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The Qur'an as a Historical Source

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Abstract: The redirection of the *qiblah* to the Ka'bah (Q 2:142-5) is redated from 622, very soon after the *hijrah* where it is placed in the *sīrah*, to 628 on the eve of the Prophet's negotiations with the leaders of Mecca at al-Ḥudaybiyah. It is interpreted as a compromise forced on the Prophet, if he was to reach a settlement with the Quraysh. A corollary was God's authorisation of pilgrimage in pagan fashion and of animal sacrifice at the Ka'bah (Q 22: 23-38, Q 5: 2-4). The Ka'bah was redesignated a monotheist sanctuary, on the grounds of its foundation by Abraham (Q 2:125-7, Q 3:96-8, Q 22:28-9). These *sūrahs* (and an anomalous late passage in Q 14:35-7) are all late. No earlier *sūrah* associates Abraham with the Ka'bah.

Keywords: Ka'bah, al-Ḥudaybiyah, qiblah

I

The Qur'ān is the single most important source to have survived from the seventh century. It is a contemporaneous document of a quite extraordinary character. It contains the voluminous words which came forth from the Prophet's mouth as he broadcast God's messages to a small but growing band of believers, and through them to the Arabs at large and to the world beyond Arabia. It is not therefore a witness to what was said. We are not forced to rely on second-hand testimony. We can, as it were, project ourselves backward in time and listen to Muḥammad, and take account of the many types of speech acts which he performs (warning, instructing, reprimanding, encouraging, rebutting criticism, legislating etc. etc.). We can therefore watch as the Prophet impressed the new faith, so well tailored to the realities of Arabia, on his listeners and guided the first actions of the ummah, the community of believers.

The monotheism that he preached may have incorporated many themes and ideas that were in the air of the contemporary Middle East, in a process of bricolage, but they were *rearranged* in a new pattern around a few central motifs – (1) the notion of a supreme God, far removed from the earth and from all the goings-on

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there, all-knowing and all-powerful, (2) rejection of the common belief that spiritual beings had any power beyond speech (heaven thus became a void, between man and God, in which wraithlike creatures, angels and jinn, could do no more than pick up and convey information, while earth ceased to be a battleground between the holy and the demonic), (3) repeated emphasis, in the Meccan phase, on the modest role of the Prophet, that of conveying God's words to his listeners, with a concomitant denial that he could produce signs, i. e. miracles, to prove his special relationship with God (in effect distancing himself from the type of holy man familiar in the wider world), (4) insistence that each individual was responsible for his/her thoughts, words and deeds (in effect, tearing them out of their kindreds, clans, and tribes), and finally (5) the terrifying prospect that the end of the world was near and that each of those isolated individuals would be brought face to face with that awesome, ahuman divinity, to face judgement.

The Our'an both transcends and is immersed in time. The central cosmological message is a universal, eternal truth. The ritual and moral precepts, once they reach their final form, are for all time. But the circumstances of the time of the Prophet's preaching, conventionally dated between 610 (the original revelation) and his death in 632, could not but have an impact on what he said and how he said it. There are numerous allusions, some clearer than others, to key events in the recent past – notably to the hijrah, to the great war being fought in the north, and to the three main engagements with the Quraysh of Mecca and their allies. The deep past is no less present, lowering over the present, providing much useful material with which to browbeat the unbelievers. Numerous cautionary tales were culled from the deep past, involving figures from the Old Testament, the most prominent being Abraham, Noah, and Moses, and Arab prophets (Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, and Shuʿayb, who were rejected by their peoples). Ruins and strange rock formations in the desert testified to the fate of peoples punished by God for disregarding his prophets. Finally, time, linear time structured the Prophet's preaching, which clearly evolved over time – from his first brief, half-coherent, apocalyptic utterances through his arguments with the Meccans who questioned his prophetic mission to his later polemics against Jews and Christians and authorization of war for the faith.1

The Qur'an took on its canonical form in the caliphate of 'Uthman (r. 644-56). Faced with readings which differed on minor points (Muhammad had not been concerned by small variations in wording), 'Uthman had an authoritative text compiled by a small team of experts on the basis of collective memory. It was then checked against a written version on loose leaves belonging to his predecessor 'Umar I's

