

A Tablet from Heaven—Or What?

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Abstract

In the article, writer-scholar Hardy Housman takes on the Muslim contention that the Qur'an came directly from heaven, and that Muhammad received it without human intervention or influence upon the contents of the book. Rather, Housman demonstrates, it was far more mundane forces that moved Muhammad, influences that included Gnosticism and, to a much greater extent, Jewish sources and heretical Christian sects. (This essay was originally written as a research paper at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.)

Nay, but it is a glorious Qu'ran.
On a guarded tablet. Surah 85:21-22

—Muslims have come to accept as dogma that the Qur'an is tied to a heavenly text, “the preserved table, ‘which came directly to Muhammad, *tanzil*, [i.e.], without passing through any other human hands....” So writes Lebanese scholar Joseph Azzi. He calls this dogma, —the foundational doctrine regarding the ultimate source of the Qur'an.¹

If Mohammed indeed received the Qur'an intact and verbatim directly from heaven, then it cannot be the case that he compiled it by plagiarizing portions and ideas from existing sources that he encountered in his life. Conversely, if the Qur'an's content is drawn from earthly

¹ Joseph Azzi, *The Priest and the Prophet* (Los Angeles, The Pen Publishers, 2005), 136.

sources, whether in a small measure or large, then the —foundational doctrine of Islam and its prophet are a monstrous fraud.

In this study we examine that foundational doctrine by critically considering whether the Qur‘an is divine or a human product. We approach the subject with skepticism, recognizing that objective truth will always survive the tests of honest scrutiny. In other words, our approach is evidential, following the evidence wherever it leads.

Concurrently we reject as logically fallacious and intellectually dishonest the circular, presuppositionalist approach that assumes *a priori* the conclusion that the sacred text *must* be true and all evidence must be pre-filtered to fit that proposition before admission to consideration. By that approach, the precious doctrine is unassailable in principle, protected from scrutiny, and no evidence could ever weigh against it, not even in principle.

First we look a little more closely at the doctrine of Qur‘anic revelation and inerrancy. Then we look at the sources that antedated and evidently contributed to shaping the text -- and in turn, shaping Islam.

At the beginning of this research, we started with the working hypothesis that the sources were primarily Gnostic material, such that it might be possible to trace the Qur‘an back to Gnostic influence, and beyond that to the neo-Platonism that underlay Gnosticism. We found that hypothesis to be a weak position that the facts do not support. There is a germ of truth in the proposition, but it fails in scope and power as an explanatory model. Only by tendentious stretching could an argument be made for it. As we will see, some Gnostic sources did influence the Qur‘an, but not sufficiently to support that hypothesis.

What we found instead is that Mohammed was primarily influenced by Jewish and heretical Christian sects. Secondly, he borrowed from pagan folklore and customs, plus some Gnostic teachings as well.

—The Qur‘an is to be regarded as uncreated. That is, it has existed from all the ages with Allah.² That view of their sacred text is a bedrock doctrine for all Muslims. Another author elaborates: The Koran remains for all Muslims, not just fundamentalists, “the uncreated word of God himself. It is valid for all times and places; its ideas are absolutely true and beyond all criticism. To question it is to question the very word of God, and hence is blasphemous.”³

Muslims regard the Qur‘an as “the immediate word of God.”⁴ As the venerable, century-old Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* puts it: “The unbound reverence of the Moslems for the Koran reaches its climax in the dogma that this book as the divine word, i.e., thought, is immanent in God, and consequently eternal and uncreated. This dogma, which was doubtless due to the Christian doctrine of the eternal Word of God, has been accepted by almost all Mohammedans since the beginning of the 3rd century.”⁵

Considered true and infallible in every way, the Quran refers to itself as “the well-preserved tablet,” *al-aw al mahfuz* (Sura 75:22) “It is accepted as an earthly reproduction of an uncreated and eternal heavenly original.”⁶ Believers hold that the Qur‘an, a holy and perfect text, is the

² Duncan MacDonald, *Aspects of Islam* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1911), 105, quoted in William Garrison, *Islamic Theology Resource Factoids* (Unpublished draft), 28.

³ Ibn Warraq. *Why I am Not a Muslim* Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2003), 294.

⁴ “Koran,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th Ed Vol 15 (New York: 1910), 898.

⁵ *Ibid.* 906.

⁶ “Qu‘ran,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th Ed Vol 15 (Chicago: 1975), 342.

word of God that was sent, word for word, from heaven to earth piecemeal by successive revelations over two decades to the prophet Mohammed through the angel Gabriel.

