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MORE PROPOSED EMENDATIONS TO THE TEXT OF THE KORAN

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In this article nine difficult words and phrases in the Koran which have not been satisfactorily elucidated by Muslim commentators or Orientalists are explained as copyists' errors in the Koranic text or in the sources from which parts of the Koran were drawn. Emendations of the text are proposed.

For Franz Rosenthal, the first recipient of the American Oriental Society Medal of Merit, awarded at Madison, Wisconsin, on March 22, 1994.

THOSE WHO READ THIS JOURNAL REGULARLY will be aware that for the past few years I have been conducting a survey of the Koran with the purpose of isolating copyists' errors in the text and emending them wherever possible. So far this has resulted in the publication of three articles;¹ the present article is the fourth and last in the series, since the survey is now complete. Of course, I cannot claim to have found every mistake in the Koranic text, but I do hope that I may have aroused sufficient interest in the textual criticism of the Koran so that other scholars may pursue the study further and that ultimately we may get a text that is somewhat closer to what the prophet really said.

Most of the mistakes that we find in the Koran are of the same sort that occur in other mss. The copyist or, more likely, the man who dictated to him, misread the text for one of the usual reasons: poor handwriting, damage to the papyrus or vellum, failure to grasp the meaning, or perhaps just plain carelessness. The first two mistakes we will look at, however, are of a different kind and are of particular interest, since they will give us some small insight into how the Koran was composed and copied. These two, I believe, resulted from misunderstood corrections in the text; that is, the copyist (or dictator) caught his mistake and corrected it, but a subsequent copyist misunderstood the correction and so produced a new error.

¹ "Al-Raqīm or al-Ruqūd? A note on Sūrah 18:9," *JAOS* 111 (1991): 115–17; "Fa-Ummuhu Hāwiyah: A Note on Sūrah 101:9," *JAOS* 112 (1992): 485–87; "Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran," *JAOS* 113 (1993): 562–73.

1. WA-INNA KULLAN LAMMĀ

In Surah 11:111 we read: *wa-inna kullan lammā la-yuwaffiyannahum rabbuka a^cmālahum* (see translation below). The crux here is the word *lammā*, for which we find the variants: *la-mā*, *lamman* (acc.), which is said to mean "all" (*jami^can*), or *inna* is changed into *in*-negative and *lammā* given the sense of *illā* "except."² The latter variant was facilitated by the fact that we do find *in kullun lammā* (= *in kullun illā*) elsewhere in the Koran.

R. Bell, p. 215, translates "not yet" and notes that the construction is uncertain and disputed. However, *lammā* cannot possibly mean "not yet" before an energetic expressing an emphatic future. R. Blachère, p. 450, says that *lammā* does not offer any acceptable sense. Neither scholar proposes any improvement in the text.

G. Bergsträsser, p. 14, has a long note on this problem, in which he cites the variants and proposes his own solution. He reads *in kullan lammā*, taking *kullan* as a preposed object and *lammā* as meaning *illā*. R. Paret, *Kommentar*, p. 245, cites Bergsträsser with approval but notes that his explanation goes against Ṭabari's express statement that in Arabic a verb following *illā* cannot govern the accusative in a noun preceding *illā*.

The best suggestion was made by J. Barth, p. 136, who correctly says that *lammā* cannot be construed and probably ought to be deleted. I would add that once this is done the sentence is good grammatical Arabic and fits perfectly in the context: "Surely to all your Lord will give full requital for their deeds."

² Baydāwī, 1:448–49.

Barth, however, did not go far enough, for he does not explain how the intrusive *lammā* got into the text, an essential element in emendation. The copyist's eye, after he had written *inna kullān* strayed back to v. 109, where we find *wa-innā la-muwaffūhum naṣībāhum* (indeed, we shall give them their full portion). He proceeded to write *la-muwaffūhum*, but caught his mistake after writing only *lām* and *mīm*, which he then cancelled with a vertical stroke. This stroke was read by a later copyist as *alif* after the *mīm*, thus producing the meaningless *lammā*.

2. WA-QĪLIHI: AND HIS WORDS

Surah 43:88 reads *wa-qīlihi yā rabbi inna hā²ulā²i gawmun lā yu²minūn* (And his words, O my Lord, verily these are a people that do not believe), for which we find the variants *wa-qīlahu* and *wa-qīluhu*,³ none of which can be construed. Blachère, p. 267, notes that the commentators make vain efforts to determine the case of *qīl*, and he thinks that the word is certainly displaced. This is probably not correct. Displacements of blocks of text do occur in MSS, but it is rare—if indeed it occurs at all—that a single word is removed from a position so remote that it cannot be located, and inserted in a place where the word makes no sense. I have checked several pages before and after v. 88, but cannot find any place where the word can be fitted in, however it is vocalized. We are on much firmer ground if we assume that the word has always been in its present location, and try to get at the meaning through emendation.

