

20: THE BACKGROUND TO ISLAM

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Muhammad, the prophet of Islam (d. 632 CE), who was born around the time of Justinian's death in 565,¹ is associated with changes that heralded the arrival of a new world unimaginable when Justinian was on the throne, and which we associate with the rise of Islam itself during the seventh century. Some of these changes, of course, must be attributed to distinctive features of Muhammad's teachings, which, in turn, were shaped in part by his own unique character and life experiences (and, believing Muslims would insist, by the revelations God vouchsafed to him). Yet in a number of ways, it makes sense to try to see the rise of Islam in the context of social and intellectual developments in the late antique world.² For no matter how original or unheralded Muhammad's ideas and message may have been, his own outlook and understanding were inevitably shaped in part by the historical situation in which he lived. Likewise, the reception of Muhammad's message by those around him would have been shaped by the concepts they had been exposed to in their lives. In both cases, this historical context derived from the institutions and ideas that prevailed in the immediately preceding generation – the Age of Justinian.

PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION

Attaining a clear historical view of the beginnings of Islam in historical perspective, however, has never been easy. Indeed, it is fair to say that despite the many "historical" works written about Islam's beginnings, we still do not have a very good idea of what the movement begun by Muhammad was all about, and how it fit into the historical context of the late antique Near Eastern world.

There are many reasons for this.³ A major impediment to achieving a truly historical view of Islam's origins arises from the nature of our sources of information about it. Contemporary documentation in the strict sense is almost totally lacking for the crucial earliest chapters of Islam's origins in the early seventh century; instead, we have a large body of literary sources that describe what happened. These were compiled by members of the Muslim community during the several centuries after the life of the prophet and provide us with sometimes voluminous detail. But, being retrospective rather than contemporary, these literary sources pose for the would-be historian challenging problems because of the likelihood that they contain, alongside possibly accurate memories of what happened, idealizations and distortions of all kinds. One notes, for example, that this literary tradition expresses a "salvation-historical" presentation of events (that is, a narration that depicts events as evidence of God's unfolding plan for the establishment of His favored community). This includes the portrayal of the early Islamic community's expansion as a series of military conquests of quasi-miraculous character; the presentation of Islam's rise as a sudden and decisive break with the past, and a concomitant tendency to minimize continuities between Muhammad's preaching and community and the ideas and practices current in other traditions, particularly in contemporary Christianity and Judaism; and, as part of this, a probable tendency to overemphasize the pagan environment in which the prophet acted. Modern historians have for the most part been forced to rely on these traditional Islamic narratives to construct their picture of "what actually happened," because there is little else to work with. But this picture has not always been historically plausible, and it has proven difficult for historians to identify and free themselves completely from the sources' salvation-historical perspective.⁴ Many of their presentations of early Islam thus are, as one of the most acute critics of the traditional sources has aptly put it, little more than "Muslim chronicles in modern languages and graced with modern titles."⁵

Another difficulty derives from the fact that Western writings about Islam began not with scholarship, but with long centuries of anti-Islamic polemic.⁶ Even though Western writers began during the Enlightenment to attempt to understand Islam and its beginnings in a more detached and scholarly manner, the heritage of polemical attitudes toward Islam was not easy to shake off. One example might be seen in the tendency, once widespread among Western scholars, to view passages in the Qur'an in a purely reductionist manner – that is, as being little more than distorted "borrowings" from the Old and New

Testaments – without paying adequate attention to broader issues such as the purpose and overall character of the Qur’anic passages. This kind of polemical or quasi-polemical attitude survives vestigially even today, although it tends now to be found more in Western popular opinions about Islam than in scholarship.

Other obstacles to a proper historical understanding of Islam’s beginnings are rooted in salient attitudes found in recent and contemporary Western culture – in particular, deeply ingrained nationalist and secularizing ideologies. The profound influence of now-discredited theories of “race” on virtually all aspects of Western culture between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries produced, as one of its manifestations, a tendency to view all of history in nationalist terms (a tendency still widely current in many areas, both within the West and outside it).⁷ This nationalist optic distorted many studies of early Islam, notably by leading historians to attribute events to the actions of presumed national groups that did not yet exist as collectivities, at least not in the political and communal sense in which these groups are currently conceived (such as “Arabs”). In the process, the importance of other historical causes, such as religious motivations, was often obscured or completely overlooked.⁸

At the same time, there has been a curious tendency in much Western scholarship on the rise of Islam to minimize, or even to discount altogether, the religious character of these events. Some scholars were devout adherents of another religion (usually Christianity or Judaism) and so, consciously or unconsciously, felt impelled to undercut Muhammad’s claim to prophecy. Other scholars were so thoroughly secularist in outlook that they felt uncomfortable with any form of religious explanation. Whatever the reason, one sees a widespread tendency in Western scholarship to explain Islam’s appearance primarily as a result of “real,” that is, social and economic factors, and a reluctance to entertain the possibility that religious belief may have motivated many people to act (sometimes even against their own economic or social interests) and so contributed fundamentally to driving the complex movement we call the rise of Islam.

Any effort to see Islam’s appearance in its proper historical context must, then, overcome these numerous challenges: the dearth of true documentation, the salvation-historical and other idealizing features of the Islamic sources on which we must rely, the lingering heritage of anti-Islamic polemic, and the straitjacket of rigidly nationalist or secularist perceptions.

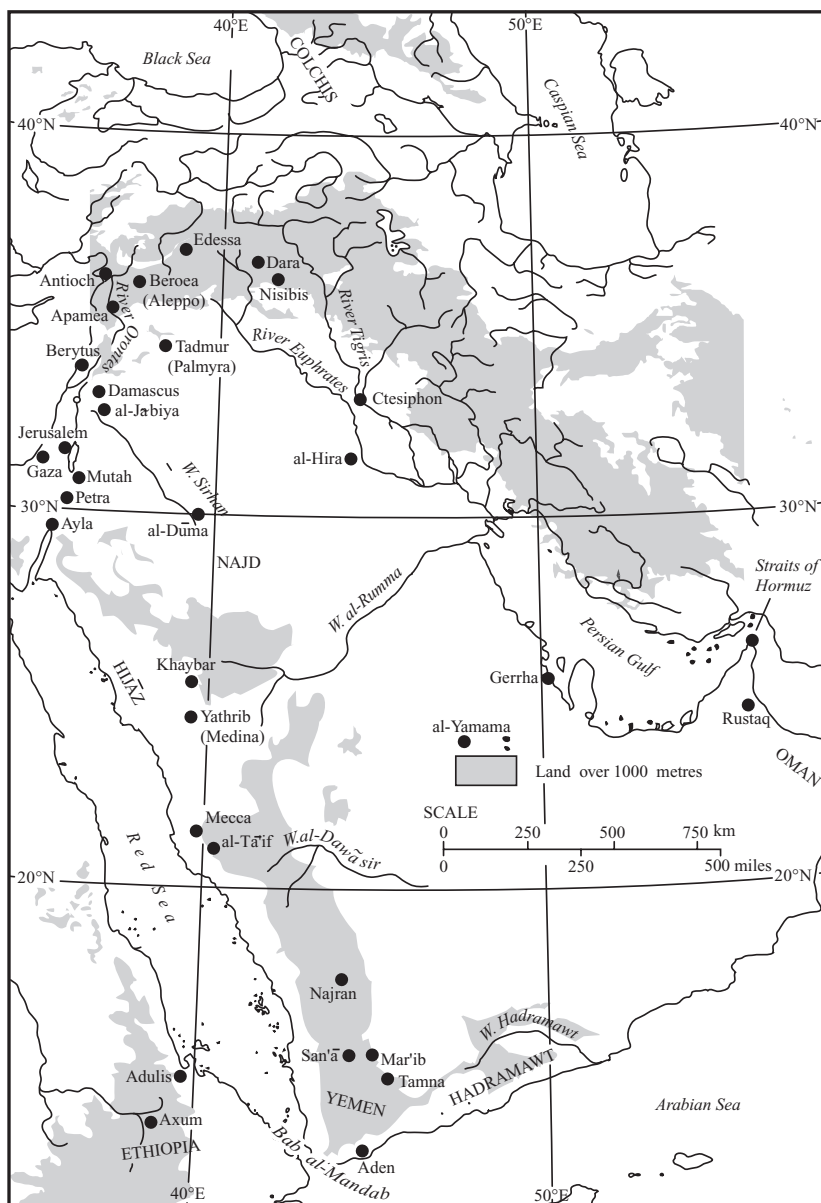
The remainder of this chapter will review briefly a number of historical phenomena in which the cultures and history of the late

