



The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities*

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Abstract

This article (in two parts) is devoted to the first step of an attempted reconstruction of the religion of the Qur'ānic *mušrikūn* on the basis of the Qur'ān and indisputably earlier evidence alone. The first part concludes that the *mušrikūn* believed in the same Biblical God as the messenger and that their lesser beings, indiscriminately called gods and angels, functioned much like (dead) saints in later Islam and Christianity. This is not exactly new since it is more or less what Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb concluded three hundred years ago. The second part examines the high God hypothesis and tries to relate the beliefs of the *mušrikūn* to those of other monotheists in late antiquity, with indeterminate results: in terms of their views on God and the lesser beings, the *mušrikūn* could equally well be pagan monotheists and Jews (or Judaisers).

Keywords

monotheism, paganism, angel veneration, mediator figures, intercession, high God, second-order deities

I. The Qur'ānic Evidence

It is well known that the *mušrikūn* with whom the Qur'ān takes issue believed in God. Like the Messenger, they called him Allāh, and both sides seem fully to have accepted that they were talking of the same deity. In Izutsu's words, the polytheist understanding of God was "surprisingly close to the Islamic concept".¹ Since the *mušrikūn* are assumed to have been pagans whereas the Messenger explicitly identified his God as the God of Moses and Jesus, this is something of a problem. Why did the pagans accept the identification? You

* Both parts of this article have been greatly improved by the comments of Michael Cook, Gerald Hawting, and Joseph Witztum. I am also indebted to Michael Macdonald for speedy answers to Arabianist queries.

¹ T. Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran*, Tokyo, Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964 (repr. Salem, NH, 1987), p. 98, 101.

do not make the Biblical God acceptable to devotees of a deity such as El, Zeus, or Wodin simply by saying that the two are the same, however comparable their positions within their respective divine realms or, as in this case, their names. The God of Abraham and Moses was a deity who had revealed Himself to a particular people at particular times and whose story was told in the Bible and para-Biblical literature, which the pagans cannot have recognized as their own unless we envisage them as pagans of a somewhat unusual kind. But the pagans of the Qurʾān do seem to accept that Allāh is the God of the Jews and Christians, and also to know the Biblical stories that the Messenger retells or alludes to in a manner suggesting that he expected them to recognize even the barest hints. The implication, often noted before, is that his opponents had themselves come to identify Allāh with the God of the Jews and the Christians, and that material of Biblical origin was circulating among them. In short, they do seem to have been pagans of an unusual type.

What kind of pagans were they, then? The question has acquired particular urgency since the publication in 1999 of Hawting's *Idea of Idolatry*, which demonstrated how little the pagans of the Qurʾān have to do with those of the tradition.² In what follows I go through the Qurʾānic information on their beliefs regarding God and the lesser deities with a view to starting a systematic examination of their religious identity based entirely on the Qurʾān and indisputably pre-Qurʾānic evidence.³ The first part of this article examines the Qurʾānic evidence; the second part deals with the well-known hypothesis that the pagan Allāh was a "high God" and tries to relate the Qurʾānic evidence to the late antique context. The Islamic tradition is excluded from both parts on the principle that we have to start by understanding the Qurʾān on the basis of information supplied by the book itself, as opposed to that of later readers, and to understand this information in the light of developments known to have preceded its formation rather than those engendered by the book itself. There cannot, of course, be any doubt that in the long run the tradition will prove indispensable for an understanding of the Qurʾān, both because it preserves early information and because it embodies a millennium and a half of scholarship by men of great learning and high intelligence on whose shoulders it is good to stand. Indeed, we cannot completely get off their shoulders even if we try, since we normally rely on their dictionaries for the lexical meaning of the words in the book. But we

² G.R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, Cambridge, CUP, 1999.

³ Another article will appear as "Angels versus Humans as Messengers of God: the View of the Qurʾānic Pagans", in P. Townsend and M. Vidas (eds.), *Revelation, Literature, and Society in Late Antiquity*, Tübingen, forthcoming 2010.

must start with the most elementary of historical tasks: separating the primary source from the secondary.

In modern academic usage, the terms primary and secondary sources often stand for the literature written by the people we study and the modern scholarly work based on it, but this is actually a trivialising use of a distinction of fundamental importance. A primary source is one which takes us as far back as we can get, a secondary source is based on a primary one. Al-Ṭabarī and the exegetes he cites are secondary sources in relation to the Qurʾān, though they also preserve evidence which is primary to us. The primary and secondary information must always be kept separate. This rule has been so consistently violated for so long in the case of the Qurʾān and the tradition that reading the Qurʾān on its own is deeply de-familiarising, at least to somebody coming to the book from history rather than Qurʾānic studies. Few historians know the Qurʾān as a primary source. It is with a view to reintroducing it as a primary source that I shall ignore the tradition in what follows, or at best refer to it as secondary literature like any other.

Some practical preliminaries: the Qurʾān takes issue with many groups without always making it clear whom it is targeting, but much of what it says is directed against people who are accused of *širk* (ascribing partners to God), who are often called *mušrikūn* (polytheists) and *kāfirūn* (infidels), and who are not called Jews or Christians, though the same polemics are sometimes directed against people called Jews, Christians or People of the Book as well. It is with these *mušrikūn* that the article is concerned. Where there is ambiguity about the polemical target, I note it, or give some indication of the grounds on which I take the target to be the *mušrikūn*. Those of them who appear as vanished nations I take to be thinly disguised versions of the Messenger's contemporaries without further ado. I translate *mušrikūn* as "polytheists" or "pagans" as a matter of convenience, without prejudice to the question of what they actually were. I accept the distinction between Meccan and Medinese suras in the sense of suras reflecting the Messenger's periods before and after his rise to a position of religious and political leadership, since some such distinction is clear in the Qurʾān itself (without being associated with particular places). My Qurʾānic translations are usually doctored versions of Arberry, Yūsuf 'Alī, or Paret, and "you" and "your" should always be understood as a plural unless the contrary is indicated.

1. *The Sovereign God*

The Messenger and his pagan opponents worshipped the same God. This is clear above all from the Messenger's repeated insistence that his opponents are guilty of *iftirā' alā llāh*, falsely ascribing things to God: they were claiming

the authority of his God for things that he regarded as utterly untrue. “Who does more wrong than the one who attributes a falsehood to God (*iftarā ‘alā llāhi kadīban*)?”, as he asks in connection with those who worship false gods (18, 15; cf. 6, 21; 7, 37; 10, 17; 11, 18; 29, 68; 61, 7; etc.; cf. also the Medinese 4, 40). “They say, ‘God has begotten offspring’ . . . Say: those who attribute a falsehood to God will never prosper” (10, 68f.). His opponents retort in kind: “He is just a man attributing a falsehood to God”, they say in a vanished nation with reference to his talk about the resurrection (23, 38; cf. 34, 8; perhaps also 42, 24). Both sides claimed to know best what God stood for. In line with this the Messenger repeatedly voices amazement at the fact that people who understood the nature of God so well could be so misguided.⁴ If you asked the polytheists who had created the heavens and the earth and made the sun and the moon subservient, they would say “God” (29, 61; 31, 25; 43, 9); they would give the same answer if you asked them who had created them (43, 87); yet they were deluded (*yū’fakūna*) and did not understand (29, 61; 31, 25). Or again, if you asked them to whom the earth and everything in it belonged, who was the lord of the seven heavens and the throne, and who had sovereignty (*malakūt*) over everything, they would say “God”, freely admitting that He was the protector against whom no protection could be given; yet they would not be admonished and were not God-fearing, but rather bewitched (23, 84-89, here for their denial of the resurrection). In short, they were inconsistent: they recognized a single sovereign, creator God, yet somehow failed to think or behave accordingly.

2. *The Lesser Deities*

The pagans contradicted their own belief in a single, sovereign God by operating with a number of other deities in addition. The additional deities are not always called gods. Countless passages simply say that the Messenger’s opponents have ascribed partners (*ašrakū*) to God; some passages say that they “have given God peers (*ḡā’alū li-llāhi andādan*)” (14, 30; 39, 8; 41, 9; cf. 34, 33 and the Medinese 2, 22, 165). But we are left in no doubt that deities are meant. The Messenger’s opponents “have chosen for themselves gods who can create nothing but are themselves created” (25, 3); “they have taken gods apart from God” (19, 81; cf. 21, 21, 24; 36, 23; cf. 18, 15, said by the Companions of the Cave). “They have taken gods apart from God in order to be helped” (36, 74). “Do they have gods that can protect them from Us?” (21, 43). No help was forthcoming from the beings worshipped as gods by the vanished nations when God destroyed them (46, 28), and the scoffing *mušrikūn*

⁴ Noted by Izutsu, *God and Man*, p. 98f., 101, 119.

who set up another god (in the singular) in addition to God would soon learn their lesson (15, 96). “Will you testify that there are other gods along with God?”, the Messenger asks them (6, 19). If there had been gods apart from Him, the heavens and the earth would have been thrown into disorder (21, 22; cf. 17, 42), he assures us, frequently exhorting against or otherwise indicating the heinous nature of setting up a god (again in the singular) along with God (*mā’a llāhi*, 17, 22, 39; 23, 117; 25, 68; 26, 213; 28, 88; 50, 26; 51, 51) or apart from him (*min dūnihi*, 18, 14). That there is no god but God is the refrain of the book.

It is not just the Messenger who characterises the lesser beings as gods, his opponents are presented as doing so themselves as well. “What, has he made (all) the gods into one? That is indeed strange”, they say, exhorting each other to “stay constant to your gods” (38, 5f.). “Are we to abandon our gods for a mad poet?” (37, 36). “Do not abandon your gods”, they say in the story of Noah (71, 23). “Have you come to turn us away from our gods?”, ‘Ād’s people ask their warner (46, 22). “We are not going to abandon our gods merely on your word”, Hūd’s people tell theirs, explaining that maybe one of their gods has afflicted him with evil (11, 53f.). When Jesus is held up as an example to the Messenger’s contemporaries, they will turn the subject into a disputation, saying, “Are our gods better or is he?” (43, 57f.). “Is this the man who talks of your gods”, they will mockingly ask when they see him (21, 36); or they will say, “Is this the man whom God has sent as a messenger? He might have led us astray from our gods if we had not been constant to them” (25, 41f.). God reassured the Messenger that no such gods existed: “ask the messengers whom We sent before you: have we set up gods to be worshipped apart from al-Raḥmān?” (43, 45).⁵

The deities are rarely identified. Sometimes the offensive practice seems to be veneration of just one additional being: one passage quotes God as saying that one should not take two gods (*ilāhayni itnayni*), for He is just one (16, 51); another counsels the Messenger to turn away from scoffing *mušrikūn* who “set up another god along with God” (*ḡā’alū mā’a llāhi ilāhan āhara*) (15, 94-96); yet another says consigns whoever “sets up another God along with God” to hell (50, 26, cf. his *qarin* in the next verse); and still others say that one should not set up “another god along with God (*ilāhan āhara mā’a llāhi*, 17, 22, 39; 23, 117; 25, 68; 26, 213; 28, 88; 51, 51). No second deity is named, however, except in the story of Elijah (Ilyās), where he appears as Ba’l (37, 125), but this name undoubtedly comes from the Biblical tradition

⁵ This is one of several passages designed to prevent the Messenger from sliding into doubt about his message, cf. R. Paret, *Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz*, Stuttgart, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1980, p. 229, ad 10, 94.

rather than the Messenger's contemporaries.⁶ Two passages suggest that the false deities included the heavenly bodies: the queen of Sheba and her people worshipped the sun apart from God (27, 24); and "Among His signs are the night and the day and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate to the sun or the moon, but prostrate to God who created them if it is Him you want to serve" (41, 37). Numerous passages condemn lesser deities in the plural, occasionally even naming them: Noah complains to God that his people will not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yağūt, Ya'ūq and Nasr, explicitly identified as gods (71, 23); and a famous verse asks, "Have you (pagans) reflected on al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt?", implicitly identified as daughters of God (53, 19f.).⁷ (The word "goddess" does not appear in the Qur'an.) Of the handful of names we are given, most are attested in pre-Islamic inscriptions and/or theophoric names, so there is no doubt that at least some of the intermediary beings were genuine Arabian deities.⁸ But what precisely was the nature of these deities in the eyes of the Messenger's opponents?

3. *Children of God/Angels*

Surprisingly, to someone coming to the Qur'an from Ibn al-Kalbī and Ibn Ishāq, the lesser beings are indiscriminately identified as gods, offspring of God, and angels.⁹ To the pagans, the three expressions were probably synonymous: to be a son or daughter of God was simply to share in His nature (cf. further below, II). But the Messenger takes the language of procreation literally. "They say, al-Raḥmān has begotten offspring (*ittahada waladan*)" (21, 26; cf. 43, 81; 19, 88, 91f.). "They falsely credit Him with sons and daughters (*banīn wa-banāt*), having no knowledge... How can He have offspring (*walad*) when He has no consort?" (6, 100f.). "Has your lord favoured you with sons and taken females (for Himself) from among the angels?" (17, 40; similarly 16, 57, 62; 43, 16; 53, 21f.). "Ask them, does your Lord have daughters when they have sons? Or did We create the angels female while

⁶ Cf. I Kings 18, 21, and the discussion in J. Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, Berlin-Leipzig 1926, p. 101.

⁷ See further below, II.

⁸ Cf. T. Fahd, *Le panthéon de l'Arabie centrale à la veille de l'hégire*, Paris, 1968, under the names of the deities in question; Hawting, *Idolatry*, ch. 5 and the literature given there.

⁹ Cf. P.A. Eichler, *Die Dschinn, Teufel und Engel im Koran*, Leipzig, 1928, p. 97ff. Their identification as angels is briefly discussed by W.M. Watt, "The Qur'an and Belief in a 'High God'", *Proceedings of the Ninth Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants*, ed. R. Peters, Leiden, 1981, p. 332f., in response to Muslims who had questioned it (though it is well known to the exegetical tradition, too).

they were watching? What they are saying is their own slanderous invention (*ifk*). Has God begotten children? They are lying. Did He choose daughters rather than sons?" (37, 149-53; cf. also the Medinese 4, 117). "Those who do not believe in the hereafter call the angels by female names" (53, 27).

The Messenger frequently denies that God has offspring (*walad*) (6, 101; 10, 68; 17, 111; 18, 4; 19, 35; 23, 91; 43, 81; etc) and finds the idea of female angels utterly outrageous; he treats the ideas of many gods, female angels, and daughters of God as practically identical concepts. The children of God include Jesus, and on one occasion both the Christians and the Jews are accused of believing in sons of God, al-Masiḥ in the case of the Christians, 'Uzayr in the case of the Jews (9, 30). But no son of God other than these two is actually named. No daughters of God are explicitly named either, though al-Lāt, Manāt and al-'Uzzā are implicitly identified as such (53, 19-21, cf. 27).

As angels, the lesser gods/children of God occupied a slot that the Messenger himself recognized as legitimate, and the Islamicist literature often claims that it was he rather than the polytheists who classified them as angels, his purpose being to demote them to a suitably subordinate position.¹⁰ This is difficult to accept. He certainly treats them as genuine angels at times, with the qualification that the pagans have misunderstood them, but more commonly he tries to distinguish the false gods from the genuine angels (cf. below, no. 12). The claim that it must have been he who classified the pagan deities as angels seems to rest on a tacit assumption that only Biblical-type monotheists believed in angels at the time, which is not correct (cf. below, II).

It is more difficult to tell exactly how we should envisage the angelic population in question. Did the adherents of female angels operate with female angels alone or see them as part of a larger cast including males? Did they single out three female angels (al-Lāt, Manāt and al-'Uzzā) for special reverence, or were the three revered by different groups, or is the Messenger picking out those three as particularly offensive because of their pagan names? It is impossible to tell.

