The Preacher of the Meccan Qur'an: Deuteronomistic History and Confessionalism in Muḥammad's Early Preaching

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There has been a trend in recent scholarship on the Qur'an to downplay the role of Muḥammad in delivering and preaching the Qur'an, such that one is presented with an almost disembodied Qur'an, a Qur'an that has no relationship to the career of Muḥammad, and is even without a relationship to a specific locale. This approach to the Qur'an is sometimes expressed radically (Muḥammad did not exist!) or covertly (by ignoring the role of his character as an element in the explication of the Qur'anic text). Milder versions of this position state that there is not much to know about the relationship between Muḥammad and the Qur'an. The disappearing of Muḥammad from the Qur'an, and the pretence that it has no preacher, allow for a radical rereading of the Qur'an, such that one can then claim not only that it is an outgrowth of a Christian preaching environment but that the Qur'an's main audience was a Biblically-saturated (or a Christian or Halakhic-inclined) community. Mecca disappears (for some, literally) from the map, and Muḥammad becomes, if not a legendary figure, inconsequential.[1]

Yet this is not the only reason to revisit the topic of Muḥammad in the Qur'an: most Qur'an specialists take (and have always taken) the historical existence of Muḥammad as a given, and so nowadays do most of the radical revisionists. There is actually a more serious issue at hand. Our *Fragestellung* about what the Qur'an has to tell us about Muḥammad is deeply problematic. It is what I call biographically conceived, seeking to reconstruct a life of Muḥammad in the manner of a nineteenth-century outline of the bourgeois comprehensive and comprehensible life. Having cast the *Sīra nabawiyya* aside, our turn to the Qur'an has proven disappointing, entailing a total disregard of what we could learn about Muḥammad from the Qur'an.[2] The Qur'an is unlike the Gospels, we are repeatedly told; there is no sustained biography of Muḥammad there to be found; and no chronological order is discernible in the ordering of its parts. Indeed, the mantra that the Qur'an does not tell us much about Muḥammad is now a truism in

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Qur'anic studies. Furthermore, we are told that when the Qur'an does tell us something concrete about Muḥammad, it is cryptic; and also that it is impossible to date any particular historical information provided in it. This is frankly blaming the document for our own shortcomings. We do have a date, indeed a fundamental date, to frame the Qur'an, which I will return to below. But, more importantly, the Qur'an is packed with information about Muḥammad. The Qur'an would not be what it is if it did provide a biography in the manner academics seek. It is actually a far more important document than a linear, biographical gospel would be: it is a record of his preaching.

The premise of this article is that there is a lot of information about Muḥammad in the Qur'an: namely that which the Qur'an considered important and wanted to make known about him. As such this article continues my broader effort to reframe our scholarship on the Qur'an so that it actually deals with the massive data available within the text (which we often do not touch because it does not appear on the horizon of what we consider important). I will investigate in this article the most important details about Muḥammad available in the Qur'an, and in so doing will assess the image of the preacher of the Qur'an as fashioned in its verses. I will then develop the historical implications of my analysis, and show that when we analyse the information given to us in the Qur'an we can obtain historical information about Muḥammad, his community, and their respective ideas. I will confine my analysis to the image of Muḥammad in the Meccan parts of the Qur'an. The topic of his image in the Medinan parts is a matter for another article.

1. Muḥammad is a Human Being (*bashar*)

The first issue about Muḥammad that apparently needed to be cleared up in the Qur'an relates to his status as a human being (*bashar*).[3] This seems to us a rather odd point to raise: what else could he be? It is a Muḥammadological problem of an importance like the Christological problem, but discussed in the founding document of the religion. It is through analysing the reaction of his people to his mission that we can begin to comprehend the import of the emphatic assertions in the Qur'an that Muḥammad is a human being like the rest of his opponents. The paradox, however, was that asserting this about Muḥammad did not solve the problem it tried to address, for his opponents were protesting two things: the arbitrary nature of the honour and role arrogated by Muḥammad in claiming to speak for the Divine (why him alone? why not others?); and the proclaimed humanity of divine messengers (for them the messengers should be angels or otherwise non-human creatures). If Muḥammad insisted on his humanity he was insulting the Meccans' sense of equality and their sense of justice; if he denied his angelic nature he was proving that he was a liar, for only angels bring messages from Gods. In this double bind the Qur'an cannot win. Both the Qur'an and the Meccans agreed that Muḥammad is a human being, but for each this yielded different

conclusions: the Qur'an used it to prove that he is not an angel, while for the Meccans it affirmed that he is a liar.

The Meccans seemed to think that a human being could not be given such power, to be a messenger of divine kerygma. Thus in Q. 14:10, the unbelievers refuse the warning of the messengers because they are *human like us*, and go on to say that unless they bring a mighty sign, they will not be believed, nor will the unbelievers forsake the religions of their fathers. The accusations that Muḥammad is *a human like us!* and of his deficiency in not being an angel are raised repeatedly in the Qur'an, which makes it clear that there was a sustained argument by the Meccans against a human being a messenger. Sura 21 starts with a detailed discussion of such an argument. In Q. 21:2–5 we find the unbelievers concluding that a human being like them could not be delivering a new revelation (*dhikr muḥdath*); why should they be fooled by magic tricks (*siḥr*), or the confused dreams of a dreamer (*aḍghāth aḥlām*), or the speech of an outright liar (*iftarāhu*), or by a poet's (*shāᶜir*'s) gift of the gab? They want a sign (*āya*) to vouch for this odd situation—and the Qur'an replies that they are asking for a sign that redefines the nature of the messenger by implying that he ought to be angelic. For the following verses (Q. 21:7–8) state that God sends only men (*rijāl*) who are given revelation, and if in doubt they should ask people of *dhikr* (the Christian and Jewish scriptural communities). The Qur'an then pronounces the most emphatic of statements about the corporality (embodiment) of the messengers found in the Qur'an: *We have not made them a corporeal body* (*jasadan*) *that does not eat, and they are not immortal* (Q. 21:8). The messengers are full human beings: they eat and are mortal; their bodies are real.

The Qur'an quotes the Meccans mocking the fact that this messenger eats (see Q. 23:33) and strolls in the markets (*aswāq*); to be taken seriously he should instead have an angel with him to be the warner. The statement about markets is repeated twice in Q. 25, first as an objection by the unbelievers (Q. 25:7, *they said, why does this messenger eats food and strolls in the markets*) but then as a declarative statement by the Qur'an about all the messengers (Q. 25:20, *We sent messengers before you and they indeed ate and walked the markets*). To the Meccans, this denigrates the status of these messengers, making them unworthy of their status: they are mundane and unworthy to be divine messengers. The Qur'an uses their arguments against Muḥammad's prophetic status to emphasise the ordinariness (if not commonness) of the messenger.

In the many stories told in the Qur'an of previous messengers, their claim to divine inspiration is seen by their opponents as an affront to the dignity and presumed equality of all. Noah is accused of claiming to be more virtuous than his peers in an act of *tafaḍḍul* ('being more worthy', Q. 23:24); moreover, Shuᶜayb's experience of divine inspiration, insofar as it is seen as a result of sorcery, is not accessible to his opponents and thus is suspicious (Q. 26:185–186, *you are under a spell, a human being like us,*

and we think you are a liar). The Qur'an also makes clear that the status of Muḥammad before his claim to prophecy was not prominent: the Meccans are quoted protesting that if this honour was indeed true, why did God not choose a mighty, deserving man? They imply that Muḥammad was being insolent and impertinent in his claims, undeserving of the honour he was ascribing to himself (Q. 43:31–32).

There is a nagging sense among the recipients of the Qur'an's preaching that the whole fact of Muḥammad's ministry is either incomprehensible, since Muḥammad is not an angel, or unjust, since he is not a figure of higher standing. The whole manner of Muḥammad's call is not in keeping with their historical or cultural memory, as Q. 38:1–8 makes clear. The Qur'an negatively depicts its receiving audience as showing arrogance (*ʿizza*) and dissent (*shiqāq*) against the message of the Qur'an, while it reflects clear indignation on their part. *They marvel* (*ʿajibū*), *astonished that one of them* (*minhum*) *has come to them as a warner, for he is simply a charlatan magician* (*sāḥir kadhdhāb*). Q. 38:6 depicts the leaders of the community as being determined to protect their gods and persevere in their ways (*this is how one should behave*, *inna hādhā la-shayʾun yurād*). We are told that there has never been such a thing before in their past (Q. 38:7, *we have heard none of this in our recent past, it is but a fabrication*). Then the Qur'an quotes their absolute disdain for Muḥammad's claims as being 'chosen', when clearly he is not deserving, in language that conveys incomprehension mixed with jealousy (Q. 38:8, *has revelation come down to him, just him, from among us!*). Muḥammad's opponents remain unmoved by any of his claims to prophethood, and rightly so, for neither tradition nor their own self-worth would allow them to take him seriously. The honour of speaking for the gods is not for humans.

Muḥammad's claim that he was the recipient of divine inspiration, an inspiration descending out of the blue upon the messenger alone and not others, clearly did not make sense to the Meccans. Q. 54:25 depicts a sceptical audience asking (and answering) a rhetorical question: *So, divine inspiration has been just thrown on him! And only him from among us! He is a liar and an arrogant man* (*ashir*).[4] In their eyes, the claim to divine inspiration by a human being is a sign of moral degeneracy. At the heart of the claim of messengers to speak for God is hubris (*ashir*), a failing that renders them unreliable. In the accounts of previous messengers, their opponents accuse them of frivolity (*safāha*) and the prophets are made to insist they are mere messengers conveying a message (Q. 7:66–67). Their claim is too grandiose to be true, and as such is the essence of frivolity and overreach. A messenger might think that he is bringing a message, speaking divine utterance, but to his audience it is decidedly human speech (*qawl bashar*, Q. 74:24–25). An interesting situation is thus created: insofar as a messenger insists he is human, his speech to his opponents is that of a human, and insofar as he refuses to be an angel he cannot be delivering divine speech. His speech is magic at most (see Q. 74:24 for one of many examples), or fabrication (Q. 38:7). In Q. 6:91 the unbelievers deny the very possibility that God has

brought down anything to any human being. There is here not only a denial of Muḥammad's claims but also a denial of scriptural revelation as a method by which God communicates with humans. The only retort the Qur'an has to this denial is to remind them of the books of Moses, which seems to be a non sequitur to the unbelievers—for they seem not to care for those people (Christians and Jews) and they call their stories 'fables of the ancients' (*asāṭīr al-awwalīn*, Q. 6:25).

To the unbelievers, to follow another human being in divine matters—to believe such a claimant that he is a messenger from the gods, although a human being like them—is the very essence of going astray, a pointed rebuff to the messengers' claim to be sources of guidance to the right path, as Q. 54:24 so clearly puts it. It states: *they said a human being* (*bashar*) *of us* (*minnā*)*, one human being* (*wāḥid*) *to follow? This is indeed misguidance* (*ḍalāl*) *and this is hell* (*suʿur*). This verse is remarkable in its announcement that the messenger is human in three constructions—a human (*bashar*), one of us (*minnā*), one (*wāḥid*)—and by its reversal of the very purpose of the messenger's call, for following him will lead to perdition and getting lost. Other messengers are accused that they are themselves lost, misguided (*fī ḍalālin mubīn*), and forced thus to argue that they are not (Q. 7:60–61). Q. 23:34 has the unbelievers state that to follow a human being like themselves is to be losers (*khāsirūn*), the opposite of winning (*falāḥ*), both polar words for salvation and damnation in the Qur'an. Muḥammad's humanness in itself is a disqualifying characteristic, so self-evident to them that they are losing their patience with the counter argument.

