Akhbār*, 1:44, 45).

⁷ Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:34; Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, *ad-Durr al-manthūr fī ʿt-tafsīr bi-l-maʿthūr* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1983), on Koran 2:127.

⁸ Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:36; as-Suyūṭī, *ad-Durr al-manthūr*, on Koran 2:36.

Adam cried the following formula of ritual invocation: *Labbayka, allāhumma, labbayk, labbayka ʿabdan khalaqtahu bi-yadayk, karumta fa-ātayt, qarrabta fa-adnayt, tabārakta wa-taʿālayt, anta rabbu ʾl-bayt*: “Here I am, O God, here I am, Here I am, Your servant, whom You created by Your hand, You are generous and benevolent, You make us near to You, You are most blessed and exalted, You are the Lord of the House.”¹¹ Thus Adam is assumed to have been the first believer in Allah, while Mecca with its shrine is declared the primeval cultic location of this deity.

Later on, when Abraham resolved to build a sanctuary to Allah on Earth, Allah lifted him to heaven from whence he could better determine a new location for the sanctuary. Despite the fact that the Kaʿba had been lain waste by the deluge, Abraham was swift to choose its previous place and the angels acclaimed him for this wise decision: “O, friend of Allah, you have chosen the sacred place of Allah on Earth.”¹² The Muslims believe that the Kaʿba has continued to serve as Allah’s abode during the ensuing ages. Muslim authors say that Gabriel appeared in front of Hagar, after she had been left alone in the arid valley of Mecca, and told her: “Here is the first sanctuary, which was built for the people of Earth, and it is the Ancient Abode of Allah.”¹³ In a version of the story of Abraham and Ishmael building the Kaʿba, with another *isnād*, al-Azraqī reports that Abraham came to Mecca to inform his son that he had been commanded by Allah to build a sanctuary for Him.¹⁴

The most important thing for us is that the mythological strata, which underlie the extant Muslim accounts about the history of the Meccan sanctuary, formed the necessary background for the origin of the theory which makes the Kaʿba the earthly abode of Allah. Traces of this belief can be found in a considerable number of accounts concerning the Jāhiliya. In many cases, the references to the relation between the Kaʿba and the cult of Allah remain rather oblique—a detail which suggests that they are of an early ori-

¹¹ M. J. Kister, “*Labbayka, Allāhumma, Labbayka*: On a monotheistic aspect of a Jāhiliyya practice,” *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 51 n. 10.

¹² *Fa-qālat lahu ʾl-malāʾikatu: yā khalīla ʾllāhi, ʾkhtarta ḥarama ʾllāhi taʿālā fī ʾl-ard* (al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:53).

¹³ *Wa-ashāra lahā ilā mawḍiʿi ʾl-bayti [wa-qāl]: hādhā awwalu baytin wuḍiʿa li-n-nās, wa-huwa baytu ʾllāhi ʾl-ʿatīq* (al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:56). Aṭ-Ṭabarī points out that an angel appeared before Hagar and told her that she was standing in front of the ancient abode of Allah, which would be [re]erected by Abraham and Ishmael (*Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, no. 1687 on Koran 2:127).

¹⁴ Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:60; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, no. 1695 on Koran 2:127.

gin, and something which made it easier for Islamic sources to accept them as convention. As a result, efforts to prove the relation between the Ka'ba and the cult of Allah were not widespread among medieval Muslim authors, who preferred to fill their reports with hints about its existence.

In a verse attributed to Qays b. al-Ḥudādīya al-Khuzā'ī, the poet swears by the House of Allah (*bayt Allāh*), where his tribesmen used to cut their hair during the annual pilgrimage.¹⁵ In a story related by al-Mas'ūdī one Shahna b. Khalaf al-Jurhumī is reported to have said in a verse reply to 'Amr b. Luḥayy (*baṣīṭ*): *Yā 'amru, innaka qad aḥdathta ālihatan / shattā bi-makkata ḥawla 'l-bayti anṣābā // wa-kāna li-l-bayti rabbun wāḥidun abadan, / faqad ja'alta lahū fī 'n-nāsi arbābā // la-ta'rifanna bi-anna 'llāha fī mahlin / sa-yaṣṭafī dūnakum li-l-bayti ḥujjābā.* ("O 'Amr, you have introduced numerous gods in Mecca, who remain erected around the Ka'ba. After there had always been only one god in the abode, you made many lords for the people. But you should know for certain that Allah, though in His own good time, will choose others [than your tribe al-Jurhum] to be custodians of the abode.")¹⁶ In a report related by al-Azraqī 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib is said to have told the messenger of the Yemeni ruler Abraha, who set out to destroy the Ka'ba: *hādhā baytu 'llāhi 'l-ḥarām wa-baytu ibrahīma khalīlihi.* ("This is the sacred abode of Allah and the abode of his friend Abraham.")¹⁷ In turn Ibn Ishaq relates that when the Arabs heard of Abraha's intention to destroy the Ka'ba, which he undisputedly calls *baytu 'llāhi 'l-ḥarām* (the sacred abode of Allah),¹⁸ they called for jihad in defense of Allah's

¹⁵ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-aṣnām* (Cairo, 1924), 21.

¹⁶ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj adh-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar* (Beirut, 1966), 1:326–27.

¹⁷ Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:143; Ibn Ishāq, *Sīrat an-nabī* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, n. d.), 1:49; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ ar-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n. d.), 2:133; *Jāmi' al-bayān*, no. 29405 on Koran 105. Though a bit later, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib would say to Abraha himself only that the house had its lord who would defend it (*Inna li-l-bayti rabban sa-yamna'uhu*; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, 2:134) without mentioning Allah by name. It is worth pointing out that Kister referred to the same conversation, yet reported to have taken place in San'a' between Abraha and some Meccan merchants residing there (M. J. Kister, "Some reports concerning Mecca from Jāhiliyya to Islam," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 15 [1972]: 65).

¹⁸ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:46–47; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, 2:132; al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:141. In another report al-Azraqī consigns the events to an even earlier period when, as he states, one of the Yemeni kings (the *tubba's*) wanted to lay waste the Ka'ba and was counseled by his priests not to do so because it was "the sacred abode of Allah" (*Akhbār*, 1:133).

abode.¹⁹ Subsequently when the attack of the Abyssinians on the Ka^cba seemed immanent, “‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib and a group of his tribesmen came to call upon Allah for help against Abraha and his troops.”²⁰ Perhaps the ultimate source of a considerable number of accounts employing the story about Abraha might be sought in *Sūrat al-fīl*, according to which Allah severely punished the Abyssinians for their attempt to destroy the sanctuary in Mecca.

The later commentator Ibn Kathīr, in his glosses on Koran 27:91 and Koran 106:3, mentions in a clear reference to Allah that *rabbu hādhihi ʾl-baldati* is “the Lord of all and its possessor, except Whom there is no god.”²¹

Medieval Islamic authors asserted the notion of Allah as the Lord of the Meccan shrine in numerous accounts. The review of this data suggests that Allah was the main deity worshipped in Mecca. There may of course be doubts about the reliability of the accounts concerning the early history and the building of the Ka^cba, but as for the late Jāhīliya there would seem to be little reason to doubt their reliability. Consequently the theory of Allah’s predominance in the Meccan sanctuary before Islam found its way into modern Western studies.

In many of these studies the assumption that Allah was already before Islam the Lord of the Ka^cba is closely connected with the divine-hierarchy theory which proclaims Him to be the highest deity of all Arabs. Watt is prone to believe that the Koran, by speaking of God as the ‘Lord of this House,’ accepts the Meccan sanctuary as a sanctuary of God.²² According to him “the identification of the Lord of the Ka^cbah with God is taken for granted.”²³ Similarly, according to Rubin, “the Ka^cba was actually considered as ‘the sacred House of Allah.’”²⁴

¹⁹ *Wa-da^cā . . . ilā ḥarbi abraha wa-jihādihī ʿan bayti ʾllāhi ʾl-ḥarām* (Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:47; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 2:132, and *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, no. 29405 on Koran, sura 105).

²⁰ *Thumma qāma ʿabdu ʾl-muṭṭalibi wa-qāma ma^cahu nafarun min al-quraysh yad^cūna ʾllāha wa-yastanṣirūnahu ʿalā abraha wa-jundihi* (Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:51; also aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 2:134).