¹⁰ D.B. Macdonald, "Allāh", *EI¹*; C. Brockelmann, "Allāh und die Götzen, der Ursprung des islamischen Monotheismus", *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 21 (1922), p. 102, agreeing with Macdonald; A.T. Welch, "Allah and other Supernatural Beings: the Emergence of the Qur'anic Doctrine of *Tawḥīd*", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 47 (1979), p. 740f.; more cautiously also J. Chabbi, "Jinn", *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*.

4. Intercessors

The polytheists held their lesser deities to act as intercessors between God and themselves. “They worship, apart from God, that which neither harms nor benefits them, saying, those are our intercessors with God” (10, 18). “Those who take [other beings] as friends (*awliyā*) apart from God [say], We only worship them so that they may bring us close to God” (*li-yuqarribūnā ilā llāhi zulfā*, 39, 3). They worshipped them as gods as a means of getting close to God (*qurbānan*) (46, 28): in short, they saw them as mediators. Most references to this belief take the form of denials that the lesser deities have the power to do what is expected of them. “Should I adopt gods apart from Him?”, a believer from a vanished city asks, adding that “if al-Raḥmān wants to inflict some harm on me, their intercession (*ṣafāʿa*) will not be any use, nor will they be able to save me” (36, 23). “Those whom they invoke apart from Him have no ability to intercede (*lā yamliku... l-ṣafāʿi ata*)”, the Messenger declares (43, 86). “Do they take intercessors apart from God?” (39, 43). He is not denying that the angels can intercede, only that they can do so as powers in their own right. “Say, all intercession is God’s” (39, 44; cf. 78, 37). “No intercession is of any use with Him except for those to whom He has granted permission” (34, 22f.; similarly 10, 3; 19, 87). The alleged offspring of al-Raḥmān are just servants raised to high honour who act by His command and offer no intercession, except for those who have found favour (with Him) (21, 26-28). “How many angels there are in heaven whose intercession is of no use, except after God has given permission for whomever He wills and is pleased with” (53, 26). The beings on whom the infidels called had no power unless they testified to the truth (43, 86), presumably meaning acknowledged their own created status.

The intercession that the pagans seek from the lesser gods seems to be this-worldly. When the believer informs his unbelieving people that the intercession of other gods will be of no avail if God decides to inflict some harm (*durr*) on him (36, 23), one takes the harm to be earthquakes, thunderbolts, violent winds ruining gardens or causing people to drown, and other forms of adversity with which God is known to test people in this world, rather than harm on the day of judgement; for the pagans doubted or denied the resurrection, or the afterlife altogether, or some of them did, and according to one passage, it was those who did not believe in the hereafter who called the angels by female names (53, 27). “They have taken gods apart from God, so that they may be [a source of] power/glory (*ʿizz*) for them”, as we are told (19, 81), but here the reference could be to the day of judgement, for the next verse says that actually they will prove to be their adversaries. The Mes-

senger, who knows that the pagans will be resurrected, certainly stresses that the pagan gods/angels will prove useless on the day of judgement, too: “We do not see with you your intercessors of whom you claimed that they were your partners”, God will tell the polytheists (6, 94); “no intercessors will they have from among their partners” (30, 13); and when the polytheists realize that the messengers sent to them spoke the truth, they will ask “do we have any intercessors to intercede for us?” (7, 53), admitting that “we have no intercessors” (26, 100).

5. *The Creation*

Did the pagans credit the lesser deities or angels with any role other than that of intercessors? In particular, did they regard the lesser gods as partners in the creation? The answer seems to be no.

The Qur’ān often stresses that the lesser deities do not have any creative powers in a manner apt to suggest that the opponents disagreed: “O men, here is a simile, so listen to it. Those whom you invoke apart from God could never create a fly even if they all met for that purpose; and if the fly were to snatch away something, they would not be able to save it from it. Feeble are the seeker and the sought” (22, 73; cf. also 13, 16). “Show me what it is they have created in the earth, or do they have a partnership in the heavens (*am lahum širkun fī l-samawāti*)? Or have We given them a book providing them with clear evidence?” (35, 40; similarly 46, 4); in other words, if the lesser deities existed, there should be evidence for them in the natural world or in a book revealed to the pagans. “Can any of your partners create for the first time and then repeat it?” (10, 34), as they are also asked.

But it would probably be wrong to read these verses as implying that the pagans saw their gods or angels as participants in the creation. For one thing, as we have seen, if one asked them who had created the world or themselves, they would emphatically answer “God” (above, no. 1). For another thing, the question whether the deities or angels had a partnership in heaven (35, 40; 46, 4) has a sarcastic ring to it, an impression heightened by the information that the pagans regarded God as the lord of the earth and everything in it, and the lord of the seven heavens too (above, no. 1). This suggests that the Messenger is confronting his opponents with the (to him) absurd implications of their own beliefs: by worshipping these beings the pagans *implied* that the beings in question had a partnership in heaven, yet they themselves denied it. They were inconsistent, as he so often said. To the Messenger, absence of creative powers implied absence of divinity: if the alleged gods were not creators, they were created, and everything created was subservient,

like the sun and the moon that the *mušrikūn* themselves, or some of them, held God to have subjected to His will (29, 61). A god was a creator: if there had been a god along with God, each god would have gone away with that which he had created (23, 91). But the polytheists did not claim that their gods were creators: why then did they cast them as gods? “Those whom they invoke apart from God create nothing and are themselves created” (16, 20), as he said; “do they associate [with Him beings] which cannot create anything, but are created themselves?” (7, 191). Whatever was not a creator was created, meaning subservient, devoid of power, in his view. “They have adopted gods, besides Him, who cannot create anything, who are created, who have no power to harm or benefit themselves, and who have no power over death, life or the resurrection” (25, 3); or again, “call upon those whom you claim [as deities] apart from God! They do not possess as much as the weight of a mote in the heavens or on earth; they have no partnership in either of them” (34, 22). As the Messenger saw it, the lesser gods were nothing, even on the pagans’ own premises. This was the inconsistency he found so glaring that he could not understand why the pagans did not agree.

The reason why the pagans could not see the inconsistency is no doubt that from their point of view there was none. The fact that the lesser deities were not participants in the creation did not imply that they were either created or powerless. Rather, they were sons and daughters of God, by which one takes them to have meant manifestations or hypostases of the divine, like the Old Testament divinities known as sons of God, later called angels, or like Christ to the Christians (many of whom had once understood him as an angel, too).¹¹ Since both sides were happy to call the intermediary beings angels, one might wonder why it mattered so much that the pagans also called them gods (cf. below, II, for the Christian handling of this question). There answer seems to be that the Messenger saw a stark contrast between God and everything else whereas the pagans saw divinity as a spectrum. The Messenger repeatedly contrasts angels and God, to his opponents this will have been absurd: their angels were of the same nature as God, the one slid into the other; they were greater and lesser manifestations of what was ultimately the same divine being. It was this line separating God from everything else which was at stake, and it certainly was not a trivial issue.

¹¹ Cf. below II and the references given there in note 100.

6. God's Power

Just as the pagans held God to be the only creator, so they seem to have held Him alone to send down rain and provide sustenance for them. "If you ask them who sends down rain from the sky, reviving the land with it after it has been dead, they will certainly say, 'God'. Say: Praise be to God! But most of them don't understand" (29, 63). Again, their inconsistency lies in recognizing just one power, yet operating with several. "Will they then have faith in falsehood (*bāṭil*), and deny/fail to be grateful for (*yakfurūna*) God's blessing, and worship things apart from God which have no power to provide them with sustenance from heaven and earth, and can do nothing?" (16, 72f.); "Is there a creator other than God to give you sustenance from heaven and earth?", the Messenger asks, stressing that his opponents are deluded (*yu'fakūna*) (35, 3); "those that you worship apart from God cannot give you sustenance", as Abraham told his people, accusing them of inventing falsehood (*ifk*) (29, 17). Since the pagans would also affirm that the earth and everything in it belonged to God, the lord of all seven heavens and of the throne who was endowed with sovereignty (*malakūt*) over everything and the protector against whom no protection could be given (23, 84-89), it is hard not to infer that they deemed God to be omnipotent.

7. Angel Worship

The Qur'ān often speaks of the pagans as actually worshipping their angels or deities: "Will they then have faith in falsehood and worship (*ta'budūna*) things apart from God?" (16, 73; cf. also 10, 18); "you worship (*ta'budūna*) idols apart from God" (29, 17, where the speaker is Abraham). Exactly what did this worship amount to? Most obviously, did the pagans ever invoke the lesser gods, or one of them, on their own?

It seems not. Paret does admittedly translate the phrase *min dūni* on the assumption that this is what they must have done. Thus he renders the Medinese 4, 117 (*in tad'ūna min dūnihi illā inātan*) as meaning that "they pray to nothing but female beings *instead of* Him" ("Statt zu ihm, beten sie zu nichts als weiblichen Wesen"). But the previous verse says that God does not forgive the ascription of partners to Him (*an yuṣraka bihi*, 4, 116), implying that the worshippers of female beings are guilty of associating these beings with God, not of replacing Him with them. "Do not set up another deity *along with* God" (*lā taḡ'al mā'a llāhi ilāhan āḡara*), as other verses say (15, 96; 17, 22, 39; etc., cf. above, 2); "Do you testify that there are other gods *along with* God

(*ma'a llāhi*)?" (6, 19). The hoopoe found a woman ruling in Saba': she and her people were worshipping the sun apart from God (*min dūni llāhi*): once again Paret takes the verse to mean that they worshipped the sun instead of God (27, 24). Since Paret evidently would not deny that *širk* was giving God partners rather than replacing Him with others, he may be translating on the assumption that the *mušrikūn* saw Allāh as an otiose high god, *i.e.* a creator God who played no role in the cult (cf. below). But sometimes Paret himself renders *min dūni llāhi* as "apart from God" (e.g. 2, 165), and God clearly did play a role in the cult of the *mušrikūn*: "the places of prostration (*al-masāğid*) belong to God, so do not call upon anyone *together with* Him (*ma'a llāhi*)" (72, 18). "Do not prostrate to the sun or the moon, but prostrate to God who created them *if it is Him you want to serve*", as another sura counsels (*in kuntum iyyāhu ta'budūna*, 41, 37).

The idea that the pagans did not normally pray to God rests on some passages contrasting their behaviour at sea and on land. "When they ride on a ship, they call on God, in sincere devotion to Him alone, but when He delivers them safely to dry land, they ascribe partners" (29, 65). They pray to God in sincere devotion to him when "a violent wind comes and the waves reach them on all sides, and they think they are about to perish", promising that "If You (sg.) will save us from this, we will be among the thankful", only to be "insolent on earth, wrongfully" when they are saved (10, 22f.), perhaps by ascribing partners again, or perhaps just by forgetting about God in their behaviour (cf. 17, 37). It is God who delivers them from the darkness of the land and sea, when they call upon Him humbly and silently (or secretly, *hufjatan*), promising to be thankful if they are saved: yet when He saves them, they ascribe partners to Him (6, 63f.). Elsewhere we are told that the pagans will pray to God for a healthy child when its birth is approaching, promising to be grateful if they get one; yet when they do, they will ascribe partners "in that which He gave them" (7, 189f.). More generally, "when trouble touches a man, he prays to Us (*da'ānā*)", but when he is given relief, he proceeds as if nothing has happened (10, 12), probably by reverting to his partners, though again it is left unspecified. "When We remove the distress from you, some of you (*fariqun minkum*) will ascribe partners to their lord", as another passage says (16, 54).

What these passages imply is not that the Messenger's contemporaries, or some of them, normally prayed to their lesser deities rather than to God, but that they normally prayed to them as avenues to God, or to all of them together; at times of danger, however, they would address themselves to God alone, meaning directly to Him. They would forget their deities and behave

like true monotheists, as some put it.¹² “It is indeed remarkable that... the pagan Arabs used to have recourse to ‘temporary monotheism’ apparently without any reflection on the grave implication of such an act”, as Izutsu says, perfectly capturing the Messenger’s point of view.¹³ But a Christian is not being a temporary monotheist when he prays directly to God instead of to Jesus or a saint. The pagans presumably also thought of themselves as monotheists whether they prayed directly to God or not, and conversely they hardly stopped recognizing their lesser deities when they bypassed them: one could present a petition to the king through a patron or one could throw oneself at directly at his feet if one was desperate enough. In the verses on how the pagans would pray to God for a healthy child, yet ascribe partners “in that which He gave them”, they seem to credit the lesser beings with a role in their success even though they have not prayed to them, or at least they give thanks to them along with God. But only an enemy of intermediary beings could see an inconsistency here: unlike the Messenger, the pagans did not think in terms of a contrast between God and the angels/lesser deities.

In the continuation of the passage on how the pagans will pray to God for a child, yet credit the partners with a role in their success, the Messenger responds that the partners cannot create anything or help anybody, and challenges the pagans to test the power of the alleged partners by praying to them: “those whom you call upon apart from God are servants like yourself, call upon them and let them respond to you, if you speak the truth” (7, 194). “Call on those whom you claim apart from God, they have no power to remove affliction from you or to change it”, as another sura says (17, 56). At first sight this is an odd proposition: calling upon these partners is precisely what the pagans are constantly accused of doing. The Messenger must mean be that they should call on them on their own: his point is that insofar as the pagans’ prayers were successful, it was thanks to God, not to the lesser beings, and that they could easily test this proposition by praying to the lesser beings alone. Once again it is clear that they did not normally pray to them on their own. Rather, they prayed to God *and* the partners or to God *through* the partners, and occasionally directly to God, *bypassing* the partners. In short, their error was *širk*, “associationism”, not just in terms of belief, but also in terms of cultic behaviour.

¹² Watt, “Belief in a ‘High God’”, p. 39; cf. *id.*, “Qur’ān and Belief in a High God”, p. 330 (cf. *id.*, “The ‘High God’ in Pre-Islamic Mecca”, p. 502).

¹³ Izutsu, *God and Man*, p. 102.

In line with this, the pagans are guilty of assigning some of their harvest and their cattle to God *and* the partners, saying, “This is for God’ — so they assert — and this is for our associates” (6, 136; cf. 16, 56). They are not accused of setting aside such things, or making other gifts, to the lesser beings on their own. Nor are they accused of prostrating to them, devoting certain days to them, housing them in their own sanctuaries, appointing guardians to them, or making pilgrimages to them. In short, there is no reference to the practicalities of a cult of deities or angels separate from that of God.