As such, the Qur‘an could never be regarded as a human product or even humanly influenced. Therefore any critical attempt to explore the prospect that human or mundane sources might have affected the development of the text is, to the true believer, unthinkable and blasphemous. Author Carlyle Murphey writes: “Fred Leemhuis, the Dutch scholar, noted that attempts to examine the Qur‘an’s origins are controversial because if people accept that its text is

situationally determined, then the consequence of this conclusion is that the text ... as we have it cannot be the eternal unchangeable word of God, and there’s the rub....”⁷ Even the Qur‘an itself indignantly rejects charges that Mohammed borrowed anything from other sources.⁸

The reality is, though, that the Qur‘anic text was heavily influenced by many existing sources that Mohammed encountered. Even if he was, as Muslims claim, illiterate—a highly debatable proposition—it is evident that Mohammed borrowed or plagiarized, consciously or otherwise, from multiple texts and intellectual sources that were current in the Arabian Peninsula during his time. We will look at a number of those; and in particular, we want to pay attention to the aberrant Christian and Gnostic influences that contributed significantly to shaping the text that became the Qur‘an.

⁷ Carlyle Murphey, “A Case of Academic Freedom,” in his *Passion For Islam* (New York: Scribners, 2002), 323, quoted in Garrison.

⁸ “Qur‘an,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th Ed, Vol 15, 343.

In order to identify and trace the various influences, it is important first to get a grasp of the cultural setting in pre-Islamic Arabia, particularly in Mecca and the surrounding Hijaz, the coastal region on the Red Sea known in Roman Times as Arabia Felix. That was the locus of Mohammed's youth and formative exposures.

Mecca was a hub for caravan trade routes traveling northwest along the coast to the Levant and to Egypt, southeast to Yemen and its port on the Indian Ocean, and even northward across the mountains from oasis to oasis across the great desert to destinations like Syria and Byzantium. Also, east-west traffic across the Dead Sea to and from Mecca continued overland to connect with the Coptic kingdom of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). The constant coming and going of caravans from faraway lands gave Mecca a fairly cosmopolitan interaction with a considerable variety of foreign ideas and ways.⁹

Additionally, Mecca was a religious hub. It was the location of the Ka'aba, a cube-shaped shrine built around a black meteoritic stone that pagan Arabs had worshiped for centuries. The Ka'aba accommodated a pantheon of three hundred sixty gods and a lucrative flow of polytheistic pilgrims who came there to worship. Among the beneficiaries of that commerce were the Quraysh tribe, non-nomadic Arabs who were the custodians of the Ka'aba.

⁹ Princeton Professor Bernard Lewis says this: "From very early times Arabia has formed a transit area between the Mediterranean countries and the further East, and its history has to a large extent been determined by the vicissitudes of east-west traffic. Communications both within Arabia and through Arabia have been directed by the geographical configuration of the peninsula into certain well-defined lines. The first of these is the Hijaz route, running from the Red Sea ports and inland border posts of Palestine and Transjordan along the inner flank of the Red Sea coastal range and onwards to Yemen. This was at times a route for caravan traffic between the Empire of Alexander and in the Near East and the countries of further Asia." *The Arabs in History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 16.

Mohammed was born into that locally prominent tribe; in fact, his grandfather was the tribal chief. The year was A.D. 570, five centuries after Roman General Titus destroyed Jerusalem, and 129 years after the Council of Chalcedon. That same year, while Mohammed was still *in utero*, the Christian King of Yemen came north from Sa‘na with a raiding force and attacked Mecca. During the same period, Mohammed’s father Abdullah¹⁰ died. Whether or not Abdullah was killed in that combat with the Yemenis remains unknown.

Beside the majority polytheists, Mecca also had a substantial community of Arabian Jews. These were literate and observant Jews who maintained their religious and ethnic distinctiveness and even operated a Jewish school there.¹¹

Additionally, there was a sizeable minority population of Christians in Mecca and the surrounding area. These Christians were generally of various heretical and schismatic sects: Monophysites, Nestorians, and Ebionites. Many of them were semi-hermetic monks and ascetics, plus some slaves. From time to time, Coptic Christians from Abyssinia passed through Mecca on the trade routes. Professor Alister McGrath notes: “The problematic Qur‘anic representations of Christianity can be argued to reflect knowledge, whether direct or indirect, of *heretical* versions of Christianity that were known to have been present in this region. The

¹⁰ It is significant that Abdullah means “servant of Allah.” That is one clear evidence of the abundantly evident fact that Allah was already worshiped among the ambient polytheistic pantheon. It would be interesting, if possible, to research whether that Jewish community was a product of the A.D. 70 Diaspora or the A.D. 135 Bar Kochba Revolt Diaspora at the time of Hadrian, or whether and when they came from somewhere else to settle in Arabia.