²¹ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm* (Beirut: Dār wa-Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1986), 4:369. Cf. the verse attributed to ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib by al-Masʿūdī: *yurīdu ka^cbatakum wa-llāhu māni^cuhū* (“He desires your Ka^cba, but Allah shall prevent him”). *Murūj*, 1:382.

²² Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 58.

²³ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

²⁴ U. Rubin, “The Ka^cba. Aspects of its Ritual Functions and Position in Pre-

The analysis of Izutsu proceeds in the same vein. He is inclined to accept that Allah “was considered the ‘Lord of Ka‘bah’ the highest sanctuary of Central Arabia.”²⁵ Yet despite his statement that “this we can prove by ample evidence from pre-Islamic poetry,”²⁶ he confines himself to adducing Koran 106:3 and asserting that the idea of Allah being the Lord of the Ka‘ba is taken for granted.²⁷

Seeking evidence, Kister adduces the *talbiya* of Adam, quoted above, in order to emphasize the fact that Allah had been the Lord of the Ka‘ba before the rise of Islam.²⁸ In a subsequent comment he points out that “[the ancient Arabic tribes] believed however in a supreme God, who had His House in Mecca.”²⁹

In general, a neat line of tradition when it comes to the Lord of the Ka‘ba before Islam may be observed. The Islamic monotheistic vision of history as a phenomenon of divine influence in the affairs of the earthly realm definitively posited that the Ka‘ba had always potentially existed in Allah’s creative intention. The period of latency ended when Allah initiated creation. One of the first acts of creation was to bring the Ka‘ba into actual existence as an earthly place for worshipping Allah, akin to the one already existing in the heavens. This concept was enhanced by the medieval Islamic authors to such an extent that any doubt about the identity of the pre-Islamic Lord of the Ka‘ba was ruled out. Closely related is the notion of the High God—another attribute of the Jāhili Allah.

Finally, these two overlapping concepts were reinforced by the efforts of modern students of the Jāhiliya and early Islam. Study of the late pre-Islamic

Islamic and Early Islamic Times,” *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam* 8 (1986): 105. Cf. also the author’s statement: “From other reports one may conclude that blood was consecrated not only to the idols, but to the Lord of the Ka‘ba as well, i.e., to Allah” (*ibid.*, 106).

²⁵ T. Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran* (Tokyo: Keio University, 1964), 103.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ This kind of argumentation is reflected in the position of G. E. von Grunebaum, who states that the assumption of Allah being the Lord of the Ka‘ba “seems quite defensible” (*Classical Islam*, trans. Katherine Watson [Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970], 25), as well as in that of the Russian author L. I. Klimovich, who posits that “the ancient god of Quraysh Allah assumed a dominant position within the gods of the dependent tribes” and that “Allah was the Lord of the Quraysh sanctuary Ka‘ba” (*Islam* [Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1962], 15).

²⁸ Kister, “*Labbayka*,” 45.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

period showed that the Arabs believed in a deity named Allah who occupied a high position in their minds.³⁰ Further, comparative study of adjacent regions, where ancient cultures had flourished, suggested that the Jāhili belief in Allah may well have been affected by the religion of Yemen or North Arabia, where Allah was known not only by name, but also as an elevated divine power. Again, around the time of the emergence of Islam, the Meccan belief in Allah became so similar to the Islamic one that Izutsu wonders “why such a right understanding of God does not finally lead the disbelievers to acknowledging the truth of the new teaching.”³¹ But if we return to the primary sources, rigorous scrutiny will reveal interesting data.

III. In a remarkable conversation between the prophet Muḥammad and Saʿd b. Muʿādh, the latter is reported by Ibn Ishāq to have said: *Qad kunna . . . ʿalā sh-shirki bi-llāhi wa-ʿibādati ʿl-awthāni, lā naʿbudu ʿllāha wa-lā naʿrifuhu*. (“Our practice towards Allah was shirk and idolatry. We did not worship Allah, nor had we knowledge of him.”)³² Another less explicit version of the conversation, this time between ʿUyayna b. Ḥasan and ʿAbbād b. Bishr is introduced by al-Wāqidī on the authority of Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab. Here ʿAbbād only points out that “we did not worship anything,”³³ but the general setting of the story clearly implies that not worshipping “anything” includes not worshipping Allah.

In another report, related by al-Wāqidī on the authority of ʿAbd Allāh b. Zubayr on the events involving ʿĀʾisha in year six of the Hijra, Abū Bakr aṣ-Ṣiddīq himself is reported to have told the Prophet concerning the Jāhiliya: *wa-mā qīla lanā hādihā fī ʿl-jāhiliyati, ḥaythu lā naʿbudu ʿllāha wa-lā nadʿū³⁴ lahu shayʿan*, (“We have not heard such things [about us] even during the Jāhiliya, when we did not believe in Allah, nor did we call

³⁰ See, for instance, Carl Brockelmann, “Allah und die Götzen, der Ursprung des islamischen Monotheismus,” *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 21 (1922): 99–121.

³¹ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 101. Brockelmann’s “Allah und die Götzen” attributes to the pre-Islamic Allah so many world-view notions that this deity appears completely identical with the Allah of Islam. However any presentation of this kind raises major questions. What are the differences between the concepts of the divine in the Jāhiliya and Islam? What were the causes of the transformation from the former to the latter, and why did it take place at all?

³² Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 3:239.

³³ *Wa-naḥnu lā naʿbudu shayʿan* (*Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones [London: Oxford University Press, 1966], 2:479).

³⁴ The verb found in Marsden Jones’s edition is *nadaʿu*, but it seems that *nadʿū* would be a more reliable reading.

upon him at all.”)³⁵

The direct statements of Sa‘d b. Mu‘adh and Abū Bakr aṣ-Ṣiddīq, and the oblique one by ‘Abbād b. Bishr, all suggest that the pre-Islamic spiritual milieu can hardly be assumed to have incorporated any concept of Allah. Hence a significant question arises. If the reports related by al-Wāqidi and Ibn Ishāq are to be lent credibility, do they indeed call in question the attested theory of the existence of Jāhili belief in Allah? And if so, to what extent may one doubt that which tradition has long since made to seem an ultimate truth?

There are many accounts in the sources that can shed additional light on this important question.

We can easily trace references to the Lord of the Ka‘ba back to the Jāhili period, when the genitive constructs *rabbu ‘l-ka‘bati* and *rabbu makkata* were frequently employed in oath formulae. In a verse by ‘Adī b. Zayd we find an interesting relation between the Christian symbol of the Cross and the Lord of the Ka‘ba: *Sa‘ā ‘l-a‘dā‘u lā ya‘lūna sharran / ‘alayya, wa-rabbi makkata wa-ṣ-ṣalībī*. (“The enemies came upon me without sparing their evil, by the Lord of Mecca and [by] the Cross.”)³⁶ In his analysis of this verse Izutsu identifies the Lord of the Ka‘ba as Allah and concludes that pre-Islamic Christians tended towards “identifying their Christian concept of Allah with the purely pagan Arabian concept of Allah as Lord of the Meccan shrine.”³⁷ The poet has indeed juxtaposed these two so different religious concepts in an extraordinary way, but the verse does not present any tangible clue that could lead to the conclusion that *rabbu makkata* here is no one else but Allah. The Lord of the Ka‘ba is also present in the oath of Jalīla bint Murra addressed to her father at the end of *ḥarb al-Basūs*,³⁸ but here again we discern only a strong veneration of that deity without any clue as to its possible identity.

The Muslim accounts about early Islam can yield additional details about the Lord of the Ka‘ba. Notions concerning this deity are clarified in the stories about the dogmatic altercations between Muḥammad and his heathen foes. When Muḥammad embarked on his early preaching, the polytheists apparently tried to mitigate the dissension he was causing by encouraging a convergence between their old religion and the new one. According to Ibn

³⁵ *Maghāzī*, 2:433.

³⁶ Al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī* (Beirut, 1986), 2:103. *Ṣalīb* must be rendered “cross,” not “crucified,” as Izutsu would prefer (*God and Man*, 104).

³⁷ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 105.

³⁸ Al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 5:67.