antique Near East seem to provide a meaningful context for ideas and events that we associate with the beginnings of Islam. It is hoped that by highlighting such factors, we can begin to contextualize the rise of Islam in ways that are, from the point of view of the historian, more plausible than many earlier descriptions of it, without detracting from Islam's claims to originality or diminishing the importance of its impact.

THE ROLE OF THE GREAT POWERS

A fundamental feature of the background against which Islam first appeared was the presence of the two great powers of the late antique Near East, the Byzantine (the later Roman) Empire and the Sasanian Persian Empire, and the complex relationship between them, which wavered unsteadily between grudging mutual recognition and open conflict.⁹ This ancient rivalry dated back to Rome's earliest expansion into the eastern Mediterranean, when it came into conflict with the Sasanians' predecessors, the Parthian Arsacids (ruled 248 BCE–224 CE) for control of important border regions coveted by both, particularly northern Mesopotamia and Armenia, and for control of trade routes and trade revenues (Map 16). These issues continued to divide the Byzantines and the Sasanians, to which were added also a religious and cultural dimension to the conflict, pitting Byzantine Christianity and Hellenistic culture against the Zoroastrian (Magian) religion and Iranian culture of the Sasanians. Between the beginning of the Byzantine era in the 330s and the rise of Islam in the early seventh century, the Byzantines and Sasanians were formally at war with one another no fewer than seven times (mainly in the fourth and sixth centuries), on some occasions for periods of a decade or more. Justinian spent lots of energy reconquering the West but like his predecessors and successors was engaged also in war with the Persians, particularly in the period 540–562, when the Sasanians invaded Syria and tried to bring Colchis (Lazica, at the eastern end of the Black Sea) under their control.

Arabia was seldom the central concern of either the Byzantines or the Sasanians, but the protracted military struggle between the two powers had a definite impact on Arabia in the decades preceding Muhammad's birth and preaching there.¹⁰ Both empires, hoping to outflank the other, tried in various ways to extend their own influence over key regions of the peninsula and to thwart the influence of their rival. On the northern fringes of Arabia, the two empires established special ties with powerful Arabic-speaking families, whose leaders



MAP 16. The Arabian Peninsula and adjacent areas in late antiquity

they recognized as “kings” and supplied with monetary subsidies and weapons. The Jafnid family of the tribe of Ghassan, based at al-Jabiya in the Jawlan (Golan) plateau overlooking the Sea of Galilee, were as early as 502 recognized by the Byzantines as *foederati* of the empire; one of the Jafnid rulers, al-Mundhir ibn al-Harith, was even given a crown by the Byzantines in 580. The Jafnids (presumably leading the rest of the Ghassanids) were charged by the Byzantines with preventing other Arabic-speaking groups in their vicinity, particularly pastoral nomadic ones, from raiding settled districts on the Byzantines’ eastern frontier in Syria and so disrupting the Byzantines’ tax base. The Jafnids were also, on occasion, required to contribute contingents to the Byzantine army when it went on campaign against the Sasanians. In Justinian’s time, the Jafnids, under their chief al-Harith ibn Jabala, played an important role at the disastrous battle of Callinicum (531) and in the Assyrian campaign of 541. The Jafnids also ward off and fought against the Sasanian’s clients, the Nasrids (see below); once (570) they even burned the Nasrid capital at al-Hira in Iraq. The Byzantines also apparently had a more tenuous agreement with the powerful Arabian group of Kinda, although we know much less about it.¹¹

The Sasanians’ client relationship with the Nasrid family resembled that of the Byzantines with the Jafnids. The Nasrids, who were part of the tribe of Lakhm, were based in the town of al-Hira on the western steppe fringe of central Iraq.¹² They also had important alliances with (or protectorates over) local chiefs in the eastern Arabian coastal region and in Oman and even maintained standing garrisons or outposts in some of these areas, such as the town of Rustaq in northern Oman.¹³ Even distant South Arabia¹⁴ was not beyond the reach of Byzantine and Sasanian interference. The Byzantines were distressed by the activities of the Yemeni ruler Dhu Nuwas (Yusuf Ash’ar), who was Jewish and who persecuted the local Christians. Dhu Nuwas had even written to the Nasrid king al-Mundhir in al-Hira, encouraging him to exterminate his Christian subjects.¹⁵ The Byzantines responded by encouraging the kings of Axum (Ethiopia) to invade Yemen in 525 and to overthrow Dhu Nuwas. Although an Ethiopian general, Abraha, made himself independent ruler of Yemen some years later, Yemen during Justinian’s reign was still firmly in the Byzantine sphere of influence. After nearly half a century of Axumite rule over Yemen, however, the locals rose in rebellion around 572, led by Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan, and called upon the Sasanians to support him (if the Sasanians had not had a hand in organizing this uprising in the first place). The Great King Khusro II sent a Sasanian expeditionary force which made

Yemen a province of the Sasanian empire under a governor, backed by a Sasanian garrison. It remained so until the time of Muhammad in the 620s CE.