The very idea that a human being could act as a conduit of divine guidance is thus preposterous to Muḥammad's audience; Q. 64:6, although a Medinan sura, shows us that to the unbelievers the very idea of a human being taking on this role is inconceivable: … *messengers came to them with clear signs, but they said, 'Human beings to guide us!'*, they marvel in denial, and reject the message and turn away from God. Q. 36:15–16, just like Q. 6:91 cited above, has the opponents of one of the messengers deny any possibility that God sends down anything (*min shayʾ*) via a human being. Indeed the Qur'an seems to think that what was preventing people from believing in the message of God is the very fact that it was a human that was bringing it. Q. 17:94 summarises this understanding for us, and the predicament it presented for the ministry of Muḥammad: *what has prevented people from believing in guidance* (*hudā*) *when it came to them*, *[was the fact that it was a human who was bringing it] for they said 'God sending a human being as a messenger!'* Here, then, is the heart of the problem: Muḥammad's opponents did not believe that humans could be divine messengers; it is not that they refused to entertain the possibility of a message coming from the gods, but it was the bearer that they found odd, and the fact that no divine manifestation was provided as a proof of such claims. They expected an angelic figure, or a manifestation of glorious power, to make the claim of communication from the Divine undeniable. It seems that theophany is the only acceptable way for God to communicate.

Q. 41:14, the Qur'an actually dramatises this attitude to human messengers. God's mercy is presented as a series of messengers (*rusul*) sent to two previous communities (ᶜĀd and Thamūd) in the face of which the unbelievers would still argue, *if God wished to send messengers He would have sent angels, and as such we deny all what you [human] messengers are bringing forth.* The sura already depicts the Meccans as turning away (*aᶜraḍ*, the verb used most often to describe the Meccans' rejection of Muḥammad) and refusing to listen (Q. 41:4). They spell out to Muḥammad their attitude towards his message in the most mocking of ways, appropriating his own language to make clear what they think of him. They tell him that *our hearts are covered, and our ears blocked, and there is a veil separating us from you* (Q. 41:5), citing back at him the very words used by the Qur'an to depict their stubbornness to his message in Q. 18:57, in which God is the one who has covered their hearts and closed their ears. Q. 36:9 speaks of a similar divide between the messenger and his audience. This attitude of the Meccans, from refusing that humans may bear divine revelation to refusing scripturalism as a necessity for religious life, could have only been held if the very notion of prophecy were alien to their religious outlook. The idea that mere individuals could be chosen to deliver prophecy or warning was not on the cards, let alone any notion of Christian holiness in the sense of a human being guided by the Holy Spirit. The concept of prophecy, a human speaking for God, has itself to be argued for, explained, and outlined: a case has to be made for it, it cannot be taken for granted. Indeed the Qur'an at first does not use the Arabic cognate for prophet in Hebrew (*n-b-y*), instead holding to the simpler concept of a messenger (*r-s-l*). The Qur'an has to argue that a messenger from God can be a human being, one who is not an angel and who is not immortal.

2. A Messenger is not an Angel

To insist that the messenger is a human being is to categorically deny that he is an angel. The clearest example of such a denial can be seen in Q. 17:89–96 (already discussed above), in which the Qur'an summarises its view of the problem of the human messenger and the unbelievers' obstinate insistence against that possibility. Most of Muḥammad's audience (*abā akthar al-nās*) are, we are told, refusing the Qur'an at this point of his mission. The unbelievers then (vv. 90–93) string out a list of demands, stipulating the actions that will make them believe in his message:

> *Bring forth a spring of water, fashion a garden of date palms and vines with rivulets running through it, bring down heaven on our heads as you have been threatening us, or better bring God and his angels to meet us face to face, or get yourself an adorned decorated palace or ascent into Heaven, but even if you are to ascend you will have to bring back a book for us to read.*

To this list, Muḥammad answers: *I am but a human being who is a messenger* (*basharan rasulā*)*!* Then, in response to the unbelievers' tirade, the Qur'an presents its view of the problem: they are refusing to believe because the messenger is a human being (Q. 17:94). It next offers a counter-argument to clarify the issue: *Were there angels on earth living peacefully, God would send to them an angel* (Q. 17:95). The argument has a speciesist logic: the Qur'an is claiming that God sends a messenger consistent with the species of the targeted audience. This argument also extends to the language used by the messenger, for he speaks and delivers his message in the language of his people, an argument spelled out in Q. 14:4 (*We have not sent a messenger but in the tongue of his people so that he clarifies to them*) and relating specifically to Arabic in Q. 26:195, Q. 46:12, Q. 19:97, and Q. 44:58. In an echo of this same logic, by implication the messenger should also be ethnically the same as his targeted audience, given the many uses in this context of the first-person plural, 'from us' and 'one of us'.

The centrality of the Qur'an's debate about the human (not angelic) nature of divine messengers should, I think, be read as demonstrating how firmly the Meccans believed that only a non-human figure can speak for God. Behind this understanding of the nature of human-divine interaction is the pagan conception of the parousia of the gods in nature: either the gods appear, or the gods send messengers of their host to humans. In Q. 25:7 the unbelievers mock Muḥammad, saying *Why? This prophet eats food, walks in the markets! Why is he not having an angel to be the warner!* If there were going to be a messenger, he ought to be an angel, and if a warning should come, it should be delivered by an angel. Nothing Muḥammad could say or do changed their minds on this point.

The issue of angelic messengers is discussed in detail in Q. 6. God refuses the unbelievers' demand in verse 8 that He send down an angel to accompany His messenger in order to vindicate him, declaring that an angel coming from God will bring perdition (Q. 6:8), as the coming of angels brought destruction in its wake, an argument which is repeated in other places in the Qur'an. In Sura 6, this point is followed by the Qur'an's most cogent, complex counterargument against the unbelievers: if God were to send an angel He would make him look like a man, reversing the situation altogether. The unbelievers would then be faced by an angel that looks like a man and is impossible to verify as being, in fact, an angel, meaning that the targeted audience would then be as confused as they are when facing a man who is being asked to be an angel. Prior to this, in verse 7, the Qur'an has already argued that any miracle (including angels) would be explained away by the unbelievers as magic, not true revelation. In the face of apparently persistent demands for an angel, the Qur'an is unambiguous about what Muḥammad is, making him state: *I do not tell you that I have the treasures of God, I know not that which is hidden from me, and I am not an angel, I only follow what is revealed to me* (Q. 6:50). Here is a self-definition, a central

verse in the Qur'an that has escaped sufficient attention before. Muḥammad is not an angel, nor a prognosticator. On both scores he will thus confirm his audience's suspicions of his mendacity.

It was thus not enough that the Qur'an had to argue for its new preaching, defending the notion of one God, of Resurrection, of the end of the world; it was also forced to define the very nature of its messenger, as such complicating the very mission he is entrusted to perform. The Qur'an tells us that its messenger is decidedly not an angel but a human being like them (*bashar mithlakum*, stated by the unbelievers in Q. 23:33, Q. 26:154, Q. 26:186, and Q. 36:15–16, but also affirmed by Muḥammad himself and the Qur'an as shown above); he eats, and has a body that needs nourishment (*ṭaᶜām*, Q. 21:8 and Q. 25:7 and 20); his is also a life that is mundane, for he has to shop for food in markets (Q. 25:7 and 20). In one verse Muḥammad is reminded that God sends as messengers only men (*rijāl*) that are married and have begotten children (Q. 13:38), the implication being that they are sexually active and very human in this regard—and so too is Muḥammad, the verse seems to imply. The messenger is, finally, also mortal. In Q. 21:8 corporality and food consumption are tied to mortality and soon thereafter the notion that a human being could be immortal is ridiculed: *immortality was never given to anyone before*, the Qur'an states in Q. 21:34, why should you be any different, *should you die would they remain alive?*. God cannot change human nature to suit the unbelievers. Q. 21:35 sums this up as a rule by stating that *every soul shall taste death* (as does Q. 29:57). In another verse the Qur'an shouts the tautology of death loud and clear: *you will die, they will die* (Q. 39:30). This insistence pre-empts Muḥammad's opponents, for whom a divine messenger is an angelic messenger, an immortal being. Muḥammad is none of these.

This lengthy analysis of material on the physical nature of Muḥammad in the Qur'an has been carried out to highlight an aspect that has largely escaped scholars before, namely that Muḥammad's humanity is a central Qur'anic theme. The historical insights gleaned from this analysis are not negligible. We know that Muḥammad did not claim to be angelic or in any way non-human. The Qur'an was nevertheless forced to define messengership (the powers of the messenger, the nature of his role as being a mere transmitter of truth) in contrast to angelic beings. Not only was the message at issue, but Muḥammad the messenger himself became a problem, and the Qur'an had to outline the scope of his claims. This debate thus cannot have been carried out within a Christological context or a Rabbinic context. The Qur'an categorically denies any ambiguity about the messenger's nature, and refuses to confuse his mission with an angelic call. This was to the detriment of his mission, for Muḥammad was basically rendered unconvincing. As part of the message he delivered, Muḥammad was working through what seems to be a fixed paradigm of what he and his ministry were, a paradigm that was alien to his people and to their notions of how gods communicate with humans. More importantly, they saw his claims as immoral, antisocial, and

(as I elaborate below) of dangerously political import, an import that the Qur'an vehemently denied. This considerably resituates investigations into the background of Muḥammad's people, if not Muḥammad's background himself. They were being called to ask the *ahl al-dhikr* (Jews and Christians) about his status, which added insult to injury, for they knew how to characterise the stories of these communities and they cared not for them, regarding them as mere fables about bygone peoples. That the Qur'an's presentation of Muḥammad's mission was referencing a Jewish paradigm of prophecy is clear, as too is the fact that his people were unimpressed by these claims and refused to take any of his assertions at face value, and this latter point is the crux of the matter. Muḥammad's immediate audience could hardly be Christians, or be living in a Christian environment, for were they versed in things Christian they would have seen him in a heretical prism. He was, after all, claiming to speak on behalf of God and not the Church or Christ, and they would have used a saturated Christian vocabulary against him, which is utterly lacking; none of the arguments of those called *mushrikūn* are Biblically inflected. Moreover, Muḥammad's claims entirely lacked a Christ-centred kerygma, as might attest a Christian background. A reference to the church is nowhere to be found. The picture we find in the Qur'an is of a pagan environment in which gods broke into the world through angelic figures, or through non-human agents; Muḥammad was a new voice, and a perplexing one to his audience. And though it is clear that there is a strong deuteronomistic structure to his self-understanding (more on this later), it lacks the most distinctive Jewish feature, namely concern for the fate of Israel or the salvation of Israel. This is a preaching that does not care for the people of Israel, and as such is not Jewish. Muḥammad was preaching a deuteronomistically-inflected new religion, but it hardly made him preach a Judaism or a Christianity. He was coming with a new kerygma, and it was all his own.

The Limited Powers of the Messenger

If Muḥammad's humanity is a constant theme in the Qur'an, it was one feature of a rather limited and very contradictory ministry. For even while he claimed to speak for the mightiest of gods, he came with few powers. The limited powers of Muḥammad are the unspoken scandal that early Islam would attempt to cover up: the preacher of the Meccan Qur'an is radical in one way, he is almost powerless. This powerlessness was, moreover, a unique characteristic of Muḥammad, distinct even from other messengers as presented in the Qur'an—for they healed the sick, resurrected the dead, split the sea, controlled the jinn, were not burned by fire, and ultimately could make their God answer their prayers. Far more importantly, God destroyed their enemies, while Muḥammad's people continued to live and mock him.

The insistence on the humanity of the messenger was the basis of the Qur'an's response to pagan demands to perform miracles. A human being is simply incapable of

performing supernatural acts, it argued (most clearly in Q. 17:93). That Muḥammad was not a miracle worker has been a truism in modern scholarship. But the Qur'an presents us with a hobbled Muḥammad, with no control over anything, not even his God. Take for example one of the corollaries of Muḥammad's humanity as defined in the Qur'an, the insistence that Muḥammad has no powers of divination, an issue of serious, negative consequences to his ministry and its efficacy. This claim of ignorance is a central characteristic of the messenger of the Qur'an, for he does not know the foretold or the hidden (the opposite of this, knowing all that which is hidden (*ghayb*, pl. *ghuyūb*), is a characteristic of his God alone, a knowledge He does not usually share with anyone: see Q. 72:26–27: *God who knows all that to be foretold* (*ghayb*) *and shares that with none but those of His messengers that He would entrust, keeping tabs on them*). This inability to foretell the future is a radical undermining of the powers of the messenger, for it renders him incapable of offering any meaningful practical prognostication. As such his claim of a coming cataclysm and general chastisement sounded obscene to his audience. Muḥammad is quoted as saying *I know not how to prognosticate* (*lā aʿlamu'l-ghayb*, Q. 6:50), and as always ascribing that knowledge to God alone (Q. 10:20, among others). He is a messenger who is not only ignorant of the future, but is at the mercy of the vicissitudes of fate, unable to bring about good or bad, and unable to use his powers to avert bad luck (as Q. 7:188 shows). Even worse, he refuses to give a date for the forecasted destruction of the unbelievers (Q. 7:187). When he does offer what the Qur'an would consider prognostication, it is simply revealed stories of the unknown past as a narrative part of his preaching, which was not what the unbelievers are after (see Q. 11:49; Q. 12:102).

