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Qurʾānic *ummī*: genealogy, ethnicity, and the foundation of a new community

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QUR'ĀNIC *UMMĪ*: GENEALOGY, ETHNICITY, AND THE FOUNDATION OF A NEW COMMUNITY*

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In memoriam Patriciae Cronae -
deductrix et inspiratio

The Qur'ānic term *ummī* and the corresponding adjectival construct, *al-nabī al-ummī*, have been the object of much interest on the part of modern scholars of the secular discipline of scriptural studies, an interest that goes back at least to Abraham Geiger's *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (1833). Scholarship on the meaning and origins of this term, however, is an exceptional case in that it virtually unanimously rejects the mainstream traditional interpretation of the phrase *nabī ummī* as "illiterate prophet." But this unanimity would hardly be surprising if one takes into account the fact that out of the six instances of the term's attestation in the Muslim scripture, the traditional interpretation does not fit the context in at

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Sadly enough, Christian Julien Robin's highly important essay, "Quel judaïsme en Arabie?" appeared too late to be included in my analysis. It is, nevertheless, gratifying to see that the results of Professor Robin's work, which draws on a wholly different body of evidence (namely, epigraphy), comport with my reading of the Qur'ān.

least three of them; this is an observation that, contrary to the popular opinion, was not lost on mediaeval Muslim exegetes,[1] who, to quote Norman Calder, showed "they are as capable as their European counterparts of taking context into consideration."[2]

Yet, scholarship seems to be somewhat ambivalent about the issue. Part of this ambivalence is rooted in the term's pragmatics in other contexts in the Qurʾān, particularly Qurʾān 2:78, which does not comport well with modern scholarship's understanding of *ummī* as gentile. The observation first made by Theodor Nöldeke that through-out the Qurʾān *ummī* is used in opposition to *ahl al-kitāb* (that is, Christians and Jews)[3] further exacerbates the problem.[4] The word's etymology has also been a matter of some contention, both in mediaeval tradition and in modern research. While previous studies have either been concerned with the term's etymology[5] or the exegetical discussions thereof, so far virtually no studies have been dedicated to an investigation of the instances of its usage in a number of sundry traditions[6] in contexts which make it clear that its meaning is

[1] Calder, "The *ummī*." Many prominent Shīʿī theologians did not believe in the Prophet's illiteracy; see, e.g., al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, pp. 124-126; al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Awāʾil al-maqālāt*, pp. 135-136; al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, *Rasāʾil*, pp. 104-108. Each of the latter two scholars marshals a mixture of theological and textual arguments against Muḥammad's illiteracy (I am grateful to Hamed Fayazi for these two references). In his commentary on Qurʾān 29:48, al-Ṭūsī voices the opinion that the Prophet was literate even before the onset of his revelation but did not read or write previous scriptures, lest opponents accuse him of plagiarism; al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān,* vol. 8, p. 216.

[2] Calder, "The *ummī*," p. 12.

[3] Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, p. 10 (*History*, p. 10).

[4] For a survey of traditional and modern literature, see Guenther, "Illiteracy," idem, "*Ummī*," and idem, "Muḥammad, the illiterate prophet," pp. 9-12, and the references therein. For a discussion of the problems arising from the modern interpretation, see below, section II.

[5] It goes without saying that most of these posit a foreign origin for it. But so far this method has spectacularly failed to impart any new insights regarding the term's function in the Qurʾān. In the present discussion, I follow Walid Saleh's lead in his insightful, albeit excessively critical, overview of etymological work on the Qurʾān. See his "Etymological fallacy," and now also "A piecemeal Qurʾān". However, this is not to downplay the importance of etymological endeavours where they are relevant and able to produce new results. For a survey of its various proposed etymons, see Pennacchio, *Les emprunts*, pp. 57-58 and 158; and Paret, *Kommentar*, pp. 21-23.

[6] Herein I use the word "tradition" in its broadest possible sense to include *khabar*, *ḥadīth*, *riwāya*, and so forth.

something other than "illiterate."[7] In what follows, I will produce all the instances of such usage in the corpus of Muslim traditions known to me.[8] It will be argued that the term indeed originally denoted "gentile," and it was probably only through more than one stage of semantic shift that it acquired the meaning of "illiterate." I will then try to tackle the problem of the inconsistency of this interpretation with the pragmatics of the word as attested in the aforementioned Qurʾānic passages. This contextual reading will then serve as a launching pad for a discussion of the centrality of Muḥammad's socio-ethnic identity to the heated exchange of polemic between his followers and opponents. A taxonomy of these opponents based on the Qurʾānic evidence would reveal them to be comprised of three major self-identified socio-ethnic groupings, namely, Jews, (Jewish and mainstream) Christians, and Arab Judaisers (see below for a definition of these terms). This collective identity assigned to gentile Arabs seems to have been instrumental in shaping up the proto-Muslim community's perception of its place in God's "Grand Scheme" for humanity, a perception heavily influenced by narratives of Israelite salvation history.

Before going any further, I should like to emphasise that the authenticity or otherwise of the traditions collected in section I is of no concern to the present enquiry. Rather, the point I am trying to make is that these traditions certainly were meaningful to those Arabs who put them into circulation and to their audience, and this implies that their understanding of the word *ummī* was different from that of the traditionists of the "classical"

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[7] With the single exception to this being Calder, "The *ummī*." But the legal rulings he produces constitute a highly idiosyncratic instance of the term's usage. On the other hand, while the author himself concedes that these legal traditions are no earlier than the time of Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179 AH), it is not clear what bearing they might have on our understanding of the meaning of the term as it occurs in the Qurʾān. Nevertheless, he mentions two relevant traditions in passing (*ibid*., pp. 112-113). Some of the traditions produced here have also been mentioned or discussed by Rubin, *Eye of the beholder*, pp. 23-27 (I am indebted to one of the anonymous referees and Ella Landau-Tasseron for bringing this work to my attention). However, despite taking *ummī* to mean "gentile," Rubin neglects the linguistic significance of these traditions at the expense of their theological and intertextual importance.

[8] I have drawn most of my testimonies from online corpora of traditions like http://shamela.ws/ and http://islamweb.net/. I deem it necessary to say that I will not cite all the works in which the traditions presented here could be found, but will confine myself to citing, rather arbitrarily, the oldest, most famous, or most authoritative works in which these traditions appear.

period. Put simply, the existence of such instances of usage demonstrates that, at some time in the past, *ummī* did not denote "illiterate." This method, in my view, is a more cogent way of ascertaining a term's denotation at any given moment of its semantic history, for the *mufassirūn*, as is well-known, are usually informed by theological, sectarian, or otherwise tendentious motives;[9] a fact which, in its own turn, has influenced Arabic lexicography,[10] whereas a term's usage in mundane, everyday idiom is a far more reliable testimony to its actual meaning. It must likewise be self-evident that the date of these traditions is not to be a matter of central concern to us either inasmuch as the signification of the term as applied by them constitutes an idiosyncratic usage not attested for later periods. Hence, the submission that they are "early" results *a posteriori*, and not *a priori*, from the following.

As to the ethno-religious terminology used in section II, I use the ethnonyms "Jew" and "Israelite" interchangeably to designate any adherent of the Mosaic law with a claim to descent from Abraham through Isaac. "Judaising Christian" signifies a Jesus-believer whose dietary observances go beyond those set out by Acts 15 (in the eastern recension), be they gentile or Jew. The appellation "Jewish Christian" designates the same identity group. One, however, may be somewhat reserved in using this denominator as it can give the reader the wrong impression that the intended group are either entirely comprised of Jewish Jesus-believers or are somehow connected with those early Common-Era followers of Jesus whom the heresiographers categorically portray as distinct heretical "sects." At any rate, I use the phrase with all its due caveats for want of a better designation. Lastly, when not explicitly applied to Jewish Christians, the designation "Judaiser" refers to a gentile adherent of Mosaic religion. In using the denominators "Jewish proselyte" and "Judaiser," I follow the terminology of my sources with the

[9] Cf. the case of the term *ḍāll* in Qurʾān 93:7, whose obvious connotation the exegetes vociferously deny; Saleh, "Etymological fallacy," pp. 650-651. The literature that discusses the tendentious nature of the *tafsīr* is so vast that even citing the most important works would make up a huge bibliography, hence I confine myself to citing John Wansbrough's seminal monograph, *Quranic studies*.

[10] See the excellent study by Kopf, "Religious influences." Note that while Kopf's study mainly revolves around the pietistic inclinations and attitudes of certain philologists and lexicographers, one can also make a case for theological influence on philology by comparative studies of discussions of certain words in both the exegetical and lexicographical literature.

understanding that so many a time the difference between the two concepts is too nuanced for non-Jews to be noticed and too artificial when made by Jews[11] — though, as will be seen in the second section, this neat distinction becomes acutely pertinent in the case of the Qurʾān.

I

A: *ummī* as gentile

1. In a tradition attributed to the *tābiʿī* Badr b. Khālid al-Kūfī, he and a group of people encounter the companion Zayd b. Thābit on the day of ʿUthmān's murder. Zayd, a Jewish convert to Islam, expresses his strong disapproval of the rebels' actions, saying: "Do you not feel ashamed of the one before whom angels appear humbly?" When he is asked what he is talking about, he replies that he heard the Prophet say: "Once ʿUthmān passed by me while a group of angels were with me. [Upon seeing ʿUthmān] they said '[he will be] a martyr from among the *ummī*s who will be killed by his own people (*shahīdun min al-ummiyyīn yaqtuluhu qawmuhu*); we indeed feel humble before him'." Then Badr and a group of people turn away from the rebels.[12]

The fact that *ummī* has been used in the plural in this *khabar*, and evidently in reference to the community from which ʿUthmān hailed, makes the possibility of reading it as "illiterate" inconceivable.[13] Moreover, according to some reports ʿUthmān was a merchant and one of the *kuttāb al-*

[11] Compare the instructive yet blurred taxonomy of the states in between "gentile" and "Jewish" in Cohen, "Crossing the boundary."

[12] Al-Ṭabarānī, *Musnad al-shāmiyyīn*, vol. 39, p. 94.

[13] The consequential question in this connexion, in my view, is not whether Muḥammad or the Arabs of his time were all (or predominantly) illiterate or not, but rather the pragmatic one of what the significance of the term in the context of its sentence is. In simple terms, would it make a difference if, say, Qurʾān 7:157 used a designation for the Prophet other than "illiterate?" The answer ought to be in the negative; replacing "illiterate" with any other adjective would not make the statement look any different, nor would it blunt the point of the argument; in sum, the word's presence in the sentence is, to all intents and purposes, redundant. Moreover, one may even wonder whether there had to exist a term for "illiterate" in a pre-literate society such as the tradition depicts for us (which, however, does not seem to have been radically different in this case).

waḥy, the scribes to whom Muḥammad occasionally dictated parts of his revelation.[14] However, this observation does not rule out the possibility that the term could be construed as "pagan," "without scripture," or just "Arab," as the Islamic tradition itself would maintain in such cases.[15] The telling clue as to the meaning of the word must be searched in the ethno-religious background of the locutor, Zayd: as a Jew, it would have only been natural for him to refer to his Arab co-religionists as "gentiles," despite that he had been united with them under the banner of *islām*.

2. In his commentary on Qurʾān 2:142 (the beginning of the pericope on the change of *qibla*), al-Ṭabarī — an ardent proponent of the doctrine of *naskh al-Qurʾān* — cites the authority of the famous early second-century theologian and mystic al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110 AH) — himself a believer in abrogation — on the issue: "The first thing that was abrogated in the Qurʾān was the *qibla*. It was because the Prophet first turned his face [while praying] towards the rock of the Temple in Jerusalem (*ṣakhrat Bayt al-Maqdis*),[16] which was the *qibla* of the Jews (*wa-hiya qiblat al-yahūd*). The Prophet prayed towards it for seventeen months so that they might believe in him and follow him, and he called Arab *ummī*s to it" (*wa-yadʿū bi-dhālika ʾl-ummiyyīn min al-ʿarab*).[17]

As in the previous tradition, *ummī* has not only been used of the Arabs in the plural,[18] but has also been contrasted with Judaism/Jewishness: Jerusalem was the *qibla* of the Jews, still, Muḥammad called on "gentile" Arabs to pray towards it as a means of making an appeal to the Jews.[19]

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[14] Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 5, p. 487.

[15] See, e.g., the traditions collected in Goldfeld, "Illiterate prophet."

[16] In early Islamic times Jerusalem was primarily called Īliyāʾ, the Arabicised form of its Roman name Aelia; Grabar, "al-Ḳuds." Bayt al-Maqdis is the Arabicised form of the Hebrew name for the Temple, Bēth ha-Miqdash, which in the early days of Islam was used to refer to the Temple, just as in Hebrew.

[17] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 2, p. 622.

[18] From a linguist's perspective, however, this is not quite correct. This structure conveys what linguists call a conventional implicature. The presence of the preposition *min* implies that the Arabs are not to be conceived as just the same ones as *ummiyyūn*, but that the former are drawn from the ranks of the latter inasmuch as *min al-ʿarab* is a structure of parenthetical nature (a permutative apposition; *badal al-baʿḍ min al-kull*) whose function is to further specify the range of the people involved. The tradition's phraseology, thereby, demarcates the subtle boundary, in an Arabian context, between Arab and gentile more pronouncedly.

[19] This tradition is the quintessence of *ummī* applied in the sense of "gentile."

3. Al-Biqāʿī, in his commentary on Qurʾān 2:248, — which narrates the account of the Ark's return to the Israelites in the days of King Saul — alleges that whenever the Israelites triumphed in a battle, a breeze would come out of the Ark whose sound could be heard. He then quotes the Prophet as saying: "I triumphed through the breeze (*nuṣirtu bi-l-ṣibā*) whose Shekhina (*sakīna*) was the entirety of its [?] horizons (*kulliyyat āfāqihā*) and whose ark (*tābūt*) the entirety of its heavens (*kulliyyat samāʾihā*), so that it need not a carriage to carry it, nor does it need people to tend to it; for it is the *ummī* nation to whom God has entrusted the keeping of its knowledge and rituals" (*li-annahā ummatun ummiyyatun tawallā Allāh lahā iqāmat ʿilmihā wa aʿmālihā*).[20]

Once more we have a case of *ummī* in the plural before us in which the term has been used to effect a contrast with Judaism and/or things Jewish in general.