All of these activities had repercussions deep in the Arabian peninsula. Most Arabian communities and pastoral groups, particularly those in the north of the peninsula, were aware of the Byzantine–Sasanian rivalry and must have been constrained to accommodate to it somehow, whether by allying themselves openly with one power or the other or by carefully trying to preserve their neutrality. The Nasrid kings of al-Hira seem to have had some influence in the affairs of Yathrib (later Medina) in the sixth century, and may have been, for a time, able to appoint a governor there.¹⁶ They may also have had supporters in Mecca and striven to establish a kind of protectorate over it.¹⁷ Similarly, there is some evidence to suggest that, on the eve of Muhammad's career, the Byzantines (probably through their Jafnid allies) may have come close to establishing an alliance with one of the leaders of Quraysh, the main family of Mecca, although in the end the town seems to have remained neutral.¹⁸

The effect of this rivalry on the intellectual life of Arabia – in particular, on the conceptual outlook of Muhammad and his first followers, who shaped the rise of Islam – is harder to determine. It might be suggested that the Sasanians' virtual encirclement of Arabia following their conquest of Yemen in the 570s and their occupation of Syria and Egypt in the first decade of the seventh century impelled the inhabitants of Arabia to seek a broader, integrating movement in order to resist the increasing pressure of Sasanian political control and Zoroastrian religion. This, some have speculated, might have been either a "nativist" (consciously Arab) identity movement, or rallying around a hitherto neglected Abrahamic monotheism, with close affinities to Christianity and Judaism, that was resurrected (or discovered for the first time).¹⁹ But, as noted above, such ruminations are speculation. The Qur'an, which is notoriously and maddeningly vague in its allusions to historical events, never refers to the Persians or to their religion, Zoroastrianism (Magianism), but speaks frequently of Jews (presumably because Jews lived in Yathrib/Medina) and, less frequently, of Christians (called Nasara). Its only direct reference to the Byzantine–Sasanian rivalry seems to be the celebrated opening verses from Surat al-Rum (30): "The Romans are defeated in the nearest land, but after their defeat they shall be victorious in a few years. The determination [of these events], beforehand and afterward, is God's. And on that day the Believers shall rejoice" (verses 2–4). This passage seems to imply a sympathy

for the Byzantine side, assuming that the “defeat” mentioned in verses 2 and 3 refers to a Byzantine defeat by the Sasanians (presumably related to the war of 603–630), but the passage is so ambiguous that it is difficult to be sure.²⁰ Moreover, if the mention of the “possessors of the elephant” in Surat al-Fil (105) does indeed refer to the attack on Mecca by an army from the Yemeni regime of Abraha’s successors, as most commentators assume, this would suggest some hostility to the Byzantines’ Ethiopian allies, at least when they tried to attack Mecca.²¹

The great powers, Byzantine and Sasanian, both espoused a concept of universal rule with a strong component of cultural mission that harked back at least to Alexander and the states of his successors in the Near East, including Parthian Iran. This concept of universal rule was adopted by the Romans and, in Christianized form, by the Byzantines; the Sasanians, too, viewed themselves as sovereigns with a claim to universal authority.²² An expression of this idea on the Byzantine side is found in Justinian’s edict of 554 to the people of Constantinople (*Novel* 132): “We believe that the first and greatest blessing for all mankind is the confession of the Christian faith, true and beyond reproach, to the end that it may be universally established and that all the most holy priests of the whole globe may be joined together in unity.”²³ Justinian was so determined to establish the Chalcedonian formula for the faith as the only one that he enacted harsh legislation against Nestorians and other Christian “heretics” and even attempted to make Jews, Samaritans, and other non-Christians espouse the formula. Above all, he attempted to eradicate paganism, ordering pagans to embrace Christianity or be stripped of their possessions, closing the pagan academy in Athens and forbidding pagans to teach.²⁴ The idea of a distinctive religious message underpinning a God-guided kingdom that would – or should – embrace all mankind, and that was particularly hostile to paganism, was thus another part of the intellectual environment in which Muhammad and his Believers worked and acted, another part of the heritage of Justinian and his age.

Commerce formed one of the arenas in which the Byzantines and Sasanians competed in the decades preceding the rise of Islam. The two empires struggled to control – and hence, to tax – the movement of luxury goods (in particular of silk, and of pepper and other spices and aromatics) that flowed from their areas of production in East and South Asia to centers of consumption in the Mediterranean basin.²⁵ Commercial concerns were almost certainly among the reasons for major offensives launched by the empires or their proxies on several occasions, including the Axumite occupation of Yemen in 525 CE, the Persian

occupation of Yemen in the 570s CE, and possibly the Persian invasion of Byzantium's whole eastern half (Syria, Egypt, and much of Anatolia) in the final Byzantine–Persian war beginning in 602.

The role of the Asian–Mediterranean commerce in Arabia and the importance of it (or of changes in it) to the rise of Islam have been hotly debated in recent Western scholarship. The Muslim sources themselves describe Muhammad as having been a merchant involved in trading ventures organized in his native town of Mecca, but it was the Jesuit scholar Henri Lammens who, in the years around 1900, first described Mecca as a wealthy “merchant republic” dealing in precious luxury goods, and identified this commerce as a key factor in the rise of Islam. He implied that the trading interests of the Meccan tribe of Quraysh, to which Muhammad belonged and from which much of the leadership of his movement was drawn after his death, underlay Islam's rapid early expansion.²⁶ Lammens's notion that Mecca was a nexus of luxury trade established itself as the consensus view among Western scholars through much of the twentieth century and was further refined in numerous detailed studies by such scholars as William Montgomery Watt and Róbert Simon.²⁷ Despite an occasional critical voice,²⁸ this theory held sway until 1987, when Patricia Crone published a book that seriously challenged – some would say demolished – it.²⁹ But her analysis still left open the possibility that the Meccans (and Muhammad) may have engaged in commerce on a much more modest scale, and in more mundane goods like hides, raisins, and grain. It has been argued that the mining of gold may have been a significant feature of the west–Arabian economy on the eve of Islam,³⁰ and that Sasanian involvement in Arabian trade, mining, and industrial activity may have stimulated an economic expansion in Arabia on the eve of Islam.³¹ In sum, while the older theory of Lammens that posited a highly-developed commercial economy in Mecca based on luxury trade should probably now be rejected, it still remains possible that a more modest level of commerce, and other economic activity, could have contributed (both in economic terms and in terms of organizational and management skills) to the orientation and success of Muhammad's religious movement.

Trade has received much attention in discussions of the rise of Islam – and it remains a subject of some dispute. Less clear still are the general economic developments (including demographic changes) in the Near East in the century or so leading up to the appearance of Islam. The evidence, both textual and archaeological, is spotty, and patterns vary from area to area, as do interpretations of it.³² Parts of southern Syria (modern Jordan) and the Negev, for example, seem to have experienced

an increase in church-building from the latter sixth century until the eighth, suggesting prosperity in the local communities.³³ But in general the sixth century, particularly the latter half of the sixth century, seems to have been one of marked decline in major urban centers of the Levant. Antioch and other major cities of northern Syria were devastated by Sasanian invasions in 540, 573, and 611–613, including in some instances having sizable parts of their population deported to Iran. The north Syrian countryside, too, seems to have undergone major changes, with farmers and magnates being replaced by pastoral nomads in some districts.³⁴ The “Justinianic plague” pandemic that first hit the Near East in 540 and recurred every decade or so until the mid-eighth century affected densely-settled urban centers more severely than small towns, villages, or the region’s nomadic populations. The demographic decline caused by the plague (the exact degree of which can only be guessed at) weakened demand for commercial goods and undermined the ability of cities to recover from other shocks, such as war destruction and the numerous very destructive earthquakes that shook the Near East in the sixth century.³⁵ The plague does not, however, seem to have spread to Arabia itself, raising the possibility that, by weakening the areas neighboring Arabia while leaving it relatively untouched, plague may have contributed significantly to the shift in power that coincides with the rise of Islam.