I believe that it should be read *wa-qablahu*, and that it was inserted by a copyist to indicate that v. 87 was displaced and that v. 88 should be put before it. Orientalists have always been willing to find displaced verses in the Koran—perhaps too many—but certainly some such errors must have occurred in a book the size of the Koran, and some were doubtless found by the copyists and/or editors.

What would a copyist do if he found he had made such a mistake? He could tear up the whole sheet and start again from scratch, or he could cross out the displaced passage and copy it again in its correct position, but both procedures would result in the loss of valuable papyrus or vellum. The sensible thing to do would be to add a note at the head of the verse to indicate its displacement. In later Arabic MSS the words *muqaddam* and *mu²akhhkar* are used for this purpose, but *wa-qablahu* is just as effective. In this case the notation crept into the text and its real purpose was forgotten.

³ Ibid., 2:244.

3. THE PROPHET SHU²AYB

The earliest version of the story of the prophet Shu²ayb is found in Surah 26:177–89, in which it is told how he was sent to the People of the Thicket (*Aṣḥāb al-aykah*), whom he urged to fear God and obey the prophet, to give honest weight and measure, and not to engage in fraud, or work corruption in the land. He was rejected by his people, who were punished by a Day of Shadow. In the later versions, the *Aṣḥāb al-aykah* are replaced by the people of Midian (Madyan); however, they are mentioned three more times in the Koran on lists of ancient peoples who disobeyed their prophets and so perished.⁴

There are two major problems in the story of Shu²ayb, first, the form of his name, and second, the identity of the *Aṣḥāb al-aykah*. The name Shu²ayb does not appear in pre-Islamic Arabic sources nor in the proto-Arabic inscriptions from North Arabia, in which thousands of personal names have been preserved.

The name has no good etymology in Arabic. It has the form of a diminutive of either *sha²b* “people, tribe,” or *shi²b* “road, ravine,” neither of which is suitable for a man's name. However it contains an ²*ayn*, which, if correct, allows us to assume a Semitic origin, but I have not been able to find any Shu²aybs in Hebrew or Aramaic.

Under these circumstances, we must assume that the text is corrupt and seek an appropriate emendation. The only place to look in hopes of finding a prophet with a Semitic name that is not Arabic, but could have been known to the Arabs, is the Old Testament, and here the search is not long or difficult. I believe that Shu²ayb is a mistake for Sha²yā (spelled with final *alif*), the Arabic form of Isaiah. The emendation is easily justifiable palaeographically since the difference between Sha²yā and Shu²ayban (in the accusative) is only a single minim; so Shu²ayb in the original source was probably in the accusative.⁵

We should ask, however, since the name Shu²ayb appears eleven times in the Koran, how the same mistake could have been repeated so often. There are two possible answers to this question; first, that the mistake occurred only once at the first recording of the name and that subsequently it was copied from, or at least checked against, its first occurrence. Second, since the name is

⁴ Surah 26 is from the second Meccan period; the later versions in 7:85–92, 11:84–94, and 29:36 are from the third. The brief mentions in 15:78, 38:13, and 50:14 are from the second Meccan period.

⁵ The name is sometimes spelled Sa²yā, which *Lisān*, 14:388, calls a *lughah fi Sha²yā*.

from a foreign source, it is more likely that the mistake was already in the pre-Koranic source from which the name was taken.

It should not surprise us that such a mistake could have occurred in a sacred text. Since there was no Jewish colony in Mecca, the source was probably Christian, or possibly the Ḥunafā², who were interested in sacred scriptures. But the Meccans could not have known the biblical languages, Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac, so must have gotten their biblical lore from other sources, such as preachers' homilies, or by word of mouth from their co-religionists, or from brief written passages that were passed from hand to hand. Under such circumstances mistakes were inevitable.

The next step is to turn to the book of Isaiah to see if we can find any feature common to both the text of Isaiah and that of the Koran which will corroborate our claim that Shu^cayb and Isaiah are the same. In Isa. 21:13–17 we find the following:

The oracle concerning Arabia.
In the thickets of Arabia you will lodge,
O caravans of Dedanites.
To the thirsty bring water,
meet the fugitives with bread,
O inhabitants of the land of Tema.
For they have fled from the swords,
from the drawn sword,
from the bent bow,
and from the press of battle.