But proclaiming the coming end of the world is the ultimate vision, which makes it all the more remarkable that the Qur'an refused to frame Muḥammad's prognostication in mantic terms—or, more accurately, that it was not feasible in the early stages of his career to do so. The preacher of the Qur'an was a mere messenger, with a limited mandate; the Qur'an might present the Hebrew prophets as a model, but Muḥammad could not yet be one of them. The ministry of Muḥammad is thus oddly restricted and circumscribed: he has no miracles, he is not part of a line of prophets from his own people, he can't prognosticate, and he is incapable of affecting anything. This limited role is undoubtedly partly because there was no natural setting for his mission, neither a polity to reform nor a king to inveigh against, nor an Israelite cult through which to claim authority. There was no paradigm for his teaching to fit into, no previous predictions he has come to fulfill, no proclaimed prophecy that he is clearly embodying. Whatever *ghayb* he knows takes the form of a narrative message, and, as the Qur'an claims, the messenger will not shrink from sharing this knowledge (Q. 81:24). The Qur'an also refuses to characterise his utterances as the speech of a soothsayer (*kāhin*, Q. 52:29 and Q. 69:42). This framing of his ministry, disavowing cultic terms, made it all the more revolutionary but also more disembodied, for it did not answer an existing

social or political need in his audience. As such Muḥammad's preaching was a far more radical event than scholarship has hitherto recognised.

What does this tell us about Muḥammad? First, he was at no time before his ministry active in any traditional role such as a soothsayer or prognosticator. He was thus not growing out of a role or traditional cultic function. His damning of his people is out of proportion to what a soothsayer would typically be entitled to forecast, and yet he refuses to give the everyday prognostications which a soothsayer would usually offer. He does seem to approach the role of a Hebrew prophet, a Jeremiah of cosmic destruction, yet this only made him the more estranged from his audience (and open to accusations of being deranged or possessed). The Qur'an is yet to call him a prophet (*nabīy*). The opponents in the Qur'an are not expecting the end of the world; more importantly, they have no such horizon for this prediction to make sense. They are expecting neither a resurrection of the body nor an afterlife judgement. Prophecy as a category is not part of how they experience the divine.

A typical scholarly analysis of Muḥammad's career assesses how coherent his message is from a monotheistic prism, and we can see that insofar as he was a messenger of monotheism his message does cohere. Yet we forget that to his audience his message seems, from the evidence in the Qur'an itself, to be incoherent. The Qur'an was attempting to present an alien message. There was no crisis in Mecca or Arabia to which this revelation answered. Part of the strategy of presenting such a message was to limit the role of the messenger to a very basic function, such that all the blame for the radical message falls unto the divine power proclaiming it. The messenger in this situation is unimpeachable. In this sense Muḥammad is blameless no matter what he proclaims: thus, in Q. 51:54 the Qur'an tells Muḥammad not to feel guilty (*you are not to be blamed*), and that he is simply to forsake (*tawallā*) his audience for their refusal of his preaching. He is merely and only the mouthpiece of a divine power (see further below). The Meccans fight is with Muḥammad's God, not with Muḥammad, and Muḥammad should not be blamed for a revelation over which he has no control.

The Qur'an is consistent and categorical about limiting the role of the messenger of Mecca, despite what looks like contradictory evidence in that his preaching itself transcended the normal bounds of a human life. He is not a soothsayer (*kāhin*), yet he is predicting the end of the world; he is not a poet (Q. 21:5, Q. 37:36, Q. 52:30, and esp. Q. 69:41), yet he comes with a proclamation the compositional like of which his audience had never seen; he is not possessed (*majnūn*, see esp. Q. 37:36, Q. 51:52, Q. 68:2 and 51, and Q. 81:22), yet he is talking to the divine. He is claiming powers, yet refusing to be different; he is not an angel and will bring no angels to vindicate him, yet he claims to carry a message from his God. No wonder they would not forsake their gods. Why would the Qur'an follow this curious strategy? On the basis of the textual evidence within the Meccan suras, Muḥammad seems to be a 'prophet' to a people that

do not understand the concept of prophecy. The conflict with his people is a generated crisis that was only created by the fact of Muḥammad's prophetic mission.

The Punishment Stories of the Qur'an: The Deuteronomistic Universal Frame[5]

We have in the early career of Muḥammad an exposed and vulnerable ministry, a message of cosmic import with little evidence to show for it. Although the vacuum in which it was operating is not unique, the scale of its ambition was unprecedented. For, however alien their environments might be, Christian missionaries relied upon a church or a monastic order behind them, a moral authority that was bigger than themselves. A missionising theology was already at the heart of the early Christian movement, of which Paul was a model. For Muḥammad, further, the paradigm of martyrdom was also off the table: he did not see himself as bearing witness against his society but rather was expecting to be violently vindicated in witnessing a final punishment. The Qur'an's own understanding of the role of this proclaimer is of a messenger (*rasūl*), one who is sent to another with a message (*risāla*). To assess this term, given the preceding analysis, is to appreciate the importance of this reconstruction of prophecy (the God-human connection) as messengership. The extensive use of this root (*r-s-l*) in the Qur'an indicates that it is here that most theorising about the ministry of Muḥammad took place.

At its basic level the messenger (*rasūl*) was one tasked to convey (*ballagha*) a message (*risāla*, pl. *risālāt*); at its more sophisticated level, it was a reworking of the deuteronomistic view of history to fit the career of a prophet in the middle of the desert and with no claims to Israelite heritage or Christ-centred soteriology. What was *Israel's* history, as envisioned in what Odil Steck has called the deuteronomistic view of history ('deuteronomistische Geschichtsbild', which Jacobson translates as the 'deuteronomistic sketch of history'), has been reworked in the Qur'an to become a vision of human history as a series of recurring episodes of messengers (*rusul*) sent to different races (*qawm*) to call them to guidance and God, promising punishment and destruction if disobeyed.[6]

This reconfiguration is of profound significance to the claims of Muḥammad and the Qur'an for divine authority.The deuteronomistic paradigm, as reconstructed by Steck and summarised by Jacobson, is as follows (mostly using Jacobson's language):

(1) Israel's history is one of persistent disobedience.
(2) Yahweh sends prophets repeatedly for Israel to repent.
(3) Israel always rejected these prophets (killing some).
(4) As a result, Yahweh has punished and will continue to punish Israel.

The rest of the paradigm relates specifically to Jewish national restoration: if Israel repents, God will restore her gathering and punish her enemies.[7] As discussed by Steck,

this deuteronomistic view of history was expressed in various Jewish and early Christian circles, especially the Hasidic movement of Second Temple Judaism and in the Q Gospel, the writings of the prophets, and later classical post-Biblical Jewish works, especially in Rabbinic Judaism. What concerns us here is that this deuteronomistic view of history helps explain the career and preaching of the Meccan period of Muḥammad's mission. In the Qur'an, the history of humanity was one of disobedience to God's messengers. God repeatedly sent messengers to people to repent. The prophets were persistently rejected. The people were consistently destroyed. In the Qur'an the paradigm is not about Israel but humanity; and the messengers are not of Israel but of their own people speaking their own languages, chosen by God to fulfil this role.[8]

There are other major reconfigurations of the Biblical deuteronomistic paradigm in the Qur'an, for not only are the people punished, mostly through catastrophic destruction, but the prophets are vindicated, either surviving on their own or accompanied by the few that followed them, a reversal of the deuteronomistic paradigm according to which the prophets were killed (a condition for the continued anger of God at Israel). This reversal of the denouement of the paradigm radically alters its meaning, transforming its theological impact. God here is vindictively victorious and interferes in history, decidedly altering its course; this pattern is presented in the Qur'an as a consistent and definitive divine habit. God always comes to the aid of his messengers (*yanṣuru*, see Q. 40:51) and He saves them (*nunajjī*, see Q. 7:64, 72, and 83; Q. 10:103; Q. 26:119; Q. 29:15; and esp. Q. 21:9, as a universal promise to the messengers). In some instances the victorious few inherit some domains and live triumphantly (Q. 7:137, said of Israel), although the more repeated theme is the complete replacement of one people by another (see Q. 44:28). Muḥammad was thus certain of two things: the destruction of his opponents and the coming vindication of God. The theme of God being true to His word and the keeper of His promise thus becomes all the more prominent, the more time passes. Despite the deferment of punishment, there is no shaking this conviction: God is true and will punish the recalcitrant (most famously in Q. 14:47).

Far more importantly, the Qur'an radically transfers the deuteronomistic paradigm from its Jewish matrix to a non-Jewish Arabian matrix. The messengers and the communities that the Qur'an cites as examples of this paradigm are mostly pagan communities that are not part of the Jewish salvific history: it is not concerned with the Biblical prophets alone, and by raising non-Biblical figures to prophetic status it achieves a novelty not seen before. Moreover, Israel is largely sidelined. There is thus a series of these stories in the Qur'an, of a messenger sent to a people to warn them, only for him to be rejected and the community to be punished and the messenger saved. These narratives have already been commented upon by scholars, beginning with Aloys Sprenger,[9] who called them 'Straflegenden' ('punishment legends'). Rudi Paret noticed that the stories

of all prophets are 'schematised' ('Typisierung', 'Schematismus'). I would add that these stories are not just random examples, but were meant to represent the course of human history, a habitual pattern in the world (*sunnat Allāh*, *sunnat al-awwalīn*, both in Q. 35:43 among other examples), and they are based on the deuteronomistic view of history that Steck has outlined. They are intimately tied to the career of Muḥammad, namely in that he is one such messenger and his people are to take heed lest they face the same fate. Indeed Q. 23:44 sums up this understanding of how God treated humanity, making it clear that this pattern is the law God has followed: *Then We sent Our messengers consecutively* (using here a hapax legomenon, *tatran*), *every time a messenger comes to a nation they give him the lie, and We sent them one after another and their stories became famous, damnation to those who do not believe*.

Another pericope (Q. 23:31–42) gives a more detailed description of this Qur'anic reworking of deuteronomistic history. It speaks of an unidentified postdiluvian people to whom God sent a messenger from among them (*rasūlan minhum*), to worship God and fear Him. The mighty of this nation, those unbelievers who never believed in the Resurrection, the rich and decadent of the people (three characteristics that are repeated in many stories) refused the call by saying, *he is a human being like us, he eats from what you eat and drinks from what you drink*. They add that *to obey a human being like you is to be damned*. The pericope continues by ridiculing the promises and the threats of this messenger, namely that there is a resurrection after death. This is far-fetched, his opponents state; *there is only this life to live, we live and we die, and we are not going to be resurrected*. The messenger then calls on God for succor (*inṣurnī*). The chastisement came and his opponents were destroyed. The pericope finishes with an open-ended statement, *then We gave rise to other nations*. Coming, as it does, immediately after the story of Noah and the deluge, this pericope leaves no doubt that this represents a consistent pattern in human history. The framing in the sura is of a chain of repeated events, all following the same pattern, starting with Noah (the beginning of human society) and ending with Muḥammad. Already the story as framed in this sura (Q. 23) is anonymous; no community is named.

This is a deuteronomistic vision distilled and adapted to suit Muḥammad's understanding of human history. To call these paradigmatic tales of messengership and disobedience 'punishment stories' as we have done in the literature is to miss the whole significance of their role for Muḥammad's self-image. This Qur'anic recasting of human history on deuteronmistic lines was essential to the coherency of Muḥammad's ministry as part of a cosmic plan that had a meaning regardless of how it was perceived by his audience. Deuteronomistic history was thus the basis of his ministry. That his career was incomprehensible to his audience was counterbalanced by the fact that his self-image and his ministry were presented as part of a ring in an established historical pattern. He was part of a universal divine plan. His people are cast as clueless (*lā yaᶜqalūnu*), barbarians (*jāhilūn*), and out of touch with the

divine plan because their ancestors were themselves unaware of God's plan (*awalan kāna ābāʾukum*), and he not only as a warner (*nadhīr*) but as a bringer of good tidings (*bashīr*).