4. In a number of reports, Muḥammad is alleged to have suspected a Jewish boy called Ibn Ṣayyād, or Ibn Ṣāʾid, of being the Dajjāl, the Islamic *doppelgänger* of the Antichrist. In one particularly interesting and widely attested version, Muḥammad and ʿUmar encounter him playing with other children near the towerhouse (*uṭum*) of Banū Maghāla. Muḥammad addresses him and asks him whether he would confirm that he is the messenger of Allāh. Ibn Ṣayyād cunningly replies: "I testify that you are the messenger to the *ummī*s" (*ashhadu annaka rasūl al-ummiyyīn*). In turn, Ibn Ṣayyād asks Muḥammad whether he would testify that he, Ibn Ṣayyād, is a messenger of God, to which Muḥammad equally astutely answers: "I believe in God and [all] His messengers." The showdown ends with ʿUmar asking Muḥammad for his permission to cut off Ibn Ṣayyād's head, but Muḥammad advises against it and says that if Ibn Ṣayyād is indeed the Dajjāl, ʿUmar would not be able to kill him.[21]

5. In another account of Ibn Ṣayyād, Muḥammad entered a palmgrove (presumably not alone) and was told that Ibn Ṣayyād was sleeping under a palm tree. Then Muḥammad, apparently intending to have a closer look at the boy, said to his entourage: "Perhaps I will find him asleep so that I can [inspect him and] inform you of him." But when Muḥammad

[20] Al-Biqāʿī, *Naẓm al-durar*, vol. 3, p. 422.

[21] Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4, p. 2244; ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 11, p. 389; Ibn Shabba, *Taʾrīkh al-Madīna*, vol. 2, pp. 402-403.

approached, Ibn Ṣayyād's mother awakened him by shouting: "This is the messenger of the *ummī*s [coming]!" (*hādhā rasūl al-ummiyyīn!*) Again, a conversation follows in which Ibn Ṣayyād is made to confirm that Muḥammad is a messenger to the *ummī*s.[22]

6. In another exotic strand of traditions on the Dajjāl, there is mention of a beast called *al-jassāsa*, or the spy.[23] The fullest version of the *jassāsa* legend is a tradition attributed to Fāṭima bt. Qays in which the Prophet boastfully relates the story of the conversion of Tamīm b. Aws al-Dārī (a Christian; *naṣrānī*)[24] to Islam after his encounter with the Dajjāl — who introduces himself as the Messiah — in a distant island at the western extremity of the world (*maghrib al-shams*), where he is incarcerated in a monastery.[25] In the account of Tamīm's dialogue with the Dajjāl, once again Muḥammad is called the prophet of the *ummī*s (*nabī al-ummiyyīn*). The tradition ends with adumbrating a few well-known minutiae from the Dajjāl's career.[26]

7. A different version of the story of Tamīm al-Dārī's conversion has him travel to Shām on the eve of Muḥammad's calling. He leaves the town for some business but cannot return before nightfall and is forced to spend the night out of town. While preparing a bed for himself, he hears a voice

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[22] Ibn Shabba, *Taʾrīkh al-Madīna*, vol. 2, pp. 402-403. For the various versions of the Ibn Ṣayyād tradition, see Raven, "Ibn Ṣayyād." Virtually all scholars seem to be at their wits' end over what to make of him; cf. Cook, *Studies in Muslim apocalyptic*, pp. 110-117.

[23] Nothing is known of the *jassāsa*'s role in the endtimes and in this tradition she is an extra at best. Her character is so extraneous to Muslim eschatology that some traditionists, for want of an explanation for her appearance in the tradition, identify her with *al-dābba*, the beast, a Qurʾānic figure that takes on an eschatological role in the tradition. For a fuller bibliography of primary sources on her, see Cook, *Studies in Muslim apocalyptic*, pp. 117-120.

[24] In this tradition and the next two ones, *ummī* has been used in the plural, but is not contrasted with Jews and Jewish traits. Yet while one can only guess at ʿAddās' persuasion by reading between the lines, it may be significant that Tamīm is a *naṣrānī*, a denominator which might signify some form of Jewish Christianity (see section II for discussion).

[25] This description is strongly reminiscent of the belief imputed to a sect referred to as the Ḥewyāyē by the late eighth century Mesopotamian Nestorian writer Theodore bar Kōnay that the Messiah and his parents live "in a church at the end of the earth"; Gerö, "Ophite Gnosticism," p. 269; also quoted in Reeves, *Trajectories*, p. 46. Reeves' remark elsewhere in his book (*ibid*., p. 23) that this motif is "a dark parody of the odd Jewish tradition about an 'imprisoned Messiah'" seems less likely.

[26] Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4, pp. 2261-2264; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, vol. 6, pp. 380-382; Ibn Abī ʿĀṣim, *Āḥād*, vol. 6, p. 5.

telling him to seek refuge in God, "for the *jinn* do not molest one who asks God for protection." When Tamīm asks what they are talking about, he is told that "the messenger of the *ummī*s has come" (*qad kharaja rasūl al-ummiyyīn*) and that they have converted to Islam and are following him and order Tamīm to do the same. The next day Tamīm goes to the Monastery of Ayyūb[27] and informs a monk there of the previous night's affair. The monk confirms what the voices have told him and he subsequently goes to Muḥammad and converts.[28]

8. In his polemic against Jews and Christians, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya accuses the former group of knowingly rejecting Muḥammad and stating that "we will not obey the prophet of the *ummī*s" (*lā nattabiʿu nabī al-ummiyyīn*).[29] This is yet another case of *ummī* used by Jews to collectively describe non-Jews.

9. Upon returning from his trip to al-Ṭāʾif a few years before his *hijra*, Muḥammad is said to have encountered one ʿAddās, a *ghulām* of ʿUtba and Shayba, the sons of Rabīʿa. When Muḥammad found out that ʿAddās was from Nineveh, he rhetorically asked: "From the city of the righteous man Yūnus ibn Mattā [= Jonah ben Ammitai]?" Puzzled, ʿAddās enquired: "Whence do you know of the son of Mattā while you are an *ummī* and in a nation of *ummī*s" (*fa-min ayna ʿarafta ʾbna Mattā wa-anta ummiyyun wa-fī ummatin ummiyyatin*)? Muḥammad replied: "He is my brother who was a prophet and I am myself an *ummī* prophet" (*dhāka akhī kāna nabiyyan wa-ana nabiyyun ummiyyun*).[30]

Apart from the impossibility of ʿAddās collectively calling the Arabs "illiterates," a more important point is that he marvels how an *ummī* may know about an Israelite prophet. Needless to say, literacy can hardly have any bearing on this. Rather, it is familiarity with the Judaeo-Christian

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[27] A monastery in Ḥawrān, so called because it is said to be the resting place of the prophet Job; Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, vol. 2, p. 499, s.v. "Dayr Ayyūb."

[28] Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 6, p. 255; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, p. 177; Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh Dimashq*, vol. 11, p. 73.

[29] Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā*, p. 435. Although Ibn Qayyim is addressing his contemporaries here, this sentence evidently refers to the Jews of Muḥammad's time.

[30] Al-Ḥalabī, *al-Sīra al-ḥalabiyya*, vol. 1, p. 500; al-Ṣāliḥī al-Shāmī, *Subul al-hudā*, vol. 2, p. 439 (with minor variants). The two clauses containing the word *ummī* are not recorded in Ibn Hishām's recension of Ibn Isḥāq's *Sīra* or al-Ṭabarī's quotations therefrom.

tradition that is at issue here, and a gentile is not supposed to be very knowledgeable about the *dramatis personae* of biblical *Heilsgeschichte*; hence ʿAddās' amazement.

10. The Prophet is reported as having said: "We are the last of the communities, and the first one that will be judged [on the Day of Judgement]. It will be said: 'Where is the *ummī* community and its prophet (*ayna ʾl-umma al-ummiyya wa-nabiyyuhā*)?' So we are the last ones who will be the first" (*al-ākhirūn al-awwalūn*).[31]

Again, a tradition is applying the term in the plural, and thus it would be hard to imagine that illiteracy is intended here. Furthermore, as it has been used of Muḥammad's community, it obviously cannot signify "paganism" or "lacking scripture," as the tradition — and occasionally modern scholarship — would hold, either.

11. A gripping story on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 110 AH) — a *raconteur* (*qāṣṣ*) knowledgeable in Judaeo-Christian lore[32] — tells of an extremely terrifying dream Nebuchadnezzar had seven years after the destruction of Jerusalem. He gathered all the diviners and priests in his court to interpret the dream, but when asked what he had seen in the dream he could not remember. He then threatened to kill them all if they were unable to tell him of his dream and its interpretation within three days. The prophet Daniel, at the time in Nebuchadnezzar's prison, heard of the affair and, following Joseph's suit, asked the warden to inform the king of his mastery in the art of dream interpretation. The king then summoned him and Daniel told him what his dream was: a gigantic idol, his feet on the ground and his head in the heavens, made of gold at the top and, in descending order, silver, copper, iron, and clay at lower parts; as Nebuchadnezzar was watching the idol in awe, God threw a stone at its head from the heaven and broke it into pieces. Then the stone grew bloated and covered the whole earth, so that only the stone and the sky above it remained visible. The king confirmed that this was indeed his dream.[33] Daniel said: "The idol is the com-munities of men

[31] Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, vol. 2, p. 1434. The last sentence is reminiscent of Jesus' words in Matt. 20:16 (cf. also Matt. 19:30; I thank Gabriel Said Reynolds for drawing my attention to this connexion).

[32] On Wahb and his role in the propagation of such materials, see Pregill, "*Isrāʾīliyyāt*, myth, and pseudepigraphy."

[33] A slightly different version of Dan. 2 (I owe this observation to Gabriel Said Reynolds). The divergence becomes more noticeable from this point on.

at the beginning, middle, and end of time. The stone is religion which God throws at these communities at the end of time. After the religion triumphs, God will send an *ummī* prophet from among the Arabs" (*yabʿathu Allāh nabiyyan ummiyyan min al-ʿarab*). One of this prophet's deeds would be "to educate the *ummī*s [presumably in the divine law and scriptures] at God's behest" (*yuʿallimu [Allāh] bihi 'l-ummiyyīn*).[34]

Obviously, it is not very tempting to think that this tradition is foretelling of an "illiterate" who is to teach other "illiterates." The tradition will only begin to make sense if we assume that *ummī* here means "gentile": it is a prognostication *ex eventu* of the coming of "the gentile prophet" put into the mouth of an Israelite prophet to counter the claims of those Jews who hold that the gift of prophecy is exclusive to Israelites.[35] This tradition, like the next three ones, belongs to the genre known as "proofs of prophecy" (*dalāʾil al-nubuwwa*), in which a common motif is to portray the members of rival religious traditions as having the foreknowledge of the coming of Muḥammad. In the present context this *topos* has been further honed by claiming that the Jews also knew that Muḥammad would be a gentile.

12. In another tradition attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih, when God sent the prophet Isaiah to the Israelites, He also told him: "I will appoint an *ummī* from among the *ummī*s [as prophet]" (*wa-abʿathu ummiyyan min al-ummiyyīn*). Then there follows a detailed description of this prophet's demeanour.[36]

13. When asked what the Prophet's descriptions in the Torah are, Aṭāʾ b. Yasār — evidently a Jewish convert to Islam[37] — replied that he is said to be, among other things, "a source of protection for the *ummī*s" (*ḥirzan li-'l-ummiyyīn*).[38]

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[34] Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, p. 136.

[35] See footnote 39 and the discussion in section II.

[36] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 6, p. 438. This tradition is markedly of the same stripe and texture as the previous one.

[37] I have been unable to trace his origins in the sources, but from a report in Ibn Saʿd that he turned down an "Arab" suitor of his daughter's on the grounds that "we marry our kind" (*lākinnā nuzawwiju mithlanā*), one infers that he was of Jewish extraction; Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 7, p. 172. He was also a *qāṣṣ*; Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh Dimashq*, vol. 15, p. 440. It is worth mentioning that some sources narrate this tradition from ʿAbd Allāh b. Salām, a Jewish companion.

[38] Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 3, pp. 66-67; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. 3, pp. 137-138; al-Baghawī, *Anwār*, vol. 1, p. 339.

14. Ibn ʿAbbās is reported to have related that God, angry at the incompetence of some Israelite prophets, vowed not to send the Holy Spirit[39] to the Israelites until he appointed "the *ummī* prophet from Arabia to whom the Holy Spirit would be sent" (*al-nabī al-ummī min arḍ al-ʿarab alladhī yaʾtīhi rūḥ al-qudus*).[40]

The traditional understanding of *ummī* does not, of course, present any difficulty in overall meaning in this case, but then it would be a redundant adjective in the context of the tradition at best (i.e., whereas semantically meaningful, it is pragmatically incon-gruent). Now, if we assume that it means "gentile," its use in the tradition will make complete sense: God has been disappointed with Israelite prophets, so this time he intends to appoint a gentile as his envoy in the hope that he may do better than his Israelite predecessors.

15. According to a tradition on the authority of ʿĀmir b. Sharāḥīl al-Shaʿbī, it has been mentioned in the scroll (or apocalypse) of Abraham (*majallat Ibrāhīm*)[41] that "there will be nations and nations from your progeny until comes the *ummī* prophet who will be the seal of prophets" (*innahu kāʾinun min wuldika shuʿūbun wa-shuʿūbun ḥattā yaʾtiya ʾl-nabī al-ummī alladhī yakūnu khātam al-anbiyāʾ*).[42]

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[39] Heb. *rūʾaḥ ha-qōdesh*. In Judaism, the Holy Spirit is the mantle of prophethood. Interestingly, some Jews believed that no gentile can assume it; see Jacobs, "Holy spirit."

[40] Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, p. 140. Cf. Rubin, *Eye of the beholder*, p. 26. However, *pace* Rubin, I do not think that this tradition echoes Jer. 5:12-15.