For thus the Lord said to me, "Within a year, according to the years of a hireling, all the glory of Kedar will come to an end; and the remainder of the archers of the mighty men of the sons of Kedar will be few; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has spoken" (Oxford translation).

I believe that the Aṣḥāb al-aykah are the Dedanite merchants who were driven into the thickets of Arabia by an incursion of the sons of Kedar, who are to be punished for their sins. Isaiah addresses the Dedanites in the second person, but the Kedarites are referred to only in the third; thus the oracle was directed to the former. That there is some confusion between the two versions over who the real sinners were is not serious enough to invalidate this piece of evidence, which, taken together with the emendation, is sufficient not only to identify the Aṣḥāb al-aykah, but also to confirm that Shu^cayb and Isaiah are the same.

4. WA-TRUKI L-BAHRA RAHWAN:
AND LEAVE THE SEA GAPING WIDE

In Surah 44:23 God orders Moses to lead the Children of Israel through the Red Sea in the following words: *fa-*

ʿasri bi-ʿibādī laylan innakum muttabaʿūn 23, *wa-truki l-baḥra rahwan innahum jundun mughraḡūn* 24 (Make my servants travel by night, indeed you will be pursued; and leave the sea gaping wide, indeed they are an army that will be drowned).

The crux lies in the words *utruki l-baḥra rahwan*. The exegetes assume that God spoke these words to Moses after the Israelites had crossed over, although the first clause, *ʿasri bi-ʿibādī*, could have been spoken only before they started out. It is explained that Moses was about to strike the sea with his staff to cause it to close up again because he feared Pharaoh's army would catch up with them, but God forbade him to do so and then destroyed the army himself. Some commentators take *rahwan* to mean "way, route, hard ground," or that the phrase means simply "leave it the way you found it."⁶ Others say that *rahwan* means "open, with a wide gap" (*maftūḥan dhā fajwatin wāsiʿatin*),⁷ and it is this interpretation that has influenced the translators. Paret, *Koran*, p. 413, "und lass das Meer gespalten"; Bell, p. 499, "and leave the sea gaping wide." Blachère, p. 170, however, translates "traverse la mer béante," and notes that *utruki l-baḥra rahwan* made no sense to the commentators, and that *rahwan* has only the meaning "marcher doucement." See however, Lane, p. 1174.

The necessary emendation here is obvious. One should read *wa-nzili l-baḥra rahwan*, which means "and descend into the sea at an easy pace." There is no longer any need to shift the scene from before to after the crossing since *inzil* fits well with the first imperative, *ʿasri*, and *rahwan* now has its most commonly accepted meaning. Confusion of isolated *lām* and *kāf* is common in Arabic manuscripts, and the verb *nazala* is frequently found with an acc. dir. obj. of the place in which one is descending; a good example is *nazalū l-sāḥila*, "they descended on the seacoast."⁸

5. QASWARAH: LION

Surah 74:49–51 describes with some exasperation the rejection by the Meccans of Muḥammad's message. *Fa-mā lahum ʿani l-tadhkirati muʿriḡūna* 49, *ka-annahum humurun mustanfiraḥ* 50, *farrat min qaswarah* 51 (Why do they turn away from the reminder as if they were frightened asses fleeing from a *qaswarah*?).

The exegetes are not of one mind on the meaning of *qaswarah*. They knew that the wild ass, or onager, was a formidable beast, so *qaswarah* had to be something

⁶ Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 25:72–73.

⁷ Bayḏāwī, 2:246.

⁸ Balādhurī, 4.1:532 ult.

even more formidable. Ṭabarī, *Jāmi*^c, 29:106, notes that some commentators say that it means “archers, hunters,” others “lion,” which is the most common translation, or a “band of men, voices of men,” or “noise (*rikz*) made by men.” Some hold that *qaswarah* is Abyssinian for “lion.”

The lexicographers do not help. They note, in addition to the above, that *qaswarah* can also mean “the middle of the night,” and is the name of a plant that causes camels feeding on it to grow fat and yield much milk.⁹

In view of the uncertainty as to the meaning of *qaswarah* despite the limited possibilities, it is best to conclude that the word is somehow wrong. I believe that *qaswarah* derives from the Syriac *pantōrā* “panther,” which goes back ultimately to the Greek πάνθηρ.¹⁰ The Greek π was transcribed into Syriac with the ambivalent letter *p/f*; this in turn was transliterated into Arabic with the ambivalent letter *f/q*, which closely resembles Syriac *p*, and which of course was left without dots. The only real mistake in the Koranic *rasm* is a minim error which occurred when a copyist wrote a *sīn* instead of *-nt-*.