Ishāq, al-Aswad b. °Abd al-Muṭṭalib, al-Walīd b. Mughīra, Umayya b. Khalaf, and al-°Aṣ b. Wā°il went to Muḥammad and informed him that they and their people were ready to accept his belief, provided that he embraced their belief as well.³⁹ It did not take the Prophet long to reject this proposition, as can be seen in the text of the Koran: “Say: ‘O unbelievers, I serve not what you serve and you are not serving what I serve, nor am I serving what you have served, neither are you serving what I serve. To you your religion, and to me my religion.’”⁴⁰

The story of the proposition to exchange beliefs and the reception it received contains a number of interesting peculiarities. In all the relevant reports the polytheists seem not to have had any positive knowledge of Muḥammad’s deity. They called it *ilāhuka*⁴¹ or *ma°būduka*⁴² and viewed it as something in obvious opposition to their own objects of worship. Such lack of awareness of Muḥammad’s concept of divinity is quite perplexing, if we take for granted that the pre-Islamic Arabs knew of Allah and deemed him their highest deity and the Lord of the Ka°ba. The answer might be that Muḥammad’s understanding of Allah was such a great deviation from the Jāhili tradition that the heathen Arabs were unable to discern in it any notions familiar to their way of thinking. But the question still stands how the polytheists in Mecca could disregard the fact that Muḥammad worshipped the same deity that they worshipped and refer to it by such generic terms as *ilāhuka* and *ma°būduka* rather than mention it by name. If Islam intended from its very beginning to reform the already existing heathen concept of Allah, then Muḥammad’s foes would have felt offended by his attempt to change the way they worshipped their highest deity. Hence the

³⁹ *Wa-°tarāḍa rasūla °llāhi wa-huwa yaṭūfu bi-l-ka°bati fīmā balaghanī °l-aswadu bnu °l-muṭṭalibi bni asadi bni °abdi °l-°uzzā wa-l-walīdu bnu °l-mughīrati wa-umayyatu bnu khalafin wa-°āṣu bnu wā°il, wa-kānū dhawī asnānin fī qawmihim, fa-qālū: yā muḥammadu, halumma fa-l-na°bud mā ta°bud, wa-ta°bud mā na°bud, fa-nashtarika naḥnu wa-anta fī °l-amr, fa-in kāna °lladhī ta°budu khayran mim mā na°bud, kunnā qad akhadhnā bi-ḥazzinā minhu, wa-in kāna mā na°budu khayran mim mā ta°bud, kunta qad akhadhta bi-ḥazzika minhu* (Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:386). In a report by aṭ-Ṭabarī on the authority of Ibn °Abbās the proposal was that Muḥammad and the heathens should exchange their respective gods every year (aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta°rikh*, 2:337, *Jāmi° al-bayān*, on Koran 109; also Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 6:496; al-Wāhidī, *Asbāb al-nuzūl* [Beirut, 1983], 342).

⁴⁰ Koran 109:1–6; trans. A. J. Arberry.

⁴¹ Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta°rikh*, 2:337; al-Wāhidī, *Asbāb*, 342.

⁴² Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 6:496.

dogmatic altercation between Muslims and heathens could be expected as a rule to mention Allah by name. In spite of this we find only a number of general references to an indistinguishable object of faith, whose name remains unknown.

In this respect attention has to be drawn to the relative pronoun *mā* used in the Koranic verse which rejects the polytheists' proposal. The generic *mā* signifies something highly unspecified, which prompts the conjecture that perhaps at this early stage of his *da'wa* the Prophet did not have a clear notion of the supreme divine authority and that his proclamations stemmed from a somewhat erratic set of beliefs, "what I serve" (*mā a'budu*). The main feature of this early state of devotion was its conscious rejection of certain pre-Islamic values—"what I serve" (*mā a'budu*) vs. "what you serve" (*mā ta'budūna*)—and some time was to elapse before this partial disparity could evolve into its final form as the total opposition of monotheism (with its single and absolute divine authority) to polytheism. The rough state of Muḥammad's conception of God during his early ministry is reflected in the Koran itself, the first Meccan suras being devoid of the name Allah.⁴³

After his initial rejection of the proposal to converge the two religions, Muḥammad's intransigence softened somewhat. The Prophet was worried by the animosity of the majority of Quraysh towards him, and at a certain stage he agreed to some concessions. It is true that they did not amount to recognition of the Jāhili religion on equal terms, but still they conferred some authority on the pre-Islamic idols. The main condition seems to have been that those idols should be consigned to a position subservient to that of Muḥammad's deity. The ultimate purpose of the *gharānīq* or "Satanic" verses was to mitigate the conceptual rupture between the Jāhiliya and Islam. They can hardly be deemed an attempt to reinvigorate an already existing religious belief in *shafā'a*, or intercession. When the heathens heard

⁴³ An even earlier instance of lack of recognition of Allah might be suggested by the Prophet's conversation with Abū Ṭālib, which apparently took place shortly after the first revelations came to Muḥammad. Here the Prophet expounded the principles of his religion to his uncle and invited him to embrace it with the words: *Ayyu 'ammī, hādihā dīnu ʾllāhi wa-dīnu malā'ikatihī wa-dīnu rusulihī wa-dīnu abīnā ibrahīm* ("O my uncle, this is the religion of Allah and his angels and his prophets, and it is the religion of our father Abraham"). Abū Ṭālib opposes himself to this bold description of the new religion, saying: *yā ʾbna akhī, innī lā astaṭīʿu an ufāriqa dīnī wa-dīna ābāʾī* ("O son of my brother, I can not leave aside my religion and that of my ancestors"). Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 2:313; Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:265.

the *gharānīq* verses for the first time,⁴⁴ they only acknowledged a limited sovereignty to Allah, and told Muḥammad that if he would make a place in his system for their idols, they would share his belief.⁴⁵

In short order—according to aṭ-Ṭabarī’s second version of the events on the very same evening⁴⁶—the *gharānīq* innovation was abrogated. Perhaps Muḥammad sensed that it would obliterate the difference between his message—his attempt to change the religious habits of Quraysh—and the tribe’s own ancient religion. If he were to accept the idols, both Muslims and heathens could conclude that Islam had failed to achieve its main objectives.

After the apparent failure of the convergence attempt, the heathens tried another tactic: to sever the two religions completely. Ibn Sa’d relates an interesting story about a conversation between Muḥammad and the polytheists of Quraysh, who tried to persuade the Prophet to arrange a deal satisfying both sides: *Qālū: tada’unā wa-ālihatanā wa-nada’uka wa-ilāhaka*. (“You leave us with our gods, and we will leave you with yours.”)⁴⁷

Muḥammad vehemently rejected this proposition and, in his turn, tried to persuade Quraysh to convert to belief in his deity. They felt obvious aversion (*ishmi’zāz*) towards this proposition, and, as Ibn Iṣḥāq adds on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās, the heathens cried: *A-turīdu, yā muḥammadu, an taj’ala ‘l-ālihata ilāhan wāḥidan? Inna amraka la-‘ujbun*. (“Do you, Muḥammad, want to make of the gods one god? Indeed yours is a presumptuous affair.”)⁴⁸ Ibn Kathīr relates the same story, also on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās, who reckons it to the period of Abū Ṭālib’s illness. Actually, the story is situated in the *Sīra* around the same period, yet without any temporal hints.

On the other hand, sura 38:1–7 to which this gloss is attached is of later

⁴⁴ *A-fa-ra’aytumū ‘l-lāta wa-l-‘uzzā, wa-manāta ‘th-thālithata ‘l-ukhrā. Tilka ‘l-gharānīqu ‘l-‘ulā. Inna shafā’atahunna la-turtajā*. (“Have you considered al-Lāt and al-‘Uzzā. And Manāt, the third, the other. Those are the high flying cranes. Surely their intercession may be hoped for.”) Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 2:338, 340.

⁴⁵ *Wa-qālū: qad ‘arafnā anna ‘llāha yuḥyī wa-yumīt, wa-huwa ‘lladhī yakhlūqu wa-yarzuq, wa-lākin ālihatuna hādhihi tashfa’u lanā ‘indahū, fa-idhā ja’alta lahā naṣīban, fa-naḥnu ma’aka* (aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 2:340; *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, no. 19155 on Koran 22:52).

⁴⁶ *Ta’rīkh*, 2:340.

⁴⁷ Ibn Sa’d, *Kitāb aṭ-ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (Beirut, 1960), 1:202; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, no. 10693 on Koran 6:108; as-Suyūṭī, *ad-Durr al-manthūr*, on Koran 6:108.