That this recasting was a radical reworking of the deuteronomistic view of history is clear from its detachment from the history of Israel (or of Christianity), and its expansion to encompass human history as a whole, importantly including the Arabian historical past. Thus, the most important of the 'messengership stories' in the Qur'an (a better name than 'punishment stories') are the Arabian stories, the story of Ṣāliḥ and his miraculous camel sent to his people Thamūd, that of Shuᶜayb to Madyan, and Hūd to ᶜĀd (he is called the brother of ᶜĀd (*akhā ᶜĀd*) in Q. 46:21, meaning 'one of them'), and the tribes al-Muʾtafikāt and al-Rass and the people of Sabaʾ. The working of these stories into a universal history (shaped by a deuteronomistic model) is clearly the work of Muḥammad's preaching; Arabia's past was being sanctified and as such normalised into human history, joined to a newly reconfigured *Heilsgeschichte*.[10] Their prominence in the early stages of his preaching is no coincidence, for they framed his ministry as an Arabian messenger. Paret has already noted that the Arabian Straflegenden were the earliest of such stories, belonging to the early layer of Muḥammad's preaching.[11] In Q. 89:6–14 we have what is the earliest of these legends strung together, the first mentioning ᶜĀd and then Thamūd (two extinct Arabian tribes), and finally the Biblical Pharaoh. Q. 53:50–54 is even more interesting, for it mentions first ᶜĀd, then Thamūd, then Noah, then al-Muʾtafikāt, thus surrounding a Biblical story with three Arabian ones.

There is however no better sura than Q. 91 to demonstrate this Arabia-centredness of Muḥammad's vision of history. This early-Meccan sura begins with a string of oaths, vowing by the sun, the moon, Heaven, Earth, and the human soul. It then exemplifies human defiance and inequity by narrating the story of the Thamūd and the messenger of God who brought a miraculous camel. When this creature was killed by the tribe, God destroys them for their sin (*dhanb*). This is a fully constructed sura which bases itself solely in an Arabian background to convey the moral world-view of Muḥammad's preaching. Indeed it is not only this sura, but all the early-Meccan suras, which have an Arabian background, a fact which has not been noticed before. Sura 105 reminds the Meccans of God's destruction of the 'People of the Elephant', a reference to the Abraha campaign in the Ḥijāz, a reminder of divine might and, by implication, the saving of Mecca.[12] In this regard the use of the name of Quraysh and reference to the 'house' in Q. 106 clearly indicates the Qur'anic centrality of Muḥammad's understanding of himself as a preacher connected to a locale and a history. The same principle is echoed in Q. 90, in which God swears by the country in which Muḥammad is living. In Q. 85 we have a likely reference to the famous persecution of the Christians of Najrān, and the sura also makes fleeting reference to Pharaoh and Thamūd (Q. 85:18).

We can see, so far, that the Qur'an is fashioning a new hierarchy, in which Moses is still yet to become central. When Moses is mentioned at all in the early suras, the focus is on Pharaoh rather than Israel's fate (as in Q. 79). This reconfiguring of the Arabic historical past into a universal historical framework is fundamental in the paradigm shift that the preaching of Muḥammad sought to achieve with his audience, a past that is no longer tribal but universal. In this sense the radical nature of his message is not that he was calling people to monotheism but in that the Arabian past has been worked into a universal history, a history that was now spilling over the present. With Muḥammad claiming to be a new messenger, he forced his audience to position itself against this universal claim (whether they liked it or not). It undermined their ancestral claim to truth, the customs of the fathers, for he levied a pan-Arabian human history against their parochial practices. When he wanted to threaten his people with the fate that awaits them, Muḥammad raised the fate of ᶜĀd and Thamūd, now understood in universal terms and not as part of the vicissitudes of fate and *dahr*. Q. 41:13 states this clearly: *if they* (your people) *refuse, say to them, I warn you of the fate and destruction like that of ᶜĀd and Thamūd*. This is a prime example of how, in the Qur'an, these Arabian legends are transformed into paradigmatic stories of how God treats humanity, and likewise how the Arabs of Muḥammad's day become members of a universal narrative.

In his article 'Das Geschichtsbild Mohammeds', Paret wrote that there were six such paradigmatic stories, three of Arabian lore and three Biblical.[13] If anything, this argument here shows the centrality of Arabian lore for Muḥammad's preaching. It is to Paret's credit that he had already noticed this structuring in the Qur'anic retelling of the stories of the messengers, a structuring that went beyond the 'punishment story motif'. In a section in his book *Mohammed und der Koran* entitled 'Die Typisierung der früheren Gesandten' (a chapter based on the rarely-read afore-mentioned article[14]), Paret sketched the basic structure or schema of a prophetic story:

> To a people a 'messenger' or a 'warner' or a 'leader' (see Q. 13:7) is sent. His people take him for a liar, mock him, and his message is refused. Finally most of the people suffer from a judgement, while the messenger survives.

Paret discusses this schematic structuring of the previous *Heilsgeschichte* (Jewish and Arabian legends) and attempts to explain its origin in the life of Muḥammad, his own experience, projected back unto the past, flattening it and impoverishing it ('eine armselige Nivellierung').[15] Actually the opposite is the case, as shown through Steck's sketch of the deuteronomistic history (published after Paret's *Mohammed und der Koran*). Muḥammad universalised this paradigm. Paret's insight that the details of these stories are echoes and reflections of Muḥammad's own life is however unassailable; the paradigm was remodelled on the deuteronomistic precedent, while the details were supplied by Muḥammad and reflective of what he was preaching.

More importantly, the stories reflect the same arguments of his people against him. Paret was not much off the mark insofar as he rightly saw this as part of Muḥammad's interaction with 'earlier *Heilsgeschichte*'. Yet Paret is (to put it mildly) too Christian-Jewish centric when he designates the Jewish and Christian paradigm as the universal one which Muḥammad was joining.[16] Muḥammad's reformulation in fact is what made it universal. Jesus is of universal significance in Christianity, but you have to confess him as a saviour for the universality to work; Christianity then did not envision a human history in which non-Christian communities had full salvific possibilities on their own terms with a prophet of equal significance to Jesus. In the Qur'an instead all of human history is leveled such that each community has their own salvific history. Each community is seen as entitled to a messenger of their own. That is the basis of Muḥammad's claim: he was the messenger to the Arabs. (Muḥammad will later have to make this point against the Jews in Medina, and against the Christians, that you can be of Abraham but not be a Jew or a Christian.) Q. 40:78 tells Muḥammad that *We have sent messengers before you, and We have told you the stories of some of them, and We have not told you the stories of others, and a messenger has no right or power to bring forth a sign unless God gives permission*. This is not a narrative of a new Israel; Muḥammad used the deuteronomistic paradigm but he did not need to be of Israel or employ a Jesus-centred kerygma for his ministry to make sense. Muḥammad reclaimed the Arab past as part of a universal history, and as such was far more willing to accommodate a local sense of the past than a Christian conversion would have been. Even his cult would eventually centre on the pagan rituals of pilgrimage and make the local language part of how his universalising message was expressed. The so-called 'break with the Jews' in Medina was thus structurally possible because Muḥammad was already operating in a deuteronomistic paradigm that was independent; his religion did not grow out of Jewish internal developments. His preaching could rethink Judaism and Christianity with little damage to his audience or the coherency of his message. This was a 'barbarian' interpretation of world history that made sense of the centre in relationship to the periphery, but also emphatically treated the periphery as equally entitled.

4. Ancestral Religion versus Deuteronomistic Universal History

It is not as if the Meccans had no historical sense or vision of history (*Geschichtsbild*). Indeed, the Qur'an gives us their trenchant rejection of the universalising claim of Muḥammad. They honoured and followed the religion of their fathers (*ābāʾ*), 'our fathers' (*ābāʾanā*), and had a cultural memory of what they worshipped (*naʿbudu*; see Q. 11:62 of earlier communities; Q. 11:109 in reference to the Meccans) and of events in their past (as is evident through the claim *mā samiʿnā bi-hādhā*, *we have not heard about such thing*, Q. 23:24). Most of this ancestral theology is outlined in the stories of other messengers, and insofar as it resembles the arguments of the Meccans, it should

be seen as reflective of the arguments they too made. To the demand of the messenger of the Qur'an that his people follow him (*ittabiʿū*, see Q. 31:21 and Q. 36:20–21, among many others), they will insist on following their ancestors. It is the ancestral tradition as transmitted that is the cult to be honoured. The expression most used for this in the Qur'an, including in Medinan suras, is variations of the verb *wajadnā* ('what we encountered'), as in *that which we encountered from our fathers* (see Q. 2:170, Q. 7:28, Q. 10:78, Q. 21:53, Q. 26:74, Q. 31:21, and Q. 43:22–23). In response to the persistent demand from Muḥammad that they follow the message of his God, the unbelievers insist on honouring the religion they have long been practicing. They saw in the call of Muḥammad a call to desert that which their fathers worshipped, a betrayal; thus the people of ʿĀd, to whom God sent the messenger Hūd ('their brother'), rejected the offer to believe and insisted on their promised punishment rather than betraying their ancestors (Q. 7:65–70).

The best admixture between the arguments of the Meccans and the arguments of previous generations who refused their messengers is in Q. 43:20–25, where we have a sustained defence by the Meccans of their cult and practices. They start by stating the obvious: a cult is by definition right, that is, no cult is unrighteous, and as such they reflect in this argument their pagan understanding of cult as people-specific and locally valid. They tell Muḥammad, *if God did not want us to worship His daughters, He would not have allowed it*, meaning that no community is wrong to honour the gods in ways they have honoured them before—but the Qur'an replies that they are ignorant and liars, for their cult is scriptureless: *have We given them a book before such that they insist on following it?* (Q. 43:21). The Meccans answer that *we found our fathers as a nation* (*umma*), *and we in their path* (*ʿalā āthārihim*) *are rightly guided* (*muqtadūn*). This is one of those significant statements that has gone unnoticed in the literature, and it constitutes the best evidence of how the Meccans understood their cult; it reflects how they understood and defended their status as an independent cultic tradition, as a nation (*umma*) entitled to its cult. The cult of their fathers is thus worthy of following (*ʿalā āthārihim* meaning 'follow on in their traces') and is a righteous guide (*muqtadūn*). Scriptural authority is not needed for them to prove their righteousness, but precedence and tradition are. It is interesting to note that the Meccans are nevertheless depicted as using Muḥammad's language of salvation, his spatially-orientated lexicon. More correctly, perhaps, Muḥammad's revelations envisioned his new mission and its salvation in the spatial language of his people.[17] The 'salvation as guidance' theology in the Qur'an is thus to be understood as the common denominator between Muḥammad and his audience. The Qur'an then throws their own argument back at them, repeating it verbatim and claiming that this is exactly what every previously-warned peoples had said before, that *they found our fathers a nation and we follow in their steps and their mode of living* (*muqtadūn*). The Qur'an tells them, *what if I brought you something more guiding than that which you*

encountered from your fathers? The unbelievers answer: *we reject that which you were sent with*. In this passage, the Qur'an strangely argues that Muḥammad was bringing a more direct path to salvation, which is a different tack than that used before (the absence of scripture being proof that the ancestors were clueless). In Q. 17:84 the Qur'an is certain Muḥammad's opponents are not going to convert, and it invokes God as the One who will know which of the two are *more guided in his path*. Q. 17:9 reassures the hearer that *this Qur'an guides to that which is straighter*. Salvation here is seen as a more righteous road than the one already traversed by the Meccans, an argument that found little success, it seems from the rest of the Text.