[41] Two hypotheses on the possible origins of this rather enigmatic phrase could be advanced. The first, and more straightforward one, is to posit that *majalla* is derived from the Hebrew *məgillā*. Literally meaning scroll, this term occurs in the title of several books of the Hebrew Bible, most notably the *Book/Scroll of Esther* (*məgillat Estēr*), and elsewhere. The second possibility is that *majalla* is related to the Hebrew term *gil(l)āyōn* or its Syriac counterpart *gelyānā* (var. *gelyōnā*), both of which occasionally appear in the titles of some apocalypses (but note that theories to etymologically connect the latter with *məgillā* have already been proposed); Kulik, "Genre without a name"; Ben-Shammai, "*Ṣuḥuf* in the Qurʾān," pp. 12-13. This makes one wonder whether this "scroll" is not some sort of apocalypse bearing the name of Abraham. Theodore bar Kōnay mentions "an apocalypse attributed to Abraham" (*gelyōnā da-bshem Abrāhām*), whose actual author he believes to be Audius, the eponymous leader of the Audian Gnostics; Reeves, *Heralds*, pp. 115-116. Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403 CE) uses a very similar wording to describe the apocryphal books of Sethians, including an apocalypse ascribed to Abraham; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, p. 279 (39.5.1). I thus cannot agree with Rubin, *Eye of the beholder*, p. 23, in that by *majallat Ibrāhīm* the Book of Genesis is intended. See also *infra*, footnote 44.

[42] Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, p. 137.

It must be conceded that the traditional interpretation of *ummī* does not pose any problems in this instance (just as in the next one), but the importance of these two traditions is in their use of *ummī* in conjunction with *shuʿūb*, nations. Clearly, *shuʿūb* here has been used as a translation for the Hebrew word *gōyim* that occurs in the promise to Abraham in Gen. 22:17-18: "indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed... in your seed all the nations of the earth (*kōl gōyē*[43] *hā-āreṣ*) shall be blessed."[44] On the Greek side of things, the first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus informs us that Abraham was reassured that Ishmael would father many nations (*éthnon*),[45] among them the nation (*éthnos*[46]) of the Arabs.[47] It is evident that our tradition has an ethnic ring of the same kind to it and uses this genealogical relation of gentiles to Abraham to downplay the *ummī* origins of its prophet,[48] Muḥammad.[49]

16. After Hagar left with her son Ishmael for Mecca, she heard a voice calling: "Oh, Hagar! Your son will father many nations, and from his nation will be the *ummī* prophet who dwells in the Sanctuary" (*inna ʾbnaki abū shuʿūbin kathīratin wa-min shaʿbihi ʾl-nabī al-ummī sākinu ʾl-ḥaram*).[50]

17. In a well-attested *ḥadīth* delineating the number of days in the month (of Ramaḍān), the Prophet asserts: "We are an *ummī* nation; we do not

[43] The term *gōy* (sing. of *gōyim*) could also signify a gentile in post-biblical Hebrew; Klein, *Comprehensive etymological dictionary*, p. 94.

[44] It may also be of some import that the promise in Genesis reappears in two Jewish apocalypses from around the turn of the Common Era, that is, the *Testament of Abraham* and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*; Kulik, *Retroverting Slavonic pseudepigrapha*, p. 25 (20.1-5); Sanders, "The Testament of Abraham," p. 886 (8.7).

[45] Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, pp. 94-95 (1.193).

[46] The Greek term for gentile, *ethnikós*, is derived from *ethnos*; Beekes and van Beek, *Etymological dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 377.

[47] Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, pp. 108-109 (1.221); for more on Josephus' depiction of Abraham as the forebear of the Arabs see Fergus Millar, "Hagar, Ishmael, Josephus." On perceptions of Abraham's relationship with the nations through the ages, see the essays in Goodman, van Kooten, and van Ruiten, *Abraham, the nations, and the Hagarites*.

[48] See *supra*, footnote 39; and *infra*, section II.

[49] Cf. also Rubin's discussion of this tradition in his *Eye of the beholder*, pp. 23-24.

[50] Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, p. 138; cf. Gen. 21:17-18. Cf. also Rubin, *Eye of the beholder*, p. 25.

keep records, nor do we reckon; the month is such and such" (*innā ummatun ummiyyatun lā naktubu wa-lā naḥsubu 'l-shahr hākadhā wa-hākadhā*).[51]

Not surprisingly, the traditional understanding of *ummī* as "illiterate" has caused trouble for those Muslim scholars who have sought to explain away this seemingly idiosyncratic *ḥadīth*.[52] One way out of this problem could be to postulate that the clause *lā naktubu wa-lā naḥsubu* is a later gloss, but the fact that not a single one of the many recorded versions of this tradition is lacking in this phrase rules out this as a viable explanation. But if we took the root *k-t-b* as denoting "to keep record," the seeming idiosyncrasy would fade away. The root in this sense is indeed attested in the Qurʾān (among other places) and is amply used to denote the records of one's deeds:[53] "Verily We resurrect the dead and We do record (*naktubu*) what they send in advance [of good and bad deeds]" (Qurʾān 36:12); or "and whoever does a good deed... We shall no doubt record it" (*innā lahu kātibūn*; lit. "We shall no doubt be its scribes"; Qurʾān 21:94). These records will be shown to man on the Day of Judgement. Perhaps not coincidentally, in one verse spelling out the process of the judgement, the root *k-t-b* has been juxtaposed with the root *ḥ-s-b*: "*iqra kitābaka kafā bi-nafsika 'l-yawma ʿalayka ḥasīban*, read your record! Your soul suffices you today as your reckoner" (Qurʾān 17:14).

The basis to opt for this translation of the root *k-t-b* is that the tradition appears to be directed against the practice of introducing intercalations into the calendar. According to mediaeval Muslim sources, the pre-Islamic calendar was a lunisolar calendar with an intercalary month called *nasīʾ*,[54] placed at the end of the year about every three years. However, the nature of the pre-Islamic calendar(s) and its possible relation with the Jewish calendar(s) remains elusive, with some scholars contending that the

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[51] I confine myself to citing Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, vol 4, p. 12, as my source. This tradition is omnipresent in all discussions on fasting, including in the six canonical books of Sunnī *ḥadīth*, under the heading "Kitāb al-Ṣiyām".

[52] See, e.g., Ibn Ḥajar's comments below and in footnote 57.

[53] On the root *k-t-b* and its semantics in the Qurʾān, see the excellent study by Daniel Madigan, *The Qurʾān's self-image*. Particularly pertinent is the section "God's recording: *kitāb* as *ʿilm*", pp. 113-117.

[54] Cf. de Blois, "Qurʾān 9:37," who doubts that there was an intercalary month in the pre-Islamic calendar of Medina. However, he leaves the question of the verse's relation with the previous verse open, where the Qurʾān asserts that "the number of months with Allāh is twelve." It is clear from this proclamation that there were at least some who held another view.

idea of the widespread use of a lunisolar calendar among the pagan Arabs is unsubstantiated at best.[55] At any rate, whatever the form of the calendar prevalent in pre-Islamic Central and Western Arabia, one cannot deny the possibility that some groups — notably Arabs cohabiting with Jews — used some form of lunisolar calendar and it is exactly to such groups that our tradition is addressed, dismissing their behaviour as Judaising and asserting that "we are a gentile people," and as such neither accustomed to nor in want of the painstaking calculations that the maintenance of a lunisolar calendar calls for.[56]

Here it is necessary to state that the foregoing interpretation is not genuinely novel. Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852 AH), too, understood *ḥisāb* as a reference to calculations pertaining to the trajectory of celestial objects (*ḥisāb al-nujūm wa-tasyīrihā*) in this context, thus implying that he took the *ḥadīth* to call the Arabs "illiterate" in regard to such issues (*wa-lam yakūnū yaʿrifūna min dhālika ayḍan*).[57] He further argued that observing the fast according to the lunar cycle was promulgated to relieve them of the burden of these calculations and branded a group who turned to those "who kept track of celestial trajectories" (*ahl al-tasyīr*) as "heretics" (*rawāfiḍ*), concluding his remarks with a polemic against astronomy.[58]

[55] Idem, "Taʾrīkh." As far as I know, few works have been dedicated to this material topic, with the latest instalment being Ioh, "The calendar."

[56] On the intricacies of the "Jewish calendar," including the lunisolar calendar, see Stern, *Calendar and community*.

[57] This is despite his attempt in the very same passage to explain away the collective use of *ummī* in reference to pre-Islamic Arabs in, *inter alia*, Qurʾān 3:62 by saying "that there were people among them [i.e., the Arabs of Muḥammad's time] who knew writing and arithmetic does not contradict this, as illiteracy was pre-dominant among them" (*wa-lā yaruddu ʿalā dhālika annahu kāna fīhim man yaktubu wa-yaḥsubu li-anna 'l-kitāba kānat fīhim qalīlatan nādiratan*); Ibn Ḥajar, *Fatḥ al-bārī*, vol. 4, p. 127. It must be noted that this line of reasoning is not unique to him, however.

[58] *Ibid*.; cf. also Ibn Baṭṭāl, *Sharḥ ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 4, p. 32.

B: *Ummī* as pagan and/or not possessing any scriptures

In the following traditions, the context in which the term *ummī* occurs puts it in apposition to paganism or not having a divine scripture. Nevertheless, it is possible that the term was meant to be understood as "gentile" in some of these traditions,[59] while others betray signs of a semantic shift towards a new acceptation for the word.[60]

18. Commenting on Qurʾān 32:3,[61] al-Ṭabarī quotes Qatāda b. Diʿāma (d. 117 or 118 AH) as saying that the pre-Islamic Arabs "were an *ummī* nation to whom no warner had been sent before Muḥammad" (*kānū ummatan ummiyyatan lam yaʾtihim nadhīrun qabla Muḥammad*).[62]

Just as before, it is exceedingly unlikely that *umma ummiyya* here means "illiterate nation." The phrase that follows it, *lam yaʾtihim nadhīrun qabla Muḥammad*, suggests that it has to be understood as "a nation deprived of divine guidance."

19. In the story of Abū Bakr's wager with the *mushrikūn* of Mecca on the alleged prophecy in Qurʾān 30:2-4,[63] the defeat of *ahl al-kitāb* from Byzantium at the hands of Zoroastrian *ummī*s (*al-ummiyyūn min al-majūs*) is said to have come as a blow to the Prophet. The *mushrikūn*, on the other hand, were filled with joy at the news and gloated: "You are a people with *a* scripture (*innakum ahlu kitābin*)[64] and so are the Christians (*al-naṣārā*), while we are *ummī*s and our brothers from Persia defeated your brothers from *ahl al-kitāb*. If we two were to fight each other, we would have likewise defeated you." Then God revealed the opening verses of Sūrat al-Rūm and Abū Bakr

[59] I believe this to be the case indeed, but in the following I am trying to investigate all the possible significations of the word rather than make a case for any particular one.

[60] That *ummī* could mean the opposite of *ahl al-kitāb* was suggested by many mediaeval Qurʾān commentators, who based their arguments on Qurʾān 3:20 and 62:2; for examples from the early *tafsīr* tradition, see Goldfeld, "Illiterate prophet"; Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, vol. 2, p. 416.

[61] "In order to warn a people to whom no warner had come before you."

[62] Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 18, p. 590; quoted in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, vol. 11, p. 675.

[63] "The Byzantines have been defeated, in the nearest land. But they will triumph after their defeat, in a few years"; reflecting on the drawn-out Byzantine-Sasanian conflagration of 602-628.

[64] Cognisance of the status of the Qurʾān as a fully-fledged "scripture" is too early for such a date and certainly betrays signs of hindsight in the tradition.

invited the *mushrikūn* (in al-Ṭabarī's version Ubayy b. Khalaf al-Jumaḥī in particular) to a wager on it. In other versions, the story is concluded with having the Byzantine victory over the Persians coincide with the Muslim victory over the Meccans at Badr.[65]

In this instance, *ummī* has been markedly put in contrast with *ahl al-kitāb*, and particularly significant is the occurrence of the phrase *innakum ahlu kitābin*, in the indefinite, suggesting that possession of *any* scripture would automatically disqualify one as *ummī*.

20. The Prophet sent ʿAlī to the people of Najrān to collect their tithe (*ṣadaqāt*) and bring him their poll-tax (*jizya*). Since *ṣadaqa* is incumbent upon Muslims, and *jizya* upon non-Muslims living under Muslim protection (*dhimma*), this report is thought to be paradoxical. The paradox is explained away by claiming that the people of Najrān consisted of two groups: Christians (*naṣārā*) living under Muslim rule and *ummī*s who had accepted Islam; the poll-tax was to be collected from the former and the *ṣadaqa* from the latter. Since *ummī* has been contrasted with *naṣrānī*, we are presumably to understand it as the anathema of "possessing scripture" again.[66]

21. Quoting Ibn Isḥāq, al-Bayhaqī says of the pre-Islamic Arabs that they "were *ummī*s and had no knowledge of any scripture (*kānat al-ʿarab ummiyyīn lā yadrusūna kitāban*),[67] nor knew anyone of the prophets. They did not believe in heaven or hell, or the resurrection and final judgement, save for what they heard from the *ahl al-kitāb*, which they did not take to heart" (*illā shayʿan yasmaʿūnahu min ahl al-kitāb lā yathbutu fī ṣudūrihim*).[68]

22. In al-Baghawī's account of ʿUmar's denial of Muḥammad's death, when he threatens to slay anybody who says the Prophet is dead, he adds that "the people were *ummī*s and no prophet had been sent to them before Muḥammad" (*kāna ʾl-nās ummiyyīn lam yakun fīhim nabiyyun qablahu*).[69]

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[65] Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 18, pp. 450-451; idem, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. 2, pp. 184-185. For more on the exegetical commentaries on this pericope and the story of the wager, see El Cheikh, "Sūrat al-Rūm."

[66] Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Zād al-maʿād*, vol. 3, pp. 563-564.

[67] This could, however, be taken to mean that they were illiterates and did not read any books, but, given the context, the translation given above is more fitting.

[68] Al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil al-nubuwwa*, vol. 2, p. 75.

[69] Al-Baghawī, *Anwār*, vol. 1, p. 755.