Qur'an thus critiques ideas that lie on the fringe of the Christian faith – and that virtually all Christians would also agree to be defective.”¹¹

Among these religious groups were a number of Hanifs. These were unitarian individuals who had rejected polytheism in favor of a sort of primitive, unarticulated monotheism. For the most part, Hanifs were independent thinkers and open-minded seekers who believed in a single creator God without claiming much knowledge about Him. One professor perceptively describes them this way: —Some Arabs, who were known as *hanifs*, became monotheists but did not embrace any particular religion. The heart and/or mind that led them to monotheism also led them to the culture of their forefathers. Their numbers were few, but the rapid and zealous spread of monotheism among the Arabs in one decade hints at a deep and widespread yearning for monotheism based upon Arab culture.¶¹³

There is no need here to sketch the well-known biographical details of Mohammed's youth and early exposures in Mecca. Later on, we will zoom into his life at the time of his marriage to Khadijah.

Anyone acquainted with the Bible who reads the Qur'an will recognize fragments of biblical narratives and allusions to biblical characters stirred into a radically discontinuous verbal mixture that is the Qur'anic text. It becomes obvious that Mohammed must have acquired his fragmented and confused views of the Bible by occasional and random exposure to oral renditions. The result is a childish pastiche of cartoonish images thrown together. For example, the Qur'an reveals that Mohammed thought Mary the mother of Jesus and Miriam the sister of

¹¹ Alister McGrath, *Heresy: A history of defending the truth* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 224-5. ¹³ Emory C. Bogle, *Islam: Origin and Belief* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 5

Moses were the same person. He thought Haman the Persian official at Ahasuerus' court was a minister of Pharaoh's Egyptian court.

The Eleventh Edition of *Britannica* put it this way: —... Mahomet did not make use of written sources. Coincidences and divergences [vis-à-vis the Bible] alike can always be accounted for by oral communication from Jews who knew a little and Christians who knew next to nothing.¹² It adds: —In addition to his misconceptions there are sundry capricious alterations, some of them very grotesque, due to Mahomet himself.¶

From the Meccan Jews, Mohammed picked up images from not only the Old Testament, but also from the Talmud, the Targums, the Midrash, and Jewish folklore.¹³

Mohammed took Sura 21:105 nearly verbatim from Psalm 37:11. How curious that the psalmist David received an advance copy of a verbatim excerpt from the eternal Qur'an that was revealed sixteen hundred years later.¹⁴

From Jewish folklore Mohammed plagiarized the story of Cain and the raven found in Pirke Rabbi Eliezer's book of fables and in the Mishnah. The Qur'an tells an account of Cain's murdering Abel. In Sura 5:30-35, God sends a raven to tell Cain, by scratching the ground, how to hide his shame by burying Abel's corpse. Similarly, in the earlier Jewish source, a raven scratches the ground to show grieving Adam how to bury his slain son Abel.¹⁵

¹² —Koran,¶ *Encyclopedia Britannica* 11th Ed. Vol 15, 900.

¹³ —Western scholars who have analyzed the contents of the various revelations have shown that much of the narrative material concerning biblical persons and events is not derived from the Bible but from later Christian and, above all, from Jewish sources (e.g., Midrash).¶ —Koran,¶ Op Cit, 900.

¹⁴ Jerry Rassamni, *From Jihad to Jesus: An ex-militant's journey of faith*, (Chattanooga: Living Ink Books, 2006), 73.

¹⁵ M. Ali, *Islam Reviewed*, (Fort Myers: Fish House Publishing, 1999), 27.

The Midrash Rabah tells a story of Abraham and his deliverance from a fire. As the tale has it, when Abraham was still in Ur of the Chaldees, he took an axe and destroyed all the local idols except one, the largest. Abraham's father confronted him about the iconoclastic action, and Abraham gave him a flippant reply. Infuriated, his father reported Abraham to Nimrod. Nimrod threw Abraham into a fire, but God intervened and delivered him.