8. *Law and Custom*

The pagans saw God, not their lesser deities or angels, as the source of their ritual law and customs. We are told that they would declare certain cattle and crops to be sacrosanct (*hiḡr*), saying that only those “whom We [*i.e.* God] wish” were allowed to eat them; they also had cattle “whose backs are forbidden”, *i.e.* on which it was not allowed to ride and/or which could not be yoked for purposes of agricultural labour, and there were cattle over which they would not mention the name of God (*lā yadkurūna sma llāhi ‘alayhi*, 6, 138). It is not clear whether they would simply omit His name, as suggested both here and in 6, 121, or whether they would replace it with another: later the Messenger prohibits meat hallowed to somebody other than God (*uḥilla li-ḡayri llāhi*), apparently with reference to the same malpractice (6, 145; again 16, 115). But if the pagans would dedicate some slaughters to a deity other than God, it is odd that they are only accused of omitting His name here: polemics are not conducive to understatement. More probably, the Messenger is sharpening the formulation the second time round. Maybe he could not see the difference between omitting God’s name and mentioning that of another deity (just as he equated not believing in God with deifying oneself, cf. 26, 23, 29; 28, 38), or maybe he meant that the pagans would sometimes mention the names of the lesser beings as well as God’s, which in his view amounted to hallowing it to “other than God”: “should I seek other than God as my lord?”, as he says in 6, 164, though his target throughout this sura is *ṣirk*, not rejection of God for another deity. At all events, it was only over some cattle that they would not mention His name: the implication is that normally they mentioned it. Even when they departed from what the Messenger took to be God’s wishes, they ascribed the rules to God Himself, falsely in the Messenger’s view (*iftirā’an ‘alayhi*) (6, 138). “Don’t say... this is lawful and this is forbidden, thereby fathering falsehoods on God (*li-taftarū ‘alā llāhi l-kaḏība*); those who ascribe false things to God will never prosper” (16, 116). “It was not God who instituted any of the *baḥīra* or *sā’iba* or

waṣīla or *ḥām*, but those who do not believe are attributing falsehoods to God (*yaftarūna ‘alā llāhi l-kadība*), as a Medinese sura says with reference to these and/or other pagan rituals (5, 103). Again, the implication is that they see their customs as God-given. They do say, on one occasion, that “If God had wanted, we would not have worshipped (*‘abadnā*) anything other than Him, we and our fathers, nor would we have forbidden anything apart from what He forbids” (*mā ḥarramnā min dūnibi min šay’in*) (16, 35), which could be taken to imply that they saw themselves as having forbidden these things on their own authority. But they appear not to have distinguished sharply between divine injunction and ancestral norms: “when they do a shameful thing (*fāḥiṣatan*), they say, This was our fathers’ way, and God has ordered us to do it (*wa-llāhu amaranā bihā*)” (7, 28), as the Messenger observes. They would credit God with things they did not know about (*a-taḡulūna ‘alā llāhi mā lā tālamūna*), as the same verse puts it, corroborating that they saw God as having ordained their ancestral ways.

In addition to invoking God’s name over sacrifices, the pagans would swear by Him, at least when the oaths were of the strongest kind. (Whether they would invoke the lesser gods or angels in their less forceful oaths we are not told: we never see them swear by Allāt, Manāt, al-‘Uzzā or any other deities in the Qur’ān, only in the tradition). “They swear by God their most earnest oaths that if a sign were sent to them, they would believe in it” (6, 109; cf. 100, 106ff., identifying them as *mušrikūn*); “they swore their strongest oaths by God that if a warner came to them they would follow his guidance better than any other nation” (35, 42, cf. 40 for their *širk*). Apparently, they were familiar with the idea that God might send them a warner and had a notion of what kind of credentials to expect from such a person.¹⁴ Again, there is more overlap between their religion and that of the Messenger than is customarily assumed. They also “swear their strongest oath by God that God will never resurrect those who die” (16, 38). In other words, it was as believers in God, not in the sons or daughters of God, that they denied the resurrection.

9. Determinism

One of the more striking characteristics of the *mušrikūn* in the Qur’ān is that they express themselves in determinist terms. They repeatedly argue that whatever they do is right, since God would not otherwise have allowed them to do it. “If God had wanted, we and our fathers would not have ascribed partners, nor would we have forbidden anything (*mā ḥarramnā min šay’in*)”,

¹⁴ See further, Crone, “Angels versus Humans”, in Townsend and Vidas, *Revelation*.

as they say (6, 148). Or again, “If God had wanted, we would not have worshipped anything other than Him, we and our fathers, nor would we have forbidden anything apart from what He forbids” (*mā ḥarramnā min dūnihi min šay’in*) (16, 35). “If al-Raḥmān had wanted, we would not have worshipped them” (43, 20). There were people, roundly denounced as unbelievers, who refused to practise charity on such determinist grounds: “shall we feed those whom, if God has wanted, He would have fed?”, they would ask (36, 47).

It is possible that the pagans meant some or all of this sarcastically, but whether they did so or not, it was a difficult argument for the Messenger to refute, since it captured his own view of God’s all-determining power. In fact, he frequently expresses himself in the same determinist vein as the pagans, especially when he is trying to make sense of the fact that he is being rejected. God has put veils over their hearts and deafness in their ears so that they do not understand, he says (6, 25; 17, 46; 18, 57; similarly 2, 7). God has put fetters around their necks right up to their chins, so that they cannot see, and covered things up for them (36, 8f.). He leads astray or guides whoever He wants (6, 39); the unbelievers will not believe unless God wants it (6, 111); and if it is hard for the Messenger to bear rejection, he should remember that “if God wanted, He would gather them to the guidance” (6, 35; cf. 13, 31). On several occasions God actually says exactly the same as the pagans themselves: “If God had wanted, they would not have ascribed partners [to Him], We did not appoint you to watch over them, nor did We make you their guardian [so stop worrying about it]” (6, 107); “If your lord had wanted, they would not have done it, so leave them and their lies (*mā yaftarūna*) alone” (6, 112). “If God had willed, they would not have done it, so leave them and their lies alone” (6, 137, with reference to infanticide). In response to their argument that they would not have ascribed partners to God or forbidden anything apart from what He forbids, the Messenger first claims that this is how their predecessors had also refused to believe and that they are following nothing but conjecture (*ẓann*) (6, 148), but in the end he agrees: “if He had wanted, He would have guided all of them” (6, 149).

10. *Allāh and al-Raḥmān*

Though the Messenger and his opponents worshipped the same God under the name of Allāh, the modern literature often says that the Messenger also knew Him by a name with which the pagans were not familiar, namely al-Raḥmān, implying that his concept of God was shaped by additional

monotheist ideas which the pagans did not share.¹⁵ But both sides call Him al-Raḥmān in the Qurʾān. There are however also passages in which the *mušrikūn* are presented as not accepting, or even knowing, Him by this name, so how is this discrepancy to be resolved?

Let us start with the verses in which the pagans speak of al-Raḥmān as their own God. “They say, al-Raḥmān has begotten children... But they [the alleged children] are just servants raised to honour” (21, 26). The reference is to children in the plural rather than a single son or sons in the dual (Christ and ʿUzayr), and so too is the response denying that the children can intercede in their own right (21, 28), so the passage must be about the *mušrikūn*. In 43, 19f. we are told that the pagans “have made the angels who are servants of al-Raḥmān females”, claiming that “if al-Raḥmān had wanted, we would not have worshipped them”. In both passages the Messenger could be using his own name for God, but if the pagans were known to be unfamiliar with the name of al-Raḥmān, this would have jarred in the ears of the audience. The pagans are presented as using the name again in a warner story in which two messengers are sent to an unidentified people: the unbelievers reject the messengers, denying that al-Raḥmān has sent down anything to them (36, 15), whereupon a lone believer, who supports the messengers, also speaks of God as al-Raḥmān (36, 23). The fact that both sides are envisaged as speaking of al-Raḥmān suggests that the name itself was not an issue.

Now let us move to the other set of verses. In 13, 30 the Messenger is told that God has sent him to recite revelation, but that they “do not believe in al-Raḥmān” (*yakfurūna bi-l-Raḥmāni*), to which he is to respond, “He is my lord, there is no God but He”. This could mean that the pagans do not believe in God (like Pharaoh in 26, 23, 29) or simply that they ascribe partners to Him, for *kufur* does not normally mean unbelief in the sense of denial of His existence: the pagans are usually unbelievers in the sense that their belief in the one God does not show in the way they speak and act (in the messenger’s opinion).¹⁶ Here too their *kufur* seems to lie in “associationism”, for the Messenger is instructed to respond by saying “He is my lord, there is no God but He”. But whether this is so or not, there is no reason to think that the issue is the name al-Raḥmān. In 21, 36 we are told that “when the

¹⁵ Cf. J. Jomier, “Le nom divin ‘al-Raḥmān’ dans le Coran”, *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, Damascus, 1957, II, p. 365ff. (the claim is rooted in the tradition, cf. p. 367); similarly Welch, “Allah and other Supernatural Beings”, p. 735.

¹⁶ In 29, 52, for example, we are told of the unbelievers that they *kafarū bi-llāhi* (29, 52), though shortly afterwards they are said to affirm that He created the heavens and the earth (29, 61).

unbelievers see you (sg.), they treat you with nothing but mockery, [saying], Is this the one who talks (*yaḏkuru*) of your gods? They do not believe when there is talk of al-Raḥman (*wa-hum bi-dikri l-Raḥmāni hum* [sic] *kāfirūna*). The repetition of the *hum* in the last line is odd, but the statement seems to mean no more than the previous passage: they do not believe in al-Raḥmān/God, either in the sense of denying his existence or in the sense of associating other gods with Him; either way, they do not believe in what the Messenger is saying about Him. In 25, 60, however, we read: “When they are told, prostrate to al-Raḥmān, they say, What is al-Raḥman? (*mā l-Raḥmān*). Shall we prostrate to that which you order us?”. This does at first sight suggest that they did not know al-Raḥmān. The response is not an explanation of al-Raḥmān’s relationship with Allāh, however, but rather praise of Him as the creator and mention of the gratitude He deserves, followed by a description of His servants (they are humble and say “peace” when addressed by the ignorant); and though the name al-Raḥmān is used once more (v. 63), God is soon called Allāh again (vv. 68, 70) without any attempt to persuade the audience that the two are identical; this is simply taken for granted. Apparently, then, the issue was not the name here either. One may compare the passage with 26, 23, where Pharaoh asks, “What is the Lord of the universe? (*mā rabbu l-‘ālamīna*)” (26, 23). The force of the question is not that he has never heard of God, but rather that he does not believe in him: he cast himself as God (26, 29). Or again, the unbelievers would say that “we do not know what the hour is”, explaining that “we are just conjecturing and are not convinced” (*in nazunnu illā ḡannan wa-mā naḥnu bi-mustayqinīna*, 45, 32): they were not saying that the concept of the hour was unfamiliar to them, but rather that they doubted its reality. When the unbelievers ask, “What is al-Raḥman?”, one takes them similarly to be voicing doubts or denials, either of al-Raḥman’s existence or of the Messenger’s understanding of Him, but in any case of something to do with God: the fact that God is here called al-Raḥmān comes across as accidental. That God and al-Raḥmān were interchangeable to both sides is also suggested by the fact that nothing is said about the latter which is not said about the former as well, whether by the Messenger or by the pagans.¹⁷ This does not completely solve the problem, for elsewhere the Messenger is instructed to say, “Call upon Allāh or call upon al-Raḥmān: by whatever name you (sg.) call, His are the beautiful names” (17, 110). This could be taken to suggest some doubt about the relationship between the two, but it is not clear whether it is the Messenger or the pagans who are in

¹⁷ Noted by Jomier, “Nom divin”, p. 370.

doubt (all six verbs in this verse are in the singular); and the statement could be read as a concession, whether to the Messenger or to the pagans.

11. *Idols*

The Qur'ān has many stories of idols, but they relate to the Biblical past, above all Abraham. The only reference to contemporary idols in a sura classified as Meccan comes in connection with the institution of the pilgrimage in 22, 30: "lawful to you are cattle, except those mentioned to you [as exceptions]; but shun the impurity of idols (*al-riḡsa min al-awṭāni*)". Here as so often, it is unclear precisely what the book has in mind, but the context suggests that what is being forbidden is a type of food, presumably meat sacrificed to idols. In the Medinese sura 5 cattle are also declared to be lawful to the believers, with a longer list of exceptions, and here the exceptions include *mā ḏubiḥa 'alā l-nuṣubi*, that which has been sacrificed on sacrificial stones (5, 3); later in the same sura, sacrificial stones (*al-anṣāb*) are mentioned along with wine, *maysir*, and divinatory arrows as "impurity of Satan's making" (*riḡsun min 'amali l-ṣayṭāni*) (5, 90). This suggests that the impurity of idols forbidden in 22, 30 is meat slaughtered on sacrificial stones.¹⁸ Sacrificial stones (*anṣāb*) were not idols, but altars, the equivalent of the Biblical *maṣṣebot*, to which they are etymologically related: things were sacrificed on them, not to them (5, 3). But the things slaughtered on them could of course be dedicated to deities other than God, or along with God, and this made them idols in the broad sense of anything constituting a rival to God. The fact that they were not images of deities or objects inhabited by them was irrelevant to the tradition, which freely conflates sacrificial stones with idols in accounts relating to Mecca.¹⁹

Given that it is only in a Medinese sura that we hear of *anṣāb*, one could also see sura 22, 30 as referring to one or more of the practices condemned in 6, 136-45. Here, as seen already, we are told that the pagans would devote part of their cattle and their harvest to God and their lesser deities, that they had cattle which they held it forbidden to use in ploughing and/or as beasts of burden, and also cattle over which they would not mention the name of God when they slaughtered them, falsely crediting these rules to God (*iftirā'an 'alayhi*, 6, 138), and that they would reserve the unborn young of some animals for the men of the community, forbidding their wives to eat of them unless they were stillborn (6, 139). To all of this the Messenger answers

¹⁸ Similarly Hawting, *Idolatry*, p. 60.

¹⁹ Cf. T. Fahd, "Nuṣub", *EP*.

that they should render to God the proper dues of the olives, pomegranates and other produce when it was harvested and that they should eat of the cattle that God had provided, without following Satan (6, 141f.). Shortly thereafter he says that there is nothing in the revelation he has received forbidding the consumption of anything apart from carrion, blood and pork, which is *riḡs* or *fisq*, and that anything hallowed to somebody other than God is also forbidden (6, 145). Elsewhere he tells a warning parable culminating in the same message: “What He has forbidden to you is carrion, blood, pork, and that which has been hallowed to something other than God”; one should not say, “this is lawful and this is forbidden”, thereby ascribing false things to God (*li-taftarū ‘alā llāhi l-kadība*) (16, 115f.). The *riḡs min al-awṭān* could refer to cattle involved in these rituals. If so, no idols in the literal sense would be involved, but the first interpretation is perhaps the more plausible.

In addition to the *nusub* the Qur’ān condemns what it calls *ṭāḡūt*, or on one occasion *al-ḡibt wa-l-ṭāḡūt*. The meaning of both words is uncertain.²⁰ In 16, 36 God says that He has sent messengers to every nation telling them to worship God and avoid *al-ṭāḡūt*. Since this is addressed to those who ascribe partners to God (*allaḏīna aṣṣarakū*, 16, 35), and since past messengers are invariably depicted as preaching against the supposed partners, one takes the *ṭāḡūt* to be the false deities here: if the word means idols, they are idols in the sense of recipients of devotion incompatible with God’s unity. Sura 39, 17 promises good news to those who avoid *al-ṭāḡūt* and do not worship it/them (*an ta’budūhā*); those who fight in the path of God are contrasted with the unbelievers “who fight in the path of *al-ṭāḡūt*”, condemned as the friends of Satan (*awliyā’ al-ṣayṭān*) (4, 76); and belief in God is contrasted with belief in *al-ṭāḡūt* again in 2, 256f., where *al-ṭāḡūt* are the friends (*awliyā’*) of the unbelievers. In these passages, too, *al-ṭāḡūt* could be the lesser deities. The remaining passages, all Medinese, are more problematic because the believers in *al-ṭāḡūt* are here recipients of scripture. The People of the Book are told, somewhat obscurely, of worship of *al-ṭāḡūt* in connection with people who were transformed into monkeys and pigs; and we are told that they, presumably the People of the Book, are insincere members of the Messenger’s community: they come to you (pl.), saying that they believe, but in fact enter in *kufṛ* (5, 59-61). Those who have received part of the book (*naṣībān min al-kitāb*) believe in *al-ḡibt* and *al-ṭāḡūt*, claiming to be better guided than the believers (4, 51); and they, or others who believe in what God has sent down to the Messenger and his predecessors, want to take their disputes to *al-ṭāḡūt* for disputation (4, 60); they are hypocrites (4, 61). Some exegetes understand

²⁰ Cf. Hawting, *Idolatry*, p. 55ff.

the *tāgūt* to which the insincere believers want to take their disputes as idols delivering oracles or guardians of sanctuaries who functioned as diviners (*kāhins*), but all one can say on the basis of the Qurʾān itself is that they sound like rival religious authorities of some kind. Of all the passages in which the word *tāgūt* occurs it can be said that if the word means idol, it is being used metaphorically.