⁴⁸ Ibn Iṣḥāq, *Sīra*, 2:27; cf. Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣṅām*, 33; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, on Koran 38:5.

origin than sura 109. Most noteworthy in this case is that when addressing Muḥammad, the polytheists already speak about “your god,” a feature that indicates an important development within the early Islamic notion of the divine. The vague devotional concept conveyed by the relative pronoun *mā* has now turned into a rigorous assertion of a tangible divine authority, which in another gloss is referred to already by the definite relative pronoun *alladhī*. This development corresponds to the view of Welch that at the beginning the Arabs were not summoned to believe in Allah and that only later the divine name *ar-Raḥmān* was introduced.⁴⁹

The conceptual development of early Islam continued alongside the encounters between Muḥammad and his foes, and a more stringent formulation of the Muslim doctrine of the divine soon became indispensable. In a gloss at Koran 4:108, Ibn Ishāq attributes to Abū Jahl the threat to revile Muḥammad’s god (*ilāhaka*), if he did not cease to abuse the gods of the polytheists (*ālihatanā*).⁵⁰ The opposition here is clear and indicates that a conceptual rupture now unquestionably existed between nascent Islam and the Jāhilī notions of the divine. Particularly striking is the threat to abuse Muḥammad’s God. It is perplexing to think of the Meccans as willing to vilify their own High God: an unavoidable conclusion if one accepts that to a degree he shared identity with the deity of Islam.

The opposition between Muḥammad’s god and the Jāhilī objects of devotion is not confined to the vituperation account. The heathens regularly spoke of “your god” and “our gods,” thus affirming verbally the difference between them. For instance, some heathens decided to plead with Abū Ṭālib to ask his nephew to desist from abusing their gods, upon which they would “leave him with his own god.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ A. T. Welch, “Allah and Other Supernatural Beings: The Emergence of the Qur’anic Doctrine of *Tawḥīd*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 47, no. 4 (Dec. 1980), Thematic Issue S, 734.

⁵⁰ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:280–81; We find a similar account in Ibn Kathīr: *La-nashtumannaka wa-ilāhaka ʾlladhī amaraka bi-hādhā* (*Tafsīr*, 5:123). Aṭ-Ṭabarī reports: *la-nashtumannaka wa-la-nashtumanna man yaʾmuruka* (*Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, no. 10693 and no. 22843 on Koran 4:108 and 38:6).

⁵¹ *Intaliqū binā ilā abī ʾlībīn fa-nukallimahu fīhi, fa-l-yunṣifnā minhu, fa-yaʾmurahu, fa-l-yakuffa ʿan shatmi ālihatinā, wa-nadaʿuhu wa-ilāhahu ʾlladhī yaʾbud* (aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 2:324). Cf. *Fa-lammā dakhālū ʿalayhi qālū: yā abā ʾlīb, anta sayyidunā wa-kabīrunā, fa-nṣifnā mini ʾbni akhīka, fa-murhu, fa-l-yakuffa ʿan shatmi ālihatinā, wa-nadaʿuhu wa-ilāhahu* (aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 2:324). See also *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, no. 10693 on Koran 4:108. There are numerous other instances where Muḥammad’s deity is named “your god” or “your lord.” Thus in the conver-

Despite his prolonged preaching, Muhammad failed to attract his tribesmen to Islam, apparently because there was so little in common between their religion and his. The animosity of the heathens towards the Muslims and their religion increased in the course of time and probably reached its peak sometime around the end of the second decade of the seventh century A.D.⁵²

The conceptual rupture between the sides persisted until the ultimate triumph of the Islamic cause. That the break continued to prevail in the minds of the majority of the Prophet's contemporaries, even after they formally embraced Islam, was spelled out by Abū Sufyān. According to al-Wāqidī, when Muḥammad entered Mecca and the idols around the Ka'ba were demolished, Abū Sufyān told az-Zubayr b. al-ʿAwwām: "I see that if there were another god along with the god of Muḥammad, something else would have happened."⁵³ Though already having accepted Islam, Abū Sufyān was unable to recognize Allah as a divine object native to his own beliefs, as would necessarily have been the case had there been a firm conceptual relation between this deity and the pre-Islamic Lord of the Meccan shrine.

Another remarkable peculiarity is the Prophet's constant call for submission to Allah. While at the outset of his preaching, supposedly, Muḥammad had confined himself to speaking only of his Lord, and not of Allah, on many subsequent occasions, when his doctrine had taken on a clearer shape, he began calling the heathens to Allah. We cite again the vituperation story, which goes on to say that Muḥammad, after the encounter with Abū Jahl, went to an assembly of Qurayshites in order to *yad'ūhum ilā ʿllāh*, to call them to Allah.⁵⁴ Hence the vituperation report may be considered from another angle. The position of Muḥammad's foes seems strange if

sation between the heathens and Muḥammad, mentioned by Ibn Ishāq (*Sīra*, 1:316–17), when asking Muḥammad to call upon his God to produce miracles, they always resort to the compound *sal rabbaka* ("Ask your Lord"). The same phrase was used by Abū Ṭālib. *Sīra*, 1:399.

⁵² Ibn Ishāq gives the following gloomy picture of the situation in Mecca upon Muḥammad's return from at-Ṭāʿif: *Thumma qadima rasūlu ʿllāhi makkata wa-qawmuhi ashaddu mā kānū ʿalayhi min khilāfihi wa-firāqi dīnihi. Sīra*, 2:31.

⁵³ *Faqad arā law kāna maʿa ilāhi muḥammadin ghayruhu la-kāna ghayru mā kāna. Al-Wāqidī, Maghāzī*, 2:832; al-Azraqī, *Akhhbār*, 1:122. Cf. Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 4:22.

⁵⁴ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:381. In a later development, just before the battle of Badr, Muḥammad is reported to have passed by an assembly of heathens and begun calling them to Allah. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 1:617.

they were capable of abusing their own deity. However, the issue becomes further blurred with the Prophet's call to them to believe in Allah. How could he demand from them faith in an already long accepted deity? Perhaps the Islamic concept of Allah was so different from the Jāhilī one that Muḥammad's god had become unrecognizable in the eyes of the heathens. However, is it possible to conclude as well that the very name Allah itself had become unrecognizable? If Allah had existed in the Jāhilī sacred realm, His name at least should have been deeply rooted in the mentality of the people of Mecca.

The results Muḥammad achieved in his endeavor to propagate the belief in Allah among the Arab tribes were not unlike those he achieved with Quraysh. Ibn Ishāq furnishes an ample account of Muḥammad's attempt to persuade some Arab tribal groups to adhere to his religion during the pilgrimage season at Mecca, probably in the summer of 620 A.D. Here again frequent use of the expression "call them to Allah" (*yad^ʿūhum/da^ʿāhum ilā ʾllāh*) may be observed,⁵⁵ with the occurrence of "enjoin to serve/worship Allah" (*ya^ʾmurukum an ta^ʿbudū ʾllāh*) as a variant.⁵⁶ It is important to note that in all these accounts Muḥammad's god proved unrecognizable to the vast majority of tribes, so unrecognizable that even a tribal fraction of Banū Kalb, allegedly called Banū ʿAbd Allāh, failed to embrace the new religion, though the Prophet was keen to assert the sameness of his god and the deity named in the genitive construct representing the eponym of this particular lineage.⁵⁷ In at least one case Muḥammad's *da^ʿwa* was confused with the *majalla*, or "revealed message," of Luqmān,⁵⁸ a clear indication that the initial teachings of Islam were easily associated with some earlier mythological strata of homiletic rather than theogonic essence. Even the subsequent success that was Muḥammad's after he turned to Khazraj arouses suspicions as

⁵⁵ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 2:32–34; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta^ʾrīkh*, 2:348–52; *Jāmi^ʿ al-bayān*, no. 5992 on Koran 3:103.

⁵⁶ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 2:32; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta^ʾrīkh*, 2:348.

⁵⁷ *Fa-da^ʿāhum ilā ʾllāhi, fa-ʿaraḍa ʿalayhim naḥsahu, ḥattā innahu la-yaqūlu lahum: yā banī ʿabdi ʾllāhi, inna ʾllāha ʿazza wa-jalla qad aḥsana ʾsma abikum, falam yaqbalū minhu mā ʿaraḍa ʿalayhim*. Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 2:33; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta^ʾrīkh*, 2:349.