In the Qur'an, Abraham destroys all the local idols except the main one. A mob confronts him and asks who did it. He sarcastically tells them to ask the remaining idol. At that, the angry mob throws Abraham into a fire, but Allah delivers Abraham by making the fire cool. The similarity to the Midrash tale is hard to miss.¹⁶

Other story elements in the Qur'an that come from Jewish sources are found, *inter alia*, in the *Testament of Abraham* (in Sura 87); *Protoevangelion's James the Lesser* (in Sura 3); *Midrash Talkut* (in Surah 2); the *Targum of Jonathan ben Uziah* (in Surah 5).¹⁹

Zoroastrian folklore influenced the Qur'an. Lebanese ex-Muslim Jerry Rassamni states, —The Qur'an and Ahadith include many stories borrowed from the Zoroastrian and Hindu religions of the East.‖ He cites a number of examples including Mohammed's night journey, the sensuous paradise with seventy virgins, the bridge of Sirat, and the evil spirits from Hell.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, pagan and animistic influences show up in Islam generally and in the Qur'an itself. The Sabeans were a pagan sect who are mentioned in the biblical book of *Job*. In fact it was a raid by the Sabeans that was the first of Job's catastrophic afflictions (Job 1:15). So

¹⁶ Ali, 28-29.

¹⁷ Ibid, 73.

they were quite an ancient people, and being desert dwellers who paid a lot of attention to the night sky, they worshiped the stars. Who knows whether or not they witnessed the black stone falling as a meteorite? But the Sabeans did venerate the Ka'aba in ancient times. That custom and other Sabean practices found their way into the Qu'ran. Praying for the dead and a thirtyday period of fasting followed by a festival (cf Ramadan and Eid) are some examples. Also the Sabaeans practiced seven ritual prayers at set times daily. It so happens that in majority Islam, the five daily prayers are prescribed to be performed at the same times as five of the Sabean prayers.¹⁸

A number of folk legends from pre-Islamic Arabia appear in the Qur'an as factual revelations. Drawing from one of those, several surahs refer to a female camel who jumped out of a rock and became a prophetess. Several others tell about *jinn*, evil spirits who were feared by the pagan Arabs long before Mohammed. Another Arab fable that the Qur'an appropriated (Surah 2 and Surah 7) said that God turned a whole village of Jews into apes for fishing on the Sabbath. Surah 2 tells of four dead birds that flew away after being butchered, another Arab fable that pre-dated Mohammed.¹⁹

Although they may not all appear in the Qu'ran, Islam is indebted to pagan Arab customs for several rituals. The pilgrimage to Mecca, circumambulating the Ka'aba and kissing the black stone, throwing stones at the devil, ceremonial washing before prayers, and other Islamic rituals were practiced long before Mohammed's day.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid, 71.

¹⁹ Ibid, 72.

²⁰ Ibid, 73.

Orientalist Alfred Guillaume, citing Herodotus and early Christian historian Nilus, writes that whereas the pre-Islamic heathens in Arabia practiced human sacrifice, —there is no trace of human sacrifice in the Qur‘an.‡ On the other hand, Guillaume notes that —Gods were honored by a kiss, or by stroking the rock or stone with the hand, the underlying idea being that the worshipper would acquire holiness by contagion.‡ Guillaume adds, —...[T]here is a tradition that the Caliph Umar once said of the Black Stone which is kissed by the pilgrims, _Had I not seen the Prophet kiss you, I would not kiss you myself.‡²¹

It is well known that Allah, symbolized by the crescent moon, was one of many pagan gods worshiped in pre-Islamic Arabia. From the ancient Canaanite worship, Mohammed borrowed their fire god Molech. Molech appears in Islam as Malik, an angel who rules in hell.²⁵

Five different surahs quote passages from the pagan Arabic poetry of Imra‘ul Qays. Tradition has it that the original poet’s daughter ridiculed Mohammed’s daughter Fatima on account of Mohammed’s plagiarism. Her mocking proved fatal to her, says a Hadith, thus contributing authoritative precedent to the policy of answering irrefutable ridicule with murder.²² The forms of Christianity that Mohammed encountered were mostly heretical and aberrant sects. The Qu‘ranic text shows that he picked up bits and pieces from their teachings and lore. It is likely that Mohammed had contact with Coptic Christians from Abyssinia, due to the commercial traffic between Mecca and Ethiopia. He also had a Coptic concubine named Myriam who could have relayed Coptic teachings to him. The Copts traced their Old Testament connection all the way back to Solomon and the Queen of Sheba; and as Christians, they had an

²¹ Alfred Guillaume, *Islam*, (Middlesex and Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1954), 9.