This is the sum total of references to idols in non-Biblical contexts in the Qurʾān. One would not guess from this that the Kaʿba is supposed to have housed a deity called Hubal, that three hundred and sixty idols are supposed to have surrounded it, that every house in Mecca reputedly had its own idol, that one of the Prophet's opponents was an idol-maker, and that no Meccan would go away without stroking his idol before leaving and doing so again on his return.²¹ Even if we take the sole reference to *awṭān* in Mecca to refer to idols rather than sacrificial stones (22, 30) and for good measure understand all the *ḡibt* and *tāgūt* as idols too, there is something completely amiss. The Qurʾān never as much as hints at the existence of idols in the Abrahamic sanctuary; it never mentions Hubal; with the possible exception of 4, 60, relating to Medina, it never mentions any pagan religious personnel; it never mentions pagan shrines or other pagan objects among the Messenger's contemporaries, nor does it threatens destruction of such things or tell of their destruction after the Messenger's victory.²² What it does talk about at length, apart from the worship of the lesser gods/angels, is five or six rural practices of a fairly innocuous nature, except perhaps for the first: (1) the pagans would devote part of their cattle and harvest to God and their lesser deities, (2) they had cattle which they held it forbidden to use in ploughing and/or as beasts of burden, (3) they had cattle over which they would not mention the name of God when they slaughtered them, (4) they would reserve the unborn young of some animals for the men of the community, forbidding their wives to eat of them unless they were stillborn, (5) they would slit the ears of their cattle, and (6) they had something known as *baḥīra*, *sāʾiba* and *ḥām* which may have been identical with one or more of the above institutions (4, 119; 5, 103; 6, 121, 136-45; 16, 35, 56, 115f.). Why should the Qurʾān devote so much attention to minor malpractices regarding the use of farm animals if

²¹ Cf. T. Fahd, "Nuṣub", *EI*².

²² It may be added that archaeology, too, has "so far contributed little to our knowledge of the specific *ḡāhiliyya* shrines known to the Islamic sources, and doubts must exist as to whether image destruction at other Arabian sites and shrines known to archaeology is really associated with the advent of Islam" (G.R.D. King, "The Prophet Muḥammad and the Breaking of the Jāhiliyyah Idols", in *Studies on Arabia in Honour of Professor G. Rex Smith*, ed. J.F. Healey and V. Porter, Oxford, 2002, p. 91).

the Meccans, quite apart from not being agriculturalists at all according to the tradition,²³ were sunk in idolatry of the grossest kind? Why should so little be said about Meccan idolatry that it is debatable whether it is mentioned it at all?

It is only in the retelling of Biblical stories that idols are plentiful in the Meccan suras, above all in the story of Abraham. Abraham asks his father and his people what they are worshipping, to which they reply that they worship idols (*aṣnām*) (26, 70f.). “Do you take idols (*aṣnām*) as gods?”, Abraham asks in another passage (6, 74); “what are these images (*al-tamāṭīl*) which you are clinging to?” (21, 52). “You have taken idols (*awṭān*) apart from God, out of love between yourselves in this life” (29, 25), he declares, ordering them to serve God instead of worshipping idols (*awṭān*) apart from God and inventing falsehood (*ifk*) (29, 17; cf. 37, 85f.); and he smashes the idols and leaves, asking God to make the land to which he has emigrated safe and to keep him and his offspring free of idolatry (14, 35; 21, 57f.). When the Israelites left Egypt, “they came upon a people devoted to some idols (*aṣnām*) of theirs and said, ‘O Moses, fashion for us a god like the gods they have’” (7, 138); and the story of the golden calf is narrated at length (20, 85ff.).

There can be no doubt that these stories are told with reference to the Messenger’s own situation, but the fact that it is only in Biblical stories that physical idols are mentioned suggests that those of the Messenger’s own time were conceptual. What he is targeting is a falsehood (*ifk*), something untrue fathered by the pagans on God: he sees himself as smashing idols in the sense of eradicating wrong *beliefs*. His pagan opponents worshipped the same God as he did, but they had views incompatible with the unity of God as he saw it. Their idols have no more to do with pagan idolatry in the literal sense than they do in the writings of Luther, or for that matter modern Iran.

12. *The Messenger’s Response to the Minor Deities*

The Messenger’s response to the pagan gods/angels is extremely varied. He copes easily enough with the idea of many gods, dismissing it on the grounds that if there were more than one, they would disagree and chaos would ensue (21, 22; cf. 17, 42; 23, 91). But that still leaves him with the task of explain-

²³ For this question, see P. Crone, “How did the Quranic Pagans Make a Living?”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 68 (2005), p. 387-399; contrast the very different place described in the tradition (*id.*, “Quraysh and the Roman Army: Making Sense of the Meccan Leather Trade”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 70 (2007), p. 63-88).

ing how the alleged deities of the pagans are to be construed, and here he seems to have four different answers: they are mere human beings falsely deified, or true angels misconstrued by the pagans, or mere names without any reality, or actual demons who have misled the pagans.²⁴

That they were mere human beings, now dead, is perhaps what we are told in 16, 20f.: “Those whom they call upon apart from God do not create anything; they are created, dead, not alive, and they do not know when they will be raised up/they do not sense when they are being raised up (*mā yas'urūna ayyāna yub'atūna*)”. At first, this sounds like a reference to idols, dismissed as dead manufactured objects. The same is true in 39, 43, where we are told that the beings worshipped apart from God have “no power over anything and do not reason (*lā yamlikūna šay'an wa-lā yā'qilūna*)”. But it is bit strange to say of manufactured objects that they do not know when they will be raised up, or that they will not sense when they are being raised up, which seems to be meant literally: the false gods are being resurrected for hellfire in 21, 98f. One can take “dead, not alive, and they do not know when they will be raised up” (16, 21) as referring to the unbelievers themselves: if so, no reference to idols is intended; what is being asserted is that the unbelievers are dead in a metaphorical sense.²⁵ But it is not the most natural reading.

A better solution seems to lie in 7, 194f. Here the Messenger declares that “those whom you call upon apart from God are servants like you” and challenges his opponents to put these beings to the test by praying to them, rhetorically asking whether they have “feet to walk with, or hands to grasp with, or eyes to see with, or ears to hear with?”. Here the language is even more suggestive of idols, dismissed as manufactured objects: “They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands but do not feel, feet but do not walk; they make no sounds in their throats”, as the Psalms say of idols made of silver and gold, the work of human hands.²⁶ There can hardly be much doubt that the Messenger has the Psalms in mind, both here and in 16, 21. But just as he suddenly identifies the apparent objects as destined for resurrection in 16, 21, so he here says that the false gods are “servants like you”: clearly, it is no longer objects that he has in mind. Yet the Psalms are still lurking in the background, for they also speak of the similarity between the objects of worship and their devotees: “Those who make them are like them”, Psalms 115

²⁴ Unlike Welch, “Allah and other Supernatural Beings”, I cannot see any gradual emergence of *tawhīd* in this: all the responses are different ways of saying the same thing, namely that God is one and all other beings are His servants.

²⁵ Cf. Paret, *Kommentar*, p. 284.

²⁶ Psalms 115-118; 135, 15-18, both drawn to my attention by Joseph Witztum.

asserts; “those who make them and all those who trust them shall become like them”, as Psalms 135 puts it. But in spelling out the likeness, the Messenger replaces the objects with beings. In other words, he is using the old language of polemics against idolatry in a situation in which physical idols are no longer the issue. One could not say of the angels that they lack hands or feet or that they are dead, so perhaps the dead beings are humans: servants like you, but rotting in their graves, such as prophets for example. But it has to be said that the verses are anything but clear.

That the lesser deities are genuine angels misconstrued by the pagans is assumed in the statement, “they have made the angels, who are servants of al-Raḥmān, females” (43, 19), as also in the above injunction to the People of the Book not to take the angels and prophets as lords (3, 80). Elsewhere, we are told that the children credited by the opponents to al-Raḥmān are simply “servants raised to honour (*‘ibādun mukramūna*)” (21, 26), and here the servants are clearly angels rather than humans, for the continuation assures us that they do not speak before He does, that they act by His command, and that they offer no intercession except for those who have already found favour with Him (compare above, no. 4). The genuine angels have no desire to be deified, we are told, again in polemics against the People of the Book, for neither the Masīḥ nor “the angels who are drawn near (*al-malā’ikatu l-muqarrabūna*)” disdain being servants of God (4, 172).²⁷ On the day of judgement the angels will deny that the pagans worshipped them, saying that “Rather, they worshipped the *ǧinn*” (34, 40f.). In other words, the pagans may have *thought* they were worshipping angels, but in fact they had been worshipping demons, perhaps in the sense that the demons were impersonating the angels or perhaps in that it was the demons who caused people to worship the angels.

That the pagan gods were empty concepts is what Joseph tells his inmates in prison (disseminating Islam to his captive audience much as prisoners do today): “apart from Him you are not worshipping anything other than names that you have devised, you and your fathers, and for which God has not sent down any authority” (12, 40). “Do you dispute with me over names which you have devised, you and your fathers, and for which God has not sent down any authority (*sultān*)?” (7, 71), another sura asks. “They are nothing but names which you and your fathers have devised. God has not sent down any authority for them” (53, 23). Four verses later we are nonetheless told

²⁷ It is tempting to read *muqarrībūn*, “the angels who draw (people) near (to God)”, given that this is what the pagans took their angels to do (cf. above, no. 4). But I do not wish to propose emendations for purposes of this article and have not pursued the question.

that those who do not believe in the afterlife “call the angels by female names”. The angels are real, then; it is only as females and as object of false worship that they are lacking in reality: “they (*i.e.* the pagans) have no knowledge about it, they follow nothing but conjecture (*al-zann*)”, as the passage continues (53, 28). The fact that God has not *sent down* any authority for the (female) partners suggests that the missing authority is scriptural. This is also clear in sura 37, where the Messenger is instructed to ask his opponents whether God has daughters when they have sons, or whether they were present when He created the angels and saw Him make them female, or whether they have a clear authority (*sulṭān mubīn*) for their view: “If so, bring us your book” (37, 149-57). Of course, the pagans are just speaking a lie (*ifk*), being mendacious (*la-kādībūn*) (37, 151f.). Those whom they chose apart from God in the hope of getting close to Him are a mere lie (*ifk*), something they have made up (46, 28); and when they are dragged off to Hell, they will realise that what they called upon was nothing (40, 74).

Whether they were dead human beings or freely invented names, the pagan gods could not help anyone, not even themselves (7, 192, 197; 21, 43). Like the idols destroyed by Abraham, they were unable to do either good or harm to those who worshipped them, or even to themselves (5, 76; 10, 18; 17, 56; 25, 3; 26, 72-74), in any way at all in the heavens or on earth (34, 22; cf. 35, 13), or on the Day of judgement (26, 93; 34, 42). Praying to them was like reaching out for water without getting it (13, 14). As angels misconstrued as divine they were powerless, too, for it was only with God’s permission that angels could act as intercessors (cf. above, no. 4). In short, the false deities were useless. God would, however, punish people for worshipping such beings, for He could forgive anything partners being ascribed to him, as a Medinese sura says (4, 48, 116); and from that point of view the false deities were not just useless, but also demonic beings.

Accordingly, the Messenger often identifies the false gods as *ǧinn* in the sense of demons: “They have made the *ǧinn* partners of God, though He created them, and they falsely credit Him with sons and daughters, without knowing anything about it” (6, 100). “They have set up a genealogical relationship (*nasab*) between Him and the *ǧinn*”, *i.e.* by casting the false deities as his offspring; but the *ǧinn* know very well that they are “summoned” (*muhḍarūn*) (37, 158). It is not clear whether the *ǧinn* know themselves or the worshippers to be summoned, but the former seems more likely. Another passage says that the pagans have established gods apart from God in order to be helped, but that these beings cannot help them: they are a troop that will be summoned for them (*hum lahum ǧundun muḍarūna*) (36, 74f.). Again, the reference seems to be to the *ǧinn*. The idea may be that they will be summoned on the day of judgement to be questioned about their role in the

promotion of falsehood. The angels will certainly be asked on that day whether the pagans worshipped them. They will deny it, saying, “rather, they worshipped the *ǧinn*; most of them had faith in them” (34, 40f.). They pass the buck, so to speak, but some of the *ǧinn* would also be able to disown responsibility, for as they themselves tell us, some of them had heard the Qurʾān and realized that God has neither a wife (*sāhibā*) nor a son (*walad*), with the result that they had denounced the foolish ones among them for the lies they told on the alleged authority of God (72, 1-5). Here the *ǧinn* mislead people by prompting them to follow lies, not by actually being the partners credited to God. The same is true when the unbelievers rhetorically ask God to show them the *ǧinn* or humans who have supposedly misled them so that they can crush them underfoot (41, 29, without specification of the alleged error).

Elsewhere, the *ǧinn* are replaced by straightforward Satanic beings. A Meccan sura informs us that God will ask those condemned to Hell whether He did not enjoin upon mankind “not to worship Satan” (*an lā taʿbudū l-šayṭāna*) (36, 60); and a passage in a Medinese sura already quoted identifies the female deities as Satan: “what they call upon apart from Him is nothing but females. What they call upon is nothing but the rebel Satan (*šayṭānan marīdan*)” (4, 117; cf. above, no. 2). But again, all it may mean is that they are following Satanic misguidance rather than God in their devotion to these beings. Satan’s authority is limited to those who take him as their friend and give partners to God, as we are told elsewhere (16, 100). At all events, the Messenger frequently dwells on the disastrous effects of such misguidance. On the Day of judgement the false gods will totally fail their devotees, leaving them to Hellfire. “Where are the things that you used to invoke beside God?”, the polytheists will be asked, to reply, “they left us in the lurch” (*ḍallū annā*), whereupon they will be thrown into the fire (7, 37, cf. 6, 22-24, 94; 7, 53; 16, 27, 87; 26, 92-101; 40, 73f.; 41, 47f.; 46, 28). The lesser deities will not respond on the day of judgement (18, 52; 28, 64; 35, 14; 46, 5f.), or they will positively disown the partnership (35, 14), or the polytheists themselves will do so (30, 13). “It was not us that they worshipped”, the beings will say when they are envisaged as genuine angels misunderstood by the pagans (34, 40f.; cf. 10, 28f., 16, 86; 25, 17f.; 19, 81f.; unlike 34, 40f, these passages do not make their identification as angels explicit, but as Welch notes, the false gods are here envisaged as having real existence and being in a state of subservience to God).²⁸ Or the alleged partners will shift the blame to the pagans themselves: “We had no power over you”, the religious leaders will

²⁸ Noted by Welch, “Allah and other Supernatural Beings”, p. 737f.

protest when the pagans start quarreling among themselves about apportioning the blame (37, 30). “I had no power over you, except to call you and you responded: don’t blame me, but rather yourselves”, Satan himself will say (14, 22; cf. 15, 42; 16, 98-100; 17, 65; 34, 21). Determinism notwithstanding, the responsibility lay with the erring individuals themselves.