⁵⁸ The conversation is between Muḥammad and Suwayd b. Ṣāmit who came to Mecca for the annual pilgrimage: *Fa-taṣaddā lahu rasūlu ʾllāhi ḥīna sami^ʿa bihi, fa-da^ʿāhu ilā ʾllāhi wa-ilā ʾl-islām, fa-qāla lahu suwayd: fa-la^ʿalla ʾlladhī ma^ʿaka mithlu ʾlladhī ma^ʿī, fa-qāla lahu rasūlu ʾllāhi: mā ʾlladhī ma^ʿaka, qāla [suwayd]: majallatu luqmān*. Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 2:36; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta^ʾrīkh*, 2:352.

to the original motives behind the assent of the representatives of this tribe to follow Islam. Though, as in all other cases, they were summoned to submit to Allah, in this particular case Ibn Ishāq suggests that the recognition of Allah on the part of these Arabs may have been abated by their long-standing contacts with Jews.⁵⁹ Whatever the nature of this relationship, it prompts the conjecture that an acquaintance with some principles of monotheism may have facilitated accurate communication between Muḥammad and his hearers in this particular case. Yet, if true, the report implying Jewish influence as a factor in the Arab's acceptance of Islam would suggest that any acquaintance with monotheistic divine notions before the rise of Islam may well have originated from a realm extrinsic to the Jāhili conceptual milieu.

As for the Koranic evidence, there are indeed verses which imply that the Jāhili Arabs believed in Allah. However, this faith is depicted in general terms and there is a lack of positive clues as to the possible relation of this belief to the deity which was venerated in the Ka'ba. The structure of the verses in question is quite uniform: the polytheists are usually asked who is the creator of the Universe, and they answer "Allah" without a trace of hesitation: *Wa-la'in sa'altahum man khalafa 's-samāwāti wa-l-arḍa, wa-sakhkhara 'sh-shamsa wa-l-qamara, la-yaqūlunna 'llāhu, fa-annā yu'fakūn?* ("If thou askest them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth and subjected the sun and the moon?' they will say, 'God.' How then are they perverted?")⁶⁰

According to the Koranic evidence, then, the pre-Islamic Arabs not only knew of a god named Allah, but also associated with him such important world-view concepts as the creation of the Universe, of the heavenly bodies, and of mankind itself. The conclusion that concepts of creation (*khalq*) broadly circulated in the Jāhili milieu has indeed a firm scriptural foundation. Nonetheless, one ought not to overlook two important points.

The first of them is the rhetorical question "How then are they perverted?" (*fa-annā yu'fakūn*) or other locutions implying doubt or unbelief on the part of the respondents which recur in the majority of the creation verses.⁶¹ Why were heathens prone to accept Allah's highest authority on the one hand,

⁵⁹ *Fa-lammā kallama rasūlu 'llāhi ulā'ika 'n-naḥar wa-da'āhum ilā 'llāhi, qāla ba'ḍuhum li-ba'ḍ: yā qawmu, ta'allamū wa-llāhi innahu la-n-nabīyu 'lladhī tū'idukum bihi 'l-yahūd, fa-lā tasbiqannakum ilayhi*, Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 2:38; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, 2:354; *Jāmi' al-bayān*, no. 5992 on Koran 3:103.

⁶⁰ 29:61; trans. A. J. Arberry. Cf. 31:25, 39:38, 23:84–89, 10:31.

⁶¹ *Fa-annā tushārūn* (23:89); *bal aktharuhum lā ya'qilūn* (29:63).

while the Koran reproaches them on the other? One of the possible answers may be related to the intercession (*shafā'a*) phenomenon. The polytheists are said to have believed in the high deity Allah, with whom they associated a number of lesser deities. According to the Islamic tradition, this was a recent innovation, which represented a deviation from the original monotheism of Abraham and Ishmael.⁶² Nonetheless, it is hard to determine in this particular study the extent to which the divine hierarchy concept was rooted in the Jāhilī mentality and whether the concomitant notion of the consecutive reappearance of monotheism and heathenism should be lent credibility. Though Koren and Nevo show that such religious alternations might have taken place in central Negev,⁶³ data similar to theirs have not been found in the Hijaz, while the conjecture that the phenomenon of Arab paganism has nothing to do with the Hijaz,⁶⁴ seems far-fetched.

Secondly, although the creation verses indubitably assert Allah's pre-eminent role during the Jāhilīya, they do not imply the existence of a link to the sanctuary of Mecca. Naturally, this is not a proof that such a link did not exist, but any conclusion to the contrary must remain in the realm of the tentative until other more convincing evidence can be produced.

Apart from the creation verses, the Koran contains a number of other revelations which are often adduced by scholars concerned with the question of Allah before Islam. Izutsu points out Koran 46:27–28⁶⁵ as a clear vindication of "the existence of a god called Allah and even his highest position among the divinities."⁶⁶ But the use of the divine name Allah in this verse is not so much historical evidence of its existence during the Jāhilīya as it is a reproach of the polytheists who oppose the bold teaching of Islam. The

⁶² *Thumma salakha dhālika bihim ilā an ʿabadū mā ʾstaḥabbū wa-nasū mā kānū ʿalayhi wa-stabdālū bi-dīni ibrahīma wa-ismāʿīla ghayrahu fa-ʿabadū ʾl-awthāna wa-ṣārū ilā mā kānat ʿalayhi ʾl-umamu min qablihim.* Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 6; Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:82.

⁶³ Y. Nevo and J. Koren, "The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhilī Meccan Sanctuary," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49 (1990): 23–44.

⁶⁴ Y. Nevo and J. Koren, "Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies," *Der Islam* 68 (1991): 87–106.

⁶⁵ *Wa-laqaḍ ahlaknā mā ḥawlakum min al-qurā wa-ṣarrafnā ʾl-āyāti laʿallahum yarjiʿūn. Fa-law lā naṣarahumu ʾlladhīna ʾttakhadū min dūni ʾllāhi qurbānan ālihatan;* trans. Arberry: "And We destroyed the cities about you, and We turned about the signs, that haply they would return. Then why did those not help them that they had taken to themselves as mediators, gods apart from God?"

⁶⁶ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 14.

Koran does provide examples of how ancient peoples were requited for their deviation from the monotheistic faith, and this may be deemed evidence of the already mentioned archaic Abrahamic monotheism, subsequently forsaken by the Arabs. However, the relation between this ancient stratum and the belief in Allah is a problem which requires additional study.

Another piece of evidence is the verse: *Mā taʿbudūna min dūnihi illā asmāʾan sammaytumūhā antum wa-ābāʾukum. Mā anzala ʾllāhu bihā min sulṭānin.* (“That which you worship apart from Him, is nothing but names you have named, yourselves and your fathers. God has sent down no authority touching them.”)⁶⁷ This part of the Koran is also related to the general course of the dispute between Muḥammad and the heathens about the nature of the divine. Even more conspicuous is the second part of the verse omitted by Izutsu: *In(i) ʾl-ḥukmu illā li-llāhi, amara allā taʿbudū illā iyyāhu, dhālika ʾd-dīnu ʾl-qayyimu, wa-lākinna akthara ʾn-nāsi lā yaʿlamūn.* (“Judgment—or authority—belongs only to Allah. He has commanded you to worship only Him. That is the true religion, but most people do not know.”) Here the Islamic concept of *ḥukm Allāh*, the authority of Allah, is imposed over the Jāhilī substratum. It hardly refers to any pre-Islamic notion. The end of the verse, moreover, “but most people do not know,” is reminiscent of the rhetorical questions found in the creation verses. Finally, even if these Koranic passages imply a positive reference to a belief in Allah during the Jāhilīya, they are still void of evidence of a relation between such a belief and the Meccan sanctuary.

The foregoing review of the early stages of the development of Muḥammad’s concepts of the divine entitles us to formulate a number of important conclusions.

When Muḥammad began to preach for the very first time, he does not seem to have recognized his call as a revelation sent to him from a specific well-known and conceptually defined divine authority. The Prophet only made admonitions in the name of his Lord and reproached Quraysh for their “presumption” and “pride in wealth.”⁶⁸ At that time his teaching had an ethical nature, while the theological elaboration was yet to come.

With the escalation of the conceptual standoff between the Prophet and his heathen foes, the concept of the High God germinated and developed, and finally acquired its ultimate nominal shape, *Allāh*. Muḥammad may have borrowed it from the Jāhilī milieu in order to help the heathen public accept it. There must have been some kind of nominal correspondence be-

⁶⁷ 12:40, cited in Izutsu, *God and Man*, 15.