23. In his *Cypriot Epistle*, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728 AH) contends that "the majority of Christians profess Muḥammad to be the messenger to the *ummī*s" (*wa-ʿāmmat al-naṣārā yuqirrūna bi-anna Muḥammadan rasūl al-ummiyyīn*).[70] It is not clear, however, how Ibn Taymiyya, who lived seven hundred years after Muḥammad, came to use *ummī* in such a sense. The implication is that he had this motif from older books and *aḥādīth* (especially the *dalāʾil al-nubuwwa* literature) which imputed such beliefs to Christians and Jews; otherwise the testimony of mediaeval polemical tractates leaves no allusion as to how the Christians of Ibn Taymiyya's time regarded Muḥammad's claim to divinely-ordained prophecy!

II

A: *ummī* in the Qurʾān

In the Qurʾān, a case in point is Qurʾān 62:2, where Muḥammad is "a messenger sent to the *ummī*s from among themselves" (*baʿatha fī al-ummiyyīn rasūlan minhum*) by God "to read His signs to them and purify them and teach them the book and the wisdom, while they were in manifest aberrance before" (*yatlū ʿalayhim āyātihi wa-yuzakkīhim wa-yuʿallimuhum al-kitāb wa-ʾl-ḥikma wa-in kānū min qablu fī ḍalālin mubīnin*). Except for referencing the *dramatis personae* in the third person, this verse is almost identical with Qurʾān 2:151 (identical wordings have been italicised): "Just as We sent *a messenger to* you *from among* yourselves *to read* Our *signs to* you *and purify* you *and teach* you *the book and the wisdom* and teach you what you did not know" (*kamā arsalnā fīkum rasūlan minkum yatlū ʿalaykum āyātinā wa-yuzakkīkum wa-yuʿallimukum al-kitāb wa-ʾl-ḥikma wa-yuʿallimukum mā lam takūnū taʿlamūn*). This verse, in turn, echoes an earlier one in the same Sūra, namely, Qurʾān 2:129, which is located in the midst of Abraham's and Ishmael's prayer as they were laying the foundations of the Arabian sanctuary, the Kaʿba. After asking God to make their progeny an *umma* who is *muslim* towards Him, they say "Our Lord! And send *a messenger to* them *from among themselves to read* Your *signs to them and teach them the book and the wisdom and purify them*..." (the

[70] Ibn Taymiyya, *Risāla*, p. 35.

ordering is slightly different, though). It follows that the messenger sent to *ummiyyūn* in Qurʾān 62:2 is the fulfilment of the prayer (or rather the *ex eventu* wish) of Abraham and Ishmael that a messenger be sent to *their descendants* in Qurʾān 2:129. Now there could be little doubt that (at least in this case) *ummī* is a word to designate Abraham's lineal descendants through Ishmael, that is, "the nation of the Arabs," of the *ūmmōt ha-ʿōlam*.[71] The same turn of phrase reappears in Qurʾān 3:164, and this time it is the believers who are favoured by God (*manna Allāh ʿalā al-muʾminīn*) in that a messenger has been sent "to them from among themselves, while they used to be in manifest aberrance before it." The *muʾminūn* must be a reference to Arab believers, since the verse evidently speaks of a people to whom no messenger had been sent previously, but have now been honoured by the advent of one amidst them. This *jāhilī* backdrop to the Messenger's appearance is also alluded to in the other aforecited verses by the use therein of expressions like *ḍalāl* and *lam takūnū taʿlamūn*, as well as by the suggestion that his people knew neither *al-kitāb* nor *al-ḥikma* prior to him.[72] This association of being a gentile with not being recipient of divine message in the Qurʾān has provided the impetus for the exegetical — and occasionally scholarly — identification of *ummiyyūn* with pagans.

Moreover, the term almost always occurs in the heat of Qurʾānic disputations with Jews (and occasionally with *ahl al-kitāb* in general) or in passages discussing (usually exclusively, as will be seen) Jewish attitudes and practices. Of considerable importance is the two instances where the phrase *nabī ummī* occurs. In both of them an emphasis is implicit in the use of this phrase, as if the fact that the Qurʾān's prophet is *ummī* is of particular import for the point being made: "Those who follow the Messenger, the *ummī* prophet, whom they find mentioned with them in the Torah (*al-tawrāt*) and the Gospel (*al-injīl*)..." (Qurʾān 7:157). The significance of this emphasis

[71] I do not, however, mean to suggest that *ummī* is derived from *ūmmōt ha-ʿōlam*. On the contrary, the usage in Qurʾān 2:141 and 2:128 of the term *umma* would suggest that it is this term that ought to be envisaged as the immediate etymon. But, whatever the case may be, I wish to stand aloof from this "etymological enterprise" – to borrow a phrase from Walid Saleh.

[72] It is, however, hard to imagine that they had no knowledge of *al-kitāb* given the extent of familiarity with biblical lore the Qurʾān presupposes. Alternatively, the text could be referencing their reliance on Jews (rather than one of their own) in matters scriptural; cf. Qurʾān 2:146 and 62:5-6.

becomes evident from the next verse: "Say: oh people! I am Allāh's messenger to you *all*... so believe in Allāh and his messenger, the *ummī* prophet" (*innī rasūl Allāh ilaykum jamīʿan... fa-āminū bi-Allāh wa-rasūlihi ʾl-nabī al-ummī*) (Qurʾān 7:158).

This stress on the universality of Muḥammad's message ("I am Allāh's messenger to you all") exposes the issue at stake, and a picture begins to emerge from the fog of centuries: the Jews[73] naturally are disinclined to accept an *ummī* as a prophet sent to them and Muḥammad neither conceals his gentile origins, nor can he deny it. Some Jews, perhaps hypocritically, accept the genuineness of his message, but only so far as it concerns the gentiles. It is not hard to imagine that some of them may even call him "the messenger of the gentiles" (*rasūl al-ummiyyīn*), thereby refusing to concede that his message extends to all, regardless of persuasion and genealogy. Muḥammad answers that he might be a gentile, but Allāh's favour does not distinguish between Israelite and non-Israelite. In Qurʾān 62:2, where the Qurʾān once again admits that Muḥammad is a prophet who hails from *ummī*s, it hastens to add that "it [i.e., prophethood] is Allāh's grace, he grants it to whomever he wills and verily he is gracious" (*dhālika faḍl Allāh yuʾtīhi man yashāʾu wa-Allāh dhū al-faḍl al-ʿaẓīm*) (Qurʾān 62:4).[74] The same theme can be found elsewhere: "Some of the *ahl al-kitāb* say... do not believe in anyone save for he who follows your religion... that anyone might be given the like of which you were given[75]... [Oh Muḥammad] say: Indeed the grace (*al-faḍl*) is at Allāh's discretion and he gives it to whomever he wills... he singles out whomever he wills for his mercy" (*yakhtaṣṣu bi-raḥmatihi man yashāʾu*) (Qurʾān 3:72-74).[76] By the same token, while the Jews would not believe the transference of prophecy from Israel, later Muslim apologists portray them

[73] The verse quoted mentions the Gospel along with the Torah and the implication would be that Christians, too, have to be counted in our analysis of this passage, but I ask for the reader's patience until I get back to this point further below.

[74] Verse 5 sarcastically asks of Jews to yearn for death if they really think they are God's confidants (*awliyāʾ*) to the exclusion of others.

[75] The passage is difficult, but apparently is to be understood as asserting that God is free to give the gift of prophecy to people other than Israelites.

[76] Also in Qurʾān 2:90, 105; 4:113; and especially 57:29, where, after exhorting "those who have believed" to believe in Allāh's messenger, it insists "so that the *ahl al-kitāb* may know that they have no power over anything of God's *faḍl*." Elsewhere in the Qurʾān, *faḍl* is used — in reference to King David and others — to denote prophethood again; Mir, "Grace."

as well-aware of the coming of an *ummī* prophet beforehand,[77] but denying it out of contempt and resentment. Occasionally, they are made to openly express their resentment at it.[78]

Yet anyone who is going to exclusively ascribe the meaning of "gentile" to Qurʾānic *ummī* ought to first come up with an explanation for the term's usage in opposition to the appellative genitival construct *ahl al-kitāb* in several key passages. This problem could be partially explained away by turning to the possibility that at least in some cases (as in Qurʾān 3:75) *ahl al-kitāb* has a narrower signification and is only used to denote Jews (and this is indeed what the exegetical commentaries on the verse tell us[79]). The fact that the Qurʾān quotes "some of the *ahl al-kitāb*" as saying "we have no obligation regarding the *ummī*s" gives further potency to this hypothesis.[80] But such a possibility could be ruled out with certainty in the case of Qurʾān 7:157, where *ummī* is contrasted with Jews and Christians. The solution to this conundrum, I would like to contend, must be sought in the real identity of the Qurʾānic *naṣārā*.

B: Christianity in the Qurʾān's milieu

The question of the confessional affiliation of the Christians of the Qurʾān's milieu has been an alluring question subject to much speculation since at least the 8th century CE. John of Damascus (d. ca. 750 CE) was the first Christian apologist to speak of "heretical" Christian influence on Muḥammad by attributing his mission to the instigations of an Arian monk.[81] The same

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[77] See *supra*, nos. 11-13.

[78] For instance in Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, pp. 136-137; al-Wāqidī, *Maghāzī*, vol. 1, pp. 365-366 and 368-369.

[79] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 5, pp. 508 ff. Others even name several Medinan Jewish grandees as the addressees of the verse; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, vol. 4, p. 115. Furthermore, many translations of the Qurʾān render *ummī* as gentile, non-Jew, or Arab in this particular verse; see Ahmed Ali, Maududi, Pickthall, and Paret.

[80] In Qurʾān 3:20, where *ummī* is markedly contrasted with *ahl al-kitāb*, the texts goes on to warn those "who kill the prophets", a Qurʾānic accusation levelled exclusively against the Jews; Reynolds, "On the Qurʾān"; Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, p. 185, footnote 4. A few verses later the Qurʾān speaks of those who "say fire will not touch us for but a few days", again an admittedly Jewish conviction; Crone, "Quranic *mushrikūn* (part I)," p. 446.

[81] Sahas, *John of Damascus*, p. 133.

motif reappears, in a more elaborate form, in a later polemical work which narrates the story of another "heretical" monk, Sergius Baḥīrā by name, who, the text claims, instigated Muḥammad's "heresy."[82] This motif remained an integral part of Christian polemic against Islam well into the modern period and even the transition from the Occidental Christian study of Islam — primarily in line with the maxim "know thy enemy" — to the academic discipline of Oriental studies during the 18th and 19th centuries did not do much in the way of affecting this preoccupation.[83]

While one can detect ulterior motives even in the works of some 19th- and early 20th-century scholars, fortunately recent decades have witnessed a proliferation of more impartial studies on the topic. The first serious scholar to push for the identification of the Qurʾānic *naṣārā* (sing. *naṣrānī*) with Jewish Christians in recent years was François Clément de Blois who, in an article published in 2003, marshalled three pieces of evidence in support of this proposition. He first brought etymological evidence to show that the Arabic term *naṣrānī* is derived from the Syriac *nāṣrāyā*, by postulating an alteration due to a folk etymology connecting it with the Arabic root *n-ṣ-r* in the verbal substantive (*maṣdar*) form *naṣr* (help) plus the suffix *-ānī* — used to form adjectives denoting ample possession of something (as in *shaʿrānī*, hirsute, derived from *shaʿr*, hair).[84] The Syriac term *nāṣrāyē* (pl. of *nāṣrāyā*) is used in the Pshiṭṭā version of the Acts as a rendering for the Greek New Testament's *Nazōraîoi* and is also used by Syriac-speaking heresiographers to designate the Jewish Christian sect known as the Nazoraeans.[85]

Although de Blois' thesis has been widely criticised, so far none of his critics have been able to convincingly account for this observation.[86] What has been overlooked by all these scholars, including de Blois himself,

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[82] Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīra*. One version of the story portrays Baḥīrā as a well-intentioned but naïve monk whose aim is to guide the Arabs by the agency of Muḥammad, but ultimately fails and his teachings are corrupted after his death by the Jewish rabbi Kaʿb al-Aḥbār.

[83] For a brief survey of modern scholarship's preoccupation with this question, see Reynolds, "On the presentation of Christianity"; for its background in pre-modern Christian polemic, see Bobzin, "Pre-1800 preoccupations."

[84] De Blois, "*Naṣrānī* and *ḥanīf*," pp. 11-12.

[85] *Ibid*., p. 8.

[86] Griffith, "*Naṣārā* in the Qurʾān," pp. 314-315; Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, pp. 192-194.

however, is that the proposed etymological relation between *naṣrānī* and *nāṣrāyā*/Nazoraean does not necessarily entail that the *naṣārā* are to be equated with Nazoraeans. One alternative, and not unlikely, scenario is that the Nazoraeans/*nāṣrāyē* were the first Christians to come into contact with the Arabs. The Arabs may have subsequently used the designation for all Jesus-believers, thereby making it the standard Arabic epithet for "Christian." A similar process can be observed in the case of the Syriac term *mhaggrāyā* which is almost certainly derived from the Arabic *muhājir*:[87] the *muhājirūn* were the Arabs who had left their homeland to settle in the conquered territories.[88] For a relatively long time, they were the only Muslims Syriac-speaking Christians knew, and when the first local people converted to Islam they too, for want of another appellative, were called *mhaggrāyā* by their erstwhile co-religionists and thus the term came to be applied to all Muslims, be they *muhājir* or otherwise, in Syriac.[89] The verb *hggar*, "to become Muslim,"[90] was later constructed from *mhaggrāyā*. So is likewise the case of another Syriac term, *ṭayyāyā* or Arab. The term is supposed to be derived from the name of the Arab tribe of Ṭayy which for centuries had inhabited the northern frontiers of Arabia, where they had regular contact with Syriac-speaking Semites.[91]

For his second piece of evidence, de Blois found echoes of the teachings of the Gospel according to the Hebrews in the Qurʾānic polemic against the *naṣrānī* belief in the divinity of Mary and her inclusion in the trinity, an accusation most prominent in Qurʾān 5:116. Drawing on the quotations from the Gospel according to the Hebrews in Patristic literature,

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[87] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 179-180, especially footnote 25.

[88] As has been shown by Madelung, "The *hijra*"; Athamina, "*Aʿrāb* and *muhājirūn*"; Crone, "First-century concept"; Lindstedt, "*Muhājirūn* as a name."