¹ Kennedy, The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates, 13-42; Howard-Johnston, Witnesses to a World Crisis, 355-58, 448-51.

daughter, Hafsah. That, at any rate, is the account of the collection and writing down of the Our'an given by a tradition which originated with Ibn Shihab al-Zuhrī (d. 742) and was accepted by the great qur'anic scholar and historian, al-Tabarī. This scenario, sanctioned by early medieval Muslim scholars, accords with the material evidence of early gur'ānic codices, datable to the second half of the seventh century. Only one of these, the palimpsest discovered in the false ceiling of the prayer hall of the great mosque of Sanaa, has a deviant text, subsequently erased and replaced with the canonical one. Apart from minor linguistic variations of six types, the major difference was in the order of the *sūrah*s. While individual revelations had been combined into sūrahs in the Prophet's lifetime, it looks as if there was no agreed arrangement until the 'Uthmānic text was produced and disseminated.²

The canonical text arranged sūrahs approximately by length, the longest first, the shortest last. They may be rearranged into rough chronological order on the basis of three principal criteria – mean length of individual verses, language, and topic – and may be divided between those in which material delivered at Mecca predominates and those predominantly belonging to the Medinan period (more militaristic, with more polemics against Jews and Christians, above all more concerned with legal and ritual prescription for the faithful). We can listen as Muhammad develops God's message – rebutting criticisms, arguing against idolatry and the existence of other gods, and issuing more and more detailed guidance to the faithful. In this paper I shall be focussing on three late sūrahs, which cast light on a key moment in the development of the new faith. They can help to explain the extraordinary phenomenon of Islam's success in the seventh and eighth centuries.

It was the words uttered by the Prophet which galvanised Arabia, a vast, desiccated, lightly populated slab of territory stretching south from the Fertile Crescent, into conquering the surrounding world. The Roman empire was stripped of its richest, most industrialised provinces (Syria, Palestine, and Egypt) by 644. The Sasanian empire was swallowed whole by 652. By the middle of the eighth century, the whole of north Africa and much of Spain was under Arab rule, while, in central Asia, Tang forces which had pushed far to the west were defeated at the battle of Talas in 751, a defeat which triggered the revolt of An Lushan, a Sogdian general, and led to a grave weakening of Tang China.4

² Déroche, Le Coran, une histoire plurielle; Anthony, Muhammad and the Empires of Faith, 11–17.

³ Sinai, The Our'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction, 111–37.

⁴ Kennedy, The Great Arab Conquests; Howard-Johnston, Witnesses to a World Crisis, 461-516; Lewis, China's Cosmopolitan Empire, 40-44, 58-64.

II

Let us turn first to Sūrat al-Bagarah (Q 2), much the longest, and universally agreed to be late. I am using the translation of A. Yusuf Ali, which I have checked as far as I can against the original Arabic text. I take it from The Holy Qur'an published by the Islamic Propagation Centre International in 1946.

O 2 contains material, in its last part, which lays down laws for the new community of believers, performing a function akin to that of the early law-codes issued by Germanic rulers in the west, after the destruction of the Roman political order. It opens with a long denunciation of Jews and Christians. It is the central section (verses 125 to 167) with which I am concerned. This deals with the Ka'bah at Mecca, the premier pagan centre of Arabia, attributing its original construction to Abraham (of which more later). The direction of prayer has been changed. It is an arresting passage. 'The fools among the people will say: "What hath turned them from the qiblah to which they were used?" Say: to God belong both east and west: He guideth whom He will to a way that is straight' (O 2:142). A second response is given in the following verse - '... and We appointed the qiblah to which thou wast used, only to test those who followed the Apostle from those who would turn on their heels. Indeed it is momentous, except to those guided by God' Finally the new direction of prayer is specified (verse 144) – '... now shall We turn thee to a qiblah that shall please thee. Turn then thy face in the direction of the sacred Mosque (al-masjid al-ḥarām): wherever ye are, turn your faces in that direction...'