⁶⁸ Watt, *Muhammad Prophet and Statesman*, 28–29.

tween the Lord of Muḥammad and a divine name familiar in the Jāhiliya. Otherwise, the quarrel between him and his foes would have been baseless, and “there could have been neither debate nor discussion at all.”⁶⁹ This being the case, one still can ask whether the vituperation story at least points to some degree of interaction and discussion. If so, the Prophet and the heathens behaved as if their deities were completely different and unknown to the other party. The proposal to exchange deities evokes a similar conclusion. Finally, most of the Arab tribes were more or less completely unable to recognize Muḥammad’s deity.

While Muḥammad may indeed have built his concept of the divine upon an already established name, there still remains the question whether this name was borrowed from the existing sanctuary of Mecca. We have no reliable references in the sources to the existence of such a deity in the Meccan Ka^ʿba. The widespread theory about the development of *al-ilāh* into Allah⁷⁰ may not be without some basis, but to rely on it here would only lead to the conclusion that every Jāhili idol was called *ilāh* thus leaving the question about the Lord of the Ka^ʿba unanswered.

Finally, the concept of the High God may have come from another region, such as the Yemen, where during the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. a monotheistic cult of a god named “the Merciful” (Raḥmān-ān) and “Lord of Heaven” became ubiquitous.⁷¹ We can further suppose that the name Allah may have been a general designation for a Semitic high deity reigning over the idols. However, in this instance, it could hardly be associated with any specific shrine where idols were worshipped. In any case, the question about the Lord of the Ka^ʿba can only be resolved through study of the Meccan cult.

IV. It is quite difficult to propose a reliable theory about the Jāhili Lord of the Ka^ʿba. The days of the Jāhiliya are shrouded with great uncertainty, and even the accounts we have, which go back to the second or third century after the Hijra, may well have been forged or tampered with. Despite this, we can consider certain stories which contain some useful cues that may shed light on the main question of this study.

One of these accounts is the story about ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib’s oath to sacrifice one of his children. According to Ibn Ishāq, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib swore in

⁶⁹ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 96.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁷¹ A. F. L. Beeston, *The Religions of Pre-Islamic Yemen, L’Arabie du Sud, Histoire et Civilisation*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1981), 267.

the Jāhiliya that if he should be granted ten sons capable of defending him, one of them would be sacrificed to Allah.⁷² The continuation of the story is even more striking. After it was decided that ʿAbd Allah—the future father of the Prophet—should be slain, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib took him to Hubal inside the Kaʿba and began seeking an oracle (*yastaqsimu bi-l-azlām*) in order to save his son. With every cast of the lots, ten camels were granted to the deity. When this action was repeated ten times and Hubal had received one hundred camels, the idol was appeased and agreed to release ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib from his oath.⁷³ The remarkable feature here is that the oath had been given to Allah, while redemption was sought from Hubal. Although Ibn Ishāq points out that ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib called upon Allah every time he cast the lots,⁷⁴ a feature which evokes the intercession notion, it is hard to say whether Hubal was among the interceding deities, or whether the name of Allah was just embedded in the story to conform to the formal introduction.⁷⁵

It is possible to discern within the sacrifice story a variety of mythological and chronological strata. The first which comes to mind is the striking resemblance with the Biblical/Koranic story of Abraham and his son Isaac. Possibly this scriptural passage prompted some Islamic authors to invent the account. It may explain as well how the concept of Allah could have been incorporated into the otherwise heathen strata which constitute the inner structure of the whole story. Another problem with the authenticity of the story is the extraneous tenfold ritual invocation of the divine name Allah while an oracle was being sought from Hubal, not to mention the fact that one hundred camels had been the customary amount of blood money for manslaughter during the Jāhiliya.⁷⁶

⁷² *Wa-kāna ʿabdu ʾl-muṭṭalibi fīmā yazʿamūn, wa-llāhu aʿlam, qad nadhara la-in wulida lahu ʿasharatu nafarin thumma balaghū maʿahu ḥattā yamnaʿūhu la-yanḥaranna aḥadahum li-llāhi ʿinda ʾl-kaʿbati. Fa-lammā tawāfā banūhu ʿasharatan wa-ʿarafa annahum sa-yamnaʿūnahū, jamaʿahum thumma akhbarahum bi-nadhrihi wa-daʿāhum ilā ʾl-wafāʾi li-llāhi bi-dhālik.* Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:164.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 164–68.

⁷⁴ Cf. also: *Qāma ʿabdu ʾl-muṭṭalibi ʿinda hubalin yadʿū ʾllāha.* *Ibid.*, 1:166.

⁷⁵ Ibn Saʿd (*Ṭabaqāt*, 1:88–89) relates the same story on the authority of al-Wāqidī, but does not mention Hubal or Allah. But al-Wāqidī is known as a weak authority on Jāhiliya matters.

⁷⁶ Ibn Saʿd says that before the event the amount was ten camels, and only afterwards it became one hundred camels (*Ṭabaqāt*, 1:89). Nevertheless al-Iṣfahānī reports that Harim b. Sinān paid one hundred camels for the slaughter of a man from

Yet if the first monotheistic layer enshrouding the story may be considered forged, the heathen strata are more convincing. The first attests to the significance of Hubal, who represented one of the greatest divine objects in the Ka'ba during the pre-Islamic age. The 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib story is clear evidence of his elevated status, and even if it should not be considered authentic, there is an abundance of other accounts which unquestionably bear witness to Hubal's authority.⁷⁷

There are many reports attesting Hubal's being the most important or one of the most important idols of Mecca during the days of the Jāhiliya.⁷⁸ The significance of this idol in the theogony of Quraysh is highlighted by the fact that he was placed within the Ka'ba.⁷⁹ His anthropomorphic statue was made of carnelian, and his right arm, which the tribe had found broken off, had been reproduced in gold.⁸⁰ All important questions facing Quraysh were considered before Hubal by divination through casting lots using arrows. Ibn Ishāq relates that the number of arrows was seven,⁸¹ comprising the central fields of decision, such as kinship (*nasab*), water, and the rather generic "yes" and "no", which could apply on any matter submitted to the idol, as was the case with 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's pledge or with the distribution of duties among the clans of Quraysh during the rebuilding of the Ka'ba at the beginning of the seventh century A.D. Al-Azraqī, preserving another indication of the place of Hubal at Mecca, records that every Meccan returning from a journey used to go to Hubal upon his entrance into the city.⁸²

Yet another proof of the dominant position of Hubal may be the rite of

Banū 'Abs at the end of the *Dāḥis* and *al-Ghabrā'* war (*Aghānī*, 10:342).

⁷⁷ It is remarkable that when Ibn Sa'd retells the story on the authority of al-Wāqidi the casting of lots is mentioned, yet not Hubal himself.

⁷⁸ *Wa-kāna hubalun min a'zami aṣnāmi qurayshin* (al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:117); *Wa-kāna a'zamahā 'indahum hubalun* (Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 27); *Wa-ḥawla 'l-ka'batī thalāthumī'ati ṣanamīn wa-sittūna ṣanaman muraṣṣaṣatan bi-r-raṣāṣ wa-kāna hubalun a'zamahā* (al-Wāqidi, *Maghāzī*, 2:832); *Kāna hubalun a'zama aṣnāmi qurayshin bi-makkata* (aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, no. 8701 on Koran 5:3); *A'zamu aṣnāmi qurayshin ṣanamun kāna yuqālu lahu hubalun* (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 2:237); *Wa-hubalun a'zamu 'l-aṣnāmi 'indahum* (ash-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-n-niḥal* [Beirut, 1993], 2:585).

⁷⁹ *fī jawfi 'l-ka'ba* (Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 28; Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:86, 164; al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:65, 100, 117).

⁸⁰ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 28.

⁸¹ Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:117–19; Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:164–65; Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 28.