[89] *Mshalmānā*, from the Arabic *muslim*, came into use rather lately, most likely because up to that time the term was not yet used as a self-designation by "Muslims." The term, as far as I know, is first attested in Syriac in the chronicle of Zuqnīn (composed ca. 775); Harrak, "Arabisms," p. 495. The first epigraphic attestation of the term *muslim* is from the year 123 AH; Hoyland, "Early Arabic inscriptions," p. 87.

[90] Sokoloff, *Syriac lexicon*, p. 330.

[91] It is rather strange that while de Blois concedes that the post-Qurʾānic (and modern) application of the term *naṣrānī* to all Christians in Arabic does not necessarily entail that they are Nazoraeans ("*Naṣrānī* and *ḥanīf*," pp. 12-13), he does not consider the possibility of such development as postulated above in pre-Qurʾānic times.

he traced similar beliefs to the Elchasaites and Nazoraeans and, with some circumspection, concluded that these beliefs were possibly more widespread than hitherto imagined within the wider Jewish Christian complex.[92] The implication would be that the Qurʾān's Christian interlocutors were of like sectarian affiliations, or else were heirs to these very confessional groupings.[93]

In response, Sidney H. Griffith has argued that Qurʾān 5:116 is a product of the Qurʾān's "polemical rhetoric" and does not reflect actual belief.[94] However, one may wonder what sort of belief or practice it is that the Qurʾān is "caricaturing" here. To reiterate, if, as Griffith contends, the Qurʾān's *naṣārā* were just "'Melkite,' 'Jacobite' and 'Nestorian' Christians,"[95] — itself a bold claim — to say that they took Mary to be a divine being strikes one as something of a far-fetched "exaggeration" inasmuch as to them Mary at the most was Theotokos or God-bearer.[96] In fact, Qurʾān 5:116 looks quite like an instance of Qurʾānic hyperbole (rather than reflecting the teachings of any early Christian "heresy"), but one would rather think what the verse has in mind is some sort of a (probably syncretic) Marian cult of veneration, — likely to have been of an angelomorphic streak — a possibility further

[92] This point is missed by Griffith, "*Naṣārā* in the Qurʾān," p. 314, who counters that "this Qurʾānic critique [of the sonship of ʿIsā] is at variance with what is reported of either the *Panarion*'s Nazrenes or most other Jewish Christian groups, none of whom explicitly confess that the Messiah is the Son of God." This criticism also overlooks the fact that our sources on Nazoraeans are heresiographical works whose very nature requires of them to be, first and foremost, concerned with spelling out the points of divergence between what is perceived as heresy and the heresiographer's own "orthodoxy." Hence, if anything, their silence on the Nazoraean view regarding Jesus' filial relationship with God the Father suggests that they shared this belief with the heresiographers.

[93] De Blois, "*Naṣrānī* and *ḥanīf*," pp. 13-15.

[94] Griffith, "*Naṣārā* in the Qurʾān," p. 318.

[95] Ibid., p. 315.

[96] Although I fully side with Griffith where he states that the Qurʾān's colourful rhetoric should not mislead one to assume too much about its opponents, an issue further elaborated upon by Reynolds, "On the presentation of Christianity."

suggested by Qurʾān 5:75,[97] which implicitly imbues the *naṣārā*'s Mary with semi-divine characteristics.[98]

De Blois' third piece of evidence concerned Qurʾānic dietary laws. Qurʾān 5:5 reads: "Today the pure things have been permitted to you and the food of those who are given the book is permitted to you and your food is permitted to them." It is common knowledge that Qurʾānic food regulations are laxer than that of the Jews, but stricter than that of mainstream Christians. Thus the permission to partake of the food of "those who are given the book" (viz., *al-yahūd* and *al-naṣārā*) would be in disagreement with other Qurʾānic commandments concerning food and drinks if we were to take *al-naṣārā* to mean "Pauline" Christians. We are, therefore, left with no alternative but to assume that the Qurʾān's *naṣārā* were in fact Judaising Christians who clung on to Mosaic law.[99]

This has equally come under criticism from de Blois' critics. According to Sidney Griffith, the observation regarding *ahl al-kitāb*'s dietary regulations in the Qurʾān "would certainly be a weighty objection if the text specified *al-naṣārā* instead of 'Scripture People.' With this phrase the Qurʾān clearly speaks only of the Jews here and not of the Christians."[100] Holger Michael Zellentin, in his own right, contends that in the Qurʾān's view Christians were supposed to observe the same dietary laws that it deems obligatory for its own followers and the fact that they did not observe these laws does not really matter inasmuch as the Qurʾān is concerned with legal injunction rather than actual practice.[101]

Holger Zellentin is the last student of the Qurʾān to have made a case for the existence of Jewish Christianity in the Qurʾānic world. His approach is somewhat different from virtually all the earlier scholars in that he has systematically investigated the similarity between several aspects of Jewish

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[97] One of the verses adduced by de Blois. Cf. the conviction on the part of the Qurʾān's opponents that messengers must be "superhuman" beings; on this see Hawting, "Has God sent a mortal?" and Crone, "Angels versus humans."

[98] However, *pace* de Blois, I would take Qurʾān 72:3 to be another case of the Qurʾān's hyperbolic rhetoric behind which one should not search for a peculiar Mariology, especially given that Qurʾān 6:101 rhetorically asks how God could have begotten a son "while He has had no consort," apparently basing itself on a point conceded by its disputants.

[99] De Blois, "*Naṣrānī* and *ḥanīf*," pp. 15-16.

[100] Griffith, "*Naṣārā* in the Qurʾān," pp. 315-316.

[101] Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, pp. 155-174.

Christian "legal culture," as documented by some of the extant Jewish Christian writings, and the Qurʾān. In the conclusion to his thought-provoking monograph, he speaks of a Jewish Christian *mindset* in the Qurʾān's milieu, but warning that they

> should not be depicted as a group that is socially distinct or even clearly distinguishable from the broader Christian (or Jewish) communities of their time. The evidence presented in this volume instead suggests Judaeo-Christianity to be a discrete religious *tendency* endorsed to varying degrees by individual members of established Christian or Jewish groups, best described by the Didascalia and the Clementine Homilies. The Judaeo-Christian ritual lawcode is a distinct phenomenon, yet those endorsing it may not have stood apart with regard to their social cohesion and self-identity.[102]

Yet, the most important of his observations for the present study is that the Qurʾān views the *ahl al-kitāb* as a single community, the wider Israel comprised of the genealogical Israel and the "new Israel" of the Christian Church.[103] He perceptively notes that the invention of "Jewish Christianity" as a distinct religious group "may be the result of the church fathers' and the rabbis' joint effort of [sic] establishing a difference between Judaism and Christianity. Our difficulty in grasping texts such as the Clementine Homilies and the Qurʾān may largely originate from these texts' refusal to accept this difference as unbridgeable,"[104] thus pushing for a move beyond the existing paradigms.[105]

By and large, however, Zellentin's most far-reaching con-clusions are probably his observations on the Qurʾānic adoption of Jewish Christian dietary regulations. In the light of the evidence he produces, his position on Qurʾān 5:5 would seem to be more tenable as it is only by so assuming that one can explain the curious state-ment "and your food is permitted to them." De Blois has endeavoured to explain it away by postulating that the verse reflects a phase in the process of the crystallisation of the Muslim

[102] *Ibid*., pp. 188-189.

[103] *Ibid*., pp. 161-164 and 187.

[104] *Ibid*., p. 176.

[105] If indeed so, the Qurʾān's use of *ummī* in contrast to *ahl al-kitāb* would no longer stand in the way of ascribing the exclusive meaning of "gentile" to the term.

Urgemeinde's ritual law in which the additional dietary restrictions of Judaism had not yet been relaxed. But this could hardly be the case, for the very same pericope, and indeed the same verse, orders Muslims to eat of the "pure" food that is inedible in Mosaic law.[106] The "pure things" that the Jews were banned from consuming were banned because of their transgressions, particularly because of the affair of the golden calf, as the Qurʾān makes it clear elsewhere.[107]

Be that as it may, there seems to be one fault in Zellentin's argument where he suggests that the Qurʾān regards Jesus' mission as the annulment of the additional food restrictions for *all* Jews.[108] Rather, they are presumably annulled only for those of them who somehow atone for their sins (cf. Qurʾān 7:153 and 20:82). One can only surmise that for the Qurʾān this atonement is to be fulfilled by believing in Jesus, as implied by Qurʾān 3:50, where the verb *aṭīʿūni* (obey me) is used by him in reference to the relaxation of dietary restrictions, or now in Muḥammad (Qurʾān 7:157, *perinde*). Qurʾān 6:144-148 (discussed below) clearly deems these restrictions to be still binding, most evidently in verse 147, where after polemicising against gentile observation of Jewish food laws it emphatically asserts: "But His chastisement would not be averted from the wrongdoer party." This fact negates Zellentin's reading of Qurʾān 5:5; hence, I propose that the *ahl al-kitāb* referred to therein are to be construed as the "believing" among them, the "true" *ahl al-kitāb*. This is evidenced by the seemingly vacillatory permission in this verse to mingle with them, whereas later in the same Sūra the Qurʾān prohibits the *muʾminūn* from fraternisation with them (Qurʾān 5:51 and 57). As a matter of fact, *pace* Griffith, the rest of the Sūra is mostly devoted to marking out the "righteous party" among both the Jews and the Christians.[109] Verse 66 informs us that there are a "moderate group" (*umma muqtaṣida*)[110] among the *ahl al-kitāb*

[106] See the next section for further discussion of this verse.

[107] Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, pp. 140-154, especially footnote 19; Wheeler, "Israel and the Torah"; Witztum, *The Syriac milieu*, pp. 275-278; already Katsh, *Judaism and the Koran*, pp. 122-123, traces this punishment motif to Christian anti-Jewish polemic.

[108] Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, pp. 127-139, 155-165, and passim.

[109] For more on this Sūra, see Donner, "From believers to Muslims," pp. 22-25. Other Sūras paint a similar picture; cf. Qurʾān 3:110, 113-115, and 199; see also Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, pp. 181 ff.

[110] See the discussion of this phrase in Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, pp. 186-188.

(Torah and Gospel are also explicitly invoked) but "wrong is what a great majority of them [i.e., the *ahl al-kitāb*] indulge in." Significantly, slightly later, after a positive portrayal of Christians that counts them among the "believers" (vv. 82-85), the text orders "those who have believed" to not abstain from the pure things (*al-ṭayyibāt*) and "partake of what God has made their sustenance of what is lawful and pure" (*ḥalālan ṭayyiban*; vv. 87-88). Thus the impression conveyed by this contextual reading is that of a milieu inhabited by Christian and Jewish sectaries, with some of whom, among both groups, the Qurʾān agrees and the practices and beliefs of others it rejects. Incognisance of this situation has for long elicited derisive comments on the Qurʾān's alleged wavering attitude towards other faith communities from scholars and polemicists alike.

It must be pointed out here that the second-century Muslim jurist Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204 AH) was the first to suggest that the Christians of this verse were in fact Jewish. According to him,

> in this verse [Qurʾān 5:5] God is speaking of those who were given the book from among the Israelites and their progeny to whom the Torah and the Gospel were revealed. With respect to those from other nations who entered their religion and adhered to it, — those who were not Israelites — they are not intended by this verse and they are not among those the consumption of the meat slaughtered by them is allowed, for they are not among those who were given the book before Muslims (*innamā ʿanā Allāh bi-'lladhīna ūtū al-kitāb fī hādhihi 'l-āya, alladhina unzila ʿalayhim al-tawrāt wa-'l-injīl min banī Isrāʾīl wa-abnāʾihim. fa-ammā man dakhīlan* [read: *dakhala*] *fīhim min sāʾir al-umam mimman dāna bi-dīnihim wa-huwa min ghayr banī Isrāʾīl fa-lam yuʿna bi-hādhihi 'l-āya wa-laysa huwa mimman yaḥillu akl dhabāʾiḥihi li-annahu laysa mimman ūtiya 'l-kitāb min qabl al-muslimīn*).[111]

[111] *Apud* al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 8, p. 132. According to al-Ṭabarī, al-Shāfiʿī used to offer this explanation in the context of the reports concerning the refusal of some *ṣaḥāba* and *tābiʿīs* to eat of the meat of the animals slaughtered by Arab Christians. Surprisingly, al-Ṭabarī dedicates almost the entirety of his exegesis of this part of the verse to the question whether one is permitted to share table with Arab Christians in general or the Banū Taghlib in particular.

As it appears, al-Shāfiʿī, just like de Blois twelve centuries after him, could not find any other explanation for the verse' equation of the diet of the *ahl al-kitāb* with that of the Muslims other than that they were Jewish Jesus-believers. He only falls short of using the modern scholarly designation of "Jewish Christian."

Apart from these, there is also another Qurʾānic verse that can be brought forth as evidence in support of the presence of Judaising Christians in Arabia of the seventh century and it is none other than the abovementioned Qurʾān 7:157. Let us quote it in full:

> Those who follow the Messenger, the *ummī* prophet, whom they find mentioned with them in the Torah and in the Gospel, who enjoins them to what is right (*yaʾmuruhum bi-ʾl-maʿrūf*) and forbids them from what is wrong (*wa-yanhāhum ʿan al-munkar*) and makes permissible to them the pure things (*yuḥillu lahumu ʾl-ṭayyibāt*) and prohibits them from the impure things (*wa-yuḥarrimu ʿalayhim al-khabāʾith*) and removes (*yaḍaʿu*) from them their burdens (*iṣrahum*) and shackles (*aghlāl*) which were on them. So those who believed in him and honoured him and helped him and followed the beacon that was sent down with him, they are the prosperous.

The lexical affinity between this verse and the other verses pertaining to dietary regulations makes it clear that the same is at issue here.[112] The verse, therefore, is not only revoking the dietary restrictions of those who believe in the Torah, but also those who follow the Gospel.[113] This brings us back to the point raised by de Blois regarding "catholic" Christian dietary practices, and, again, the only way out of this *prima facie* paradox would be to assume that those who follow the Gospel are Judaisers and not adherents of dietary laws of "Pauline" Christians.

What remains to be explicated now is the relationship of this verse to Qurʾān 3:50, where Jesus is tasked with the same duty that here

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[112] Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, pp. 155-174; see also the opening pericope of Qurʾān 5, al-Māʾida and *infra*.