Late antique society – whether in the Byzantine or Sasanian domains – was highly stratified and class-conscious, and this fact may also be seen as part of the historical and social background against which Islam arose. The Sasanian empire and its official faith of Zoroastrianism were structured around a virtual caste system, according to which people were born into and lived their whole lives as members of one of four discrete social classes – Zoroastrian clergy (including judges), “warriors” (free, landed gentry), scribes, and “cultivators” (including merchants and craftsmen), in descending order. (Moreover, slaves and aliens were effectively noncitizens, not considered to be part of the society.) Zoroastrian priestly rituals were centered on fire temples, but the maintenance of separate fire temples for each class reinforced this ideology of social differentiation and helped ensure that “inappropriate” contact between people from different classes did not occur.³⁶ Byzantine society was not so rigidly divided in theory, but in practical terms social differentiations were sharp and, for the most part, enduring. The army did provide an avenue of social mobility (even to the top of the social pyramid, as numerous emperors rose through the army), but only for the relatively small number of people who were part of it. Generally, a

small and highly privileged elite (*potentiores*), most of whom disposed of great wealth derived from vast landed estates, or sometimes from commerce, dominated the overwhelming majority of the population in the Byzantine empire – the *humiliores* – who were poor.³⁷

The extreme stratification that prevailed in most late antique societies sometimes engendered popular reaction, as in the case of the Mazdakite movement in the Sasanian/Zoroastrian context, which from the fifth century CE called for a more egalitarian structuring of society.³⁸ In the Byzantine/Christian context, the emphasis on piety helped override social stratification, because pious behavior was something that was readily recognized and could help a person overcome lowly ascribed status. The activities of the “holy men” who, according to Peter Brown, were such a prominent feature of the late antique Christian world, may also have worked to blunt class differences, because such people could hail from all strata of society and could serve as intermediaries between different classes and groups.³⁹

Arabia on the eve of Islam represented, however, something of an exception to this picture of extreme social stratification. In northern and central Arabia at least, the relatively meager level of resources and organization of society into kinship groups (“tribes”) helped undermine the tendency toward social stratification that marked other parts of the Near East. The fact that the Qur’an projects a fundamentally egalitarian view of society may be taken, perhaps, as a reflection of its Arabian milieu; alternatively, we may wish to see the Qur’an’s and early Islam’s persistent emphasis on egalitarianism and the equality of all humans before their Creator as a reaction against the class-riven visions of society emanating from the Fertile Crescent area.

Another feature of the late antique world, and of the two great empires, that may be significant as part of the background of Islam is the contemporary emphasis on laws or legal codes.⁴⁰ All states pay some attention to establishing laws, but there seems to have been a special emphasis on the codification of laws in the late antique world. In the Byzantine domains, this took the form of successive efforts to systematize the complex mass of Roman law, undertaken particularly by the emperors Theodosius II (r. 408–450) and Justinian, after both of whom law codes were named. Justinian’s *Corpus iuris civilis*, a massive compilation consisting of three separate works (*Codex Iustinianus*; *Institutes*; *Digest*), was drawn up over a five-year period early in his reign and is the most ambitious of these efforts to codify Roman law.⁴¹ Farther west, various barbarian kingdoms of Europe issued codes or collections of royal decrees.⁴² The Sasanians, too, engaged in a thoroughgoing

compilation of their legal system, particularly under the Great King Khusro II Parviz (r. 591–628). He sponsored the compilation of the *Matakdan i hazar datastan*, or *Book of a Thousand Judicial Decisions*, the culmination of earlier efforts to collect and comment on judicial decisions, Zoroastrian religious law, books on duties of officials, royal decrees, relevant court records, and other documents bearing on the law in order to create a practical guide for judges.⁴³

This emphasis on codification of basic texts also extended into the religious realm, constituting almost a bureaucratization of religious belief.⁴⁴ The preparation of authoritative Latin, Syriac, and other versions of both the Old and New Testaments was undertaken during the second through fifth centuries. It was during the Sasanian period that the books of the Avesta, or Zoroastrian scripture, were definitively compiled in written form (even though their contents dated to much earlier times), and the compilation of the Zand or commentary on the Avesta was also effected at this time. The same centuries saw the compilation, by Jewish sages, of the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, which are in essence extensive commentaries on the rabbinic text known as the Mishnah.

The result of these activities was that discrete religious confessions came to be defined as much as anything by the fact that they had their own codified holy books. This idea may be the ultimate source of the Qur'an's use of the term *ahl al-kitab*, or "people of the book," to refer to earlier recipients of the monotheist message (particularly Christians and Jews).⁴⁵ From the perspective of an imperial government that identified itself with a particular faith, moreover, as both the Byzantine and Sasanian governments did, this sharp definition of religious confessions was a valuable tool for the formulation of imperial policy and the maintenance of social control. Communities following a particular confession could be administered by their own hierarchs, and the codification of religious texts helped give them legal force. The legal orientation of the late antique world may have contributed also to the Qur'an's sense of the importance of legal guidance (*huda*) – a term the Qur'an applies above all to itself – for ensuring the salvation of the Believer.

THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

Although many works have emphasized the specifically Arabian religious background to Islam, recent work reveals that we must view

Islam's origins not only in its Arabian context, but rather against the much wider backdrop of the rich and varied religious and cultural traditions of the late antique Near East. We must consider Islam's relationship to religious traditions best known to us from lands adjacent to Arabia – Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia – with which Arabia stood, as we have seen, in intimate contact, to see how they may have contributed to its formation and reception.⁴⁶

The Islamic sources (and, following their lead, much Western scholarship on early Islam) traditionally emphasized the existence in Mecca and elsewhere in Arabia of pagans (idolators, polytheists) who revered idols representing astral deities such as the sun, the moon, and Venus.⁴⁷ These pagans were generally identified with the Qur'an's *mushrikun*, those who “associate [something with God]” and thereby deny His uniqueness, and seem to have formed at least part of the immediate background against which Muhammad's preaching and the Qur'an must be viewed. The Qur'an's insistence that God will judge us on the Last Day according to our actions in this life, and on that basis either reward or punish us in the afterlife, implies a general orientation in favor of the concept of free will. This may be read as a reaction against the pervasive fatalism of Arabian paganism, which rejected the idea of an afterlife and viewed worldly existence as determined by blind fate (*dahr*; see Qur'an 45:24).⁴⁸ Viewing the Qur'an's teachings and the career of Muhammad against the backdrop of paganism, of course, highlights both the originality of Muhammad's message in the Arabian environment and the uniqueness of his role as a reformer bringing monotheism to these polytheistic communities, and it is hardly surprising that it would be emphasized by later Muslim tradition, and hence adopted by Western scholarship as well.