Panther is really a better comparison in this passage than lion, since it is most unlikely that Arabs ever had the opportunity to see a lion chasing an onager; however, the cheetah, under the name *fahd*, which also means “leopard” and “panther,” was well-known to the Arabs as a hunting animal. The caliph Yazīd b. Mu^cāwiyah is said to have been the first to carry cheetahs on horseback.¹¹

Readers will have noticed that *fantūrah* does not make a perfect rhyme in this passage, which presents a problem, but one for which we can suggest a reasonable solution. The Koranic form ultimately derives from a *written* source that was neither pointed nor vocalized, so the reader who first attempted to pronounce the unfamiliar word changed the vowel *ū* to the consonant *w*, just as he read *q* for *f*. If *pantūrah* had been borrowed orally, it would probably have been pronounced *ban-tūrah*, since *p* in foreign words borrowed into Arabic becomes *b*.

6. DHŪ L-KIFL

The name of the prophet or holy man Dhū l-Kifl appears twice in the Koran. In 21:85–86 we read: *wa-Ismā^cīla wa-Idrīsa wa-Dhā l-Kiflī kullun mina l-ṣābirīna* 85, *wa-adkhalnāhum fī raḥmatinā innahum mina l-ṣāliḥīna* 86 (And Ismā^cīl and Idrīs and Dhū l-Kifl, all were of those who were patient, and we caused them to enter

into our mercy; indeed, they are of the pious); and in 38:48: *wa-dhkur Ismā^cīla wa-l-Yasa^ca wa-Dhā l-Kiflī wa-kullun mina l-akhyārī* (And remember Ismā^cīl and Elisha and Dhū l-Kifl, they are all of the best).

The exegetes do not know what to make of Dhū l-Kifl, and most of the attempts to elucidate the name depend on the etymology of the word *kifl*, which can mean both “pledge, guarantee” and “double.” For example, one interpretation, according to which Dhū l-Kifl supported (*takaffala*) certain prophets who were being persecuted by a wicked king, is traced by A. Geiger to the story of Obadiah (I Kings 18:4–13), who hid prophets who were being massacred by Jezebel, but it is clear that this cannot be the origin of the name itself. In another account (II Kings 2:8f.), Elijah “doubles” his cloak and strikes the waters of the Jordan with it; the waters part and he and Elisha pass over. Later Elisha receives a “double” portion of the spirit of Elijah.¹² These interpretations arose much later than the Koranic text itself, and while their provenance may have been accurately detected, it is most doubtful that the Meccans in Muḥammad’s time could have known anything definite about Elijah, Elisha, Obadiah, and Jezebel, who becomes a king (Ahab?)!

I believe that Dhū l-Kifl is a copyist’s mistake for Dhū l-Tifl, “He of the Child,” and that it, like the story of Shu^cayb and the Aṣḥāb al-aykah, goes back ultimately to the book of Isaiah. In Isa. 9:6 we find:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”;

and further in 11:6:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

Admittedly there is less corroborative evidence for this interpretation than we saw in the case of Shu^cayb = Isaiah, but since we know now that the source of Shu^cayb and the Aṣḥāb al-aykah is the book of Isaiah, it is reasonable to assume that other Koranic allusions could go back to the same source. The verses cited were regarded by Christians as foretelling the coming of Christ, so they would be the parts of Isaiah most likely to be circulated widely among Christians. Confusion of *ṭ* and *k* is a common mistake in Arabic manuscripts.

⁹ al-Zabīdī, *Tāj*, 13:411ff.

¹⁰ Brockelmann, 580b.

¹¹ Damīrī, 2:175.

¹² See the article by I. Goldziher, *EI*¹, 2:962.

The use of the particle *dhū* is a bit puzzling, but since the child is mentioned in the book of Isaiah, the phrase *Dhū l-Ṭifl* probably refers to Isaiah himself. He was, of course, a prophet and so deserves to be associated with *Ismāʿīl*, *Idrīs*, and *Elisha*.