The deep rooted nature of the Meccans' reverence for their ancestors can be seen in the way the Qur'an calls on Muslims to venerate God as much as they used to venerate (or remember) their ancestors (Q. 2:200) in the Medinan period. The complex relationship of the Meccans to their ancestors is likewise reflected in a number of remarkable demands that Muḥammad bring their fathers back to life. In many instances they are surprised that Muḥammad is promising resurrection, and they want to make sure that this includes their fathers. Thus, Q. 27:67, Q. 37:17, and Q. 56:48 register the unbelievers' disbelief that their fathers will be resurrected, while in Q. 44:36 they ask Muḥammad to bring back their fathers as a proof that he is telling the truth. Q. 45:25 is more emphatic, making the resurrection of their fathers the precondition for their belief in the Resurrection on the final day. Furthermore, this new religion is not part of the knowledge passed down down from the ancestors, and it thus does not have the legitimacy of their approval (see Q. 23:24 and Q. 28:36: *we have not heard such a thing among our early fathers*). In the Qur'an, pagan reverence for the fathers appears alongside a repudiation of filial privilege on the Day of Resurrection, which was meant as a Qur'anic rejection of the tribal dependence on kinship for salvation. Thus, Q. 26:88 assures its listeners that on the final Day *neither wealth nor sons will then avail anything*; Q. 70:10–14 is more categorical and more sardonic, declaring that on that Day neither the intervention of a friend, nor ransoming one's own progeny for oneself, nor one's wife or brother, nor the tribe who sheltered you, nor the entire earth will save anyone (see also Q. 35:18). The man who chooses to reject the Truth and *walk back to his tribe, self-possessed*, is also mocked (Q. 75:33), since he, in reality, is alone and will always be judged alone (Q. 75:14, see Q. 74:38), since at death one is left with no help (Q. 70:26–28). These verses all clearly convey a Qur'anic argument that reverence for the ancestors, and reliance on tribal lore and precedent, is misguided since responsibility is personal and not collective.

The scriptureless Meccans are thus being denied religious validity by the Qur'an precisely because their cult is oral, tradition-based, and ancestor-oriented; they are also rebuked because morally they are blind, allowing family and kinship to determine how they judge and evaluate things; their cult is not prophetic or universal, based as it is on the practices of the fathers. The Meccans are stumped when asked by Muḥammad

to bring a scripture-based defence of their cult (see Q. 46:4). In Q. 7:28, God exhorts the children of Adam (humanity) who are about to inhabit the earth not to commit a monstrosity or moral transgression (*fāḥisha*) and then justify it by claiming that *'we found our fathers on it, and God ordered* (*amaranā*) *us with it', Say, 'God does not command evil deeds, do you claim to know about God that which you do not know.'* This is actually a summary of a persistent argument in the Qur'an against the Meccans and their pagan cult, that they falsely claim to act in God's way.

If the Meccans claim they are a nation then they are one only in the sense Muḥammad envisions, namely one awaiting God's chastisement and messenger. In Q. 13:30 Muḥammad is told that he is sent to a nation (*umma*) that was already preceded by other nations (*khalat min qablihā al-umam*), and as such is not special: being a nation does not mean that the cult of the nation is above reproach. The same holds true for another passage that can be understood only if we consider its complex polemical engagement with Muḥammad's pagan interlocutors: after reiterating a moral code in which each is responsible for their own deeds, Q. 17:15 finishes by stating *and We do not send chastisement unless We send a messenger*. Given the general setting of this verse, in the midst of another retelling of the deuteronomistic paradigm, the implicit meaning of this verse becomes clear. The Meccans have lived a life of tranquility and uneventful peace, so why are they being threatened now? Why is their way of life suddenly not adequate? Why were they not destroyed before if their fathers were also misguided? The Qur'an is making the paradigm logical, presenting an argument for the new threat of destruction that is based on the notion of an appointed time (*ajal*). When the time of a nation comes, God will send a messenger and destruction will follow (see Q. 7:34; (*halāk*) in Q. 17:16). The internal contradictory premises of the reconfigured universal deuteronomistic paradigm are here being defended: if humanity is necessarily recalcitrant, why even bother? This problem is mentioned again in a dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh. In Q. 20:51 Pharaoh asks Moses, *'What is the fate of previous generations?'* (or: what is the matter with previous generations, why were they not punished and judged?), and is answered rather honestly: *'Knowledge of them is with my God in a book, God does not go astray and does not forget.'*

The Qur'an thus admits that the Meccans have never been warned before, or more accurately that their fathers have not been warned before. Q. 36:1–6 acknowledges this openly and describes the mission of Muḥammad and its recipient as follows:

> *By the wise Qur'an, you are a messenger, walking a straight path, [a Qur'an] sent down by the Mighty Merciful one, so that you warn a people* (*qawm*) *whose fathers* (*ābāʾuhum*) *were not warned before, and they were unaware!*

Likewise, Q. 32 (vv. 1–3) starts with the Meccans' accusation that the Qur'an is fabricated, to which the Qur'an responds with the fact that their fathers have not been

warned before: *This is the sending down of the Book, no doubt about it, from the Lord of the worlds. But they say, 'He fabricated it* (*iftarāhu*)*,' indeed not, it is the truth from your God, so that you might warn a people* (*qawm*) *who had not received a warner before you came, so that they might be guided* (*yahtadūna*). These verses make it clear that nothing in their past had prepared the Meccans for the coming of Muḥammad, and for the experience of his preaching. Q. 11:49 also highlights the innovative nature of Muḥammad's mission when it groups together Muḥammad and his people as the recipients of previously 'unknown' stories: *These stories* (here the story of Noah) *are news from the unseen* (*ghayb*) *that We reveal to you, news that neither you* (*anta*) *nor your people* (*qawmaka*) *before knew about. Have patience, the winners are the Godfearing*. Even Q. 12, the most sustained narrative in the Qur'an, insists that Muḥammad was 'heedless' (*min al-ghāfilīn*) before the revelation of the Qur'an (Q. 12:3). The Qur'an is insisting on his ignorance of these stories prior to their being made known to him as part of the revelatory experience, and stressing that this is an ignorance he shared with his people.

What do these verses inform us historically? First, that the unbelievers were worshippers of an ancestral cultic tradition, which they saw as coherent and as having a claim to truth. The second thing we can tell is that they themselves admitted that their religious tradition was not scripturally based, and the Qur'an used this fact to shame them. One of their arguments is actually spelled out for us, as in Q. 6:156–157 the Meccans are reported as acknowledging that scripture has been revealed to two sects before but not them, and they did not study such books. Had a Book come down to them, they would be even better than the two earlier groups. The argument they are putting forward here is that, far from being godless heathens, they are a pious lot, who are honour-bound to follow tradition, while what Muḥammad is bringing to them is not their tradition. Indeed had their tradition included a Book they would have honoured it as they honoured their fathers. They are thus refusing Muḥammad's claim to be bringing a Book that they need to be receptive to, but, most importantly, they are affirming that his new paradigm of preaching is not ancestral and not validated by their history.

The second thing these verses tell us is that the Meccans did not uphold the notion of one universal truth, which was what Muḥammad claimed to be representing. The Meccans raised a devastating critique against the universalism that Muḥammad was ascribing to his cult (by saying we should all worship the same God) by pointing to the diversity found between other cultic practices, especially between Jews and Christians. The issue of why humanity does not adhere to a single religion is thus discussed in the Qur'an, which would seem to be an odd thing to address if it were not for the Meccans' notion of national cults to which it responds (see Q. 16:93 for one example). Their polemic and arguments against one universal religion even led to justification in the Qur'an of why Jews and Christians are bitter enemies. The Meccans were thus not

completely unaware of other cults, but were simply unconvinced that they should forsake their own for an alien paradigm.

5. Messengership in the Qur'an

Let us now look more closely as to how messengership is envisioned in the Qur'an. The first element in the construction of this office is that God is the sender of messengers; thus Noah was sent (*arsalnā*) to his people (Q. 7:94), as were Moses (Q. 23:45), Ṣāliḥ (Q. 27:45), and many others. But this act of 'sending' is not isolated; it is abstracted into a pattern in the Qur'an, a divine habit that could explain the career of Muḥammad. Thus, Q. 30:47 tells Muḥammad that *We have sent before you messengers to their people, and they brought with them clear signs, and We took Our vengeance from the criminals and We shall indeed aid the believers to victory*. This general description of human history is turned into a mantra in the Qur'an. Q. 15:10 tells the receiver of the Qur'an that God has sent previous messengers to bygone communities (*shiyaᶜ al-awwalīn*); Q. 16:63 states that God has sent to *nations before yours [Muḥammad]* (*umam min qablika*), as does Q. 6:42 using the same phrasing, such that there is a historical pattern, a Sunna, a habit of God towards humanity (Q. 17:77). This is a deuteronomistic theory of history made universal.

Yet, this commissioning from God is so disembodied, so untethered to a unified cult or any known previous activities in Arabia, that it is clear that Muḥammad was acting on his own. There does not seem to be a group or a cult behind his mission: his opponents do not suggest that he is representing a group, and he conceives of himself as directly related to God, as part of God's plan, not part of a Church or the people of Israel, or an already existing faith community. The Qur'an admits that his opponents accuse Muḥammad of being taught by a human being (*bashar*), an accusation it denies on the basis that the individual concerned spoke a non-Arabic language, while the Qur'an is Arabic (Q. 16:103). However, the accusation itself is revealing in that it makes clear that the issue at hand was that if Muḥammad had contact with an inspiration, it was with an individual rather than an organised structure. The most interesting Qur'anic historical reference about Muḥammad is thus an exchange between Muḥammad and his opponents about the Qur'an he is revealing. Q. 10:15–16 reads:

> *When Our verses are recited to them, clear, those who do not believe in resurrection say 'Bring another Qur'an, a different one, or change it.' Say [Muḥammad]: 'I cannot change it on my own, by my own powers, I follow* (*attabiᶜu*) *that which is revealed to me. I fear a terrifying torture if I disobey my Lord.' Say: 'If God so willed I would not have recited it to you, nor made it known to you, for did I not live a long time among you before I started it, do you not have sense?'*

Muḥammad was a local, one of them, and there had been no portents in his life so far that he was about to break into revelatory rapturous ministry. The argument here is that he was not a habitual liar, that he was a normal member of his tribe, and that he would not have started on his prophetic mission if he had not received it from his God. But for our purpose, it is the clearest statement that Muḥammad was a member of his community with nothing to distinguish him from them before his mission. Muḥammad's life was always a public life, the details of which his people were aware of before he became a messenger for a God they do not believe in. Q. 29:48 spells out the question: did Muḥammad previously dabble in old books? Scripture? Was he copying older legends? Was he known before his mission to collect such things? The verse categorically denies that he had ever recited or (more importantly) copied scripture before. It adds the statement that had he done so before he became a messenger, people should have become suspicious—seeming to imply that if he were in the habit of dabbling in such things his people would have known where his revelation was gleaned from. Muḥammad's innocence is a sign that his call is genuine; he was called to his mission out of the blue by his God, and he, Muḥammad himself, is free from contrivance.

However, it is still not clear how this argument is going to win the unbelievers over. Q. 29:51 argues that Muḥammad has a book coming down to him, although it is not a 'book'. Clearly after his messengership commenced the Meccans noticed that he was telling 'the fables of bygone generations' (*asāṭīr al-awwalīn*): Q. 25:5 tells us that people described Muḥammad as being busy dictating such legends, only for the Qur'an to state in the next verse that it is God that is sending this down (Q. 25:6). The Qur'an thus comments on a change in Muḥammad's ability to interact with textual material that the Meccans noticed coincided with his call.

The messengers are tasked with proclaiming a message (*risāla*, mostly in the plural, *risālāt*). Q. 7:62, 68, and 93 all have statements about messengers delivering a message from God. This message is also called *balāgh*, a delivered item, an item that reaches someone or somewhere, a declaration. Thus Q. 14:52, summing up the main theme of the sura and the mission of Muḥammad, states: *this is a message* (*balāgh*) *to the people, so that they are warned by it, and that they know that He is the only God, and so that wise people are reminded.* The term *balāgh* is used to restrict the activity of the *rasūl*: the messenger has only to deliver clearly (*wa-mā ᶜalā'l-rasūli illā'l-balāghu'l-mubīn*, Q. 29:18, Q. 16:35, Q. 64:12, and Q. 36:17), in a phrase that would continue to be used in the Medinan period (see Q. 5:99, *the messenger has only to deliver, God knows what you hide and what you show*). In using the term 'messenger', and in insisting on the restricted role of just delivering a message (*balāgh*), there is almost a clinical detachment, it describes an act of conveyance, and the moment the message is delivered, the burden is squarely on the audience receiving the message (see more below about their responses). With time, we start seeing psychological and emotional

descriptions of the messengers in terms of their sorrow, sadness, and compassion for the people. However, in these cases the emotional aspects are not emphasised as relating to the messenger's function, but rather to the effects of his work on him, and when they are mentioned it is only to make sure that the messenger does not lose his nerve and cease his ministry.