²² *Ibid*, 71.

established body of Christian doctrine dating back to apostolic times. Thus they remained generally unaffected by the great controversies of the Church Councils in the fourth and fifth centuries, although they may have assimilated a measure of the neo-Platonism that spawned Gnosticism downriver. In any case, there is little evidence that Coptic Christianity had any influence on Mohammed and the Qu‘ran.

The prevalent forms of Christianity in Arabia during Mohammed’s time were Monophysite, Nestorian, and Ebionite. The divisions between sects mostly concerned disagreements over Christology, the same controversies that sparked the Church Council debates two and three centuries earlier. —[W]hen Mohammed reached manhood,|| writes Guillaume, —Arab Christianity was split into rival camps weakened by persecutions and internecine war, and filled with the utter detestation of the Greeks.||²³ The Greeks he mentions were the Greek Orthodox, who were also represented in the region, even so far from Constantinople.

The Monophysites, also called Jacobites, held that Christ had only one nature, over against Christology claiming two natures. The Council of Ephesus in 431 and the Council of Chalcedon twenty years later had wrestled over the question, and the factions remained bitterly partisan. The Monophysites believed that Christ’s humanity became divine. Professor Harold O.J. Brown writes, —The fundamental impulse of monophysitism, is that the unity of the divine and the human in Christ is fulfilled in the physical life of Christ and produces a single nature. The theory states that the Word becomes flesh, but it works itself out in the human flesh becoming divine.||²⁴

²³ Guillaume, 14.

²⁴ Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and orthodoxy in the history of the church*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 184.

Brown states, —Opposition to Chalcedon is the real hallmark of the Monophysites.... Inasmuch as the empire committed itself and its authority to the implementation of Chalcedon, their resistance led to decades of conflict. It produced a bitter animosity that ultimately resulted in the easy submission of the dissatisfied and alienated monophysite provinces to the surge of Islam.²⁵

While it is understood that any sort of Christianity would weigh against polytheism, clearly Monophysite theology would militate in support of both a radical monotheism and a severely delimited, less than fully divine Jesus. Both of those ideas tended to prepare the ground for Islam by shaping Mohammed’s concept of Christianity. Accordingly we find them both reflected, albeit with variation, in the Qur’an, with its vehement anti-Trinitarianism and its strictly human view of Jesus. Monophysites have cited Origen in support of their view.²⁶ Guillaume observes: —...[T]he Monophysites held that there was only one nature in Christ who was the divine Word (notice the expression _a word from Him‘ used to explain the office of Jesus in the Qu‘ran) incarnate.²⁷

Professor Emory C. Bogle writes: —Many Arabs knew about the concept of monotheism, but few had received instruction in such beliefs. Interestingly, however, most of the Arab Christians insisted upon the Monophysite approach to Christianity, which rejected the confusing concept of the Trinity.²⁸

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Brown, 94.

²⁷ Guillaume, 14.

²⁸ Bogle, 5.

This snapshot description of Monophysite presence in sixth-century Arabia helps us to appreciate their influence: —The Monophysites were extraordinarily active in converting the Arabs, and shortly before the birth of Mohammed large numbers had been baptized. A priest and deacon were appointed to each tribe. Churches were founded, almsgiving and fasting were regularly practiced. Monasteries were open day and night to travelers, who were given food and drink before they were sent on their way. Women were veiled when out of doors.²⁹ That veiling of women probably impressed Mohammed as a mark of piety.

Nestorian Christianity was a parallel and rival influence in the region. Subscribing to a dual-nature Christology, —Nestorians held that Christ was truly man but was born as God of the Virgin Mary, uniting in himself the two natures.³⁰ Nestorius, who had begun as a monk in Antioch, was an ex-Patriarch of Constantinople in the early fifth century, and he tended to support Pelagius over against Augustine.