7. *YUBAṢṢARŪNAHUM*: THEY WILL BE MADE TO SEE THEM

In Surah 70:10–14, the Koran describes the desperate situation of those sinners who are about to be punished on Judgment Day: *wa-lā yasʿalu ḥamīmun ḥamīman* 10, *yubaṣṣarūnahum yawaddu l-mujrimu law yaftadī min ʿadhābi yawmaʿidhin bi-banihi* 11, *wa-ṣāḥibatīhi wa-akhīhi* 12, *wa-faṣīlatīhi llatī tuʿwihi* 13, *wa-man fī l-arḍi jamīʿan thumma yunjihi* 14 (And friends will not ask friends; they will be made to see them; the sinner would like to ransom himself from the punishment of that day with his children, his wife, and his brother, and his kinfolks who give him refuge, and everyone on earth; then [he thinks] this would save him).

The crux in this passage is the word *yubaṣṣarūnahum*, which makes little sense in the context.

Blachère, p. 94, translates “en vue de qui il sera mis,” but notes that he translates by intuition, and that the commentators can find no clear sense in this expression. Bell, p. 605: “they will gaze at each other,” or, “being made to see each other clearly.” Paret, *Koran*, p. 482, “Sie haben die Möglichkeit der Menschen (mit denen sie seinerzeit zusammengelebt haben?) zu sehen,” and notes that the meaning of the expression is not certain.

The difficulties of the passage are reflected in the translations, two of which are obviously wrong. Blachère uses the sg. pronoun “il,” though both the verb and its object are plural; and Bell translates *-hum* as a reciprocal, although the suffixed pronouns do not have this function.¹³

Among the commentators, Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 29:47, choosing from among several interpretations, prefers: “No friend asks a friend about his situation, but they see them and know them, then they flee from one another.” Baydāwī, 2:356, explains *yubaṣṣarūnahum* as a new sentence (*istiʿnāf*) or *ḥāl*, that makes clear that what prevents them from asking is their preoccupation (with their own plight).

Since *lā yasʿalu* requires a second object, the best emendation here is to read *yaṣṣurūnahum*, without altering the *rasm*, and translating: “Friends will not ask friends to help them.” Since they are so desperate to ransom themselves that they are willing to sacrifice their own families and, indeed, the whole world, they would

not consider asking help from mere friends. The word *ḥamīm* may be used as a plural, justifying the pl. verb (Lane, p. 637). When *an* is omitted, the following verb is in the indicative: see another Koranic example in 39:64: *a-fa-ghayra llāhi taʿmurūnnī aʿbudu* (Do you command me to worship other than God?). This construction is found after verbs of command, including *qāla*, refusing, forbidding, knowing, and in oaths and asseverations.¹⁴ Since asking is a mild form of command and also involves an utterance, it seems reasonable to admit this construction here, although I have not found another example with *saʿala*. Less acceptable would be *nuṣūrahum*, though it gives the required sense, and *bi-nuṣūrihim*, which is not as appropriate; both involve changes in the *rasm*, which should be avoided wherever possible.

8. *SŪRAH*

The word *sūrah* occurs nine times in the Koran in the singular¹⁵ and once in the plural *suwar*.¹⁶ In seven of these occurrences the word is accompanied by some form of the verb *nazala*, in the three others by the imperative *ʿātū* “produce,” where the prophet challenges the pagans to produce a *sūrah* like it. The word always refers to a portion of the divine revelation, though not as yet a specific portion. The problem with *sūrah* is not its meaning but its derivation, and on this point there is considerable difference of opinion among the Muslim exegetes and Orientalists alike.

The Orientalists agree that the word must be a foreign borrowing, but they have not successfully identified the original. A commonly accepted origin is Mishnaic Hebrew *šūrāh* “row, rank, file,” which was first proposed by J. Buxtorf, and accepted by Nöldeke in the first edition of *GdQ*. He reverts to this explanation in his *Neue Beiträge*, p. 26, but qualifies it with “vermutlich.” Schwally (*GdQ*, 1:31) notes that *šūrāh* means a “row” (of persons or objects) in Mishnaic Hebrew, but that its use for “line” (in books and letters) is found only in later Hebrew. Jeffery, *Foreign Vocab.*, 180–82, adds that *šūrāh* seems not to be used in connection with scripture. He gives extensive references, and himself prefers the Syriac *sūrtā* “writing,” which, he says, “occurs in a sense very like our English lines.” None of the origins

¹⁴ According to Rabin, 185f., the construction without *an* was current in the Hijaz; see also Wright, 2:27 and note; Lane 104; Reckendorf, 384.

¹⁵ In 2:23, 9:64, 86, 124, 127; 10:38; 24:1, and 47:20 *bis*.

¹⁶ In 11:13.