On the other hand, there is evidence for an indigenous Arabian notion of henotheism – the belief that, while many gods existed, one was supreme among them. Its Arabian form focused on Allah as a “high God” who existed above the lesser gods of the “pagan” pantheons. There is also some evidence for an indigenous Arabian monotheism called *hanifiyya*. The latter may have been linked to recognition of the people of Arabia as descendants of Abraham, and of Mecca's Ka'ba as a shrine to this “religion of Abraham,” even in pre-Islamic times.⁴⁹

Moreover, the fact that the Qur'an is replete with references to figures (especially prophets) and events that were part of the Old and New Testament lore reveals that the Qur'an's original audience must also have been familiar with monotheism in its Christian and Jewish variants.⁵⁰ This is not to say that Muhammad's early followers

were originally Jews or Christians, but it does imply that Judaism and Christianity were present in Muhammad's vicinity. The Qur'anic evidence is bolstered by the traditional biography of Muhammad, produced by the Muslim community during the two centuries after his death; this relates in some detail Muhammad's interactions with what are described as large Jewish communities of western Arabia, particularly with those of Yathrib (Medina), which became his base of operations for the last decade of his life, and other communities farther north, such as Khaybar and Tayma'.⁵¹ G. Hawting has recently argued that the Qur'an's references to *mushrikun* are hyperbolic: that is, they refer not to actual pagans, but rather to monotheists considered inadequately rigorous in their monotheism.⁵² G. Lüling has gone farther and suggested that Arabia was largely Christianized in Muhammad's day, and that the Ka'ba may have been a Christian church.⁵³ C. Luxenberg has proposed that some problematic words and phrases in the Qur'an are actually not in the Arabic language at all, but are rather a transliterated form of Syriac⁵⁴ – the literary vehicle of the Syrian and Mesopotamian Monophysite and Nestorian churches between the fourth and eighth centuries CE – suggesting a powerful resonance between the Qur'an and the late antique Christian tradition. These hypotheses remain tentative and still require further investigation, but the evidence as a whole forces us to recognize that Arabia alone (and its presumed paganism) can no longer be viewed as the full setting in which the Qur'an and Muhammad's mission must be viewed. Rather, Islam's origins must be situated in the context of religious trends current in the broader Near Eastern world of the sixth and early seventh centuries CE – a time when this region was intensely engaged in interreligious polemic among various, mostly monotheistic, religious groups, including Jews, several varieties of Christians, and perhaps Zurvanite Zoroastrians.⁵⁵

An important feature of the late antique religious environment in the Near East was the widespread currency of apocalypticism, a complex of eschatological ideas centering on the imminent anticipation of the end of the world. Usually this was expected to be marked by cataclysmic events – natural and sociopolitical – that would usher in the final resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment, and the dispatch for eternity of all people to heaven or hell. The titanic struggle between the Byzantine and the Sasanian Empires seems to have coincided with a spate of apocalyptic thought and writing in the Near East.⁵⁶ By the sixth and seventh centuries, these ideas had been current in the Near East for more than five hundred years. The continuing attraction of apocalypticism in the Byzantine Empire and elsewhere in the Near East

throughout the late antique period and into early Islamic times is revealed by the translation and reissue of earlier apocalyptic texts (such as the Tiburtine Sibyl, a fourth-century text translated into Greek in Baalbek during the sixth century)⁵⁷ and by the production of entirely new ones during the seventh century and later, such as the late seventh-century works of Pseudo-Methodius, Pseudo-Athanasius, and even the *History* of Sebeos.⁵⁸

Apocalyptic ideas seem to have penetrated Arabia, too, by Muhammad's day and thus may be taken as another dimension of the intellectual background against which Islam arose. Whether Muhammad himself and his earliest followers were charged with apocalyptic enthusiasm remains a subject of debate. The evidence on this point is ambiguous; the text of the Qur'an seems at times to be concerned with establishing a just social order, and in other ways implies belief in a future on earth, but it also speaks with great frequency of the Last Day using powerful eschatological imagery, exhorts its hearers to be constantly mindful of its approach, and offers other hints that the end was considered imminent.⁵⁹ Whatever the situation with Muhammad and the earliest Believers may have been on this score, it is hardly surprising, in view of the prevalence of apocalyptic ideas throughout the Near East, that apocalyptic writings began to appear in the Islamic community soon after the time of the prophet. Apocalyptic "predictions" were often presented as utterances of the prophet Muhammad in the *hadith* literature that crystallized in the eighth and following centuries CE.⁶⁰ Likewise, a number of rebellions or uprisings in the early Islamic community embraced apocalyptic imagery to give force and appeal to their claims.⁶¹

Another feature of the late antique religious environment was a widespread concern for individual piety, sometimes to the point of ascetic self-denial. It may in some cases have been associated with apocalyptic concerns, because the conviction that the Judgment was near could incline people to be more punctilious about their religious duties in an effort to ensure their salvation.

This pious attitude was especially marked in Egypt and Syria, but it also was found in most other parts of the Near East.⁶² It involved a keen awareness of the need to prepare for death and the life after death, and a turning away from the more public, socially connected cults of classical antiquity. Peter Brown has typified this "new mood" as one that encouraged the drawing of sharp boundaries around the worshippers: "The invisible chasm between the 'saved' and the 'damned'

stood like a deep moat round the little groups, pagan and Christian alike, that came to chisel out a position for themselves at the expense of the time-honoured consensus of traditional public worship.”⁶³

We have little direct evidence to show how deeply this orientation toward piety had penetrated the societies of the Arabian peninsula on the eve of the rise of Islam. But it seems plausible to assume that late antique piety formed the direct background for the understanding of piety in the earliest Muslim community, if for no other reason than because the Qur’an itself has parallels to many late antique practices in this regard. Certainly the Qur’an shows an acute awareness of the distinction between “saved” and “damned,” Believer (*mu’min*) and unbeliever (*kafir*).

Another feature of the Near Eastern religious background to Muhammad’s mission that we should not overlook is the very concept of prophecy itself. Although the Jewish rabbis had decided that the age of true prophecy had ended in the first century CE – in the sense that there were after that time no more authentic prophets, defined as individuals who received God’s revelations – a tradition of belief in active prophecy nevertheless continued in some late antique religious communities, including some branches of Christianity, although prophecy may have become in some cases entirely unmoored from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The notion of prophecy was probably not always clearly defined in late antiquity and may have been understood in various ways by different groups. For some, prophecy seems to have meant what we might simply call the occasional onset of “inspiration,” a special felicity in interpreting scripture or in deciding what to do in a given situation, presumably under divine influence, or the skillful interpretation of dreams and omens, or inspired prognostication.⁶⁴ But others understood prophecy in a much more active way, including being the recipient of divine revelations taking written form. Mani, who preached in Iraq in the later third century (he was executed by the Sasanian chief minister Kartir, a determined Zoroastrian, in 276), presented himself as a prophet who had received divine revelations and compiled them in a book. Like Muhammad, Mani saw himself as one in a long series of prophets, including many known to Judaism and Christianity, and called himself the “seal” of the prophetic series.⁶⁵