Overall

If we base ourselves on the evidence of the Qur’ān alone, the *mušrikūn* were monotheists who worshipped the same God as the Messenger, but who also venerated lesser divine beings indiscriminately called gods and angels, including some identifiable as Arabian deities, and perhaps also in some cases the sun and the moon. The *mušrikūn* saw the lesser divine beings as mediators between themselves and God, sometimes apparently only venerating one mediator figure, at other times several, sometimes including female ones. They would address prayers, offerings, and thanks to the mediators along with God, but they are not accused worshipping them instead of God, or even of engaging in practices often deemed perfectly compatible with monotheism when the lesser beings are called saints, such as venerating their images, establishing shrines for them, making pilgrimages to them, or deferring to the religious personnel looking after their shrines. Apart from giving Arabian names to some of these beings and denouncing them in terms derived from the Biblical polemics against idolatry, the Messenger says nothing to suggest that the *mušrikūn* were pagans. Indeed, as Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb quite correctly observed, they are accused of lighter sins against monotheism than those of which Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb deemed his own saint-addicted Muslim contemporaries in Arabia to be guilty.²⁹

II. The Context

The High God Theory

Islamicists often refer to the God of the Qur’ānic *mušrikūn* as a “high god”, often in a tone suggesting that this accounts for all the peculiarities of the

²⁹ Thus an epistle by Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Muḥammad b. Qāsim al-‘Āṣimī, *al-Durar al-saniyya fi l-aḡwiba l-naḡdiyya*, Beirut, 1982, II (*K. al-tawhīd*), p. 19ff., discussed along with other versions of the epistle in M. Cook, “An Early Text of an Epistle of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb” (in preparation). My thanks to Michael Cook for drawing it to my attention.

way in which they are described in the book. But just what is a “high god”? The term seems first to have been used in Islamicist circles by Watt, who initially identified a high god as a god superior to other deities.³⁰ This is too broad to be of use. Any deity in the pagan Near East could be described as superior to others by his devotees, even when he occupied a minor position in the preserved mythological works; the deity picked out for flattery might be said to have created the world, including the other gods, and to be the only true god or indeed the only god *tout court*, even when he was worshipped in close connection with other deities:³¹ under the stress of emotion any deity could be promoted to supreme status, as Nock said with reference to the Greeks.³² In short, whether a deity was high or low was in the eye of the beholder. Later Watt added that a high god is more remote than other gods and therefore seldom worshipped directly, a feature he related to the Qur’anic passages on “temporary monotheism” (cf. part I, no. 7); at the same time, however, he sought support for his theory in a work by Teixidor, a Semiticist who had postulated a trend towards monotheism in the Near Eastern inscriptions of the Hellenistic and Roman periods,³³ and what Teixidor saw as emerging in the Near East was not a remote high god (a term he did not use), but rather an active supreme god who controlled all other gods, or indeed reduced them to mere angels, and who was certainly worshipped directly. Watt related Teixidor’s findings to the fact that the Qur’anic pagans saw their deities as angels, but did not explain how the two seemingly incompatible conceptions were to be combined.

The standard idea of a high god is that of a distant god who is not the object of regular worship (a *deus otiosus*), a deity found to have been present in the most diverse pagan societies, even very simple ones, as seems first to have been demonstrated by the anthropologist Andrew Lang in 1898.³⁴ The distant god was often regarded as the creator, but he was “utterly transcendent, removed from the world that he originally created”, as a dictionary def-

³⁰ Watt, “The High God in Pre-Islamic Mecca”, p. 499; *id.*, “Belief in a ‘High God’”, p. 35.

³¹ M. Smith, “The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 71 (1952), p. 135-147, with ample documentation.

³² Nock cited in L. Koenen, “How Dualistic is Mani’s Dualism?”, in L. Cirillo (ed.), *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis*, Cosenza, 1990, p. 32, in connection with a similar problem in the Mani Cologne Codex.

³³ Watt, “The Qur’an and Belief in a ‘High God’”, esp. p. 327f, 332f, with reference to J. Teixidor, *The Pagan God: Popular Religion in the Greco-Roman Near East*, Princeton, 1977, p. 13ff.

³⁴ A. Lang, *The Making of Religion*, London, 1898, cf. esp. ch. 9, on “High Gods of Low Races”.

inition says.³⁵ He was all-knowing, all-powerful, and the one who introduced order into the chaos of things, but he had no priests or shrines and was not usually worshipped directly, as an anthropologist explains with reference to West African religion.³⁶ He was “elevated above man and not to be reached by man”, as Nilsson says in a classic article on the high god in Greek religion.³⁷ That the pagan Allāh was such a god was proposed already in 1887, without use of the term “high god”, by Wellhausen, who was inspired by classical rather than anthropological literature.

Wellhausen based himself primarily on historical accounts relating to the Ḡāhiliyya (above all Ibn al-Kalbī) rather than the Qur’ān. His theory was that originally every tribe in Arabia had its own deity, but that trade, pilgrimage and tribal movement gradually undermined the close relationship between people and cult, leading to religious syncretism in the sense of a fusion between the different tribal religions. As a result, a new idea of a single god above the many local deities emerged along with a new sense of a common “nationality” above the many different tribes into which people were divided. This new god above the gods was Allāh. Here Wellhausen introduced a hypothesis to which the response has been uniformly negative, and which has caused his entire historical reconstruction to be unduly ignored. Originally, he said, “Allāh, the god”, was a title like “the lord”, which could be used of every tribal deity; but eventually the name came to be reserved for the anonymous deity above them. (Wellhausen saw Allāh as “a kind of abstraction from local deities”, as Watt said.)³⁸ This new Allāh was encountered above all in inter-tribal affairs, and he was a *deus otiosus*, a god without a cult: for it was only the local gods that formed ties of solidarity with particular groups, and so it was only they who had to be cultivated for favours. No sanctuary in Arabia was named after Allāh or devoted to him in Wellhausen’s view; though he noted some possible exceptions. The new Allāh was still approached indirectly, through the local (tribal or civic) deities out of which he had grown, but the latter had none the less lost importance. This was the deity that came to be worshipped directly, as the one and only God, with the rise of Islam.³⁹

³⁵ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Chicago, c. 1987, V, s.v. “high god”.

³⁶ J. O’Connell, “The Withdrawal of the High God in West African Religion: an Essay in Interpretation”, *Man*, 62/5 (1962), p. 67-69.

³⁷ M.P. Nilsson, “The High God and the Mediator”, *Harvard Theological Review*, 56 (1963), p. 101. For the importance of the cult, see L.W. Hurtado, “What do we Mean by ‘First-Century Jewish Monotheism?’”, *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*, 32 (1993), p. 348-368.

³⁸ Watt, “Belief in a ‘High God’”, p. 35, with a list of others who have reacted adversely.

³⁹ J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, Berlin, 1961 (first publ. 1887), p. 215-24.

Brockelmann, who based himself primarily on pre-Islamic poetry, proposed a similar theory. He too saw the pagan Allāh as a *deus otiosus*. He did not accept Wellhausen's reconstruction of the development of this deity (which has not in fact found favour with anyone), but he was familiar with the anthropological literature, and on that basis he proposed that the pagan Allāh was a creator God who had always been too exalted to be approached directly, not, as Wellhausen saw it, a new deity too universal to have a house and a cult in one particular place.⁴⁰

In fact, however, it is clear that the pagan God was not a *deus otiosus*. The Qur'ān gives us to understand that the pagans would pray to God along with the lesser deities, devote portions of the harvest to Him, invoke His name over their slaughter (some exceptions apart), and swear by Him. They also fought with the Messenger over a sanctuary which both sides clearly saw as His (a subject not examined here).⁴¹ Even so, Wellhausen's hypothesis has two great merits: it anchors the emergence of the pagan God in a historical development, and it displays a strong awareness of the fact that the pagan deities were mere intermediaries. To take his theory further, however, we need to go to his source of inspiration, which he does not identify, beyond repeatedly contrasting it with ancient Israel, but which is clearly classical antiquity (which looms large in Teixidor's account as well).⁴²

What Wellhausen discerned in pre-Islamic Arabia is a variation on the famous Greek idea according to which all the known gods were expressions of one common divine essence, or, in a different formulation, all the second-order gods were manifestations of a single, often unknowable, high God.⁴³ The idea seems to have been pioneered by the early Stoics. "God is one yet has many names, being called after all the various conditions which he himself inaugurates", as a famous hymn by Cleanthes (d. 232 BC) said.⁴⁴ "God is one and the same with Reason, Fate, and Zeus; he is also called by many other names", as later Stoics put it.⁴⁵ It came to acquire great popularity.

⁴⁰ Brockelmann, "Allah und die Götzen", esp. p. 104, 119ff.

⁴¹ I hope to come back to this in a later article.

⁴² Teixidor reads his laconic Syro-Mesopotamian in the light of authors such as Plutarch and Celsus (cf. his *Pagan God*, p. 15f.).

⁴³ Both formulations are in Hurtado, "First-Century Jewish Monotheism", p. 356f. Compare Wellhausen, *Reste*, p. 219, on the Arabs preferring the generic Allāh to a collective such as *hoi theoi* or *dii*.

⁴⁴ Nilsson, "High God", p. 102; cf. also "God is one and the same with Reason, Fate, and Zeus; he is also called by many other names", the Stoics in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ed. and tr. R.D. Hicks, Cambridge (Mass.)-London, 1925, VII, p. 135, on Zeno the Stoic.

⁴⁵ In Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, VII, p. 135.

“Apollo, Helios and Dionysios are the same, and there are many who simply reduce all the gods to a single power”, as Dio Chrysostom (d. after 112 AD) declared. “It makes no difference whether we call Zeus the Most High, or Zen, or Adonai, or Sabaoth, or Amoun like the Egyptians, or Papaeus like the Scythians”, the Platonist Celsus (wr. c. 180 AD), now including non-Greek gods among the many.⁴⁶ “O Queen of heaven, whether you are Ceres... Venus,... Phoebus’s sister (Diana)... Proserpina... by whatever name, with whatever rite, in whatever image it is meet to invoke you, defend me now”, as Lucius calls out in *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius (2nd C AD).⁴⁷ The possibly North African (and possibly Christian) Neoplatonist Macrobius (d. 423 AD) goes through the Greek pantheon complete with its Egyptian additions to show that each deity was only a partial representation of one great solar god.⁴⁸

Unlike the high God of the anthropologists, the one we encounter in the Greek literary texts was the outcome of philosophical attempts to impose order on the divine world, but he too was mostly a *deus otiosus*. Though he was often identified by name, usually as Zeus or Jupiter, he was more commonly left nameless, and neither sacrifices nor prayers were or should be addressed to him, or so at least according to the philosophers.⁴⁹ At a more popular level, however, he was certainly invoked, not least by magicians; and he was also the object of a cult in late antiquity under the label of Zeus Hypsistos or simply Hypsistos, “the Most High”. But even at that level it seems usually have been through, or along with, the gods who were his manifestations or powers that he was approached, very much as Wellhausen held Allāh to have been approached through tribal gods in pre-Islamic Arabia.⁵⁰

Despite the long period over which the idea can be observed, however, there is no trend in the Graeco-Roman empire towards the emergence of the high god as a deity separate from the second-order gods in which he manifested himself, still less was he intolerant of them, except when Hypsistos is identified with the Jewish god. There can, of course, be no doubt that the widespread identification of local and foreign deities (a process formerly known as syncretism) and the increasing prominence of the One testify to a radical transformation of paganism in the Mediterranean and Near East, for

⁴⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, tr. H. Chadwick, Cambridge, 1953, V, p. 41; cf. I, p. 24.

⁴⁷ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, ed. and tr. J.A. Hanson, Cambridge (Mass.)-London, 1989, IX, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, Oxford (?), 1959, book I; cf. E.R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Graeco-Roman Period*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1953, II, p. 252.

⁴⁹ Nilsson, “High God”, p. 110f., 115.

⁵⁰ Cf. the famous Oenoanda inscription below, note 72.

the very reasons that Wellhausen imputes to Arabia: increased contact between hitherto separate and politically autonomous peoples. But to pagan monotheists, the one and the many coexisted instead of competing. The input of Biblically derived monotheism was required in order for the many to be seen as illegitimate.

Wellhausen envisaged the developments he postulated for Arabia as a parallel to those in Graeco-Roman world, not as part of them, for to him, Arabia was a world apart, closer to ancient Israel than to the Near Eastern world on its doorstep. Besides, he undoubtedly envisaged the battle against Graeco-Roman paganism as long over by the time of the rise of Islam. His preconceptions were entirely reasonable in 1887, when his *Reste* was published. Since then, however, the huge expansion of scholarship on pagans, Christians, and late antiquity in general has turned these preconceptions upside down. Whatever happened in Arabia will have been part and parcel of the developments affecting the Near East at large.

Sons/Daughters of God and Angels

One development of relevance is the identification, from Hellenistic times onwards, of the celestial beings called sons and daughters of God with angels. In the ancient Near East a “son of God” was a celestial being who formed part of the entourage of a deity: a divine courtier so to speak. We meet such divine courtiers in the Old Testament, where God presides over an assembly of them in Job 1, 6; 2, 1; 38, 7, and elsewhere, and where some of them famously disobey him by mating with the daughters of men on earth (Gen 6, 2, 4). They were not envisaged as God’s sons in the literal sense of the word (which is not to deny that other deities could be thus conceived); their sonship merely expressed that they were of the same nature as God and also subordinate to Him. Even humans (often kings) were sometimes called sons of God in the Bible, and also in South Arabia, where the expression was also used of people worshipping the deity in question: the Sabaeans were the children of the god ‘Alqama, the Qatabanians the children of ‘Amm.⁵¹

By the Hellenistic period the Jews had come to understand the Biblical sons of God as angels, as seen among other things in their translation of the expression in the Septuagint. Angels to them were not (or no longer) deities, except when they were personifications of divine qualities such as God’s

⁵¹ B. Lang, *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority: an Essay in Biblical History and Sociology*, Sheffield, Almond Press, 1983, p. 21, 58; C.J. Robin, “Les ‘filles de dieu’ de Saba’ à la Mecque: réflexions sur l’agencement des panthéons dans l’Arabie ancienne”, *Semitica*, 50 (2001), p. 123; R. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, London-New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 140.

wisdom or *logos*: Philo (d. 50) famously spoke of the *logos* as God's archangel, son of God, and second God alike.⁵² In pagan inscriptions too, according to Teixidor, the divine assemblies gave way to "holy angels" about the same time.⁵³ Teixidor sees this as revealing a trend towards monotheism, but it is not clear that pagans saw angels as more subordinated to God than the sons of God that they replaced; what the change of wording does seem to reflect a new concept of the subordinate beings as messengers.

The Jews and Christians eventually stopped expressing the relationship between God and the angels in terms of descent, but others continued to do so. Both deities and angels were known as "sons of God" in Manichaean Parthian and Sogdian;⁵⁴ other Gnostics would refer to the divine being who reveals the invisible God as His son;⁵⁵ the Zoroastrians spoke of fire as the son of Ohrmazd, and referred to both fire and the stars as His children.⁵⁶ Given that ancient Near Eastern culture lived on in Arabia without the break inflicted by Persian and Greek conquest on the rest of the Near East, Arabian pagans could well have continued to speak of subordinate deities as sons of God as well, but whether they did so is another question: the expression still has not turned up in the inscriptions, whether in South Arabia or further north.