⁸² Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:117.

cutting hair. Although the poet Qays b. Ḥudādīya al-Khuzā'ī swears by the House of *Allah* (*bayt Allāh*), where his fellow tribesmen used to cut their hair during the pilgrimage, many reports associate this custom with Hubal. Al-Azraqī reports that after ʿAmr b. Luḥayy erected Hubal inside the Kaʿba, people began to cut their hair near him.⁸³ Abū Sufyān is reported by al-Wāqidī to have cut his hair in front of Hubal after the victorious battle of Uḥud.⁸⁴

It is clear from the sources that Hubal played an important role in the martial rites of Jāhilī Meccan society. Thus before the battle of Badr some Meccans went to query Hubal as to whether they should go to war against Muḥammad.⁸⁵ One of the battle cries of Quraysh during their wars against the Muslims was “Exalted be Hubal!” (*aʿli hubal*).⁸⁶

Newborns were also brought to Hubal by their parents, who apparently wanted to invoke his blessing on their offspring. Even Muḥammad, after his birth, was brought before him by his grandfather ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, who went to thank God for what he had bestowed on him.⁸⁷ According to al-Azraqī, Hubal dominated such important customs as the circumcision of boys, marriages, and the burial of the dead.⁸⁸

As for the relation between Hubal and the Lord of the Kaʿba, it is important to note that the term *rabb al-bayt* (the Lord of the House) is generic. It could be used to denote any divinity worshipped at any sanctuary, as, for example, Dhū ʿsh-Sharā in his sanctuary at Petra,⁸⁹ or a number of gods worshipped at shrines in the Yemen.⁹⁰ Hence, Hubal may well have been the

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Al-Wāqidī, *Maghāzī*, 1:299.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 1:33–34.

⁸⁶ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 3:45; al-Wāqidī, *Maghāzī*, 1:296–97; al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:117; Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 28; *Dīwān Ḥassān b. Thābit*, ed. Sayyid Ḥanafī Ḥusayn (Cairo, 1983), 95; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 2:526, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, no. 6413 on Koran 3:153; al-Isfahānī, *Aghānī*, 15:193.

⁸⁷ *Fa-yazʿamūna anna ʿabda ʿl-muṭṭalibi akhadhahu fa-dakhala bihi ʿalā hubalin fī jawfī ʿl-kaʿbati fa-qāma ʿindahū yadʿū ʿllāha wa-yashkuru lahu mā aʿtāhu* (aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 1:157). In the report of Ibn Ishāq, the name of Hubal is omitted: *Fa-yazʿamūna anna ʿabda ʿl-muṭṭalibi akhadhahu fa-dakhala bihi ʿl-kaʿbata fa-qāma yadʿū ʿllāha wa-yashkuru lahu mā aʿtāhu* (*Sīra*, 1:172).

⁸⁸ Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:118; Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:165.

⁸⁹ Jawād ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī taʾrīkh al-ʿarab qabla ʿl-islām*, Dār al-ʿIlm li-l-Malāyīn (Beirut: Maktabat an-Nahḍa; Baghdad, 1970), 6:415.

⁹⁰ Beeston, *The Religions of Pre-Islamic Yemen*, 262.

Lord of the Ka^ʿba in the Jāhiliya. He is mentioned as such by Zayd b. ʿAmr b. Nufayl, who became pious (*taʿallaha*) during the Jāhiliya, and said (in verse) concerning his conversion: “I desisted from visiting Hubal, who was our Lord in the past, when my reason was little.”⁹¹

A quick review of the etymology of the name Hubal is appropriate at this point. If the reading by Jawād ʿAlī of the first part of the name as the definite article “*ha*,”⁹² can be accepted, then the whole name Hubal may be rendered “the Lord.”

While any reading of Hubal as “*ha-baal*” would emphasize his dominant position before Islam, the term *ilāh*, which was also obviously associated with the deity, leaves more room for doubt. Ancient Arabs used to call their idols *ilāh*. Hubal surely was one of these *ilāhs* too, and the story of the pledge of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib is probable evidence for this Jāhili belief. As for the causes of the confusion of Allah with *ilāh* in early reports, two reasons can be pointed out. The first is that a certain deity—perhaps Hubal—was elevated with the advent of Islam from the status of *ilāh* (one of many gods) to *al-ilāh*—the god. Subsequently, the natural course of linguistic transformation led to the reduction of *hamzat al-qaṭʿ*, along with the initial vowel, and gradually “*al-ʿilāh*” was replaced with *Allāh*. Soon the term *ilāh* dropped out of circulation and people felt little need to use it even with respect to the heathen era. Nevertheless it can be found in a number of instances, one of them clearly related to the shrine of Mecca. In a verse, attributed to Nufayl b. Ḥabīb after the ordeal of Abraha at Mecca, we read: *Ayna ʿl-mafarru wa-l-ilāhu ʿt-tālibū // wa-l-ashramu ʿl-maghlūbu, wa-laysa ʿl-ghālibū?* (“Where is the way to escape when *al-ilāh* is the hunter // and the one with the slit nose [Abraha] is vanquished, not victorious?”)⁹³ If authentic, this account shows that the definite form *al-ilāh* had been in use even before Islam implying a well-known high deity. Despite this, the story as a whole does not provide any information about the real position of Hubal with respect to the other deities at Mecca. The idol may have been the enigmatic *al-ilāh*, yet another deity could as well fit the criteria.

None the less, it is conceivable that the Jāhili Arabs may have applied the name Allah to Hubal. On the other hand, the name Allah occurs predominantly in monotheistic passages attributed to Jāhili poets. These cannot be

⁹¹ *Wa-lā hubalan azūru wa-kāna rabban / lanā fī ʿd-dahri idh ḥilmī saghīrū* (Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 22).

⁹² Jawād ʿAlī, *Mufaṣṣal*, 6:232.

⁹³ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 1:53. In his imprecation (*duʿāʿ*) against Abraha, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib referred to the definite form [*al*]lāhumma (ibid., 1:51).

totally discarded, but there is considerable doubt concerning their authenticity. Yet even if Hubal were called Allah, the question about the possible subservience of the other deities to him still remains.

Perhaps the reading of Hubal as Allah (*al-ilāh*) helped A. G. Lundin draw the conclusion that “as the chief deity in Mecca Hubal was seemingly considered identical with Allah.”⁹⁴ But this inference visibly derives its authority from the later Islamic notion of the transcendent Allah. Finally, Winnett’s assumption that the origin of the divine name Allah may have been foreign to the Arab milieu⁹⁵ could suggest another point of resemblance with Hubal, who is said to have been imported to Mecca.⁹⁶ True or false, however, this conjecture does not add anything concerning Hubal’s position at the Ka’ba.

The story about ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib’s pledge to sacrifice his son to Allah may contain another, if more hypothetical, reference to the religion of the pre-Islamic Arabs. As some external sources point out, the ancient Arabs used to sacrifice human beings, and in certain cases young children, to the “mighty goddess” al-‘Uzzā.⁹⁷ If these reports are accepted as plausible, could the story of the sacrifice of ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib be reminiscent of such rites? While it is not possible to answer this question with certainty, reports about the significance of al-‘Uzzā at Mecca are to be found elsewhere as well.

Ibn al-Kalbī reports that “Quraysh and the Arabs dwelling in Mecca did not venerate any idol as they venerated al-‘Uzzā, then al-Lāt, then Manāt. As for al-‘Uzzā they preferred her to the other [idols] by pilgrimage and

⁹⁴ *Mify narodov mira* (Moscow, 1992), 2:606. One can not discard Jawād ‘Alī’s point that there might have been a relation between the lunar cult and the emergence of belief in Allah (*al-Mufaṣṣal*, 6:174). If Hubal had in his turn also been associated with the moon sometime during the Jāhilīya, as M. ‘Ajīna would suppose (*Mawsū‘at asāṭir al-‘Arab ‘ani ‘l-jāhilīya*, 1:195–99), and given that Jāhilī Arabs used to call the moon *ba‘l*, i. e., “Lord,” one might imagine the possibility of some generic relation between Hubal and Allah.

⁹⁵ F. V. Winnett, “Allah before Islam,” *The Moslem World* 28 (1938): 246–47.

⁹⁶ According to Ibn Ishāq, Hubal was brought to Mecca from al-Balqā’ in Syria by ‘Amr b. Luḥayy (*Sīra*, 1:82). Al-Azraqī retells the same story, but traces the origin of Hubal to what he names *hītun min arḍi ‘l-jazīra* (*Akhbār*, 1:100). Ibn al-Kalbī only points out that the idol was placed inside the Ka’ba by Khuzayma b. Mudrika, without speaking of its origin (*Aṣnām*, 28).