Several observations can be made on these passages. (1) The old *qiblah*, wherever it was, had evidently been accepted for a long time, probably from the Meccan period.⁵ The faithful had become used to it, and some objected openly to the change. (2) The change was recent. The objections had just been lodged. It follows that the traditional date, immediately after the hijrah in 622, is wrong. Admittedly the notice about it is placed there in the sīrah, the life of Muhammad based on traditions collected, arranged, and transmitted from the end of the seventh century, which, I believe, reflect historical reality. But, unlike most other episodes in the Prophet's career at Mecca and Medina, there is no accompanying detail – no elaboration, no explanation, no context. It looks as if the notice has been deliberately uprooted and relocated, in what would be a very rare example of deliberate tampering with chronology. (3) Two different answers are given: one, which to me, at least, makes sense and should have worked, that God is everywhere (i. e. a direction of prayer is

⁵ Meccan date: Neuwirth, "The Oibla of Muhammad's Community Reconsidered," 253-54.

⁶ Sīrah: Schoeler, The Biography of Muhammad, 20–37.

⁷ Howard-Johnston, Witnesses to a World Crisis, 413–14, 458, n. 49.

needed but may point anywhere – the object is to ensure that the whole congregation face in the same direction); the second is rather extraordinary – God had been testing the faith of the believers with the wrong qiblah, and has now fixed on the true, permanent one. (4) The first qiblah is not specified, but has usually been thought to be Jerusalem, in particular the Holy Mount, where the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsā Mosque now stand. Jerusalem, the holy city of Jews and Christians, recipients of the first two revelations, was equally venerated by Muslims, recipients of the third. 8 (5) The new qiblah was the Ka bah at Mecca, the large cube to which idolaters made annual pilgrimages from all over Arabia and where they made sacrifices to their gods. It was not simply the change of qiblah to which objections were voiced but its pagan character.

This is an objection which we can well understand. How on earth could the Prophet be instructing the faithful to redirect their prayers from the holy city of monotheist Peoples of the Book to the pagan cult centre of Arabia? Were they now expected to venerate it, perhaps even to go on pilgrimage to it? Might they be expected to follow pagan practice and sacrifice animals to God, as if He would appreciate the meat and the blood of the sacrifice?

For the moment, though, let us just note the brute fact of the new Meccan *qiblah*, and try to fix the date of its inauguration. The outer limits are the *hijrah* in 622 and Muhammad's performance of the 'umrah, the Little Pilgrimage, in 629. It was assuredly nearer the latter, since the *sūrah* is late.

Muslims were indeed instructed to go on pilgrimage to the Kabah, and Muhammad himself would do so in 629. The instructions were issued in another of the late sūrahs, Sūrat al-Ḥajj (Q 22:23-38). Abraham had been told to sanctify God's House 'for those who compass it round, or stand up, or bow, or prostrate themselves' and to proclaim the pilgrimage for men to come on foot or on lean mounts and to 'celebrate the name of God, through the days appointed, over the cattle which He has provided for them: then eat ye thereof and feed the distressed ones in want. Then let them complete the rites prescribed for them, perform their vows, and circumambulate the Ancient House' (vv. 28–29). After stressing that it is lawful to eat cattle, the faithful are told to 'shun the abomination of idols and shun the word that is false' (v. 30). A few verses further on the sūrah returns to the subject of sacrifice: 'The sacrificial camels we have made for you as among the symbols from God: in them is good for you: then pronounce the name of God over them as they line up; when they are down on their sides, eat ye thereof, and feed such

⁸ Neuwirth, "The Qibla of Muhammad's Community Reconsidered," 260-63 envisages the first qiblah as a quasi-transcendent, otherworldly sanctuary imagined as being in the Holy Land.

as live in contentment, and such as beg with due humility: thus have we made animals subject to you that ye may be grateful. It is not their meat nor their blood, that reaches God: it is your piety that reaches Him ...' (vv. 36–37).