What we do find in Arabia are "daughters of God" or more precisely "Daughters of the god ʾĪ" (*bnty 'l*). They appear in ten South Arabian dedicatory inscriptions, two dating back to perhaps 600 BC, the rest to the first or second century AD,⁵⁷ where they have been explained as girls dedicated to temple service, as a synonym for *šlmt* (female statues), as a mistranslation of a term meaning "gift to God",⁵⁸ or as the deities to whom the offerings are

⁵² Philo, *Who is the Heir of Divine Things*, p. 205; *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, II, p. 62 (second god); *On Husbandry*, p. 51 (firstborn son).

⁵³ Teixidor, *The Pagan God*, p. 14.

⁵⁴ H. Humbach, "Herrscher, Gott und Gottessohn in Iran und in angrenzenden Ländern", in D. Zeller (ed.), *Menschenwerdung Gottes-Vergöttlichung von Menschen*, Freiburg-Göttingen, 1988, p. 105f.; D. Durkin-Meisterernst, *Dictionary of Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian* (= *Dictionary of Manichaean Texts*, III, ed. N. Sims-Williams, part I), Brepols, 2004, s.v. "bgpwhr".

⁵⁵ G. Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God: some Notes on Meṭaṭron and Christ", *Harvard Theological Review*, 76 (1983), p. 275f.

⁵⁶ Yasna 1.12, 17.11, 25.7, 62 etc. (the expression is common); G. Hoffmann, *Aufzüge aus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer*, Leipzig, 1880, p. 53 (here also water); Th. Nöldeke, "Syrische Polemik gegen die persische Religion", *Festgruss an Rudolph von Roth*, Stuttgart, 1893, p. 37, citing P. Bedjan (ed.), *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, Paris-Leipzig, 1890-97, II, p. 592.

⁵⁷ Robin, "Filles de Dieu", p. 119f.

⁵⁸ A. Jamme, "Some Qatabanian Inscriptions dedicating 'Daughters of God'", *Bulletin of American Society of Oriental Research*, 138 (1955), p. 39-47; W.W. Müller, "Die angeblichen 'Töchter Gottes' im Licht einer neuen Qatabänischen Inschrift", in R. Degen, W.W. Müller,

dedicated.⁵⁹ The current view is that the *bnty*'*l* were minor deities of the same undifferentiated nature as angels and demons, very much as one would expect.⁶⁰

Daughters of God also appear in a Nabataean spell of c. 100 BC. It invokes three daughters of El, one son or daughter of Shamash, and one daughter of a daughter of El, identifying them as *šlmyt*, female statues or idols, presumably referring to the representations that the magician had made of them.⁶¹ It also gives them strange names: Tinshar, Tipshar, A'asas, Ḥargol, and Shebaṭbaṭa. Normally, neither sons nor daughters of God had names, any more than angels did. There were exceptions among the angels, of course, at least in Judaism,⁶² but the strange names that we encounter here sound as if they were made up by the magician for purposes of invocation (as is true of many angelic names in Jewish magic too).

The daughters of God are anonymous again in a Palmyrene inscription of 63 AD. It dedicates altars to Arṣu, Qismaya and the daughters of God (*bnt'l*), the good gods, for the lives of his father, children, brothers and himself: here the daughters of God are our familiar subordinate beings distinct from the named deities.⁶³ We also meet the expression as a divine name in Palmyra, in the form of "Daughter of Bel" (*brt Bl*);⁶⁴ there similarly was a goddess called Bēdukht, "Daughter of God" in Sasanian Mesopotamia.⁶⁵ In addition, Philo speaks of hypostatised wisdom (*sophia*) as a daughter of God,⁶⁶ and "daughter

and W. Röllig, *Neues Ephemeris für Semitische Epigraphik*, 2 (1974), p. 145-8; also discussed in J. Ryckmans, "Uzzā and Lāt dans les inscriptions sud-arabes: à propos de deux amulettes méconnues", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 25 (1980), p. 197.

⁵⁹ Robin, "Filles de dieu", p. 117ff, citing A.G. Lundin, "Dočeri Boga' v južnoarabskih nadpisjah i v Korane", *Vestnik Drevnej Istorii*, 132/2 (1975), p. 124-31.

⁶⁰ Robin, "Filles de dieu", p. 138; cf. also *id.*, "À propos des 'filles de dieu'", *Semitica*, 52-53 (2002-2007), p. 139-48, esp. 141 (uncomfortably suggestive of the discarded view that they were girls dedicated to temple service).

⁶¹ J. Naveh, "A Nabataean Incantation Text", *Israel Exploration Journal*, 29 (1979), p. 111-199.

⁶² The only pagan angel named by Teixidor is Malakbel, "angel of Bel" (*Pagan God*, p. 14f.), and he was actually a deity in his own right, cf. J.T. Milik in J. Dentzer-Feydy, J.-M. Dentzer and P.M. Blanc (eds.), *Hauran II*, I (Textes), Beirut, 2003, p. 269, 272f.

⁶³ Kh. As'ad and J. Teixidor, "Un culte préislamique à Palmyre d'après une inscription inédite", *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 1985, p. 286-93.

⁶⁴ J. Starcky, "Inscriptions archaïques de Palmyre", *Studi Orientalistici in onore di Giorgio Levi della Vida*, Rome, 1956, II, p. 512f.

⁶⁵ Hoffmann, *Auszüge*, p. 128ff.

⁶⁶ Philo, *De Fuga et Inventione*, p. 52. Porphyry uses the expression as a metaphor for the soul (in P. Courcelle, "Anti-Christian Arguments and Christian Platonism: from Arnobius to St. Ambrose", in A. Momigliano (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, Oxford, 1963, p. 156).

of God” was also the term used in Manichaean Sogdian for the light maiden, a divine emanation.⁶⁷ But no example of daughters of God being equated with angels seems to have come to light.

The Qurʾān does not actually have the expression “daughter of God”, but it certainly implies that the *mušrikūn* used it when it rhetorically asks them whether God should have daughters/females and they themselves sons (17, 40; 37, 149, 153; 43, 16; 52, 39), or when the Messenger accuses his opponents of giving daughters (*banāt*) to God (16, 57). It clearly stood for a subordinate being of the same essence as God, but not a nameless one. In fact, “daughter of God” seems simply to be the feminine form of *ilāb*; there was no other way of saying “goddess”. The expression certainly did not mean daughter in the literal sense, a point made several times before,⁶⁸ not least by al-Ġāhiz: God was angered when the Arabs called the angels daughters of God even though they did not mean that He had procreated them in a literal sense, he remarks.⁶⁹ He is surely right. The Messenger preferred to take the expression literally, in part presumably because the Christians understood Christ as God’s offspring in a literal sense, but no doubt also because he wished to ridicule the conception.

The Monotheist Trend

As noted already, Teixidor discerned a monotheist trend in Near Eastern paganism already in Hellenistic times, but whether he is right or not, did not involve demotion of previously autonomous deities. The sons of God and the angels who replaced them were equally subordinate and usually anonymous beings; the angels who rose to prominence never bore the names of beings previously worshipped as deities in their own right.⁷⁰ This is what changed in late antiquity.

The Greek unification of the Mediterranean and Near East was followed by that of the Romans, under whom a loose federation of city states was gradually replaced by a centralised empire. The more tightly the Roman empire was integrated, the more conscious people became of the diverse religious and cultural traditions by which they were surrounded, and the harder

⁶⁷ Humbach, “Herrscher, Gott und Gottessohn”, p. 106n.

⁶⁸ See for example Eichler, *Dschinn, Teufel und Engel*, p. 98; Wellhausen, *Reste*, p. 24. Robin finds it impossible to be sure as regards the South Arabian material (“Filles de Dieu”, p. 122f.), but at p. 138 he himself speaks of the daughters as an emanation of ʾĪl.

⁶⁹ Al-Ġāhiz, “al-Radd ‘alā l-našārā”, in *Rasā’il*, ed. ‘A.-S.M. Hārūn, Cairo, 1964-79, III, p. 333 (*lam tağ al al-malā’ika banātihī ‘alā l-wilāda wa-ttiḥād al-sāhibā*).

⁷⁰ The pagan angels Teixidor adduces are all anonymous “holy angels” or “holy brothers”, except for Malakbel, who was actually a deity (cf. above, note 62).

they tried to make sense of them in terms of a single, overarching system. Pagan, Christian and other Bible-derived forms of monotheism all flourished as a result. The pagans of the Greco-Roman empire increasingly came to see their traditional gods as angels, by which they meant manifestations of a single monotheist deity along the lines pioneered by the Stoics. “The one doctrine upon which all the world is united is that one God is king of all and father, and that there are many gods, sons of God, who rule together with God”, as the philosopher Maximus of Tyre (c. 150 AD) said: the sons of God are here all the deities worshipped at the time.⁷¹ “Born of itself, untaught, without a mother, unshakable, not contained in a name, known by many names, dwelling in fire, this is God. We, his angels, are a small part of God”, as a famous inscription from third-century Oenoanda proclaims.⁷² The speaker is Apollo, a previously autonomous deity who here identifies himself as an angel and part of God. The pagan deities Nirig, Sin, Shamash and Bel and the goddess Nanai appear together as holy angels on an Aramaic incantation bowl, probably pagan, from Iraq,⁷³ while the formerly supreme god Baalshamin appears as the angel Balsamos in the Cologne Mani Codex.⁷⁴

Like the angels of the Jews and Christians, the subordinate deities of the pagans acted as intercessors between god and man. There is an Arabian example of this in a fragmentary Sabaic inscription of uncertain provenance in which a father and son dedicate a statue to their patron deity T^oLB for helping the father with the deity ‘Aṭtar, who cured him an eye disease he had been suffering from for five years.⁷⁵ The higher deity is assumed to have received thanks in a separate dedication. Here we have a close parallel to the situation that the Messenger rails against in that we see pagans give thanks to a lesser deity along with a higher one, though only the latter has worked the cure. T^oLB, moreover, was the patron deity (*šym*) of a tribal group whereas ‘Aṭtar was worshipped by all South Arabians,⁷⁶ so that we are also close to Wellhausen’s idea of Allāh as reducing the tribal deities to mere intermediaries.

⁷¹ *Orations*, 11, 5 (tr. M.B. Trapp, Oxford, 1997, but the translation given here is Chadwick’s in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, xvii); similarly 39, 55. Cf. also R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1981, p. 88.

⁷² S. Mitchell, “Cult of Theos Hypsistos between Pagans, Jews, and Christians”, in M. Frede and P. Athanassiadi, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford, 1999, p. 86.

⁷³ J.A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, Philadelphia, 1913, no. 36.

⁷⁴ CMC 49 in I. Gardner and S.N.C. Lieu (trs), *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire*, Cambridge, 2004, p. 54.

⁷⁵ *Corpus d’Inscriptions et Antiquités Sud-Arabes* II (*Musée d’Aden*), 1 (*Inscriptions*), Louvain, 1986, p. 189-91, cited in Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, p. 140. My thanks to Michael Macdonald for help with this inscription.

⁷⁶ Cf. Robin, “Filles de dieu”, p. 128, 130.

Whether T³LB had ceased to be a deity in his own right is impossible to say, however, for he is not identified as an angel or a son of either ʿAṭṭar or Il and could well have acted as an autonomous deity as well, as he does in other inscriptions.⁷⁷ On the Greek side, Plutarch (d. after 120 AD), following Plato, distinguished between God, secondary gods, and daemons, crediting the daemons rather than the secondary gods with conveying the prayers and petitions of men.⁷⁸ In agreement with Plato, both he and Maximus of Tyre held that the one, supreme God, creator and ruler, and the source of all good, could not come into direct relation with the material and therefore evil world: “hence He needs the daemons, immortal beings dwelling between heaven and earth, mediators between human weakness and divine omnipotence”, as Maximus explained.⁷⁹ The Latin Christian Ambrosiaster (wr. c. 380) says that if one asked a pagan how he could worship a whole lot of gods, he would reply that they were like dignitaries interceding in their favour with the sovereign.⁸⁰ In polemics with Christians, Zoroastrians would similarly claim to worship one God, all the other deities being simply “the king’s great men”.⁸¹

By Ambrosiaster’s time, the pagan monotheists had long been in competition with the Christians, who relentlessly attacked them for their attachment to their deities. Since the pagans were happy to call these deities angels and both sides saw the angels as intercessors, the pagans could not (or perhaps pretended not to) understand why the Christians made such a big issue of this. “Why do we dispute about a name?”, a Neoplatonist philosopher, possibly Porphyry (d. c. 305), asked the Christians: whether one addressed divine beings as gods or angels made very little difference, for their nature was the same.⁸² “That Moses calls the angels gods you may hear from his own words”,

⁷⁷ Beeston notes the parallel (in *Corpus*, II/1, p. 190), adducing the Satanic verses, which seem often to be envisaged as the only passage in which the lesser deities appear as intercessors in the Qurʾān. But Greek gods would similarly intercede with Zeus for their protégés, as he also notes, though they were autonomous deities in their own right. For T³LB in action as a tribal deity, see for example A.F.L. Beeston, “The ‘Ta’lab Lord of the Pastures’ Texts”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 17 (1955), p. 154-6 (drawn to my attention by Michael Macdonald).

⁷⁸ Plutarch, “Isis and Osiris”, p. 26, with “On Fate”, p. 9 [*Moralia*, V, p. 387; VII, p. 343f., in the Loeb edition, tr. F.C. Babbitt, P.H. de Lacy and B. Einarson, Cambridge (Mass.)-London, 1936, 1959].

⁷⁹ Maximus, *Dissertationes* (tr. T. Taylor, 1944), XIV, p. 8.

⁸⁰ F. Cumont, “La polémique de l’Ambrosiaster contre les païens”, *Revue d’Histoire et de Littérature Religieuse*, 8 (1903), p. 426f.

⁸¹ Hoffmann, *Aufzüge*, p. 42.

⁸² Macarius Magnes (fl. 4th/5th C), *Apocriticus*, tr. T.W. Crafer, New York, 1919, IV, p. 21.

Julian the Apostate (d. 363) pointed out.⁸³ Some Christians agreed, if only up to point: sometimes the angels were called gods in the scriptures, Origen (d. c. 255) admitted, “but not in the sense that we are commanded to reverence and worship (them) instead of God”.⁸⁴ Augustine (d. 430) agreed that if the Platonists preferred to speak of gods, they were free to do so, for one should not engage with them in a controversy over words: the scripture also spoke about gods, and if the pagans saw their gods as created beings made immortal by adhesion to God rather than by themselves, then they were saying the same as the Christians.⁸⁵ But on the whole the Christians found it wiser to drive a wedge between the angels and the pagan deities of old, for however humble the old deities might have become, they stood for a religious outlook to which the Christians were opposed: a concept of the divine as a spectrum rather than a unique figure, as an impersonal being rather than a caring one intervening in history with a plan in mind, and as rationality built into the cosmos rather than a force standing above it. Most pagan deities also had the disadvantage of being local; the Christians might worship three deities in one and a host of angels, but they were the same three deities and angels everywhere, of the same Biblical roots and carrying the same cultural tradition with them. The pagan deities lacked these unifying features. The North African Christian, Lactantius (d. c. 320), was adamant that the angels had no wish to be called gods, for their one and only duty was to serve the wishes of God: “no one would say that in governing the province a governor’s staff are his equals”.⁸⁶ This was exactly the Messenger’s point of view.

The Mušrikūn

The pagan deities mentioned in the Qur’ān had all been autonomous gods, yet all appear to have been downgraded to intermediary status. Wadd, Suwā’, Yağūt, Ya’ūq and Nasr are all identified as gods, with no indication whether they were also known as angels or sons of God, but al-Lāt, Manāt and al-‘Uzzā are implicitly characterised as both daughters of God and angels: after mentioning them the Qur’ān asks the unbelievers whether they should have males and God females (53, 19-21), a question which obviously relates to sons and daughters. “They assign daughters to God, exalted is He, and that which they desire to themselves” (16, 57), as another passage says, simi-

⁸³ Julian, *Against the Galilees*, in W.C. Wright (ed. and tr.), *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, Cambridge (Mass.)-London, 1913-23, III, p. 400.