⁹⁷ Jawād ‘Alī, *Mufaṣṣal*, 6:238–39.

gifts.”⁹⁸ Al-Azraqī adds that the pre-Islamic Arabs ended their *hajj* circum-ambulating al-‘Uzzā and stayed in her presence for one day.⁹⁹ Another token of her significance is her presence beside Hubal in a war cry of Quraysh.¹⁰⁰ The prophet Muḥammad is reported to have sacrificed a red ewe to al-‘Uzzā before the revelation,¹⁰¹ while the father of Khālīd b. al-Walīd used to offer her the best animals from his flocks and herds.¹⁰²

That al-‘Uzzā indeed enjoyed great respect among the people of Quraysh is further indicated by the narratives about the concern of her custodian (*sādin*) Aflaḥ b. Naḍr ash-Shaybānī about her future. According to the Islamic sources, he foresaw her imminent downfall. Al-Wāqīdī recounts that Abū Lahab, the paternal uncle of Muḥammad, was swift to assert that he would be the one to take care of al-‘Uzzā after Aflaḥ’s death, and he boasted that he would gain great favor with her.¹⁰³ The significance of al-‘Uzzā during the late Jāhiliyya and early Islam is perhaps the best explanation for Abū Lahab’s offer to look after the goddess and his eagerness to incur her favor towards himself. Probably the same cause lay behind Muḥammad’s determination to destroy the shrine of al-‘Uzzā. Al-Wāqīdī reports that Khālīd b. al-Walīd was sent to demolish the sanctuary on two consecutive

⁹⁸ *Wa-lam takun qurayshun bi-makkata wa-man aqāma bihā min al-‘arabi yu‘zimūna shay’an min al-aṣnāmi i‘zāmahumu ʾl-‘uzzā, thumma ʾl-lāt, thumma manāh. Fa-ammā ʾl-‘uzzā, fa-kānat qurayshun takhuṣṣuhā dūna ghayrihā bi-z-ziyārati wa-l-hadīya.* Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 27.

⁹⁹ *Fa-kānū idhā faraghū min ḥajjihim wa-ṭawāfihim bi-l-ka‘bati lam yaḥillū ḥattā ya’tū ʾl-‘uzzā fa-yaṭūfūna bihā wa-yaḥillūna ‘indahā wa-ya‘kifūna ‘indahā yawman* (*Akhbār*, 1:126).

¹⁰⁰ *Yā li-hubal, yā li-l-‘uzzā* (Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:42). In other reports Abū Sufyān says: *lanā ʾl-‘uzzā wa-lā ‘uzzā lakum* (aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 2:526).

¹⁰¹ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 19.

¹⁰² Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:128. Al-Wāqīdī adds on the authority of Sa‘īd b. ‘Amr al-Hudhalī that the father of Khālīd b. al-Walīd used to sacrifice one hundred camels and sheep to al-‘Uzzā, and then to remain in her presence for three days (*Maghāzī*, 3:874).

¹⁰³ *Wa-kāna sādinuhā aflaḥu b. naḍrini ʾsh-shaybānīyu min banī sulaym, fa-lammā ḥaḍarathu ʾl-wafātu dukhila ‘alayhi wa-huwa ḥazīn, fa-qāla lahu abū lahab: mā lī arāka ḥazīnan? Qāl: akhāfu an taḍī‘a ʾl-‘uzzā min ba‘dī, qāla lahu abū lahab: fa-lā taḥzan, fa-anā aqūmu ‘alayhā min ba‘dika, fa-ja‘ala kullān man laqiya qāl: in taḥzuri ʾl-‘uzzā kuntu qadi ʾttakhadhtu yadan ‘indahā bi-qiyāmī ‘alayhā, wa-in yaḥzur muḥammadun, wa-lā arāhu yaḥzur, fa-ʾbnu akhī.* *Maghāzī*, 3:874. See also Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣnām*, 23, and the bold article of U. Rubin “Abū Lahab and Sūra CXI,” *BSOAS* 42 (1979): 13–28.

occasions,¹⁰⁴ while another version of the report with another *isnād* recounts that he had to return to Nakhla not less than three times.¹⁰⁵

As one of the greatest pre-Islamic deities, al-[°]Uzzā may have influenced the emergence of the belief in Allah. In a commentary on Koran 7:180 aṭ-Ṭabarī derives al-[°]Uzzā from al-[°]Azīz, one of the beautiful names of Allah.¹⁰⁶ However, assuming the natural sequence of events which led to the transition from heathenism to monotheism, we may hypothesize that the derivation presented by aṭ-Ṭabarī should be reversed. The theory saying that the polytheists derived their idols' names from those of Allah is itself strongly influenced by the Islamic concept of history. Perhaps on the contrary, the resemblance of some of the names of Allah to the heathen numina may be a sign of the incorporation of many heathen traditions into nascent Arabian Islam. It is quite interesting to observe the wide-ranging similarity of the reports of the Islamic authors concerning al-[°]Uzzā and Hubal. Both deities are depicted as the most significant divine objects of Quraysh, and important devotional rites are likewise attributed to each of them. Yet whether al-[°]Uzzā was the second great deity in Mecca remains rather obscure. According to the existing reports, her sanctuary was in the Ḥurād valley near Mecca, just beyond the sacred territory (*ḥaram*).¹⁰⁷ However, if trust is to be put in Robertson Smith's theory about associated male and female deities,¹⁰⁸ al-[°]Uzzā might be deemed the female component of such a pair at Mecca, the male one being perhaps the Lord of the Ka[°]ba Hubal.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

The Islamic understanding of history has greatly influenced the concept of Allah as the pre-Islamic Lord of the Ka[°]ba. The message revealed to

¹⁰⁴ On the authority of Sa[°]īd b. [°]Amr al-Hudhalī (*Maghāzī*, 3:873–74; al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:127–28). The story is related by aṭ-Ṭabarī with an *isnād* going back to al-Wāqidī, *Ta[°]rīkh*, 3:65.

¹⁰⁵ On the authority of Ibn [°]Abbās (Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣṇām*, 25).

¹⁰⁶ *Wa-sammaw ba[°]dahā [°]l-[°]uzzā [°]shtiqāqan lahā mini [°]smi [°]llāhi [°]lladhī huwa [°]l-[°]azīz* (*Jāmi[°] al-bayān*, no. 11988 [cf. no. 11990]). Al-Lāt is likewise said to have been derived from the very name Allāh (ibid.).

¹⁰⁷ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Aṣṇām*, 18; al-Azraqī, *Akhbār*, 1:126.

¹⁰⁸ R. Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Cambridge: University Press, 1885), 292–301.

¹⁰⁹ Yet another hint at the possibility of the existence of such a divine pair at Mecca are some glosses on Koran 53:19–20 stating that the Jāhilī Arabs deemed al-Lāt to be the feminine form of Allah (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 6:26).

Muḥammad presupposes that the belief in Allah has been an ever existing phenomenon. The ancient Arab and then Islamic shrine in Mecca became the main topos of this concept. The place of the Ka^ʿba is said to have been designated for a sanctuary dedicated to Allah by the very creative intention of the divine will. As creation unfolded, the Ka^ʿba was devoted to a sole deity, and only intermittent occurrences of polytheism or “associationism” (*shirk*) could blemish its intrinsically monotheistic role.

Compared with the notion of Allah’s everlasting presence at the Ka^ʿba, the purely historical data may suggest a somewhat different picture of the sanctuary during the pre-Islamic era. Credible reports to the effect that Allah actually was the Jāhili^l lord of the sanctuary are lacking, while the accounts of the Islamic authors concerning the early Islamic period show that the Islamic concept of divinity unfolded gradually and rather slowly. Muḥammad could not instantaneously disassociate himself from his ancestors’ customs; in the beginning he wanted only to admonish Quraysh. In the face of their ardent resistance to his message, he became inclined to a kind of compromise. Only later, after prolonged ideological clashes with his heathen opponents, did he articulate the concept of the solitary transcendent deity without any partners or equals (*shurakāʾ*). Allah became the Lord of the Meccan shrine and the only deity of Islam.

As for the pre-Islamic Lord of the Ka^ʿba, only tentative conjectures can be made. Our sources definitely show the importance of Hubal and al-^ʿUzzā before Islam. Yet to what extent these reports can be trusted remains to be studied. Both Hubal and al-^ʿUzzā, as well as other deities, were highly venerated at Mecca, but the extant data is insufficient to tell whether they were deemed lords of the Ka^ʿba. The name Allah, which indubitably existed before Islam, evokes many questions. At present, we are unable to judge whether it denoted a supreme divine power elevated over the idols, or even to what extent this name might have designated one particular Jāhili^l deity and how it was related to the Meccan cult in general. Until more convincing sources or methodological approaches are forthcoming, the question of the identity of the Jāhili^l Lord of the Ka^ʿba remains rather problematic.