[113] It is possible that the two clauses *yuḥillu lahum al-ṭayyibāt* and *yuḥarrimu ʿalayhim al-khabāʾith* refer to Jews and Christians respectively, but, in my view, this is exceedingly unlikely as it would require that in the preceding couple of clauses *yaʾmuruhum bi-l-maʿrūf* exclusively refer to Jews and *yanhāhum ʿan al-munkar* to Christians, obviously an impossibility.

Muḥammad is supposed to perform. Zellentin suggests that here the Qurʾān is broadening "the concept (also known from the Didascalia) of the messenger predicted in Scripture who will ease the burden of the law to include not only Jesus, the prophet to the people of the book, but also Muhammad... the 'prophet to the gentile nations'."[114] He thus sees in this verse a "scriptured"-gentile dichotomy which necessitates the same function to be fulfilled twice by two different people, once for each group. But this cannot be the case since, for one thing, the gentile prophet here is to relax the burdens of "those who follow the Gospel and the Torah" and not those of the gentile nations and, for another, the Qurʾān never deems the additional food restrictions of Judaism incumbent upon gentiles in the first place. In fact, when it comes to gentile observance of Jewish food laws, the Qurʾān never uses the eirenic language of law and abrogation, but rather it takes a much more aggressive stance, denouncing such observances as "fabrications imputed to God" (*iftirāʾ ʿalā Allāh*; see *infra*).

Given the sharpness of the Qurʾānic polemic against Judaisation, Qurʾān 7:157 must have viewed this Christian obser-vation of Jewish dietary customs as instituted by divine law (that is to say, they must have been thought of as Israelites), but a law that has been abrogated. On the other hand, however, it is hard to imagine that the Qurʾān viewed the consumption of things it termed "impure" (*khabāʾith*) as scripturally instituted, and with no law to begin with there would have been no need to abrogation.[115] Thus — and presupposing that the verse is responding to an issue that was a matter of debate in the Qurʾānic milieu — I submit that it cannot be construed as suggesting that Muḥammad is to abrogate or legislate some food laws (for Christians); he is, rather, to *reinstitute* Jesus' abrogation of these laws. The verse is, then, preoccupied with dietary malpractices such as *illegal* consumption of impure food and unnecessary observation of already abrogated regulations by Christians. But it must be pointed out that the dietary laws of the intended audience of this verse are different from those in Qurʾān 5:5. There, the food laws the "believing" Jews and Christians obey

[114] Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, p. 157; but cf. also his comment in p. 169, footnote 13.

[115] Note that the Qurʾān accuses its opponents of slandering God *only* in connexion with gentile observance of exclusively Jewish precepts, not the consumption of *khabāʾith*, presumably since its opponents never attributed their consumption to God's ordinance; cf. 6:148 and 16:35; see also *infra*.

is exactly the same as that of Muslims, whereas here the laws observed by the people of the Torah and the Gospel are clearly more stringent than Muslim food regulations. This is a further testimony to the image of a milieu inhabited by competing, yet also overlapping, groups with diverging practices.[116]

To all these we may add Zellentin's and de Blois' incisive argument that the Qurʾān's understanding of Jesus' mission as the affirmation, rather than abrogation, of the Mosaic law is in exclusive keeping with the Jewish Christian view of Christ.[117] The late Shlomo Pines had made the same observation on *qāḍī* ʿAbd al-Jabbār's critique of Christianity, but had failed to trace this critique to its immediate, though only intermediate, source, the Qurʾān, as pointed out by Gabriel Said Reynolds. Reynolds further noted that "ʿAbd al-Jabbār's contention that Christ taught and conducted himself according to the Tawrāt of Moses is thoroughly Qurʾānic... however... the Qurʾān itself may have been influenced by Judaeo-Christianity and thus the *Critique*, being influenced by the Qurʾān," would indeed be "a Judaeo-Christian text."[118]

Jewish Christians, it seems, were after all present in the Qurʾān's milieu; the presence of Judaisers in Western Arabia, however, was apparently not limited to Judaising Christians, as will be argued presently.[119]

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[116] Overlap between the following of competing doctrines and congregations is not an unfamiliar phenomenon, at least not in Late Antiquity. See, e.g., Tannous, "You are what you read," who treats the case of the so-called Melkite and Jacobite Christians of Syro-Mesopotamia in the seventh and eighth centuries.

[117] Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, p. 138 and passim; de Blois, "Islam in its Arabian context," p. 622. In this latter work, de Blois — basing himself on a passage in Ibn al-Nadīm's *al-Fihrist* he had previously investigated in detail in his "Sabians" — contends the Elchasaites could still be found in the marshlands of southern Iraq in the tenth century. But while I completely agree with his identification of Ibn al-Nadīm's "baptists" (*mughtasila*) with Elchasaites, I believe the latter's statement that they were still numerous in southern Iraq in his time was the result of a mere confusion of Mandaeans with Elchasaites.

[118] *A Muslim theologian*, pp. 14-15. For an overview of the Pines-Stern debate, see *ibid*., pp. 4-17.

[119] See also the closing remarks of the next section. Some scholars have attempted to posit a Jewish Christian background to the emergence of the Qurʾān by tracing specific Qurʾānic doctrines and ideas to Jewish Christian or Gnostic texts and groups, most recently so Hawting, "Has God sent a mortal?"; Gobillot, "Der Begriff Buch"; eadem, "Des textes pseudo clémentins"; eadem, "L'abrogation selon le Coran." Because of the methodological peculiarities of this line of enquiry (Crone's remark on her own proposals in her "Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine

C: Jewish proselytes and Qur'ān 2:78

In those religious communities where the ethnic and religious identities of the members are intertwined, speaking of proselytism always somehow breeds controversy, and Judaism is no exception to this rule.[120] Yet the sensitivity of the issue has not prevented all Jews from engaging in missionary activity, nor has it succeeded in dissuading gentiles from converting to Judaism. The existence of a missionary mindset in Second Temple Judaism has been a matter of hot debate,[121] but what cannot be doubted is the occasional conversions of pagans — either through personal inclination towards Judaism or through the agency of individual Jews — for which we have the notable example of the conversion of the royal family of Adiabene in the first century CE.[122] The existence of Jewish proselytes in the Rabbinic period is better documented, although no solid evidence for the existence of a systematic convert-seeking programme can be discerned in this period either. In any case, there is not only direct evidence for conversion in the form of funerary and other forms of sundry inscriptions[123] and occasional references to converts in literary sources,[124] but also indirect evidence in the form of Roman laws aimed at curbing conversion to Judaism,[125] rabbinic conversion ceremonies,[126] and even conversion legends.[127] But probably the most climactic episodes of conversion in the entire history of Judaism were those of Ḥimyar and Khazaria; the former

Iconoclasm," p. 94, that "the case for the survival of the Judeo-Christian tradition thus rests entirely on the Judeo-Christian writings" sounds very pertinent here), I defer an investigation of Jewish Christian materials in the Qurʾān to future studies.

[120] One notable case is Arthur Koestler's hypothesis in his notorious essay, *The thirteenth tribe*, on the Khazari proselyte origin of Ashkenazi Jews. The controversy went so far as to necessitate a Y chromosome polymorphic marker study to refute Koestler's claim; Nebel et al., "Y chromosome evidence"; but cf. Elhaik, "The missing link," who opts for the middle ground.

[121] For a survey see Goodman, "Jewish proselytizing in the first century"; and more recently Dickson, *Mission-commitment in ancient Judaism*, pp. 11-50, who strikes a balanced view.

[122] Neusner, "The conversion of Adiabene."

[123] Goodman, "Identity and authority," p. 31.

[124] Idem, *Mission and conversion*, pp. 129-153.

[125] Ibid., pp. 134-135 and 138-141.

[126] Cohen, "The rabbinic conversion ceremony."

[127] Idem, "Crossing the boundary," pp. 162-164.

antedating Islam by about two centuries, the latter postdating it by a nearly equal timespan.[128] The conversion of Ḥimyar is by far the more thoroughly-studied of the two, mostly through the decipherment of an infinite number of South Arabian inscriptions, epitaphs, and graffiti. These documentary sources reveal much about the religious life of Ḥimyar in this period. For one example, we have the testimony of three inscription for that at least some of the Ḥimyarite Jews considered themselves to be part of Israel. In such inscriptions, they not only call themselves "people of Israel" (*s²ʿb ys³rʾl*),[129] but also invoke the "lord of the Jews" (*rb yhd; rb h(w)d*),[130] adopt Jewish names, use Hebrew vocabulary,[131] and show their zeal for the faith by persecuting, and occasionally massacring, Christians. But uncalculated actions like this last one could prove fatal in a region dominated by powerful Christian kingdoms and principalities. Shortly after the massacre of the Christians of Najrān in 523, Kālēb, the Christian king of Aksum, arrived in Ḥimyar with Byzantine logistical support and removed Yūsuf Asʾar Yathʾar, the Jewish king of Ḥimyar and the driving force behind these atrocities. This marked the end of Jewish supremacy in Southern Arabia until half a century later, when Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, a hero of mediaeval Arabic folktales, dislodged Ethiopians from Ḥimyar with the help of Sasanians.[132]

Whatever the sagas of Ḥimyarite Jewry, it is almost certain that Jewish proselytism was a known phenomenon to Arabia of that time.[133] But can we take it for granted that the Qurʾān had firsthand engagement with Jewish proselytes? A preponderance of the evidence seems to point in that direction. For one, there is the case of Kinda, a tribe with a considerable

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[128] Also of note here is Sozomen's account of the Judaisation of a group of Arabs cited further *infra*. On the conversion of the Khazars, see Golden, "The conversion of the Khazars"; and now Olsson, "Coup d'état, coronation and conversion." In recent years, some scholars have cast doubt that such a conversion ever did occur; cf. Gil, "Did the Khazars convert?" (I owe this reference to Michael Lecker); and Stampfer, "Did the Khazars convert?"

[129] Robin, "Ḥimyar et Israël,"pp. 844-852.

[130] *Ibid*., passim; Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*, p. 232.

[131] Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia," pp. 270-272.

[132] For a survey of the history of the Kingdom of Ḥimyar, see *ibid*.; Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*; and Robin, "The peoples beyond the Arabian frontier."

[133] This is further borne out by the report concerning the imposition of Judaism on the Ḥishna, a subdivision of Balī; Lecker, *Muslims, Jews and pagans*, p. 66.

number of converts to Judaism.[134] Judaism was known among the Kinda since a few centuries before Islam, presumably permeating their ranks through Ḥimyar. Nonetheless, Kindites were no doubt thought of as "Arabs" by their contemporaries[135] – even though some of them may have considered themselves to be part of the "people of Israel." Kinda — whose chiefs had been appointed kings of the Maʿadd by Ḥimyarite kings — also had a noticeable presence in Central and Western Arabia and some Kindites had emigrated to the region of Mecca.[136] Kinda also produced a few companions, among them al-Ashʿath b. Qays b. Maʿdīkarib, the celebrated chieftain of the tribe. Al-Ashʿath — who was almost certainly a Jew[137] — had first met Muḥammad when the Kinda decided to embrace Islam and sent him at the head of a delegation to Medina in 10 AH. In this meeting a marriage between al-Ashʿath's sister and Muḥammad was agreed, but the latter died before the bride's arrival in Medina. After Muḥammad's death, al-Ashʿath cast his lot with some of his fellow Kindite tribesmen and took part in their *ridda*, but was spared their fate after their defeat at Nujayr.[138] He then settled in Kūfa and became the head of the Kinda there and died during the abortive caliphate of al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī (40-41 AH).[139] Another person worth mentioning here is Abū Mālik ʿAbd Allāh b. Sām al-Quraẓī who too, despite his *nisba*, was a Kindite. He had emigrated from the Yemen and settled in Medina before Muḥammad's *hijra* and later became a Muslim.[140] Interestingly, Ibn Isḥāq narrates his account of the conversion of Ḥimyar on his authority through his descendants.[141] Above all, a most noteworthy passage in al-Yaʿqūbī's

[134] Too often one comes across references to converts or tribes with an appreciable percentage of Jewish converts in the sources, but here I confine myself to investigating the well-documented case of Kinda.

[135] Cf. the genealogy of Kinda as given by later Muslim authors; Shahid, "Kinda."

[136] Robin, "Les religions," p. 215. A literate Kindite, Bishr b. ʿAbd al-Malik, reportedly instructed a few Meccans (among them Abū Sufyān and Abū Qays b. ʿAbd Manāf) in writing; Ibn al-Kalbī, *Nasab maʿadd*, vol. 1, p. 191.

[137] He is not explicitly said to be a Jew himself, while his father and paternal aunt are; Robin, "Les religions," pp. 224 and 227.

[138] Lecker, "Judaism among Kinda."

[139] Blankinship, "al-Ashʿath"; and Lecker, "Kinda on the eve of Islam."

[140] Idem, "Abū Mālik ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sām."

[141] Idem, "The conversion of Ḥimyar," pp. 132-134. On Kindite Judaism, see idem, "Judaism among Kinda"; and now Robin, "Les religions."

Taʾrīkh reveals that there were converts to Judaism even among the Aws and the Khazraj.[142] Occasional references to Jewish proselytes in Medina abound in the sources.[143]

The foregoing must have given away the solution I am going to propose to reconcile my understanding of *ummī* with its use in Qurʾān 2:78. This verse occurs in the middle of a long polemical pericope directed against the Israelites. After recounting the story of the sacrifice of cow, the Qurʾān says: "And among them are *ummī*s who do not know the scripture save for hearsay (*amānī*)[144] and they but conjecture"; then goes on to threaten those who engage in scriptural falsification (or, to be more precise, scriptural forgery). In the light of the evidence presented above, I believe it is not only possible, but very likely that the Qurʾān is talking about Jewish proselytes here;[145] a likelihood that, when taken together with the other instances of the term's attestation, verges on certitude.[146] In the Qurʾān's view these "gentiles," being converts, do not have a deep appreciation of the scripture and its commandments and are reliant on the rabbis' teachings, but these latter group lead them astray for their own worldly purposes.[147]

Thus far we have examined extra-Qurʾānic evidence for proselytes in the Qurʾān's milieu from both Muslim literary sources and near-

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[142] *Wa-tahawwada qawmun min al-Aws wa-'l-Khazraj... li-mujāwaratihim yahūd Khaybar, wa-Qurayẓa, wa-'l-Naḍīr*; al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. 1, p. 257; cited in Robin, "Les religions," p. 226.