⁸⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V, p. 4.

⁸⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, tr. J. Healey, London 1945, IX, p. 21.

⁸⁶ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, tr. A. Bowen and P. Garnsey, Liverpool, 2003, II, p. 16, 5.

larly highlighting the absurdity of God having daughters when the devotees themselves want sons (likewise 17, 40; 37, 149, 153; 43, 16; 52, 39). And shortly after hearing of al-Lāt, Manāt and al-'Uzzā we are told that those who do not believe in the afterlife give the angels female names (53, 27). In short, like Apollo, Nirig, Sin, Shamash, Bel, Nanai and Baalshamin, the three Arabian goddesses have been reduced to subordinate deities. Like the monotheist pagans of the Roman empire, moreover, the *mušrikūn* would identify their lesser deities/angels as intercessors through whom one could approach God. And like his Christian predecessors, the Messenger mostly responds by driving a wedge between the angels/gods and God Himself. He does sometimes accept them as genuine angels/misunderstood by the pagans, but as has been seen, he is more given to dismissing them as false. To the Messenger, God was the sole creator and only power in the universe, and nothing could be part of Him, of His nature, or like Him in any way.

There is no reason to think that the *mušrikūn* had taken to identifying their gods as angels in response to the Messenger's preaching: they are much too assured in their reaction to him to have taken such defensive action; it is he who comes across as being in the weak position, even needing reassurance from God that no such children of al-Raḥmān existed.⁸⁷ The monotheist trend must predate him, as it does in Wellhausen too. What kind of trend was it, then: pagan, Bible-based, or some kind of mixture?

The Messenger treats his opponents as pagans, partly by casting them as idolaters of the type that Abraham had opposed and partly by listing Arabian deities by way of illustration of their lesser gods, as seen already. He also recycles familiar anti-pagan arguments in his polemics against them. The most striking example is the argument that the coexistence of many gods would lead to anarchy, an idea which seems to have been pioneered by Lactantius. According to him, those who claim that there are many gods do not consider the fact that the gods might "want different things, which leads to dispute and contest among them: hence Homer's fiction of gods at war with each other"; decisions about the world had to be made by one, or the whole would not stay together; it was with the world as with armies: "if there were not to be one and only one to whom the care or the whole could be referred, it would all break up and collapse together".⁸⁸ The idea was taken up by Eusebius (d. 340) in his praise of Constantine: "Monarchy excels all other kinds of constitution and government", he declared, "for rather do anarchy and civil war result from the alternative, a polyarchy based on equality. For which

⁸⁷ Cf. 43, 45 and other passages listed in R. Paret, *Kommentar*, p. 229, ad 10, 94.

⁸⁸ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, I, p. 3, 17-19.

reason there is One God, not two or three or even more”.⁸⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 389) also liked this idea. “The oldest doctrines regarding God are three, anarchy, polyarchy, and monarchy”, he said. “The first two have amused the children of the Greeks – let them continue! In effect, anarchy is disorder. Polyarchy is discord, and thus anarchy and thus disorder. The two lead to the same point: disorder, which leads to ruin; for disorder is the preparation for ruin”.⁹⁰ Or, as he also put it, “We are not impressed by a crowd of gods, each ruling in his own way, for to me it is all the same to be ruled by none as to be ruled by many, all at sixes and sevens. Strife means division, and division means dissolution... So I find nothing divine in the government of many”.⁹¹ At some point the argument went into the Syriac tradition, presumably before the rise of Islam (in Armenian it appears already in the sixth-century Elishē),⁹² but it is only in Moses Bar Kepha (d. 903) that I have come across it: “If there were many Gods, there would be enmity between them as among the rulers and powers of this world”, as he says, with further elaboration of the argument.⁹³ The same argument appears three times in the Qur’ān: “If there had been many gods in them [*i.e.* heaven and earth] apart from God, then both would have been corrupted. How far is God, lord of the throne, from that which they attribute to Him” (21, 22). “If there had been other gods along with him, as they say, they would have sought a way to the owner of the throne” (17, 42). “Are many discordant (*mutafarriqūn*) lords better or God the one, the all-powerful (*al-qahhār*)?” (12, 39). The lack of elaboration suggests that this was an argument that everyone had heard before.

Another argument familiar from the earlier polemic against pagans is that the false deities were demons (cf. part I, no. 11). This idea is found already in the Pentateuch and the Psalms;⁹⁴ and in the *Book of Watchers*, probably dating from the third century BC, the fallen angels, *i.e.* the sons of God who mate with the daughters of men, generate evil spirits that seduce people into

⁸⁹ Eusebius (d. 340), *Laus Constantini*, III. p. 6, tr. H.A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine. A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1976, p. 87.

⁹⁰ Gregory Nazianzen, *Discours*, ed. and tr. P. Gallay, Paris, 1978, Oration 29, 2.

⁹¹ *Poemata dogmatica*, vs 80 (PG, xxxvii, col. 414), cited in F. Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy*, Washington 1966, II, p. 689.

⁹² Elishē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, tr. R.W. Thomson, London, 1982, p. 86f (p. 33 of the original).

⁹³ Moses Bar Kepha (d. 903), *Der Hexaameronkommentar des Moses bar Kepha*, tr. and comm. L. Schlimme, Wiesbaden, 1977, ch. 3. 9-11.

⁹⁴ Deuteronomy 32, 17 (drawn to my attention by G. Hawting); Psalms 106, 37.

making sacrifices to them in the mistaken belief that they are gods.⁹⁵ It lies behind the translation of “the gods of the nations are idols” (Psalms 96, 5) as “the gods of the nations are demons”, in the Septuagint (here Psalms 95, 5); and it first appears as a Christian explanation of idolatry in Justin Martyr (d. 160s),⁹⁶ to become the standard explanation thereafter. The Christians envisaged the demons as inhabiting the physical idols worshipped by the pagans, and so they do in the Islamic tradition too, coming out in all their hideousness when the Muslims destroy idolatrous objects such as stones, trees and statues. But in the Qurʾān the polytheists seem only to worship *ḡinn* or *šayāṭīn* or Satan himself in the sense of being swayed by these powers and trusting the falsehoods they spread, so it seems to have reached it from different channels. The last argument is that the pagan deities were really long-dead human beings, if this is indeed being argued in the Qurʾān (cf. above I, no. 12). This idea goes all the way back to c. 300 BC, when Euhemerus proposed that they were simply human beings of great merit who had been deified by their grateful contemporaries. Since his thesis was meant to explain the gods worshipped by the Greeks themselves, it did not find much favour at the time, but it shot to fame when the Christians looked for ways of discrediting the pagan deities, and the Messenger seems to know it, and to direct it against the Christians themselves as well. In fact, the Christian deification of Jesus offering a perfect illustration of Euhemerus’ thesis, though it was not one that the Christians had noticed themselves. Euhemerist explanations of the pagan deities appear in the later Islamic tradition as well.⁹⁷

Though the Messenger does his best to cast his opponents as pagans, the *mušrikūn* cannot be straightforward pagan monotheists. Their God was not simply the One, the being above all other beings venerated by the Neoplatonists and other pagan monotheists on the Greek side of the border, but rather a concrete God with a record of intervention in human history under a name of His own, or rather two, Allāh and al-Raḥmān. Pagans though the *mušrikūn* seem to have been from one point of view, they come across as Bible-based monotheists from another. This does not necessarily mean that they were Jews or Christians of some kind, for we also have to factor in the possibility that they believed in *Allāh taʾālā* in the sense of *theos hypsistos*, God the Most High, identifying Him with the Biblical God. This presupposes neighbourhood with Jews, but not membership of their community. What it

⁹⁵ 1 Enoch, 19, 1 (tr. G.W.E. Nickelsburg and J.C. VanderKam, Minneapolis, 2004, p. 39).

⁹⁶ Second Apology, 5 (tr. L.W. Barnard, New York, 1997, p. 77).

⁹⁷ See the exegetes (e.g. al-Ṭabarī, *Ġāmiʾ al-bayān*; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-mantūr*), ad 71, 23, on the Noachite gods; Fahd, *Panthéon*, p. 104, on Isāf and Nāʾila.

does mean is that we must also look at the *mušrikūn* from the angle of the Biblical tradition.

Jewish Angel Worship

Angels enjoyed great prominence in post-exilic Judaism and eventually came to be venerated to such a degree that modern scholars debate how far there was an actual cult of angels among Jews on the eve of the rise of Christianity. Much of the evidence refers to a principal angel who was sometimes identified with God's word or wisdom, or as His son, or as a second God, or a lesser God (as seen above in connection with Philo),⁹⁸ and much of the research is driven by the question how far the concept of this principal angel can explain the emergence of the Gnostic demiurge on the one hand,⁹⁹ and the development of Christology, in particular the deification of Christ (who was widely regarded as an angel in early Christianity), on the other.¹⁰⁰ For this reason the centuries around the rise of Christianity have been studied with much greater intensity than those of immediate relevance to us, and all discussions of angel worship in a Christian context seems to be about Christ. Perhaps there was no angel worship unrelated to Christ among Christians in the period before the rise of Islam. At all events, as things stand, Jewish (and Jewish Christian) angel veneration seems considerably more promising than that of the Christians.

Jewish veneration of a principal angel may be relevant to the Qur'ān in that the *mušrikūn* seem sometimes to have venerated "another god along with God" (*ilāhan aḥara ma'a llāhi*, 17, 22, 39; 23, 117; 25, 68; 26, 213; 28, 88; 50, 26; 51, 51). One should not take two gods (*ilāhayni itnayni*), as another passage puts it (16, 51). This second god could be reflected in the accusation that the Jews worshipped a son of God called 'Uzayr (9, 30), which both Newby and I have related to veneration of a principal angel, the difficulties posed by the name notwithstanding. One principal angel, Metatron, was actually known as "the lesser YHWH".¹⁰¹ The accusation regarding 'Uzayr is

⁹⁸ For a helpful survey, see L.W. Hurtado, *One God, one Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, Philadelphia, T.&T. Clark Publishers, 1988, p. 41-92; briefly summarised in his *How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?*, Michigan-Cambridge (UK), 2005, p. 46ff.

⁹⁹ Cf. A.F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, Leiden, Brill, 1977.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. J. Barbel, *Christos Angelos*, Bonn 1941; C.A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christianity*, Leiden, Brill, 1998.

¹⁰¹ For all this, see P. Crone, "The Book of Watchers in the Qur'ān", in H. Ben-Shammai, S. Shaked and S. Stroumsa (eds.), *Exchange and Transmission across Cultural Boundaries: Philosophy, Mysticism and Science in the Mediterranean* (Proceedings of a Workshop in memory

made in a Medinese sura, whereas the injunctions against veneration of another god, or of two deities, appear in Meccan suras, but it would not be the first example of groups identified as *mušrikūn* in Meccan suras turning up as Jews or People of the Book in those assigned to Medina.¹⁰² Only some *mušrikūn* venerated two gods, however. Others, including those whose lesser angels or deities were female, are described as venerating a plurality of divine beings and so need to be considered separately.

In his letter to the Colossians (with a related passage in Galatians), Paul advises the Christians to resist anyone who would condemn them in matters of food, drink, festival observance, new moons and sabbaths, and also anyone “insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels”.¹⁰³ The misguided people who would advocate such practices are widely assumed to have been Jews or Judaizers within the Jesus movement. A similar cluster of misguided practices is explicitly attributed to the Jews in the Syriac version of the *Apology of Aristides*, composed around 125 AD: here the Jews are declared to “suppose in their minds that they are serving God”, whereas “in the nature of their actions their service is to angels and not to God” (which is curiously reminiscent of the Qurʾān on the *mušrikūn*), but here it is their clinging to Jewish practices which constitutes angel worship, so no actual cult of angels seems to be implied.¹⁰⁴ A different version of the same text appears in *Kérygma Petrou*, a Jewish Christian document of the late first/early second century AD quoted in Clement of Alexandria (d. 217), and here the Jews are guilty of “adoring angels and archangels, the month and the moon”, and (consequently?) of *not* observing the festivals in question when the moon is not visible.¹⁰⁵ It is hard not to suspect that all three passages are rooted in an earlier, stereotypical charge regarding angels, the moon and the calendrical calculation.¹⁰⁶

of Prof. Shlomo Pines, the Institute for Advanced Studies, Jerusalem; 28 February-2 March 2005), Jerusalem, forthcoming, and the literature given there.

¹⁰² Cf. Crone, “Angels versus Humans”, in Townsend and Vidas, *Revelation*.

¹⁰³ Colossians, 2, 16, 18, Compare Galatians, 4, 3, 9f.: “we were enslaved to the elemental spirits (*stoikheia*) of the world... how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits?... You are observing special days, and months and seasons, and years”. Both passages are discussed in L. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology*, Tübingen, 1995, p. 104ff., a study to which I am much indebted.

¹⁰⁴ J.R. Harris (tr.), *The Apology of Aristides*, Cambridge, 1891, XIV, p. 2; Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 140: their service to angels shows itself in the observance of the sabbath, new moons, the passover, the great fast, the feast, circumcision, and the purity of meat. The passage is not in the Greek version.

¹⁰⁵ Clement, *Stromateis*, vi, v, 41, 2; also reflected in Origen’s commentary on John 13, 17, cf. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 141.

¹⁰⁶ That the passage in *Kérygma Petrou* is connected with Colossians 2:6ff. and Galatians 4:3, 9 is stressed by H. Paulsen, “Das Kerygma Petrou und die urchristliche Apologetik”, *Zeitschrift*

Further evidence comes in the form of apocalypses dating from the pre-Christian period to the second century AD in which a human being responds to the appearance of an angel with gestures of worship, which the angel refuses to accept: the angel tells the human not to bow down to him or worship him, claiming that he is just a fellow-servant like him, or he shows in some other way that even supernatural beings who serve God's purposes may not be worshipped.¹⁰⁷ Stuckenbruck deems the material insufficient as evidence for an actual cult of angels, but grants that the intensity of the angel's refusal is hard to explain without positing "some form of venerative behavior" deemed incompatible with monotheism by some Jews and early Christians, though not necessarily by those who engaged in such behaviour themselves.¹⁰⁸

There are several examples of Jews invoking the angels along with God for help or protection. An inscription from Asia Minor dating from the late second or early first century BC includes the angels in an appeal to God to avenge the murder of two girls; the angels are anonymous.¹⁰⁹ In the Testament of Levi (preserved in a Christian form dating from the second century AD though its Jewish core is earlier) Levi says to the angel who has shown him heaven, "I beg you, Lord, teach me your name so that I may call upon you in the day of tribulation"; the angel responds by identifying himself as "the angel who makes intercession for the nation of Israel, that they might not be beaten", without giving his name (unless we assume it already to be common knowledge that the angel interceding for Israel was Michael).¹¹⁰ Angels also refuse to give their name in the Bible, once explaining that the name is "too wonderful" to be revealed.¹¹¹ Here it would probably be too wonderful in the sense of conferring too much power on an individual. A Palestinian rabbi active in the fourth century AD contrasts the human patron, who keeps petitioners waiting by his door for admission, with God, who can be approached directly, to ram home the message that "when distress comes upon a man, he should not cry out to either Michael or Gabriel", but rather to God Himself, suggesting that individuals did in fact call upon

für Kirchengeschichte, 88 (1977), p. 18ff., but he does not say how. Stuckenbruck curiously underplays the connection.