There is one unique instance in the Qur'an that describes what the messenger of the Qur'an is to do: *iṣdaᶜ*, a verb used in Q. 15:94 to describe the breaking of something (used also to describe the earth in Q. 86:12), shows the act of declaration to be the explosive uncovering of a hidden thing, like the opening of a rock, a rupture. Clearly this ministry is public, not secret or furtive; it is rather a proclamation that is meant to reach every member of the community (whether the messenger was ordered to warn his family first is inconsequential for the theology of the Qur'an, see Q. 26:214). The same verse (Q. 15:94) uses the verb *tuʾmaru* (*you are ordered [by God]*) to enjoin the messenger to deliver the message, in another unique instance of verbal usage—the verb *a-m-r* is typically employed to order messengers to believe in God or to worship him. Q. 15:94 thus reads, *break out with that which you are ordered to do, and turn away from those who are polytheists*.

The messengers also call to God, or are made to call to God, with the verb in the imperative: *Call to the path of your God!* (*idᶜu ilā sabīli rabbika*). The phrase is mostly fixed, with the word 'path' being the object of this call (Q. 16:125, Q. 22:67, and Q. 28:87). This is the beginning of the development of a web of terms that depict salvation in spatial metaphors, as a journey in which guidance (*hudā*) is needed, on a path (*sabīl*, *ṣirāṭ*) to be traversed, or on which one can lose one's way to God (*ḍalāl*) and end up in perdition (*halāk*). The response to this call is for the people to follow (*t-b-ᶜ*) this call. *T-b-ᶜ* is also a verb that is used in regard to the messengers' response to God's call, that is, the messengers have to follow what God ordered them to deliver, as in Q. 6:50 (discussed earlier, *I but follow* (*attabiᶜu*) *that which is revealed to me*). This verb (*t-b-ᶜ*) thus plays a part in constructing a passive image of the messenger, inasmuch as he is powerless to change the content of the message.

The message was delivered to the *rasūl* by an act of inspiration (*w-ḥ-y*), most famously in Q. 53:10, where a vision is coupled with inspiration. This root has been studied extensively by Angelika Neuwirth,[18] all that needs to be stated here is that inspiration was the first manner in which the Qur'an explained the delivering of the message to Muḥammad. It will however soon be joined by another verb, seen as a synonym to the former: *anzala*, 'to send down', the act of making something descend on someone. This root was used later in the Meccan period, and clearly reflects an understanding that the message of the messenger is more than a proclamation; it is rather a compositional product, a genre of special speech, such that references are easily made to the previous scriptures, especially the book of Moses. The use of the verb *n-z-l* is to be directly tied

to the revelation of the Torah to Moses, and to a developing self-understanding of Muḥammad not only as a warner but also as a revealer of a scriptural corpus, where his message is more than a warning, it is a *dhikr*.[19]

6. Guiding (*hudā*) as the Principal Concept: The Confessionalism of Early Meccan Preaching

The Meccans, as discussed above, were perplexed as to why God would choose Muḥammad of all people and not another, more suitable, man from amongst them. The Qur'an takes the issue of how one is made a messenger seriously, and it offered an explanation for it before the incorporation of the notion of Jewish prophecy became operative in the Qur'an. There is of course the general deuteronomistic framing of human history, which is given as the larger justification for the coming of Muḥammad to his people. But there are several words used in the Qur'an to more specifically depict the process of selecting a messenger. Since most of these elaborate explanations about choosing a messenger are middle- and late-Meccan, we can presume that they were offered as a response to questions raised by the Meccans—but the Qur'an has one notion that was developed earlier. The verb *ijtabā* ('to select'), especially as it is used in Q. 19:58 about the cohort of messengers and prophets whom God selected, as well as in Q. 6:87 about a number of prophets and messengers, is always accompanied by the verb 'to guide', *hadā* (specifically in the form *hadaynāhum*, *We guided them*). God guided these messengers to Him.

The verb *hadā* is actually the cornerstone of the divine act of selection for the office of messengership, and it is the earliest and most continuously used term in the Qur'an for the relationship between the messengers and God, and also between God and human beings. It does not bear connotative echoes of the election theology of the Jewish people, nor any hint of grace by genealogy (at least not explicitly). It lacks any hint of Christian conversion through Jesus Christ, or a call by the Holy Spirit, nor is it directed to the glory of Christ. God guides the messengers and it is by such guidance that they are messengers. Indeed, with the various usages of this root we have the working out of a theology of salvation in the Qur'an, where salvation is guiding to the right path; this is a uniquely Qur'anic understanding that will be soon discarded by the post-Qur'anic developing Islamic theology. The verb *hadā* is also used to describe the act of what the messenger would achieve by his mission to the unbelievers: he will guide them. The messengers are thus also performing the very acts the followers are to perform. The messengers follow God (*t-b-ʿ*) and they are guided by God (*h-d-y*), just as they want the listeners to follow the message and be guided. The term *hadā*, in being used for the messengers and the audience alike, has also a counterbalancing effect to the grandiose claims made by the messengers of speaking for God. As such it continues the main theological claim of the Qur'an that the messenger is an equal who happens to know the right path, a guide in a desert, another fellow traveller.

God Himself is a deity that continuously 'guides.' In one of the early suras, Q. 87:1–3, we have the Qur'an equating 'creating' (*khalaq*), 'making perfect' (*sawwā*), 'deciding' (*qaddar*), and 'guiding' (*hadā*), all as constant activities of the One God. Guiding moreover is an act that is not only related to humans, for God is duty-bound to guide (Q. 92:12, *it is upon Us to guide*). Q. 20:50 connects the acts of creation and guiding as simultaneous activities of God's power. Q. 76:1–3 states that God guides unto a path, either of gratitude (*shākir*) or ingratitude (*kafūr*), an idea summarised in Q. 90:10, where God, the creator of human beings, has guided them to the two paths. Thus life is seen as two bifurcated roads, one that leads to damnation and the other to salvation, and it is God who guides to either one. In Sura 96, which narrates God's relationship to human beings, the saved camp is described as being *on guidance* (*in kāna ᶜalā'l-hudā*, Q. 96:11). Being with God is being rightly guided. A deity that is guiding by His nature will guide a messenger to guide a community. This is the argument of the Qur'an.

The most important usage of the verb 'to guide' in relationship to messengership is in Q. 93:7, a sura that narrates three acts of generosity from God to Muḥammad: sheltering him after he was orphaned, enriching after he was poor, and guiding (*hadā*) him after he was lost (*ḍāll*). Muḥammad was guided by God to Himself, and the opposite of being guided is being lost (*ḍāll*); these two opposed terms anchor the whole theology of the Qur'an. All the messengers in the Qur'an had been 'guided', in many instances explicitly to the 'path' (e.g., Q. 14:12 quotes the messengers as saying that God *has guided us to our paths*). Moses goes to the mountain hoping to find a fire or guidance (*hudā*) in Q. 20:10. Abraham will go to his God who will guide him (Q. 37:99). *Hudā* is the verb used to describe how God related to all messengers.

The root for guidance, *h-d-y*, is used not only for the act of guiding but also the state of being guided. Salvation is *hudā*. *Hudā* is what God sends with the messengers, and it is what God wants the prophets to spread. The Qur'an is a guide (*this is hudā*: Q. 45:11 and 20, see also Q. 17:9); *it guides to that which is more straight*, and causes guidance (Q. 27:92). Eventually the Torah and the Evangelium too are *hudā*. The term will continue to be used throughout the preaching of Muḥammad. But what did the Qur'an mean by this guiding? To look at the verb and its various usages in the Meccan period is to face a real paradox. Muḥammad was asking for the ultimate betrayal, namely forsaking one's religion in exchange for a mental and emotional reorientation, walking the right path and no more being lost, being saved. This is the crux of the new teaching of Muḥammad, of being with God through reorientation: at once an easy task and an impossible one. He was asking for conversion of one's being, forgetfulness of one's own past—yet the Qur'an simultaneously insisted that the preaching of Muḥammad is a *dhikr*, a reminder of what is truly real, ceasing one's old way of walking through life in order to reorient to the God now calling you (see Q. 2:17–20 for the Medinan depiction of a man walking and halting in a storm-lit night, one of the most powerful images of the need for guidance).

Muḥammad was not initially calling for a new legal code. His cult is far from being legally and ethically grounded (that is, there are no rules and prohibitions that are enforced, what ethically inflected verses there are are not particularly unique, and I doubt the Arabs of his time would have objected to any of his ethical calls). There is no revolutionary apocalyptic dismantling of the social order that advocates radical social transformation, although he was predicting the end of the world (thus no levelling of social differences, no freedom for slaves, no call for abstinence). There is too no cult of the person: he is very carefully de-charismatised in the Qur'anic verses from the Meccan period. There does not seem to be one single cultic act that functions as the symbol for this new faith, no mysterious sacrifice. All is clear and decipherable, yet all so vague. How do we understand this call beyond negative terms (e.g. leaving the gods of the fathers)? I think the best explanation is to understand it as a confessional reorientation. It is clear that he was asking for a theological-mystery reorientation of the self towards a single cosmic creator. Muḥammad was calling for a revolution of one's relationship to the meaning of one's life, and, it seems from the Qur'anic text, that this refers to the reorientation of an inner attitude that does not entail a radical social disruption. An attitude of gratitude (*shakūr*) instead of ingratitude (*kufr*) and a confessional internal acknowledgement of God (*Allāh*) as the sole godhead were supposedly enough to generate this transformation. Perhaps the best way of describing Muḥammad's cult is as a new cosmopolitan movement in a tribal society. But then this was a national movement also, for the emphasis on 'Arabness' goes beyond a mere translation of monotheism into Arabic (there were already many Arab Christians and Jews). Understood in this way, we can see his movement as being far more radical, far more incomprehensible to his tribal society. He was asking the impossible: a transformation of the self without a transformation of society.

Muḥammad himself might have thought he was saving his people through a simple confessional reorientation that was apolitical, but to them he must have appeared to be jockeying for power. It is this perception, and consistent attempts to rebut it, that leave a remarkable imprint in the Qur'an. The Meccan Qur'an tirelessly defended its messenger from charges of political ambition. This is the next issue that I would like to discuss in this article.

7. Power Unrecognised: The Paradox of Public Preaching in the Meccan Qur'an

The Qur'an has a specific description for the job of the messenger: he is a warner (*nadhīr*). An early example of this can be seen in Q. 74, where in fact messengership as warning is the central theme. God orders Muḥammad to warn (Q. 74:2, *get up and warn*); then the message is described as *a warning to humanity* (Q. 74:36), although the object of this warning is left as an unstated but clearly cosmic event; the sura ends with the Qur'an describing itself as a reminder (*tadhkira*, Q. 74:54), another form of warning. The Qur'an is emphatic that the only job of the

messenger is to warn: *you are nothing but a warner* (*anta illā nadhīr*, see Q. 35:23 and 38:70, among many), a phrase repeated endlessly in the Meccan period. Previous messengers also came to perform the role of 'warner'. Eventually another description will appear in addition to 'warner', namely that of the messenger as a harbinger of good tidings (*bashīr*). It is however clear that this is a second-stage development. Warning remained the main function of a messenger, and it is presented as the core of a messenger's mission: he is there to warn his people against the coming chastisement, if not the end of the world. There is almost a merging of the two words 'messenger' and 'warner', such that the Qur'an seems to imply that the one is the other, or that a 'warner' is the messenger of the deuteronomistic view of history: *We sent you rightly a harbinger of good tidings and a warner, and indeed every nation* (*umma*) *had a warner come to it* (Q. 35:24). Warning implies a terminal, not variegated, career for the messenger (one delivers the warning, waits, and is done). He was there not to establish a polity, reform a kingdom, or lead his people in an exodus, but to warn them of the chastisement soon to come. There is no new beginning here, but rather an end.