An active attitude toward prophecy was also espoused by the Christian sect called the Montanists, named after their founder Montanus, who along with his associates Priscilla and Maximilla in the

late second century believed they had received revelations from God. Montanists established communities in central Anatolia, Alexandria, and elsewhere, clinging stubbornly to the idea that individual members of the community could, like their founders, be the recipients of prophetic revelations. Despite the church's increasingly strong disapproval of such ideas and its efforts to suppress them, Montanists continue to be mentioned through Justinian's time and until the eve of Islam's appearance.⁶⁶

In Arabia, it is noteworthy that according to the Islamic sources themselves, Muhammad and his followers had to confront a number of rival prophets (called, naturally, "false prophets" by Muslim tradition) who, like him, claimed to be receiving divine revelations. The best-known of these, Maslama (Musaylima) of the Hanifa tribe, was based in the rich oasis of al-Yamama in eastern Arabia (modern Riyadh), and he and his followers put up stiff resistance to the spread of the early Islamic state during the so-called *ridda* wars (wars of apostasy) immediately following Muhammad's death in 632.⁶⁷ Several other such "false prophets" (and even one prophetess, Sajah) are reported to have been active in northeastern Arabia, in the Najd, in Yemen, and in Oman.⁶⁸ These reports, despite their sketchy character, reveal that Muhammad's claim to prophecy was not *sui generis*. Rather, they make it clear that the late antique tradition of active prophecy was very much alive in Arabia during the sixth and seventh centuries CE, and it is against this background that Muhammad's prophetic claims, and their reception, must be understood.

CONCLUSION

The various facets of life in the late antique Near East that we have touched on – political, economic, social, legal, and religious – all formed parts of the background against which Islam first emerged and gradually assumed its distinctive lineaments. It is important to remember, however, that they constitute a background, not a blueprint; they were not, in themselves, "seeds" for a religious movement whose advent no one could have predicted before it happened, even less an inventory of causes or components of the movement itself. The religious movement that began with the prophet Muhammad and soon came to be identified as Islam was, like all such movements, historically unique – shaped by forces that defy historical analysis in part because they are rooted in the individual psyche of key actors and in part because they are vulnerable

to the inscrutable interplay of intention and chance. In this sense, no historical event can be fully explained by its context, and each remains unique. We can, however, contextualize Islam's origins to a certain extent by seeing it against beliefs, practices, and institutions that came to resonate with its teachings and actions as a movement, or that – once it had appeared on the historical stage – can be seen to have helped prepare the way for its acceptance.

NOTES

In this article no diacritical marks are used when romanizing words from oriental languages, except for the *'ayn* (') and *hamza* (').

- 1 The traditional date for Muhammad's birth is often given as 570 CE; the conflicting traditions are examined in Lawrence I. Conrad, "Abraha and Muhammad: Some Observations apropos of Chronology and Literary Topoi in the Early Arabic Historical Tradition," *BSOAS* 50 (1987): 225–240, which favors a date around 552 CE.
- 2 One of the first attempts to see early Islam in this way – rather than adopting the early Islamic sources' own vision, which sees the rise of Islam as marking a sudden break with the past – was Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* (London, 1971). See also Walter E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge, 1992), esp. chap. 2, "The Byzantine Empire in an Era of Accelerating Change," 26–46, on institutional continuity; also his "Variable Rates of Seventh-Century Change," in *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity*, ed. Frank M. Clover and R. Stephen Humphreys (Madison, Wis., 1989), 191–208. A useful compilation and analysis of the non-Muslim primary sources from many languages that describe the rise of Islam is Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* 13 (Princeton, N.J., 1997).
- 3 A slightly more developed version of the points covered here appears in my *Seeing the Rise of Islam in Historical Perspective: The First Wadie Juwaideh Memorial Lecture, delivered November 4, 2002* (Bloomington, Ind., Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, 2003).
- 4 On the complexities of the narrative accounts, see Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, N.J., 1998). An important recent study reexamining the "pagan background" is Gerald R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge, 1999).
- 5 Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge, 1980), 13.
- 6 The classic treatment of early Western writings on Islam is Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh, 1960; rev. ed., Oxford, 1993).
- 7 For an introduction, see Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (New York, 1974); and George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (Madison, Wis., 1985).
- 8 See Fred M. Donner, "Modern Nationalism and Medieval Islamic History," *Al-'Usur al-Wusta* 13 (2001): 21–22.

- 9 See Geoffrey Greatrex, "Byzantium and the East in the Sixth Century," Chap. 19 in this volume. On the Byzantine empire, see J. A. S. Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power* (London, 1996), and Mark Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600–1025* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996). On the Sasanians, see Ze'ev Rubin, "The Sasanid Monarchy," *CAH* 14:638–661 (chap. 22a); Michael Morony, "Sasanids," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2).
- 10 See Lawrence I. Conrad, "The Arabs," *CAH* 14 (chap. 22c); and Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London, 2001).
- 11 On the Byzantines' relations with Ghassan and Kinda, see the exhaustive work of Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (Washington, D.C., 1995–2002). See also his summary treatment, "Ghassan," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2). The Sasanian Great King Kavadh is also reported to have had contact with Kinda; see Clifford E. Bosworth, "Iran and the Arabs before Islam," *Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge, 1983), 3:593–613 (chap. 16).
- 12 On Sasanian influence in Arabia, see Bosworth, "Iran and the Arabs." The classic study of the Lakhmids is Gustav Rothstein, *Die Dynastie der Lakhmiden in al-Hira* (Berlin, 1899). See also Irfan Shahid, "Lakhmids," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2); M. J. Kister, "Al-Hira: Some Notes on Its Relations with Arabia," *Arabica* 15 (1968): 143–169.
- 13 See Monique Kevran, "Suhar," and G. Rex Smith, "Rustak," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2).
- 14 Yemen is roughly 3,500 kilometres as the crow flies from the Byzantine capital at Constantinople (modern Istanbul) – about as far as Constantinople is from Scotland – and over 2,000 km from the Sasanian capital at Ctesiphon (near modern Baghdad).
- 15 M. R. Al-Assouad, "Dhu Nuwas," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2).
- 16 Kister, "Al-Hira," esp. 144–149; Bosworth, "Iran and the Arabs," 600–601.
- 17 Suliman Bashear, *Muqaddima fi l-ta'rikh al-akhar* (Jerusalem, 1984), 130–131. Bosworth, "Iran and the Arabs," 600, notes references to *zindiqs* in Mecca, perhaps remnants of the Sasanian monarch Kavadh's adoption of Mazdakism and the Kindite interregnum in al-Hira.
- 18 On the episode of 'Uthman ibn al-Huwayrith, see William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford, 1953), 15–16.
- 19 Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, N.J., 1987), 246–250, makes the former suggestion (Arab nativism) explicitly and seems to hint at the latter. The nativist idea is also touched on in Uri Rubin, "Hanifiyya and Ka'ba: An Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of *Din Ibrahim*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990): 85–112. See also Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 229–247 (chap. 9), "Arabhood and Arabisation," which seems to adopt this notion.
- 20 The Sasanian Great King Khusro II began his invasion of Byzantine territory in Anatolia in 603; northern Syria was invaded in 611, and Antioch Apamea taken; Damascus was conquered in 613, Jerusalem in 614, and Egypt fell in 619. Heraclius's campaigns of reconquest began in Anatolia in 622, focused from 627 on Mesopotamia and Iraq, and resulted in the fall of Khusro II in 628. Heraclius returned to Constantinople and made a triumphant visit to Jerusalem in 630 to return fragments of the True Cross. See Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N. C. Lieu, eds., *The Roman Frontier and the Persian Wars, Part II, A.D. 363–630: A Narrative Sourcebook*