[143] Lecker, *Muslims, Jews and pagans*, passim. Most notable is the case of the tribe of Murayd, presumably nearly entirely comprised of proselytes; *ibid*., pp. 45 ff.

[144] The term *amānī* is attested a few times in the Qurʾān, and almost always in the sense of a wish or wishful thinking; but its singular *umniyya* (attested only once) almost exclusively connotes "saying" (with the more precise pragmatics of "interjection"); "And We did not send any prophet or messenger before you unless Satan interjected (*alqā fī umniyya*) [in his recitation] when he was reciting" (*idhā tamannā*) (Qurʾān 22:52; note the usage of *tamannā* — from the same root — in the sense of "to read, to recite").

[145] This possibility has already been suggested by Patricia Crone — albeit vaguely and in passing — in her "Quranic *mushrikūn*," p. 472, especially in footnote 86. Rudi Paret, too, in his German translation of the Qurʾān, consistently renders *ummī* as *Heide*, including in this verse. He explicitly considers this possibility in his *Kommentar*, p. 22 — although with some reservation: "[in] 2,78... ist bei dem Ausdruck *ummīyūn* vielleicht an solche Juden gedacht, die vom arabischen Heidentum zur jüdischen Religion übergetreten sind."

[146] In fact, I believe this to be the strongest indication in the Qurʾān that *ummī* should be exclusively understood as "gentile."

[147] See Qurʾān 9:34 for Rabbinic prevention from the right path and its implicit association with worldly yearnings.

contemporary documentary evidence and have seen that conversion, so to speak, to Judaism was becoming increasingly appealing in Arabia on the eve of Islam. We have also seen that there is nothing in the text of the Sūra to make the reading proffered untenable. But could we not find a more decisive evidence for the presence of Judaisers elsewhere in the Qurʾān?[148] As it turns out, the answer is in the affirmative. One piece of evidence is to be found in Sūrat al-Anʿām (the Cattle), in the midst of another controversy concerning dietary laws. There we first hear that "loss is for those who killed their children out of ignorance and forbade (*ḥarramū*) what God had made their nourishment" (*razaqahum*; Qurʾān 6:140). After listing some of the sustenance God has provided for man and inviting the *mushrikūn*[149] to eat of them (vv. 141-142) and then alluding to what seems to have been a cryptic Arabian practice and denouncing those who fabricate an untruth against God (*iftarā ʿalā Allāh kadhiban*; vv. 143-144), the Qurʾān asks of Muḥammad to say: "I do not find in what has been revealed to me any dietary restrictions on a man [lit. "partaker"] unless that that food is carrion or spilt blood or pork, for it is an uncleanness (*rijs*), or a *fisq* hallowed to other than God" (Qurʾān 6:145). From this one may conclude that the Messenger is denouncing a "pagan" prohibition of the consumption of the meat of sacrosanct animals and produce, but curiously the next verse states: "And *to the Jews We forbade* whatever animal with uncloven hooves and from oxen and sheep *We* forbade them their fat… that is how *We* punished them for their transgression" (Qurʾān 6:146).[150]

What is the relevance of this discussion of Jewish food laws to the rest of the pericope? How are we to reconcile the statement in vv. 143-144, where God denounces any dietary restriction for the opponents in addition to those set out in v. 145 as a slander against Himself, with this latter one, where He assumes responsibility for imposing additional food restrictions on the Jews? The passage would make sense if we took its disputants whose practices it attacks to have been neither "pagans" nor Jews, but Judaising

[148] By what follows I might be accused of eclecticism in my treatment of literary sources, now accepting their overall reliability, now doubting the picture of the *jāhiliyya* they draw for us. But it must be understood that the recourse to literary evidence is meant to be a prosopographical survey.

[149] That they were *mushrik*s appears from vv. 136-137.

[150] The pericope actually follows the earlier discussion of food regulations in Qurʾān 6:118-121.

Arabs. The point of v. 146 is not the additional dietary restrictions of what the apostolic pseudepigraphon known as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* terms the "second legislation" *per se*, but the purported reason for their promulgation: it is a punishment for the transgressions (*baghy*) of the Jews, so the verse asserts. To paraphrase, the pericope sees the "second legislation" as a punishment for the Israelites,[151] and only for the Israelites, not the Arabs or anyone else for that matter. The Arabs, therefore, should not observe these additional restrictions. The next verse adds: "And if they rejected you, say: your Lord's mercy is all-embracing, but His chastisement (*baʾs*) would not be averted from the wrongdoer party" (Qurʾān 6:147); God is kind and does not impose unnecessary restrictions on his servants and, according to the logic of the verse, the Israelites have brought these restrictions on themselves by their sins, so no other people need to observe them.[152] Slightly later, we are given to know that the disputants are neither Jews nor Christians, for God has revealed to them the Qurʾān so as to pre-empt any future excuses like "the book had only been revealed to two groups (*ṭāʾifatayn*) before us and we were ignorant of their teachings" (Qurʾān 6:156), or that they may say "had the book been revealed to us we would have been more guided than them" (Qurʾān 6:157). Using similar wording, Sūrat al-Naḥl enjoins its addressees to "eat of what God has provided for you of what is pure" (*ṭayyib*) (Qurʾān 16:114) and that "He has *only* forbidden to you (*innamā ḥarrama ʿalaykum*) carrion and blood and pork and what hallowed to other than God" (Qurʾān 16:115).[153] It again warns that they should not slander God by imputing their

[151] Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, pp. 140-154.

[152] For more on this pericope, see Lowry, "When less is more," especially pp. 25-26; his contention that Qurʾānic attitude towards law is "minimalist" is awry, however, for reasons that will become clear shortly. Nonetheless, he passingly remarks that if one follows "Hawting's skepticism [in his *Idea of idolatry*] to its logical conclusion, one might see in these ayas [vv. 136-138] a polemical reference to Levitical rules of purity and sacrifice"; *ibid*., p. 39, endnote 12. Freidenreich, *Foreigners*, p. 134, even goes so far as to state that, in these verses' view, the Jewish food law "does not warrant emulation," thereby hinting at Judaisation, but ultimately fails to home in on the real issue; cf. also idem, "Dietary law", p. 469.

[153] Cf. Qurʾān 2:168-173, where the addressees are *muʾminūn* (see *infra* for discussion). Donner, "From believers to Muslims," pp. 21-22, despite missing the connection between these two pericopes, takes the addressees of Qurʾān 6:114-118 to be the Jews among Muḥammad's followers, noting, rightly, that otherwise "the sudden reference to the Jews in verse 118, in [the] context of the verses preceding it, is inexplicable." This would be *a* viable explanation if it accounted for the accusation of slander; though it hardly comports with Donner's own view of

own fabrications (*iftirāʾ*) and lies (*kadhib*) concerning permissible (*ḥalāl*) and impermissible (*ḥarām*) food to Him, adding that what they gain by these lies is meagre while the attendant punishment in the afterlife will be severe (Qurʾān 16:116-117). It then once again asserts that "We forbade (*ḥarramnā*) to the Jews what We have already detailed for you and We did not treat them unjustly but they [caused] themselves [to be] treated unjustly" (Qurʾān 16:118).

To sum up, the crux of the Qurʾān's argument is that the regulations of the "second legislation" do not prohibit "pure" food,[154] have only been promulgated as a punishment for Israelites, and are of their own making. Adherence to the full range of Jewish food laws is not incumbent on gentiles inasmuch as they were not culprits of the sins for which the Israelites have been punished. Those gentiles who fully observe these laws in the name of God[155] are imputing to him something He has not decreed and due punishment will be meted out to them in the hereafter.[156] Needless to emphasise, the logical prerequisite for the relevance of these disputations is the presence among Muḥammad's opponents of a body of Judaisers.[157]

Another case in point is the elaborations on permissible food in Sūrat al-Māʾida (the Table of food). After once more declaring as edible some of the food considered impermissible by the Jews (v. 1) and listing what the Sūra itself deems to be impermissible to its audience (v. 3), in verse 4 it states

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things as the contrast drawn by the passage between the dietary laws applicable to its supposedly Jewish discussants and other Jews would require the former to not have been viewed as ordinary Jews anymore.

[154] For the notion that these food are basically pure, see Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's legal culture*, pp. 140-154, especially 144-145.

[155] Cf. Qurʾān 3:93-95. In Qurʾān 6:148 these Judaisers, whom we now encounter under the circumlocutory sobriquet of *alladhīna ashrakū*, are quoted as countering, in deterministic terms, "had it not been for God's will, we would not have associated (*ashraknā*), nor we would have made impermissible (*ḥarramnā*) anything" (recapitulated in Qurʾān 16:35); on this see Crone, "Religion of the Qurʾānic pagans" (pp. 164-165 for ritual laws; pp. 165-166 for determinism).

[156] It appears that Muḥammad did not find the mere observance by gentiles of the "second legislation" as outrageous as the claim that it was a divine ordinance.

[157] At pains to make sense of the verse, Lowry, "When less is more," p. 25, concludes that the opponents quoted in Qurʾān 6:147 were possibly Jews responding "to the unflattering characterisation of the dietary rules given at Q. 6:146." However, he does not elucidate the relevance of the Qurʾān's response and, by and large, fails to offer a coherent interpretation of the pericope. Cf. also Robinson, "Sūrat Āl ʿImrān," p. 12.

"they will question you concerning what is permissible to them (*mādhā uḥilla lahum*). Tell them: you are permitted the pure things" (*al-ṭayyibāt*). The next verse reemphasises "today the pure things have been permitted to you" (*al-yawma uḥilla lakum al-ṭayyibāt*). On the face of it, this verse is legislating new laws, but the statement in the previous verse that the Messenger will be asked about dietary rules, rather than that he will be petitioned for laxer regulations, shows that the question has been posed to him by the uninitiated who have no knowledge of the laws of their new faith.[158] On the other hand, the use of the *ḥāl* (adverb) *al-yawma* indicates that the addressees used to abstain from (some of) the *ṭayyibāt*, hence they must have been Judaisers. That they were not Jews or Jewish Christians is evidenced by the second part of verse 5 which states "and the food of those who are given the book (*alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb*) is permitted to you and your food is permitted to them and the chaste women (*muḥṣanāt*) from believers and the chaste women from those who were given the book before you" (*min qablikum*). From the contrast drawn by the verse between its addressees and *ahl al-kitāb*, and especially the unequivocal phrase "those who were given the book before you," we may infer that the neophytes were former Arab Judaisers.

Having established the relevance of the Qurʾānic accusation of slander against God (*iftirāʾ ʿalā Allāh*) to otiose dietary observances, we can now move on to Qurʾān 7:31-37, where after inviting its addressees to eat and drink without indulging in profligacy (v. 31) the text adds: "Say: who has made impermissible (*ḥarrama*)… the pure things of edibles" (*al-ṭayyibāt min al-rizq*) (v. 32). In the next verse it reasserts that "my Lord has only forbidden (*ḥarrama*) the obscenities (*al-fawāḥish*)… and sin (*ithm*) and oppression/ transgression (*baghy*) and that to associate with God something for which He has sent no authority (*mā lam yunazzil bihi sulṭānan*) and to attribute to God something you do not know" (Qurʾān 7:33).[159] From this last count and from v. 37 it can be surmised that the disputants are Arabs, as both verses imply that they think of their dietary restrictions, denounced in v. 32, as divinely

[158] The assertion *al-yawma akmaltu lakum dinakum* concerning the dietary regulations in v. 3, however, is not to be understood as referencing a new legislation. What is meant here is the completion of the old creed of Arab Judaisers by their acceptance of Muḥammad's message, for if we took the completion in question to be an intra-Islamic one, it would follow that up to this point carrion, blood, pork, and so forth were allowed to Muslims and are now being banned!

[159] The pericope curiously fails to list inedible food.

mandated, whereas in Qurʾān's view this is wrongdoing (*ẓulm*) and slandering God with untruth (*iftirāʾ ʿalā Allāh kadhib*).[160] Thus the phraseology indicates that not only is the passage concerned with the same issue as the previous ones, but also that the same people, the Arab Judaisers, are involved.

Likewise, Qurʾān 2:168 exhorts its interlocutors to "eat of what is in the earth of lawful (*ḥalāl*) and pure (*ṭayyib*) and not follow (*lā tattabiʿū*) in Satan's footsteps," for he "enjoins you to misdeed (*sūʾ*) and obscenity (*faḥshāʾ*) and that to attribute to God (*taqūlū ʿalā Allāh*) what you do not know" (Qurʾān 2:169).[161] Here again the discussants are depicted as abstaining from what the Qurʾān deems pure, presumably taking it to be divine ordinance, hence the statement they "attribute to God" what they "do not know." Verse 170 bitterly observes: "When they are asked to follow what God has revealed (*attabiʿū mā anzala Allāh*) they say 'but we follow (*nattabiʿu*) what we have found our fathers adhering to it'." Then the Qurʾān turns to the *muʾminūn* and invites them to "eat of the pure things that We have made your sustenance" (*ṭayyibāt mā razaqnākum*), reiterating "He has only forbidden to you carrion and blood and pork and that which is hallowed to other than God" (Qurʾān 2:172-173, recapitulating Qurʾān 16:114-115). As the Judaisers of vv. 168-169 are again accused of imputing falsehood to God, we seem to be dealing with the same group as before. After their disappointingly obstinate posture of v. 170, the Qurʾān apparently asks the believers to take stock of the example of the *mushrikūn*'s[162] blindly illogical behaviour (v. 171) and avoid their malpractices and not forbid the *ṭayyibāt* (v. 172), reassuring them (v. 173) that the range of inedibles is not as wide as the *mushrikūn* believe it to be. And it is significant that, throughout all these disputations, the Qurʾān falls back on the very teachings of Rabbinic Judaism. It shares this conviction with both the Jews and the Christians that the "second legislation" solely

[160] It might not be insignificant that ignorance of the *kitāb* is an attribute common to both the Judaisers of Qurʾān 7:37 and the *ummiyyūn* of Qurʾān 2:78.