Other Qur'anic descriptions of Muḥammad's job seem to have one effect, namely to limit the scope of his activities in order to deny him any range for action: he is not an independent agent but controlled by the dictates of the message from his God. These restrictions to his activities are incomprehensible unless we see them as part of a larger strategy in the Qur'an to deny the messenger any subversive powers, a hidden political agenda, or autonomous control of his message. In Q. 34:50 the limits of his powers are starkly presented: he seems to admit to the utterly lonely and personal experience he is undergoing. He is asked to tell the Meccans, *if I were to go astray, I go astray on my own, and if I am guided then that is because of what God has revealed to me, He is near and hearing*. The limitation placed on Muḥammad by the Qur'an is also carried through in the rhetorical structure of the Qur'an, in which the text is framed as the word of God and not Muḥammad's. This was essential if one were to be convinced by the Qur'an; the message has to be separate from the messenger, and the Qur'an sets out that distinction very clearly. This aspect of Qur'anic rhetoric is usually not given the significance it deserves in the literature: the Qur'an not only makes Muḥammad a messenger, it sets itself as the message (*risāla*, *balāgh*, *dhikr*) distinct from the carrier. Indeed, it is through this rhetorical separation that the Qur'an becomes a persona.

The terms used to restrict the ministry of Muḥammad are important qualifications that define the nature of his career and are critical to an understanding of how his hostile audience experienced him. The terms are all power or money related, and thus surprisingly political in nature. The impression generated by Muḥammad's preaching on his audience, that he was harbouring a political agenda or was after control over his fellow tribesmen, seems to have perplexed Muḥammad, for he protested innocently and vehemently, but given the structuring of his role in the Qur'an we are to take it that his opponents were not convinced by his protestations and were on the outlook for any sign

that confirmed their suspicions. The Meccans seem to have thought that Muḥammad wanted more than to deliver a warning, for the Qur'an is at pains to deny that he is anything but a messenger. Q. 10:78 sums up this understanding of the career of messengers as understood by the receiving audience. The opponents of Moses accuse him of coming to *turn us away from that which we found our fathers following, so that you and your brother become mighty* (*kibriyāʾ*) *on earth, we will not believe in you*. The word *kibriyāʾ* ('mightiness') is only used twice in the Qur'an, here in the context of harbouring political ambition and once in a declarative statement about God being the supreme ruler of the heavens and earth (Q. 45:37). The root *k-b-r* is otherwise reserved to describe the arrogance and overreach of the unbelievers. The audience of the messenger were apparently convinced that all was not what it seemed, and the early preacher of the Qur'an attempts to dispel this to no avail.

The terms that deal with the accusations of political ambition on the part of the messenger can be divided into several groups. There are first the terms that relate to being in a position of power, overseeing one's audience; thus the Qur'an denies that Muḥammad is a *ḥafīẓ*, an overseer or a keeper of his audience. Q. 6:104 denies that *I* (Muḥammad) *am overseer over you* (*mā anā ʿalaykum bi-ḥafīẓ*), after presenting salvation as a personal choice that one can refuse or accept (*fa-li-nafsihi*). Q. 6:107 turns to Muḥammad and tells him that if *God wished, they would not have become polytheists, and We did not make you [Muḥammad]* (*mā jaʿalnāka*) *an overseer* (*ḥafīẓan*) *over them*. This verse actually uses two statements to deny any control that Muḥammad could have over his audience, adding that he is not their 'agent' (*wakīl*, see below). Q. 42:48 couples this denial that Muḥammad is not an overseer (*ḥāfīẓ*) with the affirmation that Muḥammad has only to proclaim or deliver his message, nothing more (*in ʿalayka illā'l-balāgh*, '*you only have to deliver*'). This power to be an overseer (*ḥafīẓ*) is God's, who alone is the overseer—in both a rhetorical and theological relocation of power to God in the Qur'an. Thus, Q. 42:6 tells Muḥammad that *those who have taken other gods as protectors, God Himself is their overseer* (*ḥafīẓ*), *you are not their overlord* (*wakīl*). The Qur'an is stating that each is responsible for oneself in a radical way, responsible before the call of God.

The second term in this group, *wakīl*, is used in the same manner as *ḥafīẓ*, namely to deny that Muḥammad is in control of his audience and to insist that only God is the controller. Q. 6:66 tells Muḥammad that he is not *in control* (*wakīl*) *over them*, while Q. 10:108 couples this statement with a declaration that personal choice and responsibility are given to human beings so that they can decide if they accept or reject the call (those who get lost, get lost on their own). The concept of God as the only *wakīl* is frequently repeated endlessly in the Qur'an. Q. 17:65 gives an interesting elaboration on the hidden meanings in the term *wakīl*: the pericope depicts the devil mounting a war on human beings, attacking humanity with his voice, his horses, and his footmen, only for God to state that *you have no power* (*sulṭān*) *over My*

worshippers, God is enough of a wakīl. Clearly there is a political dimension to the use of this word, as it establishes that the real power over humans (*sulṭān*) is in the hands of God; and *wakīl* denotes a might-based relationship of someone under the control of someone else. The *wakīl* is the representor, the one who controls your affairs. The root for this term (*w-k-l*) is also important in other contexts in the Qur'an, especially in its form of *tawakkul* ('reliance' or 'dependence' on God), which becomes the Qur'anic characterisation of true believers.

The third term with a connection to the idea of Muḥammad's political ambitions, *ḥisāb*, is presented negatively, as an act that only God performs and is never attributed to Muḥammad. The Qur'an thus denies that Muḥammad is in a position to perform such an act. The root *ḥ-s-b*, 'to count' or 'account for', 'be in position of power over', is analogous to the two terms discussed already. In Q. 13:40 God promises Muḥammad that He will deliver on His promise of chastisement, and tells him to rest and not worry, for God is the One who will do the accounting (judgement). This verse is structured like the previous examples we have seen: *should We show you some of what We are promising them [of punishment] or make you die before you see it, it is Our decision, for you are to deliver the message and We are to undertake the judgement*. The use of words derived from the root *ḥ-s-b* in the Qur'an leaves no doubt that human beings are not in a position to be in judgement over others, and only God is the one who counts and judges. Thus, in Q. 6:52, Muḥammad is rebuked for turning away some of his followers, he is ordered not to expel his followers and he is told that he is not a judge (*ḥasīb*) over them, nor are they judges over him; clearly, he is no position to be 'in judgement' (*ḥisāb*) over anyone. But more interestingly this community of his is radically equal by the mere fact that he has no control over them; the phrasing is a mirror image between *you are not to judge them in anything* and *they are not to judge you in anything*. The net effect of these restrictions is clear: Muḥammad is not the judge, not the one who controls anything, he has no authority. His God however is boundless in His power, and this diametric opposition between God and His messenger is reflective of the same pattern of differentiation between God and human beings. Nobody should thus fear Muḥammad, since he will not be in control of anyone who follows his call.

There are two other terms, which constitute the second group of words used to restrict the authority of Muḥammad. These are more explicit terms that were used to dispel any doubt about the nature of Muḥammad's activities or his ambitions. They put to rest any notion that he is after power. These each occur only once, but are no less potent for that. Q. 50:45 tells Muḥammad that God *knows what they are saying about you, but you are not a tyrant* (*jabbār*) *over them, so just remind those who fear My warning using the Qur'an*. Q. 88:22 tells Muḥammad that he is not *a magistrate* (*muṣayṭir*, the Arabised form of the Latin term magistrate). In both of these instances, the Qur'an is, remarkably, distancing Muḥammad from any hint that he has any claim of authority

over his audience. The use of these terms could not have been unprovoked; that is, they must be answering to the perception that by preaching his message Muḥammad was by necessity making a political claim over his audience. He is consistently portrayed as powerless and of limited authority, and the Qur'an uses political terms to explicitly renounce his authority. There is much material for speculation here, but one cannot discount the possibility that Muḥammad's audience saw in him a sort of a foreign agent, a sort of an imperial vanguard, who wanted to convert them (enslave them to a new cult), in which they will come under the control of someone else, and most probably be taxed (for more on which, see below).

I have not discussed so far the terms used to describe how Muḥammad was treated by his people—giving him the lie, mocking him (*sakhir*, see Q. 37:12 and Q. 23:110), ridiculing him (*yastahziʾūn*, see Q. 21:41, Q. 13:32, and Q. 6:10), etc.—which could only have been employed if he were vulnerable and unable to retaliate. This cluster of words constitutes the third group. Muḥammad's powerlessness to retaliate and the continuous injunctions in the Qur'an to be patient, to forgive, to turn away, and to have equanimity are thus not empty statements but can be assumed to reflect his real position. The terms used in the Qur'an for the responses of Muḥammad to his untenable position are as important as those described above for showing how circumscribed his power was. There are many pacifist terms used in the Qur'an to instruct the messenger in how to behave in face of this hostility. Q. 7:199 orders him to *forgive, behave as is customary, and turn away from the ignorant lot.* He is ordered mostly to avoid them, or turn away (*iʿriḍ*), as in Q. 15:94 and Q. 6:106. Q. 6:68 asks him to turn away if they are debating or mocking God. The order to *turn away from them and wait* (*fa-aʿriḍ ʿanhum wa'ntaẓir*) is the only real option offered Muḥammad by his God (Q. 32:30; see also Q. 6:158, Q. 10:30, and Q. 10:102). Muḥammad's helplessness is at times dramatically emphasised by the Qur'an to effect a moderating effect on his own unrealistic expectations. Thus, Muḥammad is told pointedly that he can neither bore a hole in earth, nor climb a ladder to the heavens to bring forth a miracle, and that he should simply stop being hurt when people turn away from him (Q. 6:35). He is even asked to forgive (*iṣfaḥ*) and say peace (*salām*, Q. 43:89) to attacks from antagonistic people, and to be peaceful with them (Q. 25:63, see also Q. 7:199 above). But mostly he is asked to be patient (*iṣbir*) and to bear what his opponents say (Q. 20:130 and Q. 38:17, among many examples). These exhortations leave no doubt that Muḥammad was in no position to retaliate, and that he at no point thinks he will carry out the chastisement himself. God is the punisher, and the horizon of His messenger's career was defined by his deuteronomist understanding of his limited role, to end with the catastrophic destruction of his people.

There are further terms, a fourth group, that deny that Muḥammad was after any financial gains from his ministry, or that he would impose taxes on his followers. The term *ajr* ('fee') is used repeatedly in the Qur'an, and every messenger is presented as

denying that he is after a fee as a recompense for his ministry. Q. 12:104 has Muḥammad saying that *you are not asking them for a fee for it, it* (the Qur'an) *is but a reminder to humanity*, Q. 25:57 reasserts that Muḥammad is not asking for a fee, only that people walk in the path of God. Sura 26 has five verses (109, 127, 145, 164, and 180) that repeat almost verbatim the expression *I do not ask you for a fee for it, my recompense is from God*, a phrase presented as uttered by a line of messengers to their people. Given how many times it is repeated in the Qur'an the expectation that Muḥammad might ask for a fee must have been widespread. Is it because his audience saw him as a prognosticator (*kāhin*), though admittedly a failed one? In Q. 52:40 the Qur'an mocks the Meccans and attributes their refusal to listen to the message to their impression that they will be forced to pay an exorbitant fee. The other instance (Q. 23:72) where Muḥammad is made to deny that he wants a fee from his audience is more revealing, for it uses the term for taxation (*kharāj*). The non-monetary nature of Muḥammad's ministry is not a minor issue, for it is made a characteristic feature of the ministry of the messengers.

Taken together, the parameters of Muḥammad's role are rather baffling. He is denied any meaningful role in the eyes of his people: he is not a poet, nor a soothsayer, nor a possessed individual, but rather a warner (a characterisation which does not seem to have impressed them much). His preaching is perceived as disruptive and irrational to his audience, especially on the core teachings he is presenting: that there is going to be a destruction of the world, and that there is a resurrection of the dead. Moreover, his call for them to acknowledge the One God is an abstracted call, since it is really a conversion experience that he is asking them to undergo, a confessional transformation. This is perhaps one of the most fascinating conclusions to draw from our close examination of Muḥammad in the Meccan Qur'an. For his preaching is, after all, 'modern' (meaning, confessional; Christian-like but also universal, since Manicheanism and Zoroastrianism were likewise definitely confessional) in its inflection. As such, despite the absence of any Jesus-centred teaching in his preaching, he was asking for a confessional individual conversion akin to a Christian subject, calling for a radical transformation of his people into a society that resembles the Byzantine Christian societies. I think this is at the core of the misunderstanding between him and his people. It is no wonder that the Qur'an would use the word 'light' to mean guidance and faith. This is a confessional, not a cultic setting, an inner reorientation (most memorably exemplified in Q. 6:79, in Abraham's discovering God and confessing Him through a spatial reorientation: *I turn my face to the One*, although he has just realised that this God is directionless). The Qur'an will eventually (in Medina) offer a full-fledged credal statement, but it is already an unavoidable development, given the confessional nature of Muḥammad's early preaching (Q. 2:285). This very confessionalism should be seen as the major impediment to his success in Mecca: Muḥammad's mission did not seem in any way viable to his people.