¹⁰⁷ Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 75ff.; cf. also L.T. Stuckenbruck, "The Angelic Refusal of Worship: the Tradition and its Function in the Apocalypse of John", *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*, 1994.

¹⁰⁸ Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 102ff.

¹⁰⁹ Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 182ff.

¹¹⁰ *Testament of Levi*, 5, p. 5f., in the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, tr. H.C. Kee in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, New York, 1983-1985, I, p. 790.

¹¹¹ Gen 32, 29 (without explanation); Judges 13, 18. I owe both references to Joseph Witztum.

these angels to help and protect them.¹¹² Calling upon Michael to intercede for the *community* rather than one's own private needs was not discouraged, at least not in later centuries: Eleazar Kallir, a rabbi who probably flourished at the end of the sixth century, but perhaps in the seventh or even as late as the tenth, probably in Palestine, composed a *piyyut* calling on twenty-one angelic princes, including Michael, to intercede for Israel; and Michael is invoked for the delivery of the community in later synagogal poetry from the Near East as well.¹¹³ But by then, of course, much had changed.

There are also several examples of the angels being invoked in expressions of thanksgiving. In the earliest examples the angels are anonymous.¹¹⁴ They are likewise anonymous in a Jewish inscription from Asia Minor dating, perhaps, from the third century AD, which dedicates "works" (perhaps donations) to *theos hypsistos* and His holy angels.¹¹⁵ In Joseph and Asenath, dating from between the first century BC and the second century AD, Asenath gives thanks to God and the angel who announces God's acceptance of her conversion, and then asks the angel, "what is your name, Lord; tell me in order that I may praise and glorify you for ever (and) ever". Here too the angel refuses: "why do you seek this, my name, Asenath?" he asks, explaining that it is written in the heavens in the book written by the finger of God, and that man is not allowed to hear or pronounce it.¹¹⁶ This is a strong wording. What the Biblical motif is being used to convey here could be disapproval of the use of angelic names in magic.

All religious communities had their magicians, but Jewish magic was a particularly prominent phenomenon in all the centuries of interest to us. It is attested in the Greek magical papyri from Egypt, dating from the second

¹¹² Y. Berakhot 9, 13a, in Schäfer, *Rivalität*, p. 70; Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 64f., with parallel texts. Stuckenbruck oddly takes the comparison to be with the Persian monarch who can only be approached through his satraps (a common image in polemics against the lesser gods as intermediaries), but the patron was a feature of everyday life in all Roman provinces, and there is no hint of anything Persian in R. Yudan's comparison, which does not even mention a king.

¹¹³ W. Lueken, *Michael*, Göttingen, 1898, p. 11f.; cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, 1971, s.v. "Kallir, Eleazar".

¹¹⁴ The earliest is the Book of Tobit, possibly predating the second century BC: Tobit blesses God, His holy name and all His holy angels when his blindness is cured thanks to medical advice by the angel Raphael; Tobit explicitly credits his recovery of sight to God Himself in the next verse ("Though He afflicted me, He has had mercy upon me"), and Raphael is not singled out for praise in the thanksgiving (Tobit, 11, 14f). The second is the Qumran document 11Q Berakhot, 4f (see Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 161ff.).

¹¹⁵ Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 185ff.

¹¹⁶ Joseph and Asenath, 15, 12, in Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, II, p. 227; Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 168-70.

century BC to the fifth century AD,¹¹⁷ in Aramaic amulets mainly from Palestine, in incantation bowls from Sasanian Iraq,¹¹⁸ in the Hekhalot literature, reflecting the period *c.* 200-800 AD,¹¹⁹ in manuals for sorcerers from late antiquity,¹²⁰ and in the Geniza.¹²¹ Several rabbinic passages prohibit the making of images of angels, the sun, moon, stars and planets; others prohibit sacrifices to the sun, moon, stars, planets, the archangel Michael or the smallest worm, sometimes adding sacrifices to the mountains, hills, rivers, and deserts,¹²² and all of this could be associated with magic too.

The association of angel worship and magic is explicit in Origen's refutation of Celsus, a pagan who wrote about 180 AD. Celsus had claimed that the Jews "worship angels and are addicted to sorcery", which Origen characterises as a misrepresentation.¹²³ In another passage, Celsus finds fault with the Jews on the grounds that "although they worship the heaven and the angels in it", they do not worship the sun, moon and stars, as they ought to do in Celsus' view.¹²⁴ Origen rejects the charge again. Maybe Celsus had been misled by the spells used in trickery and sorcery which caused phantoms to appear, but if so, he did not realize that those who did such things were acting contrary to the law: either he should not have attributed such things to the Jews at all or else he should have made it clear that he was talking about law-breakers; just as those who worship such beings because they are blinded by magic are breaking the law, so too are those who sacrifice to sun, moon, and stars.¹²⁵ One is surprised that he should mention sacrifices to the sun, moon, and stars here, since Celsus had complained of their absence, but it is clear that he freely admits the existence of wrongful practices because to him the issue is the norm. Celsus had wrongly presented worship of the heaven and the angels as normative Judaism; Origen's concern was to show that it

¹¹⁷ H.D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, Chicago-London, 1986, p. xli, xlv.

¹¹⁸ See (for example) the introduction to J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations from Late Antiquity*, Leiden, Magnes Press/Brill, 1985.

¹¹⁹ Cf. P. Schäfer, "Merkavah Mysticism and Magic", in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After*, ed. P. Schäfer and J. Dan, Tübingen, 1993; *id.*, "Jewish Magic in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages", *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 41 (1990), p. 76-79.

¹²⁰ Cf. M. Gaster (ed. and tr.), *The Sword of Moses: an Ancient Book of Magic*, London, 1896; reprinted in his *Studies and Texts*, New York, 1928, I (translation) and III (text); M.A. Morgan (tr.), *Sepher Ha-Razim: the Book of Mysteries*, Chico (CA), 1983; P. Torijano, *Solomon the Esoteric King: from King to Magus*, Leiden, 2002, p. 198ff., with further references.

¹²¹ P. Schäfer and S. Shaked (eds and trs), *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1994.

¹²² Schäfer, *Rivalität*, p. 67ff.

¹²³ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I, p. 26.

¹²⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V, p. 6.

¹²⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V, p. 8, 9.

was wrong, and maybe he mentioned the sacrifices to heavenly bodies to be on the safe side: Celsus may not have known about them, but others did, and all should know that such people were lawbreakers. Jeremiah and Paul's Epistle to the Colossians are adduced as concrete examples of how Jews guilty of worshipping angels, the sun, moon, stars or images had been punished or reprov'd for such behaviour (Paul being a man with a "meticulous education in Jewish doctrines").¹²⁶

Origen was irked by Celsus' claim because it obscured the fundamental difference between pagan and Biblical monotheism that he was trying to clarify. In the preceding passage Celsus had proposed that by angels the Christians probably meant daemons, in the sense of intermediary divine beings.¹²⁷ It was in response to this idea that Origen granted that the angels were sometimes called gods in the scripture.¹²⁸ The difference that he wishes to highlight is that where the pagans saw a continuum, the Christians drew a sharp line between God and Christ on the one hand and angels, gods, and daemons on the other: only the former were to be worshipped. Angels ascended, bringing the prayers of men to the highest regions and descended to bring some benefit from God to each individual in accordance with his merit, Origen said, but "we have to send up every petition, prayer, intercession, and thanksgiving to the supreme God through the high-priest of all angels, the living and divine Logos". One prayed to God through Christ, or simply to Christ, "the very Logos himself", but not to the angels.¹²⁹ Even if one had secret knowledge about the nature and function of the angels (as magicians claimed to have), such knowledge would "forbid us to pray to any other than the supreme God, who is sufficient for all things, through our Saviour, the Son of God". Angels were in a different category, and as for daemons, Celsus did not realize that daemons were always evil powers.¹³⁰

Stuckenbruck concludes from his examination of all the material (including the magical texts) that none of the evidence quite amounts to "cultic devotion" and stresses that the angel veneration was not conceived as a substitute for the worship of God by those who engaged in it.¹³¹ The same could be said of angel worship in the Qur'ān: the *muṣṛikūn* are monotheists who see themselves as worshipping God alone, but who see Him as having

¹²⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V, p. 8.

¹²⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V, p. 2; cf. above, notes 49-50.

¹²⁸ Cf. above, note 53.

¹²⁹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V, p. 4.

¹³⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V, p. 5.

¹³¹ See Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 200ff.

intermediaries too, on whom they call along with God, and to whom they offer shares of their harvest and cattle along with that to Him as well.

The *mušrikūn* differ from their Jewish counterparts, however, in that the names of their angels, in so far as we know them, are those of former Arabian deities, not Michael or the like, and also in that their angels, or some of them, are female. These two features distinguish the *mušrikūn* from the Christians as well, and also, as far as the second is concerned, from the Gnostics, for although the latter did operate with female emanations of God, they are not known to have incorporated Arabian deities in that role. The Manichaeans, who systematically adapted their pantheon to local religious traditions, could well have done so, just as they accommodated the Mesopotamian Baalshamin. But as things stand, the combination of Biblical God and Arabian deities/angels, sometimes female, is not only highly distinctive, it is also the *only* feature to set apart the Messenger's opponents from other believers worshipping the God of the Bible.

How is this combination to be explained? One solution would be to reject the Arabian names as polemical exaggeration designed to brand the intermediary beings as pagan abominations. But this is most implausible. Leaving aside that it would not dispose of the female nature of some of these beings, the Messenger was arguing with his opponents face to face, trying to convert them, not writing a polemical treatise in comfortable distance from his targets: everything he said had to be recognizable to them; obviously wrong claims about them would simply discredit him. He could have told them that venerating intermediary beings was *as bad as* worshipping al-Lāt, Manāt, al-'Uzzā, and other pagan deities, but this is not what he said. It is possible that he picked out the Arabian names from among many others borne by their intermediaries because of their well-known pagan origin, but he cannot have foisted them on his opponents.

A more promising line to pursue is the link between "angel worship" and magic which is so prominent in the material relating to the Jews. Magicians called upon angels because they saw them as the dominant forces behind the natural and social events by which their lives were shaped, and wished to harness these forces to their own ends by any method, foul or fair. They did not so much worship angels as manipulate them. But they certainly saw them as powers in their own right, to the point that their outlook was one of "mitigated monotheism", as Shaked observes in connection with the incantation bowls.¹³² The key way in which the magicians tried to manipulate the angels

¹³² S. Shaked, "Popular Religion in Sasanian Babylonia", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 21 (1997), p. 104.

was by calling on them, preferably by name. The magical texts abound in angelic names, some familiar and others made up to sound mysterious and impressive (the so-called *nomina barbara*). Tables were drawn up correlating the birth of angelic powers with the days of the moon, presumably with a view to determining the best days on which to invoke the powers in question,¹³³ giving us a clue to the association of angel worship and calendars. Since magicians preferred to err on the side of inclusiveness, and/or saw all known deities and angels as manifestations of a single god, the texts often call upon divine beings from religious communities other than their own, sometimes in an adapted form, to the point that it is frequently impossible to establish the confessional origin of a text. A Greek magical papyrus, probably pagan, invokes Apollo along with “the first angel of [God], great Zeus Iao” as well as “you who rule heaven’s realm, Michael” and “you, archangel Gabriel”, plus Abrasax, Adonai, and Pakerbeth.¹³⁴ Another, dating from the fourth-century, promotes Jewish archangels to divine status: it calls on “the god Michael...the god Gabriel...the god Raphael” along with the gods Iao, Abaoth, Adonai, Souriel, Abrasax, Iaiol, an Chabra(ch).¹³⁵ Elsewhere, Raphael and Michael appear together with Helios, King Semea, and “Titan, flaming messenger (*angelos*) of Zeus, divine Iao”.¹³⁶ Aphrodite figures in a spell in the Jewish magical work, *Sepher ha-Razim* partly datable to the fourth century AD, which also includes a short prayer to Helios (*i.e.* the sun) transliterated from Greek into Hebrew.¹³⁷ The Near Eastern version of Helios, *i.e.* Shamash, is popular in the magic bowls, and Aphrodite appears here as well, as does Hermes.¹³⁸ The magic bowls, mostly made by Jews, if not always for Jewish clients, also mix in Iranian figures, and sometimes Christian ones as well.¹³⁹

What we see in the magic texts is a milieu in which gods and angels blended: it is on a probably pagan magic bowl from Iraq that the formerly autonomous pagan deities Nirig, Sin, Shamash and Bel and the goddess

¹³³ Cf. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, II, p. 234f.

¹³⁴ Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 194 (*PGM*, I, p. 262-347); see also Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, II, esp. p. 191ff.

¹³⁵ Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 194f. (*PGM*, III, p. 129-61).

¹³⁶ Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 195 (*PGM*, III, p. 187-262).

¹³⁷ Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, p. 199.

¹³⁸ Shaked, “Jesus in the Magic Bowls”, p. 315 and n. 17; *id.*, “Jews, Christians and Pagans in the Aramaic Incantation Bowls of the Sasanian Period”, in A. Destro and M. Pesce (eds), *Religions and Cultures: First International Conference on the Mediterranean*, Binghamton, 2001, p. 71f. One bowl identifies Hermes and Metatron, the angelified Enoch later to be known as Idrīs (Montgomery, *Incantation Texts*, 207, cf. p. 99 (nos.?).

¹³⁹ D. Levene, *A Corpus of Magic Bowls: Incantation Texts in Jewish Aramaic from Late Antiquity*, London, Routledge, 2003, no. M163.

Nanai appear together as holy angels;¹⁴⁰ it is in a seemingly Jewish magic text from Egypt that the angels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael appear as gods. One text speaks of the same being as a spirit, an angel and a god alike.¹⁴¹ Female deities called daughters of God figure in a Nabataean spell in c. 100 BC, as we have seen; and seven “sons of God” (*bny ’lly*) who keep the universe together with seven powerful words appear in a magic bowl around 600 AD.¹⁴² In short, magic shows us a milieu in which pagan Arabian deities could have come to be accepted as angels by Jewish and other monotheists of the “mitigated” kind and in which such angels could be identified as gods and sons/daughters of God as well. The Qur’ān polemicalises against Jewish magic; it is in the context of magic that it mentions the fallen angels/sons of God of Genesis, under the Iranian names of Hārūt and Mārūt (2, 102); and the prostrations to the sun and moon that it condemns could have a background in magic too (27, 24; 41, 37).

Were the *muṣrikūn* Jews, then? The question is obviously premature. There is much more information about the polytheists in the Qur’ān which has to be taken into consideration first; and they also have to be examined in the light of what the Qur’ān says about the groups it labels Jews or Christians. It is hard to avoid the impression that both Jews and Judaising pagans are involved, but this is as far as one can go.

One point I do hope to have established in this article is that reading the Qur’ān in the light of the Qur’ān itself, without reference to the exegetical literature, makes sense; and relating the result to the earlier religious literature produced in the Near East is illuminating. It would of course have been more illuminating to relate the result to indisputably earlier literature from Arabia itself, but we do not have it. It is not always appreciated, however, that the debates in the Qur’ān are sufficiently closely related to religious developments in the regions from which we do have evidence for us to have some hope of being able to trace the threads behind its emergence. As mentioned already, it goes without saying that the Islamic tradition will eventually have to be brought to bear on the result as well; but as things stand, research on the Qur’ān has been so heavily shaped by later readers’ reactions that we should start by separating them.

¹⁴⁰ Above, note 73.

¹⁴¹ *PGM*, I, p. 54ff, in M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, New York, Harper and Row, 1978, p. 98f.

¹⁴² D. Levene, *Magic Bowls*, M163, 9.