¹³ Reckendorf, 286 *ult*.

proposed by Orientalists is a good equivalent of a divine revelation.

The exegetes are equally at a loss. They etymologize the word, trying to derive it from either *swr* or *s^r*. The word *sūrah* may mean “eminence of nobility, exalted state, rank,” as well as “row of bricks or stones in a wall” (Lane, p. 1465). If one reads *su^rrah* with *hamzah*, the meaning is “remnant of food or drink left in a vessel,” or “remnant of youthful vigor” (Lane, p. 1282). Ṭabarī, *Jāmi^c*, 1:35, lists both possibilities but does not commit himself to either. Both are unacceptable. One cannot believe that the Koran would employ a word meaning “dregs and orts,” or “row of bricks” as a metaphor for a divine revelation. These are very poor metaphors, much inferior to the generally high level of rhetoric that we find throughout the Koran.

In emending the text, the main consideration is to find a word that is fitting and appropriate for a revelation sent down by God from on high. I believe we can find it in the Hebrew *b^eśōrāh*, which means “tidings, good tidings, news.” The mistake is another instance of a minim error, in which the copyist wrote three minims instead of four. As in the case of *Shu^cayb* and *qaswarah*, the error did not originate in the Koranic tradition, but was already present in the source from which *sūrah* was taken. The borrowing must have been fairly old, since the word had already acquired a broken plural.

9. AL-ŠĀBI²ŪNA: THE SABIANS

One of the most intriguing textual problems of the Koran is the identity of the Sabians, a religion or sect that is ranked along with Muslims, Christians, and Jews as believers who will be given their just reward in heaven. They receive this promise in Surah 2:62, and it is partially confirmed in 5:69. In Surah 22:17 added to the list are the Magians (Zoroastrians) and the Polytheists, and God promises only to decide which of them was in the right on judgment day. Despite the illustrious company they keep, the Sabians were unknown to the earliest generation of Arab commentators, who had not the faintest notion of who they were.

Their confusion is amply demonstrated by the great variety of explanations of the term they offer. The Sabians are described as: a people with no religion; neither Jews nor Christians; something between the Magians and the Jews, whose sacrifices cannot be eaten nor their women married (i.e., by Muslims); a group, neither Jews, Magians, nor Christians, living in the *sawād* (of Iraq); or living in the Jazīrat Mawṣil, having no works, book, or prophet, and saying only *lā ilāha illā llāh*; worshippers of angels who pray the five

prayers to the *qiblah* and recite the psalms; one of the peoples of the book.¹⁷

To these the dictionaries add: they falsely claim that they follow the religion of Noah; they are one of the *ahl al-kitāb*, whose *qiblah* is to the north at midday; a group resembling the Christians, whose *qiblah* is to the south; they are named after Šābi² b. Lāmak, the brother of Noah; they are worshippers of the stars.¹⁸

Since the *rasm šbwn/šbyn* admits of reading the masc. pl. act. part. with either *hamzah* or *yā²*, later readers disagree on this point. Of the seven canonical readers, only Nāfi^c reads *yā²*; all the others prefer *hamzah*.¹⁹ The finite verb *šaba²a* does not occur in the Koran. The best attested meanings for it are “to grow out” (used of a hoof or nail) and “to rise, appear” (used of the moon and stars). Other definitions are “to go forth against someone with enmity, or unexpectedly,” “to come upon suddenly,” and “to put one’s hand, or head, into food.”²⁰ None of these fits into the context of the Koran.

The verb *šabā*, however, does occur once in the Koran with the meaning “lust after” (12:33), and the noun *šabi* “child” occurs twice, in 19:12, 29. The participle is scarcely suitable for a sect of believers who will get their reward in heaven.

Faced with this difficult word, the exegetes attempted to redefine it, as was their custom. So it was said to mean “change from one religion to another,” and it is claimed that the polytheists called Muḥammad and his followers “Šābi²ūn” because they had left their old religion for Islam. Despite the preference of the readers for *hamzah*, the verb *šabā* plays a large role in the exegesis of *šābi²ūna*, and necessarily so, since the Hijazi dialect of Arabic had lost its *hamzahs*; thus the word was surely pronounced by the earliest readers as *šābi-yūna*. It comes into the discussion on the basis of its meanings “long for” (*ḥanna*) and “incline” (*māla*), i.e., long for or incline toward a different religion. The lexicographers point out that the plural is sometimes *šubāt*, as if formed from *šbw*, like *qādī*, *quḍāt*.