It was the full set of pagan rituals which was being prescribed for Muslims. The Prophet was telling them to behave in every respect like pagans in the sacred month and in the sacred precincts. They were to circumambulate the Kabah and to bring animals for sacrifice. Some details are added in Sūrat al-Mā'idah (O 5:2-4), about the animals that they were not allowed to eat (game, since hunting was prohibited during the pilgrimage); from incidental references in those same verses it may be inferred that they were to wear traditional pilgrim garb and to garland the sacrificial animals in the traditional way. It is clear then that Muhammad was authorizing his followers to venerate the pagan sanctuary, to adopt pagan rites, and to carry out pagan sacrifices. There were only two caveats. They were to disregard the idols crowded around the Kabah and to remember that the supreme, omnipotent and omniscient God, whose power was imprinted on the landscape of Arabia, was not concerned with the meat and blood but with their prayers. A pagan sacrifice was transformed into a monotheistic ritual by the attitude with which it was carried out.

What a contrast with the adamant opposition of early Christians to sacrifices during the pagan crackdowns in the third century Roman empire!

Apart from direct commands from God to pray towards the Kabah and to go on pilgrimage, the faithful were given an explanation in human terms. Abraham, they were told, was the original builder. 'Remember We made the House (al-bayt) a place of assembly for men and a place of safety; and take ye the station of Abraham as a place of prayer; and We covenanted with Abraham and Ishmael that they should sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves. And remember Abraham said: "My Lord, make this a city of peace, and feed its people with fruits – such of them as believe in God and the Last Day"... And remember Abraham and Ishmael raised the foundations of the House ...' (O 2:125–27). This provided the justification for the change in the direction of prayer discussed later in the same sūrah (O 2:142–45).

There are two other passages which associate the building of the Ka'bah with Abraham. Sūrat Āl 'Imrān (O 3) is undoubtedly late, like Sūrat al-Bagarah (O 2). It is long and makes a clear reference to the battle of Uhud fought in 625 (vv. 165-67). It is largely taken up with polemics against unbelievers, and a comparatively conciliatory distancing of Muslims from the other Peoples of the Book. It is Muslims who are being addressed in verses 95-101, which refer to the Kabah: 'The first House appointed for men was that at Bakkah: full of blessing and of guidance for all kind of beings: in it are signs manifest: the station of Abraham: whoever enters it attains security; pilgrimage thereto is a duty men owe to God - those who can afford the journey; but if any deny faith, God stands not in need of any of His creatures. Say: "O People of the Book! Why reject ve the signs of God, when God is Himself witness to all ye do?" (vv. 96–98). Why Mecca is called Bakkah remains a mystery, unless it be an early mistake of orthography or a play on the names Ka'bah (inverted) and Mecca. The foundation of the Ka'bah is also attributed to Abraham in Sūrat al-Ḥajj (Q 22) on pilgrimage, already cited above: 'Behold! We gave the site, to Abraham, of the House: "Associate not anything with Me; and sanctify My House for those who compass it round ..." (v. 26).

Abraham features in the Qur'an more frequently than any other figure from the Old Testament except Moses. 9 He is the first true monotheist, who believed in an all-powerful God. He truly submitted, being ready to sacrifice his son at God's command. He is a fierce opponent of idolatry. But no connection is made between this exemplary believer and the foundation of the Kabah until the three late sūrahs I have just quoted – with a single exception, a passage in what is patently a Meccan sūrah (Q 14, Sūrat Ibrāhīm), focussed on God's power to create and to destroy and the imminent day of judgement. Abraham is suddenly mentioned in verse 35: 'Remember Abraham said: "O my Lord! Make this city one of peace and security: and preserve me and my sons from worshipping idols ... O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring to dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Thy Sacred House, in order, O our Lord, that they may establish regular prayer: so fill the hearts of some among men with love towards them, and feed them with fruits: so that they may give thanks ...' (Q14:35-37). Abraham's prayer continues to verse 41, after which the *sūrah* reverts to Meccan themes.

Given the abrupt changes of subject at the start and close of Abraham's prayer, it looks like an insertion of late material into an early sūrah. Certainly its presence in O 14 is anomalous, and does not detract from the circumstantial evidence, namely the late dates of Sūrahs 2, 3, and 22, for placing the first association of Abraham with the Ka'bah late in the Medinan period of Muhammad's mission, almost certainly (as argued above) in 628.