- (London, 2002), chap. 13, "The Persian Takeover of the Near East" (182–197) and chap. 14, "The Roman Recovery under Heraclius (622–630)," (198–228).
- 21 On this attack – probably to be identified with the campaign on Haliban in 547 CE – see Bosworth, "Iran and the Arabs," 606, which cites the relevant scholarship discussing the problems raised by this identification.
 - 22 On this theme, see John H. Marks, *Visions of One World: Legacy of Alexander* (Guilford, Conn., 1985); and Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J., 1993). Also see Charles Pazdernik, "Justinianic Ideology and the Power of the Past," Chap. 8 in this volume.
 - 23 Quoted in P. N. Ure, *Justinian and His Age* (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1951), 122.
 - 24 A summary of Justinian's religious policies is provided in Pauline Allen, "The Definition and Enforcement of Orthodoxy," *CAH* 14:811–835 (chap. 27), esp. 820–828.
 - 25 See Touraj Daryaee, "The Persian Gulf Trade in Late Antiquity," *Journal of World History* 14 (2003): 1–16.
 - 26 See especially Henri Lammens, "La République marchande de la Mecque vers l'an 600 de notre ère," *Bulletin de l'Institut Egyptien*, 5th ser., no. 4 (1910): 23–54, and *La Mecque à la veille de l'hégire* (Beirut, 1924).
 - 27 Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*; Róbert Simon, *Meccan Trade and Islam: Problems of Origin and Structure* (Budapest, 1989; the Hungarian original of this work first appeared in 1975). Like many other works, my own *Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, N.J., 1981) accepted this theory without full critical scrutiny; it was assumed "proven."
 - 28 See especially G.-H. Bousquet's review of Watt's *Muhammad at Mecca*, "Une explication Marxiste de l'Islam par un ecclésiastique épiscopalien," *Héspérus* 41 (1954), 231–247, which calls into question the notion of Mecca as a center of "capitalist" commerce on which Watt builds his work, explicitly mentioning (at least in passing) the work of Lammens himself (238).
 - 29 Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. In his review of this work, the historian Hugh Kennedy terms it a "thorough demolition job" against the traditional Meccan trade hypothesis: *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 22 (1988): 54–55.
 - 30 Gene Heck, "Gold Mining in Arabia and the Rise of the Islamic State," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42 (1999): 364–395; Heck, "'Arabia without Spices': An Alternate Hypothesis," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123 (2003), forthcoming.
 - 31 Michael Morony, "The Late Sasanian Economic Impact on the Arabian Peninsula," *Name-ye Iran-e Bastan* 1.2 (2001–2002): 25–37.
 - 32 Two important studies that appeared in the same year and draw on much common evidence provide a striking contrast. J. A. S. Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power* (London, 1996), 225–240, sketches the deterioration of towns and institutions in Syria during the sixth century under the impact of repeated earthquakes, invasions, and plague and outlines the difficulty the emperor had in rebuilding ruined towns; in Evans' view, "by 600, the amenities of urban life which still existed a century earlier had disappeared in most of [the cities of the classical world]" (225). Mark Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600–1025* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996), 53–68, argues, on the contrary, that the "decline" of Syria during the sixth century has been overstated by modern scholars and alleges that western Asia Minor, Cilicia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt provide evidence of "the

- empire's continuing prosperity in 600" (59). Although not an expert in these matters, I find the evidence provided by Evans, Trombley (see n. 34), and others more convincing than that adduced by Whittow, although Whittow is undoubtedly correct to stress that we must not equate change with decline.
- 33 See Clive Foss, "The Near Eastern Countryside in Late Antiquity: A Review Article," in *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Some Recent Archaeological Research*, ed. J. H. Humphrey, *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, suppl. 1 (1995), 213–234, which summarizes some of the archaeological evidence.
 - 34 Frank R. Trombley, "War and Society in Rural Syria ca. 502–613 A.D.: Observations on the Epigraphy," *BMGS* 21 (1997): 154–209.
 - 35 Foss, "The Near Eastern Countryside"; Hugh Kennedy, "The Last Century of Byzantine Syria: A Reinterpretation," *Byzantinische Forschung* 10 (1985): 141–183. On the plague and its impact, see Lawrence I. Conrad, *The Plague in the Early Medieval Near East* (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1981); and Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, 160–165. Whittow, *Making of Byzantium*, 66–68, attempts to minimize the impact of the plague, in keeping with his general interpretation.
 - 36 See A. Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," *Cambridge History of Iran* 3:627–680, esp. 631–646. Also Jamsheed Choksy, "Sassanians," in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 682–685; Richard N. Frye, "Parthian and Sasanian History of Iran," in *Mesopotamia and Iran in the Parthian and Sasanian Periods: Rejection and Revival c. 238 B.C.–A.D. 642*, ed. John Curtis (London, 2000), 17–22.
 - 37 A concise overview of Byzantine social structure in the later sixth century is found in John F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge, 1990), 26–31; see also Whittow, *Making of Byzantium*, 53–68. Mercantile wealth is discussed in Linda Jones Hall, "The Case of Late Antique Berytus: Urban Wealth and Rural Sustenance – A Different Economic Dynamic," in *Urban Centers and Rural Contexts in Late Antiquity*, ed. Thomas S. Burns and John W. Eadie (East Lansing, Mich., 2001), 63–76.
 - 38 Patricia Crone, "Kavad's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt," *Iran* 29 (1991): 21–42; Ehsan Yarshater, "Mazdakism," *Cambridge History of Iran*, 3:991–1024.
 - 39 On the "holy man," see Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *JRS* 61 (1971): 80–101; and Peter Brown, "Town, Village, and Holy Man: The Case of Syria," in *Assimilation et résistance à la culture gréco-romaine dans le monde ancien* (Madrid, 1976), 213–220, both reprinted in Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982). Also see Peter Brown, "Holy Men," *CAH* 14: 781–810 (chap. 26); Han J. W. Drijvers, "The Saint as Symbol: Conceptions of the Person in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity," in *Concepts of Person*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg, Y. B. Kuiper, and A. F. Sanders (Berlin, 1990), 137–157.
 - 40 See Caroline Humfress, "Law and Legal Practice in the Age of Justinian," Chap. 7 in this volume.
 - 41 A fascinating glimpse of the procedures followed in compilation of Justinian's *Digest* is A. M. Honoré, *Justinian's Digest: Work in Progress* (Oxford, 1971). The same author has provided a useful overview of the codification of Byzantine law in his article "Law Codes" in Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar, *Late Antiquity*, 539–540. More generally, see Detlef Liebs, "Roman Law," *CAH* 14: 238–259 (chap. 9).