The only occurrence of Šābiyūna in poetry that I have found occurs in one of five verses ascribed to a certain Surāqah b. ^cAwf b. al-Aḥwaṣ,²¹ whom I have not found mentioned elsewhere. The verses were not picked up by the exegetes or lexicographers for use as

¹⁷ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi^c*, 1:253.

¹⁸ al-Zabīdī, *Tāj*, 1:307; Lane, 1640; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, 1:107f.

¹⁹ Dānī, 74.

²⁰ Lane, 1640.

²¹ al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 17:59; noted by Jeffery, 191, n. 2.

a *shāhid*. In the fourth verse Surāqah levels a reproach at the famous poet Labīd b. Rabi^cah:

*wa-ji²ta bi-dīni l-Ṣābiyīna tashūbuhū bi-alwāhi Najdin
bu^cda ^cahdika min ^cahdi*

And you brought back the religion of the Sabians to mingle it with the stones of Najd; away with this imposition of yours!

The verse, even if genuine, tells us nothing about the meaning of the word or the identity of the sect, but only that Surāqah disapproved of Islam, which he confused with Sabianism.

There are two major events in the early history of Islam that were taken as a kind of historical matrix into which the lexicographical treatment of *ṣaba²a* was inserted. They are the conversion of ^cUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb to Islam and the raid led by Khālīd b. al-Walīd against the Banū Jadhīmah. In both of these there are difficulties that warn against taking them at face value.

The future caliph ^cUmar, on becoming a Muslim, informed Jamīl b. Ma^cmar al-Jumahī, who immediately went to Quraysh in their assembly at the Ka^cbah, crying out: *Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb qad ṣaba²a*. ^cUmar, who had followed him, indignantly denied this, saying: *kadhabbita lākinnī aslamtu* (You lie! I have become a Muslim).²² If *ṣaba²a* meant “change one’s religion,” ^cUmar could not have denied it, since that is precisely what he had done. It is clear that *ṣaba²a* here—if the account is authentic and most likely it is not—must mean “convert to some specific religion” (other than Islam).

In another version of ^cUmar’s conversion, better known than the one referred to above, he is said to have gone through the streets girt with his sword. A certain Nu^caym b. ^cAbdallāh asked him where he was going and he replied, “I am seeking Muḥammad, that Ṣābi² (here follows a stream of invective) to kill him.” Nu^caym warns him off and tells him to worry about his own sister and brother-in-law, who have become Muslims and followed the religion of Muḥammad (*qad aslamā wa-tāba^cā Muḥammadan ^calā dīnihi*). ^cUmar goes to them and is so impressed by the reading of the Koran that he converts.²³

The same story is told by Ibn Sa^cd, 3.1:191, but here ^cUmar does not refer to Muḥammad as a Ṣābi² but rather rebukes the man who warns him off, saying, *mā arāka illā qad ṣabawta wa-tarakta dīnaka*. The man

replies that your brother-in-law and sister *qad ṣabawā wa-tarakā dīnaka*. Here *tarakta* (*tarakā*) *dīnaka* is virtually a gloss on *ṣabawta* (*ṣabawā*), which probably would not have been intelligible without it. It seems clear that *aslama* is the older version, which was displaced in order to provide a *shāhid* for *ṣabā*.

There is, furthermore, an anachronism in the use of Ṣābiyūn in the Koran and ^cUmar’s conversion, since he is said to have converted while the prophet was still in Mecca, but Ṣābiyūn occurs only in Medinese Surahs.

In the year 8 of the Hijrah Muḥammad sent Khālīd b. al-Walīd against the Arabs of the lower Tihāmah to summon them to Islam but not to fight them. Khālīd exceeded his instructions. He persuaded the Banū Jadhīmah to disarm and surrender, and then, after binding them, killed a number of the men in cold blood. To Ibn Ishāq’s account of this affair Ibn Hishām adds a note: *lammā atāhum Khālīdun qālū ṣaba²nā ṣaba²nā* (we have changed our religion); with no further explanation.²⁴ In Ṭabarī’s account, which duplicates much of the material found in Ibn Ishāq, the statement by Ibn Hishām does not appear.²⁵

Khālīd’s action is explained in a hadith, in which it is stated that the Banū Jadhīmah said *ṣaba²nā* because they did not know how to say *aslamnā* (*lam yuḥsinū an yaqūlū aslamnā*).²⁶ This is hardly credible, since they could have been taught to say *aslamnā*, or they could have said *āmannā*, which verb is more common in the Koran than *aslama*.