Why then was the change of qiblah ordered? Why did the new religion, which looked to an ahuman, uncircumscribable divinity, infinitely remote, omniscient, omnipotent (rather akin to the Fate of whom pagan Arabs were vaguely aware), why, why did it embrace the premier pagan cult centre of Arabia with all its trappings? Why were the faithfuls' prayers to be directed at the very place where pagans worshipped their gods, a place full of idols?

The answer must be sought in the circumstances of the time. 10

⁹ Moses appears 137 times, Abraham 69 times.

¹⁰ Neuwirth, "Qibla of Muhammad's Community Reconsidered," 277-83 argues that a real site had to replace the almost unworldly indeterminate site loosely connected with Jerusalem (emblem of

III

Six years on from the hijrah the ummah was beleaguered. Not just in the sense of being besieged or blockaded, but also because Muhammad was finding it difficult to break into Mecca's network of alliances and to propagate the new faith across Arabia. This was made all too clear in 627 when the Meccans and their chief nomad allies advanced on Medina. The siege which followed was not pressed. There was no military thrust into the oasis. 11 It looks as if the operation was not intended to eradicate the ummah and kill the renegade Quraysh at its heart – an internecine act which would have caused shock throughout Arabia - but as a demonstration of the overwhelming power of Mecca. It can be viewed then as the first move in a diplomatic minuet between the emigrants and their home city. If the Ouraysh were to maintain their dominant position in the Hijāz, they had to affect a rapprochement with the exiles. The unedifying spectacle of a feud between the Muslims and Mecca could not but damage Mecca's prestige and weaken its nexus of alliances.

The second act is described in some detail in the sīrah. I take the principal elements in the tradition which originated with 'Urwah b. al-Zubayr (b. 643/4, d. 712) to correspond to reality. Muhammad decided to go on the 'umrah, the Little Pilgrimage, in 628 with a large party from Medina. He donned the customary pilgrim garb and took the customary animals for sacrifice. The Quraysh barred the way, Muhammad took a side route through a pass to the small depression of al-Hudaybiyah, to the north of Mecca, on the edge of the sacred area. There he and his party halted, and held talks with Quraysh notables, headed by Abū Sufyān. The negotiations were evidently tough. The Ouraysh would not allow Muhammad to go ahead with the pilgrimage that year. They refused to recognise him as the apostle of God, insisting that he be referred to by his patronymic in the final agreement, by his position in the kinship structure of Mecca. Equally they refused to recognise al-Raḥmān, 'the Compassionate,' as a proper name for God, insisting instead that the wording of the agreement should refer to him as plain Allāh (one of several gods and goddesses venerated at Mecca). Conversion to Islam was allowed, but no Quraysh could move to Medina without the permission of their guardian, whereas anyone wishing to move back to Mecca was free to do so.

Muhammad had made a major concession before negotiations began – namely incorporation of the Ka'bah and all the rites of the pilgrimage into the new universal religion. This he made very plain by his attempt to go on pilgrimage. In return, the

Jewish collective identity), that the concept of the qiblah 'changed from a spiritual self-expression to a more rational, identity-political one.'

¹¹ Kennedy, The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates, 29–35: Anthony, Muhammad and the Empires of Faith, 97-98.

Ouraysh made two concessions of their own. First, a stop was put to the fighting, a ten-year armistice being agreed. Second, the key concession, Muhammad was allowed to make agreements with non-Qurayshīs – in other words the Quraysh were giving up their formal opposition to Islam and were allowing Beduin tribes freedom to choose between themselves and the ummah. From that point on, the Muslims could set about proselytising in Arabia with real hope of success. 12

The various passages quoted above from Q 2, 3, 5, 14, and 22, in which the change of qiblah is announced, pilgrimage is authorised and the polytheist sanctuary is shown to have been founded by Abraham as the place of worship of God, testify to the effort made to win over the faithful and gain backing for Muḥammad's initiative before the Hudaybiyah meeting. Muhammad could not have made his offer publicly without the wholehearted support of the *ummah*. Once the offer was made and accepted, the new religion could break out from encirclement and begin to work on minds throughout Arabia, a land where the power of God had imprinted itself in the rock formations and ruins which spoke of communal punishment for sins, and where it continued to manifest itself in the flora and fauna which came to life in so hostile an environment. A year later Muhammad was able to go on the 'umrah, make the sacrifice, and enter the Ka'bah, thus realising a vision seen long before. 13 Within two years, the balance shifted dramatically. Now it was the turn for Muhammad, his followers and a large force of allies to march on Mecca, to receive the submission of the notables and to cleanse the Ka'bah of its idols. 14