[161] Presumably what they follow Satan in is both *shirk* (discussed in the preceding verses) and abstaining from lawful food; cf. the association between *shirk* and indulging in *faḥshāʾ* in Qurʾān 6:151 and 7:33.

[162] See vv. 165-167 for their polylatry.

concerns the Israelites, only the explanation proffered for its institution differs.[163]

Lastly, I should like to devote a few words to the puzzling recourse to the Torah in Qurʾān 3:93-95, wherein it states "all food was permissible (*ḥillan*) for Israelites, save for what Isrāʾīl [meaning Jacob] abstained from (*ḥarrama ʿalā nafsihi*) before the Torah was revealed; say: bring forth the Torah and recite it, should you be veracious" (v. 93).[164] In the next verse, we again encounter the recurrent motif of *kidhb* and *iftirāʾ* and verse 95 demands of its audience to follow the religion (*milla*) of Abraham *ḥanīfan*. However, Judaisation proper does not seem to be implied in this case, since neither an apparent change in audience (from the first exchange with the Banū Isrāʾīl to the demand that the addressees must follow Abraham *ḥanīfan*) could be discerned here, nor the exclusive evocation of Isaac would sound quite fitting if non-Jews were intended. This verse, therefore, seems to be a reply to the Jews' dismissal of the idea that "atonement through belief" (see *supra*) could revoke the punitive dietary restrictions imposed on them. To substantiate its claim, the Qurʾān cites Isaac — who it contends only abstained from a limited number of (pure) edibles — but the Jews apparently reject the notion that he did not observe the entirety of the Law, bringing the Torah as evidence. The Qurʾān likewise resorts to the Torah to vindicate its own position and rejects the claim of the Jews regarding Isaac (and other patriarchs) as a slander against God. It then orders the Messenger to reply that "God speaks the truth" and that they should follow Abraham[165] *ḥanīfan*.[166] Joseph Witztum's

[163] See the references cited in footnote 107. On the above-discussed pericopes, also cf. Freidenreich, *Foreigners*, pp. 131-143.

[164] Compare Hirschfeld's comment in his *New researches*, p. 114: "It is, therefore, not quite clear what Muhammad meant by this remark, except that he wished to parade his intimate acquaintance with the Pentateuch."

[165] But note that these verses come in the wake of an earlier articulation of faith in "what has been revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the descendants, and what has been given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets by their Lord" (Qurʾān 3:84); so we probably have to generalise this statement to include all the patriarchs, in line with the conviction of the Christian tradition.

[166] Given the context, it might be tempting to read this adverb as de Blois does in his "*Naṣrānī* and *ḥanīf*," that is, "gentile, not bound by Jewish law." Although this interpretation might not seem obvious, as conceded by de Blois himself, the fact that the Qurʾān puts too much emphasis on Abraham's *ḥanīfiyya* suggests that this was not taken as a given by its audience. In any event, theological motivations are at play here.

observation that "the Quran... concludes that since Abraham did not follow these rules, neither should the *Muslims*.... It is with regard to this very point that the *Jews* are challenged to produce their scripture as damning evidence"[167] could then be seen as correct if we counted "believing" Jews among "Muslims." Technically speaking this is not wrong, but the terminology is no doubt anachronistic; the Jew who accepted Muḥammad as God's messenger most likely retained his Jewish identity, since it would be hard to figure out the significance of the recourse to the Torah by both sides if Muḥammad had asked of them to turn against their Judaism.[168]

The Arabs of Muḥammad's time, then, do not appear much different from what Sozomen famously wrote of a group of their brothers from the northern peripheries of the Arabian world two centuries earlier:

> This is the tribe which took its origin and has its name from Ishmael, the son of Abraham.... Such being their origin, they practice circumcision like the Jews, refrain from the use of pork, and observe many other Jewish rites and customs.... As is usual, in the lapse of time, their ancient customs fell into oblivion, and other practices gradually got the precedence among them. Some of their tribe afterwards happening to come in contact with the Jews, gathered from them the facts of their true origin, returned to their kinsmen, and inclined to the Hebrew customs and laws. From that time on, until now, many of them regulate their lives according to the Jewish precepts.[169]

Of course, this incident happened at a spatiotemporal remove from the Ḥijāz of the early seventh century, but it is exactly this remoteness that makes the resemblance between the images of Sozomen's Saracen Judaisers and the Qurʾān's *ummī* associators all the more striking. Preceding and succeeding

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[167] Witztum, *The Syriac milieu*, p. 277 (emphasis mine).

[168] However, I must add that I cannot share Donner's view on the purported "oecumentical" character of early Islam — at least not in his own formulation of it — since, as I have argued, the Qurʾān legislates on the *ahl al-kitāb* and in this respect a, say, Jewish "believer" would be "confessionally" distinct from other Jews. What constitutes "confessionalism" can no doubt be subjected to scholarly debate, but since Donner has never set out his own definition of it I apply the term in its common sense.

[169] Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica*, p. 375 (6.38); quoted in Millar, "Hagar, Ishmael, Josephus," pp. 374-375.

this entry in Sozomen's *Historia* are two accounts of Christianisation of *foederati* Arabs shortly before the time of writing. It can be seen that the sectarian "melting pot" in which Islam fused into being was already in the making by the early fifth century CE. Yet, one must be careful not to attach too much significance to Sozomen's account, as the best tool for sketching the religious map of the Qurʾānic *Umwelt* is the Qurʾān itself. This is not to impugn the worth of literary or documentary sources, but, one might say, just as the most vivid portrait of a bygone world might be seen in the mirror of its remains, the brightest light is shed on a text by the text; textual archaeology is to the student of a writ what material archaeology is to the historian.

Before closing my discussion of such ethno-religious denominations as "Jew," "Israelite," "Arab," and "gentile," it would not go amiss to stress that I am not reading modern conceptions of race and ethnicity back into the seventh century; on the contrary, in my view the Qurʾān's argumentation is based on the malleable popular perceptions of collective identity-markers. If it considers the *naṣārā* (who were likely predominantly Christian Judaisers rather than Jewish converts to Christianity) to be part of Israel, it is most likely because they viewed themselves, and were viewed by others, as such, not least because of the total observation of the Mosaic law by some of them. Likewise, the application of such epithets as "Jew" and "Israelite" to only one group of the adherents of the Mosaic religion among Muḥammad's opponents (and supporters) reflects widespread acceptance of their genealogical claims by contemporaries. The other group of Moses' followers in the Qurʾān's world, the Arab Judaisers, must then have formed a distinct social identity group of their own too. It was this distinction in identity between these latter two that inspired the Qurʾānic polemic against Arab observation of the whole range of Jewish dietary laws.[170]

[170] I hope the discussion of dietary laws in this section has succeeded in further underlining the potential of this line of enquiry for shedding light on the "sectarian milieu" of the Qurʾān's emergence, an issue that has become particularly urgent in the wake of Zellentin's masterful study. Furthermore, in recent years some scholars have contended that the Qurʾānic *mushrikūn* were in fact monotheists whose monotheism was deemed less than perfect by the Qurʾān. Whilst the foregoing has no direct bearing on the issue, the possibility that a considerable number of Muḥammad's gentile opponents may have been Judaisers raises interesting questions as to the extent of the survival of idolatrous cults into this period. It is also hugely consequential that

Back to our discussion of Qurʾān 2:78, it is nevertheless possible to take its *ummiyyūn* to have been Jews, and assume that the Qurʾān is calling them gentiles "in the sense of exclusion" because of their ignorance of Jewish teachings.[171] This reading, however, is hardly appealing, not least because it presupposes an unlikely, if not impossible, etymon for *ummī*, the Hebrew *ʿam hā-āreṣ*. The phrase is used in Rabbinic literature to designate those Jews with no knowledge of the law,[172] and the similarity of the Qurʾānic context has led some scholars to postulate a relationship between the two. However, a certain circumspection is evident in the words of many of them: while for Wansbrough it is "a parallel to if not a calque of *ʿam ha-areṣ*,"[173] for Horovitz "the word might have been confused" with the Hebrew phrase,[174] and Calder sees "no insuperable linguistic problems" inherent in it, since, in his view, the medium of transition must have been "colloquial."[175] These half-hearted comments clearly capture the dilemma in which these scholars found themselves: they were not able to resist the allure of a possible connexion between the two lexemes, and Calder's facile remark aside, neither were they able to ignore the obvious impossibility of a transition from *ʿayn* to *hamza* in Semitic Languages. Without this proposed Hebrew connexion, such an interpretation would not be self-evident.

III

We need not subscribe to any sort of conspiracy theory to believe that *ummī* originally meant something other than what the later tradition claims. The fact of the matter is that the true meaning of the term was lost on the tradition. What later exegetes and lexicographers offer of meaning and

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some of the *loci classici* of these scholar's discussions are exactly those passages discussed here that engage the Judaisers. See in particular Hawting, *Idea of idolatry*, especially pp. 45-66; Crone, "Religion of the Qurʾānic pagans"; and eadem, "Quranic *mushrikūn* (part I and II)."

[171] Wansbrough, *Quranic studies*, p. 54. See Horovitz, "Jewish proper names," pp. 190-191, for a list of earlier scholars who shared this view.

[172] Wald, "*Am ha-areẓ*."

[173] Wansbrough, *Quranic studies*, p. 54.

[174] Horovitz, "Jewish proper names," pp. 190-191; see also idem, *Untersuchungen*, p. 53.

[175] Calder, "The *ummī*," p. 116.

etymology is just ingenious conjecture. It is, of course, justified to question how a term's original meaning could have been lost without leaving any trace in an admittedly well-attested and living linguistic tradition; but the traditions presented in corpus A must have made it clear that this is simply not the case. Corpus A is effectively an *archaeological corpus*, a residue of the term's usage in the first and early second century AH. But how did the word come to lose its original meaning? Like its counterparts in other languages, *ummī* is primarily idiomatic of Jewish parlance. It is either used by a Jew in reference to a non-Jew, or has been put in the mouth of an Israelite prophet or a Medinan Jew when speaking of the Arab Muḥammad. If we find this exonym used in the Muslim scripture, it is because the Qurʾān is engaging its opponents over the issue of "ethnicity" in those passages, an issue that looms large in the Qurʾān's exchange of polemic with not only the Jews, but also the Arab Judaisers who apparently shared the Jewish conviction that prophecy is an Israelite prerogative. It must have been this conviction of the Arabs' that elicited the Qurʾānic vociferation "in each community We appointed a messenger from among their midst."[176] What is more, the socio-religious standing of the Arabs as gentiles vis-à-vis the Jews appears to have been a cause for the alienation, and subsequent separation, of certain elements within the former group.[177]

On the other hand, the upheavals of the first few centuries of Islam virtually uprooted Judaism from many of its former abodes in the Ḥijāz. While several tribes, like the Banū Qurayẓa and the Jews of Kinda, were decimated,[178] others either converted to Islam and assimilated into the nascent Muslim community, or were piecemeally relocated to other locales outside Arabia.[179] Such a cataclysmic interruption in the continuity of the

[176] Adding: "peregrinate in the earth to see what has been the fate of those who spurned (*al-mukadhdhibīn*) [the messengers]" (Qurʾān 16:36; see the previous verse for their Judaisation); see also Qurʾān 10:47.

[177] Perhaps most evident from Qurʾān 62:2-8. It may be surmised from this pericope that the gentile prophet has been sent to *gentiles* so that they need not rely on Jews, transgressors who have corrupted God's law, for religious instruction.

[178] On the former, see, e.g., Kister, "The massacre of the Banū Qurayẓa"; on the latter, see Lecker, "Judaism among Kinda."

[179] However, cf. now Munt, "No two religions," who doubts that such a forced relocation ever happened, though he is unable to produce any evidence for the presence of non-Muslims in Medina after the first century AH; and one must note that even his singular piece of evidence

Jewish presence in Western Arabia naturally must have obliterated almost all traces of traditions and customs peculiar to Arabian Jewry, including its jargon.[180] Later Muslim traditionists who commented on things Jewish — among them the subject of the present article — were at a world's remove from what they were musing on.[181] It should hardly come as a surprise if the latter-day traditionist is at a loss as to the real meaning of the word.

The end-result of this ignorance on the part of the exegete is that he resorts to his intuition to come up with an explanation for the term he does not have a meaning for in his lexicon. But as the word's context in the Scripture offers conflicting possibilities, he runs a whole gamut of alternatives without settling on one. This is probably the underlying reason behind the one, or perhaps two, stages of semantic shift the word underwent — from "gentile" to "pagan" and then to "illiterate."[182] The verses which contrast *ummī* with *ahl al-kitāb* must have played the greatest role in helping the term acquire the meaning of "without scripture," while Qurʾān 2:78, combined with the industry of Muslim apologists, would have secured the denotation of "illiterate" for it. In sum, whatever Muḥammad's educational background, the Qurʾānic locution *al-nabī al-ummī* was most likely meant to

from ca. 100 AH concerns the expulsion of the non-Muslims of Medina by ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz. (*ibid*., p. 265. Sadly, Munt makes an unfortunate mistake in translating the tradition; "and [ʿUmar II] sold their [that is, non-Muslims'] slaves to the Muslims" must read "and he bought their Muslim slaves.")

[180] Another point worth considering in this context is the relocation of the major centres of Muslim learning to Syro-Mesopotamia and elsewhere, where scholars naturally had no contact with Arabian Jews.

[181] This is not to deny that the Muslim tradition could be a forthcoming source for the life of Medinan Judaism, but the tendentious nature of the Muslim accounts of Muḥammad's relationship with Jews and the fact that most of the information on Medinan Jewish practices must be gleaned from the highly problematic *asbāb al-nuzūl* literature calls for the utmost care when attempting a study of the delicate issue of Islam's first encounter with Judaism. (For a resounding warning against overly sanguine approaches to this question – commenting on a recent failed venture – see Hughes, "Review.")

[182] For a more detailed, if methodologically problematic, retracing of the process of this shift in Qurʾānic exegesis, see Goldfeld, "Illiterate prophet." I have to emphasise that I do not see this process as a stepwise three-staged metamorphosis and the picture presented above is obviously a simplified model. It is more reasonable to assume that it was a clumsy transition with completely blurred boundaries.

be a marker of his non-Jewish pedigree rather than a reminder of his alleged illiteracy.

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