This story becomes even less credible when one compares it to another episode in Khālīd’s career, the execution of members of the Banū Tamīm, among them the famous poet Mālik b. Nuwayrah, in the year 11. The event turned on a confusion of dialect words, *adfa²a* (to make warm) and *adfā* (to kill). Khālīd’s excuse was that he told his troops to warm the prisoners—it was a cold night—but they misunderstood and killed them.²⁷ The prophet is also said to have made the same mistake and paid the bloodwit for the prisoner wrongly killed.²⁸

Both *ṣaba²a* and *ṣabā*, and derived forms, occur a number of times in hadith but the passages seem to be contrived to provide examples of the words. One example should suffice. In a lengthy hadith, which contains sev-

²⁴ Ibid., 835.

²⁵ Ṭabarī, *Ta²rikh*, 1:1649ff.

²⁶ Ibn Ḥajar, 9:119.

²⁷ The account in Ṭabarī, *Ta²rikh*, 1:1925, is somewhat garbled but the gist of it is clear.

²⁸ Lane, 895.

²² Ibn Hishām, 229.

²³ Ibid., 226.

eral episodes, there is an account of an expedition of the prophet during which the men complained of thirst. The prophet sent out ʿAlī and some unnamed man in search of water. They meet a woman on a camel carrying two water bags, and invite her to come to the prophet. She asks: *alladhī yuqālu lahu l-ṣābiʿ?* They reply: *huwa lladhī taʿnīna* (he is the one you mean). The woman goes with them and a miracle ensues. Her water bags remain full no matter how much water is drained from them. She and her people convert to Islam.²⁹ The commentators do not know which expedition is referred to. Mentioned are the return from Khaybar, the return from Ḥudaybiyah, the way to Mecca, the way to Tabūk, and Muṭtah, even though the prophet did not participate in the last-named raid.

Western scholarship has not come to any definite conclusion as to who the Sabians were.³⁰ For a summary of Orientalists' opinions on this point, see Jeffery, pp. 191–92.

My own view is that the word *Ṣābiʿūna/Ṣābiʿīna* (rasm: *ṣbwn/ṣbyn*, with no diacritics or vowels), is a copyist's error for *mnwn/mnyn*, which means Manichaeans. The Arabs used three terms for Manichaeans, *Mānī*, *Manānī*, and *Manawī*,³¹ and the emended rasm could easily accommodate the first two of these. Emending *ṣ* to *m* is no problem; both consist of loops, and examples of this mistake are found in later MSS.³²

²⁹ Ibn Ḥajar, 1:464ff.

³⁰ This statement may soon have to be modified. F. C. de Blois in an article, "Ṣābiʿ," *ET*², 8:672, notes that he has argued in a still unpublished study that the Sabians were Manichaeans. Since I have not seen his study, I cannot comment on it but it is possible that de Blois and I have reached the same conclusion by different routes.

³¹ Ṭabarī, *Taʿrīkh, Glossarium*, CDXCV.

³² A good example is found in Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, tr. F. Rosenthal (Princeton, 1967), 1:5, n. 3: *ṣuḥbatihī/maḥabbatihī*.

No further emendation is required in the case of *Mānī*, and for *Manānī* we need only add one *minim*.

A good case can be made for the Manichaeans; among the major religions they ranked probably second behind Christianity, since by the time of Islam they had spread across North Africa, into southern Europe, and to the eastern borders of Iran. They had a sacred scripture, most of it written by Mani himself, so they qualify as a people of the book. The influence of Persia is well attested in sixth-century Arabia, especially in the Yemen, but also in Medina. The tribe of Quraysh was to some extent under Manichaean influence.³³ In Manichaeism, ritual prayer, alms-giving, and fasting were very important; they are all pillars of Islam, so the pagan Arabs may have called the Muslims Manichaeans simply because they could not tell the difference between the two religions.

* * *

It is a curious irony of Koranic scholarship that the exaggerated confidence reposed by Orientalists in the correctness of the Uthmanic text has played a role, however small, in the diminution of the prophet's reputation in the West. Non-Muslim Koranic scholars agree that Muḥammad, in one way or another, composed the Koran, so they tend to lay all the problems of the text at his doorstep, usually without considering that mistakes in the tradition of the text as well as in the sources from which parts of the Koran were drawn might be at fault. Perhaps one may hope that this and the preceding articles will go some way toward setting the record straight.

³³ Ibn Qutaybah, 621: *wa-kānati l-zandaqatu fī Quraysh; akhadhūhā mina l-Ḥirah*.

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