Conclusion: The Historical Implications of Muḥammad's Ministry[20]

The Qur'an is unable to deny the opponents of its message their voice. Their arguments against the Qur'an are at the core of its own counter-arguments, and offer us a clear idea of what these opponents thought of Muḥammad, of his message and of their own position. They insisted on his humanity and the human origin of his teaching (as in Q. 44:14, *they turned away from him saying he is being taught this [by another human] and he is mad*). They themselves lacked a scripture that they could use or base their arguments in (see Q. 68:37, Q. 34:44, and Q. 6:156), and held out in a world in which scripture and the Biblical paradigm (in the wider sense) was the norm. Nothing, however, would convince them to forsake the religion of their fathers: Mecca refused its prophet. Using conversion as a measure, Muḥammad's ministry was a failure in Mecca, and one can see why: the crisis he was proposing to solve was (to coin a phrase) one of his own creation. We have yet to give this failure its due and treat the Meccan period from its own vantage point, rather than of the victorious period that followed in Medina. At this point he was functioning outside the bounds of his audience's world, asking them to forsake their sunna, their traditions, and for what? For a confessional reorientation to One God such that they would be saved and resurrected. Confessionalism is an unpredictable form of religious proselytising: it can resonate but it mostly does not, unlike cultic practices. The Meccans meanwhile did not believe they were damned. One cannot emphasise this aspect of their world enough; they were not expecting destruction, or an end to the world. They were also presented with a messenger who did not want to be a leader, an overseer, or a tax collector. Muḥammad could instead be seen to be purposefully dis-enchanting himself. In the last resort he was creating unrest and gathering the lowly to him (see Q. 26:113 about Noah, and Q. 80), and causing discord among families. He was not able to affect a radical change in his society. Eventually he had to leave Mecca, after his movement plateaued and his enemies became bolder. This Muḥammad, the Muḥammad of Mecca, is radically different from the leader of Medina. When he left Mecca he left a persona behind. The break was profound.

Muḥammad was neither a Jew nor a Christian (see Q. 2:135), nor was he calling for a Jewish cult, nor did his preaching grow out of a Christian heresy. Recognising this will have profound implications for our scholarship, much as the statement that Jesus was a Jew had profound implication for New Testament studies. Muḥammad was one of his pagan people, and this must affect our analysis of the encounter between him and his opponents, in order to reconstruct his world. His message referenced Jewish and Christian paradigms, but was not an outgrowth of any of them. Instead it is his prophetic experience that changed and made him. He believed he was a messenger with a message, and it was not that of Jesus, nor was it concerned with the fate of Israel and its redemption. For their part, his people were certainly neither Jews nor Christians. They were not living a life of Jewish customs or habits. They honoured neither Moses

nor Israel, nor did they keep a Sabbath or kashrut. They were not Christians, and any sign of Jesus-centred salvation is absent both from Muḥammad's teaching and his wider world. His people were aware of the stories of the Jews and the Christians, but these stories were not reference points for their arguments. It is clear from his preaching that Muḥammad, on the other hand, understood human history in a manner completely alien to his people. He seems to have had an understanding of deuteronomistic Jewish history as universal and detached from Israel's fate. There is an accusation in the Qur'an that Muḥammad was mixing with a foreign-speaking individual, but this really is inconsequential to the task of analysing the Qur'an, for which his prophetic vision more than sufficiently accounts. Jewish ideas could be easily come by. Yemen had been a Jewish polity for at least 300 years by the time Muḥammad was born, and Jewish tribes were all over the north of Arabia and in Medina. The Qur'an, however, was a new preaching, and what to make of it is a matter of theoretical orientation.

The scholarly attempt to 'contextualise' the Qur'an has become another mode of actually robbing it of any originality. So Late Antique is the Qur'an now that it seems all of it is antique. This is despite the fact that the Qur'an was self-consciously aware of its originality and called itself a new dispensation (Q. 21:2). This was a revolutionary text, which is why it failed in Mecca. The analysis carried out in this article requires that we revisit the Hijrī calendar. For we seem to think that the Qur'an is unanchored in history or locale. It is not. The gap inside the Qur'an, the schism, the unbridgeable two parts of the Qur'an as we have it, point to a radical change in the life of its preacher. There were two Qur'ans, so to speak, preached in two locales. The Hijra inception of the Muslim calendar (622 CE) anchors the Qur'an historically. The messenger of Mecca is a pathetic figure when compared to the expansive role of the Muḥammad of Medina. A man leading armies is, we can agree, not a mere messenger: few of us can muster that power over others, to lead them to death. Far fewer can ask to have a share in our wealth. One has to offer an explanation for the breach between this passive messenger and this army-leader-tax-collector; the traditional Islamic historical memory is still the only cogent paradigm for it. To repeat a remark that I have stated before, the Hijrī calendar (coming as it does, soon after the conquest of the major centres of civilisation in the Middle East) is remarkable for one thing: not its early adoption but rather its point of reference.[21] It pointed to the beginning of the Muslim polity, inside Arabia and before the Arabs came out of it. Conquering the world (or Jerusalem, for instance) was not impressive enough to mark the beginning of the calendar. The Hijra points to a different beginning. New calendars are for new dynasties, and why should early Islam be different here? This only begs the question of what Muḥammad was doing before he managed to establish a polity. The Meccan parts of the Qur'an are the answer, and this article charts the course of Muḥammad before the Hijra. Historians of early Islam are becoming so minimalist that they can only start from inscriptions and

the like (we are fortunate that now we are asked to begin with Muᶜāwiya, no longer ᶜAbd al-Malik—an advancement of thirty years). This draconian standard, that only with dated inscriptions are we allowed to talk about early Islam, is then used to browbeat specialists of the Qur'an. To accept this criterion is to renounce reading the Qur'an; yet strangely, revisionist historians seem nonetheless able to appropriate it on their own terms.

Meanwhile, we are starting to be presented with a Qur'an so alien to what it produced that none of this contextualising is making sense anymore. The Qur'an is made continuous with Late Antiquity, but is strangely discontinuous with what it directly produced! Most of the Syriac literature compared with the Qur'an is so poorly attested, barely one manuscript here or one there, that one must ask how a work in the middle of Palestine, Northern Iraq, or Turkey, tucked away in a monastery, was exerting such an influence on a man who we know did not read Syriac.[22] Monotheism, apocalyptic visions, and confessional constructions of identity are paradigms which can be obtained through other means than books. The deuteronomistic view that is clearly behind the Qur'an's vision of history is a good example of what it is not possible to establish through historical scholarship: we can detect an echo but it is impossible to venture how it was come across. There are at least two possibilities: one is to claim that the Q Gospel survived in Arabia among remnants of Christian-Jewish sects (not a new claim, mind you), while the other claim is that the Qur'anic vision reflected the Jewish environment in Arabia in a wider sense. My own wager is on the second possibility. Whether one agrees with the analysis presented here is beside the point: we have the data already in the Qur'an, and the issue is how to interrogate it. We must admit the limitations of what is historically possible but also not shy away from drawing conclusions based on a sensible reading of the material at hand.

NOTES

* The research and first draft of this article were carried out in the summer of 2016 during my stay at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, at the invitation of Professor Ronny Volandt. I am grateful for Professor Volandt and for the IAS for their invitation and the opportunity to dedicate myself to research.

1 For an overview of the status of Qur'anic studies see Angelika Neuwirth's 'Qur'anic Studies and Historical-Critical Philology', especially p. 37.

2 My intellectual debt to Rudi Paret's *Muhammed und der Koran: Geschichte und Verkuendigung des arabischen Propheten* should become more apparent as the article proceeds. In many ways this article is a continuation of his pioneering efforts and the many essays he wrote on the relationship of the Qur'an to Muḥammad.

3 See on the same topic but with radically different conclusions: Crone, 'Angels versus Humans', and Hawting, 'Has God Sent a Mortal as a Messenger?'.

4 al-Ṭabarī already summarises this verse to mean: 'they are denying that God sends messengers from among the human beings (*inkāran minhum an yakūna Allāh yursilu rasūlan min Banī Ādam*)'.

5 I am grateful for my colleague John Kloppenborg for his assistance with the literature on deuteronomistic history and literature on the Q Gospel. My first encounter with deuteronomistic history was in his book, *The Earliest Gospel*, p. 76 ff.

6 Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame*.

7 Jacobson, 'The Literary Unity of Q'.

8 Odil Steck has already noticed that the Qur'an contains references to the tradition of the deuteronomistic prophetology. He however restricts it to the accusation against the Jews that they have killed the prophets in Q. 2: 87 and Q. 5:70–71 (*Israel und das Gewaltsame*, pp. 97–98). Steck comes tantalisingly close to realising the connection between deuteronomistic history and the punishment/messengership stories, but does not elaborate on this—but then, he was not a Qur'an specialist. No scholar has picked up on this paragraph (*Israel und das Gewaltsame*, pp. 98–99): 'Im Qoran findet sich auch sonst eine Reihe von Vorstellungsmomenten, die auf einen traditionsgeschichtlichen Zusamenhang mit der Ueberlieferung der deuteronomistiche Prophetenaussage weisen; so die Vorstellung von der Prophetenreihe (zB Sure 2:87) die Bezeichnung "Gesandte" im Rahmen der deuteronomistische Prophetenaussage, vielleicht auch die haeufige Bezeichnung "Warner" fuer Muhammed, ferner die Auffassung der Propheten als Strafprediger und Uebermittler des Gotteswillens'. My own realisation came through reading Kloppenborg and Jacobson, only to be confirmed by this paragraph later on.

9 The most comprehensive review of the literature on 'punishment stories' is Devin Stewart's 'Wansbrough, Bultmann, and the Theory of Variant Traditions in the Qur'ān', esp. 29–34. Stewart did not include Rudi Paret in his extensive bibliographical review of the literature.

10 It was Rudi Paret who first used this term for Muḥammad's historical consciousness. However, Paret was talking about a Jewish/Christian *Heilsgeschichte*, while Muḥammad was inventing a new one. See his 'Das Geschichtsbild Mohammeds', p. 219. This article is later summarised in his *Mohammad und der Koran*, but it is worth reading in full for Paret's articulation of Muḥammad's historical vision. I am grateful for Dennis Halft for sending me a copy of the article.

11 Paret, *Mohammad und der Koran*, p. 95.

12 See now the literature on this campaign by Christian Robin in 'Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and *Arabia Deserta* in Late Antiquity', pp. 151–152.

13 Edwell et al., 'Arabs in the Conflict between Rome and Persia', p. 222.

14 This section is part of the chapter on the earlier *Heilsgeschichte*; *Mohammed und der Koran*, pp. 90–101, esp. 99–101.

15 The eurocentrisim here is embarrassing yet understandable; Paret could not conceive of any improvement on Christianity.

16 Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran*, p. 91.

17 See the many verbs used for salvation as walking a path in my article 'The Etymological Fallacy and Qur'anic Studies', p. 666.

18 Neuwirth, 'The "Discovery of Writing" in the Qur'an'.

19 For the Qur'an's revelation as a book as argued by Muḥammad, see my 'A Piecemeal Qur'an'.

20 The other remarkable similarity between the theology of Q and the Qur'an is the assumption of Jesus. This is a topic for another conversation, but see Daniel A Smith, 'The "Assumption" of the Righteous Dead', and his 'Revisiting the Empty Tomb'.

21 See my '"What If You Refuse, When Ordered to Fight?", pp. 261–283.

22 For the dearth of Syriac literature see Brock, 'Without Mushē of Nisibis, Where Would We Be?'.

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