- 42 For an overview, see T. M. Charles-Edwards, "Law in the Western Kingdoms between the Fifth and the Seventh Century," *CAH* 14: 260–287 (chap. 10).
- 43 See Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 628–631.
- 44 See Humfress, Chap. 7, and Nicholas de Lange, "Jews in the Age of Justinian," Chap. 16 in this volume.
- 45 On this concept in the Qur'an, see Georges Vajda, "Ahl al-kitab," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2). Zoroastrians are not mentioned in the Qur'an, but later Muslims debated the status of Zoroastrians and the mainstream view included them among the *ahl al-kitab*.
- 46 A pioneering experiment to do this was Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977). The shortcomings of some aspects of *Hagarism's* historical reconstruction should not diminish our appreciation of the value of the attempt or obscure the impact the book had.
- 47 The classic studies are Julius Wellhausen's *Reste arabischen Heidentums* (Berlin, 1887) and Toufic Fahd, *Le Panthéon de l'Arabie centrale à la veille de l'hégire* (Paris, 1968). See also Uri Rubin, "The Ka'ba: Aspects of Its Ritual Functions and Position in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1986): 97–131; and Michael Lecker, "Idol Worship in Pre-Islamic Medina (Yathrib)," *Le Muséon* 106 (1993): 331–346.
- 48 See Helmer Ringgren, *Studies in Arabian Fatalism* (Uppsala-Wiesbaden, 1955).
- 49 See Hamilton A. R. Gibb, "Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia," *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 269–280; William Montgomery Watt, "Belief in a 'High God' in Pre-Islamic Mecca," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16 (1971): 35–40; and Rubin, "Hanifiyya and Ka'ba."
- 50 A classic overview of the Old Testament material found in the Qur'an is Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählung im Qoran* (Grafenhainchen, 1931). The New Testament parallels in the Qur'an, which are greatly outweighed by those with the Old Testament, are discussed in Richard Bell's *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (London, 1926).
- 51 An overview of what can be learned about these Jewish communities, not a little of it derived from the *Sira* and similar works, is found in Gordon Darnell Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia* (Columbia, S.C., 1988). An English translation of the *Sira* is Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (Oxford, 1955). The *Sira* makes far less mention of Christians and does not portray Christian communities as being present in western Arabia. The penetration of Christianity in other parts of Arabia is surveyed in J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London, 1979).
- 52 Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*; see my review in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001): 336–338.
- 53 Günter Lüling, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad* (Erlangen, 1981).
- 54 Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin, 2000).
- 55 On the latter, see R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan, A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford, 1955).
- 56 On this as background to Islam, see my "The Sources of Islamic Conceptions of War," in *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions*, ed. John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson (Westport, Conn., 1991), 30–69, esp. 43–48; Gerrit J. Reinink, "Heraclius, the

- New Alexander: Apocalyptic Prophecies during the Reign of Heraclius,” in *The Reign of Heraclius (610–641): Crisis and Confrontation*, ed. Bernard H. Stolte and Gerrit J. Reinink (Leuven, 2002), 81–94; Wout Jac. van Bakkum, “Jewish Messianic Expectations in the Age of Heraclius,” in Stolte and Reinink, *Reign of Heraclius*, 95–112.
- 57 See Paul J. Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek: The Tiburtine Sibyl in Greek Dress* (Washington, D.C., 1967).
- 58 See Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985); Francisco Javier Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius* (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1985); John Haldon, “The Works of Anastasius of Sinai: A Key Source for the History of Seventh-Century East Mediterranean Society and Belief,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. 1, *Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* 1 (Princeton, N.J., 1992), 107–147; Gerrit J. Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius: A Concept of History in Response to the Rise of Islam,” in Cameron and Conrad, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, 149–187; Han J. W. Drijvers, “The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: A Syrian Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period,” in Cameron and Conrad, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, 189–213; Walter E. Kaegi, “Byzantine Sardinia and Africa Face the Muslims: A Rereading of Some Seventh-Century Evidence,” *Bizantistica* 3 (2001): 1–24, helps clarify the outlook of Ps.-Methodius. Walter Kaegi informs me that the role of apocalyptic expectations in the construction of Sebeos’s *History* is noted in Timothy W. Greenwood, *A History of Armenia in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries* (PhD diss., Oxford University, 2000), which I have not seen.
- 59 For example, Qur’an 16 (al-Nahl): 77: “God’s are the hidden things of the heavens and the earth; the matter of the Hour is like the fleeting glance, or even nearer.” For a general overview, see Uri Rubin, “Al-Sa’a (2),” *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2).
- 60 For an overview, see Arendt J. Wensinck, *A Handbook of Muhammadan Tradition* (Leiden, 1927), s.v. “Hour,” which indexes many purported sayings of Muhammad dealing with the coming of the end. See also Wilferd Madelung, “Apocalyptic Prophecies in Hims in the Umayyad Age,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 31 (1986): 141–185; and David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton, N.J., 2003).
- 61 For example, the Abbasid revolution, or the anti-Abbasid rebellion of Abu l-Umaytir in Syria, on which see Paul M. Cobb, *White Banners: Contention in Abbasid Syria, 750–880* (Albany, N.Y., 2001), 55–65.
- 62 Two classic treatments of late antique piety are Arthur Vööbus, *A History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 2 vols. (Louvain, 1958–1960); and Derwas Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Oxford, 1966). See also Peter Brown, “Asceticism,” *CAH* 13, chap. 20, and the references in n. 39 herein on the “holy man.”
- 63 Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 57.
- 64 On the survival of various concepts of prophecy into the late antique period, see Rebecca Gray, *Prophetic Figures in Late Second Century Jewish Palestine: The Evidence from Josephus* (New York, 1993). My thanks to Charles Jones for guiding me to this important study.
- 65 On Manichaeism, see Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (Tübingen, 1992). L. J. R. Ort, *Mani: A Religio-Historical Description of His Personality* (Leiden, 1967), 117–127, discusses Mani’s forerunners.

- Garth Fowden, "Religious Communities," in Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar, *Late Antiquity*, 95, emphasizes parallels between Mani and Muhammad.
- 66 Ronald E. Heine, *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia* (Macon, Ga., 1989) provides Montanist texts; Stephen Gero, "Montanus and Montanism According to a Medieval Syriac Source," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.ser. 28 (1977): 520–524, discusses persecution of Montanists under Justinian.
- 67 On al-Yamama, see Abdullah al-Askar, *Al-Yamama in the Early Islamic Era* (Riyadh, 2002); Musaylima and religious questions are dealt with on 77–117. Also M. J. Kister, "The Struggle against Musaylima and the Conquest of Yamama," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 27 (2002): 1–56.
- 68 The best discussion of the movements subsumed by Muslim historians under the rubric *al-ridda*, which includes the political activities of the various "false prophets," remains Elias S. Shoufani, *Al-Riddah and the Muslim Conquest of Arabia* (Toronto, 1972). The religious activities of these figures is obscure, but their claim to have been prophets is not in doubt. One can read descriptions of their activities in al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 10, *The Conquest of Arabia* (Albany, N.Y., 1993); it is hostile to them, of course, but for the best known of them, Maslama, it provides at least a caricature of his religious preachings.