The secret of Islam's military and political success is, I believe, to be found in the fusion of the interests of the faithful, on the one hand, with those of the governing elite of Mecca, on the other, brought about by the decision to incorporate the Ka'bah and its rites into the new religion.

Independent evidence – above all the material evidence of growing prosperity in towns on the Syrian fringe of the desert – leads me to accept the sīrah's picture of Mecca as a city dominating the northern trade routes. 15 Other extraneous sources corroborate its account of five notable episodes in the political history of Arabia in the sixth century – the persecution of Christians in Najrān (north of Yemen) in 523, the Ethiopian expedition to oust Yūsuf, the Jewish ruler of Yemen, in 531, a subse-

¹² I accept as historically accurate not just the placename al-Ḥudaybiyah and the terms of the treaty, as argued by Andreas Görke ("The Historical Tradition about al-Hudaybiya"), but also the circumstances surrounding the negotiations.

¹³ Q 48:22–27. There are clear allusions to the negotiations at al-Ḥudaybiyah in this sūrah, which stresses the tranquillity of the Muslims (verses 4 and 26) and the restraint of the Ouraysh (verse 24).

¹⁴ Kennedy, The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates, 35–37.

¹⁵ Walmsley, Early Islamic Syria, 34-45.

quent rebellion by the occupying forces which installed Abrahah as ruler, Abrahah's attempt to project his authority north into the Hijāz in 552, and the Persian occupation of Yemen in 571. I am therefore ready to put my trust in the main lines of the sīrah's account of pre-Islamic Arabia, and, in particular, in what it says and what may be inferred from what it says about Mecca. 16

Mecca had achieved a dominating position in the Hijāz by the late sixth century, despite being off the direct south-north route. A plentiful water supply from the Zamzam well attracted traffic. As the Ka'bah rose to become the premier sanctuary of the Hijāz and adjoining regions, the market associated with the sanctuary grew in importance. So too did the town, which developed into a major commercial centre and created a network of alliances with neighbouring nomad tribes. ¹⁷ Late sixth-century Mecca may be envisaged as the leading city-state in the Hijāz, with ramified commercial and political connections south, north and east. Incidental references to trade by land and sea in the Qur'an provide confirmation. So do notions taken from the counting-house and transferred to the moral sphere in the Qur'an reckoning and calculating, weighing and balancing, wages, sales, loans, pledges for debt, loss and fraud etc.18

Already in 629, a year before Muḥammad's take-over of Mecca, an expedition dispatched north from Medina indicated an interest in asserting authority over the booming Levant – an interest highly likely to have been shared by the Quraysh notables. 19 The combination of a dynamic faith and a city-state with ramified political and economic networks proved unstoppable in the years following the Prophet's death in 632. Arabia was united under the rule of the twin cities of Medina and Mecca, and, in 634, they could embark on the conquest of the whole Levant, Persian as well as Roman. The conjoining of two utterly different polities, the one religiously powered, the other with well-developed statecraft, led to an explosive expansion of Arabs from Arabia.

Tensions remained, between pure believers and pragmatists, and broke out in open civil war twice in the seventh century. Each ended with the victory of the pragmatists and rule by members of the old Meccan elite, first Mu'awiyah, son of Abū Sufyān, second 'Abd al-Malik. But the driving force of faith remained as strong as ever – as it does today.20

¹⁶ Howard-Johnston, Witnesses to a World Crisis, 358-66, 396-402.

¹⁷ Kennedy, The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates, 13–25.

¹⁸ Torrey, The Commercial-Theological Terms in the Koran.

¹⁹ Kennedy, The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates, 35.

²⁰ Kennedy, The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates, 37-90; Howard-Johnston, Witnesses to a World Crisis, 458-507.

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