Nestorius incurred a great deal of opposition, religiously and politically, when he chose the term *theotokos*, —God-bearing One,³¹ for the Virgin Mary. He was trying to assert that Jesus was God even in the womb. Brown explains: —Nestorius taught that the two natures of Christ fall together in one *prosopon*. The Greek word is ambiguous: by it, Nestorius apparently meant one person, which would be quite orthodox, but his opponents understood him to be saying one *appearance*, and thus to be speaking of only an apparent unity.³¹

Actually, Nestorius held to the orthodox view that there is a single Son having two natures. But his ecclesiastical rival, Cyril of Alexandria, exploited the verbal misunderstanding in order

²⁹ Guillaume, 14-15.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Brown, 174.

to get Nestorius condemned and banished. As a result, Nestorianism was marginalized to the fringes of the empire and beyond. Outside the empire, it spread as far as China.³² Nestorius' original Christology has been misunderstood ever since, distorted into the idea that Christ is two persons.³³

In sixth-century Arabia, Nestorian Christianity was a substantial ingredient in the socioreligious mix. Guillaume says, —The church in the east was predominantly Nestorian, though a fair number of Monophysites were to be found there.¶ According to Guillaume, the Nestorians —established schools in many towns. In their monasteries monks could be heard chanting their offices, so that the Arabs became accustomed to seeing the monks at prayer, day and night, prostrating themselves with their faces to the ground. In prayer the Christians turned to the east.

Such men were a familiar sight on all the caravan routes of Arabia.¶³⁴

The perennial debate between Nestorians and Monophysites presumably provoked interest and raised questions that tumbled in the minds of locals including Mohammed. Too, it seems reasonable to think that Mohammed copied some of his Islamic prayer forms from the model of these Nestorian monks – the chanting and the unidirectional prostrating. If the exposure to them

³² Ibid., 172.

³³ Sixteenth-century Anglican theologian Richard Hooker wrote that Nestorianism distorts the essential doctrines of Christianity —by _rending Christ asunder' and dividing Him into two persons....¶ McGrath,93

³⁴ Guillaume,
15. ³⁹ McGrath,
105.

influenced him to such an extent in form, surely it influenced his impressions of Christian ideas as well.

Having looked so far at the Jewish community and some Christian communities in and around Mecca, we turn our attention to the Ebionites. The Ebionites (from the Hebrew, —poor men) were an odd sect of heretical Christians about which relatively little is known. There is considerable debate over whether they should be considered Jewish or Christian. One scholar claims, —... [I]t is nevertheless widely accepted that the beliefs of the Ebionites are to be positioned firmly within the matrix of contemporary Judaism.³⁵ Others say the Ebionites were —an ultra-Jewish party in the early Christian church and identify them with —the Jewish Christians of Syria³⁵ What is clear is that they were far from orthodoxy in either religion. It is also clear that they were not at all Gnostic. Unlike the Gnostics, who believed that a demiurge created the world, Ebionites held that the true God of Israel was the Creator. They adhered to the customs and ordinances of the Mosaic Law, and rejected Paul and his writings, considering him apostate for not doing likewise. Most of them accepted the virgin birth of Jesus without accepting His pre-existence as *Logos*. They accepted something called the *Gospel of Matthew*, and the extra-canonical *Gospel According to the Hebrews*, but none of the canonical Gospels.³⁶ They were extreme millenarians who believed that Jesus would eventually rule a messianic kingdom headquartered in Jerusalem. They observed both the

³⁵ —Ebionites, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th Ed. Vol 8, (New York: 1910), 842.

³⁶ —Ebionites recognized a single, non-canonical gospel. They called it *the Gospel of Hebrews*. It is also called the *Gospel of Matthew*, but an unachieved, distorted, and falsified one, according to Epiphanius. Azzi, 8.

Christian Lord's Day and the Jewish Sabbath every week. They have alternatively been called *Nazarenes*. Their system is basically pharisaical and resembles the Judaizers.³⁷

Their Christology was not uniform, and as early as the beginning of the third century, some of them held to an apparent blend of Christianity and Essenism.³⁸ These —Essene Ebionites— were called Elchasaites, and they accepted a sacred book called *The Book of Elchasai*. According to that text, Jesus was an enormously tall (miles high) angel born of human parents, and the Holy Spirit was an equally gigantic female angel. This Jesus was not divine, but only a prophet and a teacher. Since he did not affect the Mosaic Law, circumcision and repetitious ritual washing remained in effect, together with other ordinances. They added some elements of ascetic practice and astrology to their system.³⁹

The Eleventh Edition article on Ebionites ends with this loaded sentence: —Ebionite views lingered, especially in the country east of the Jordan until they were absorbed by Islam in the 7th century.⁴⁰ If it is indeed true that Islam absorbed Ebionite views as early as Islam's first century, then we have an important clue concerning our search for Qur'anic sources.

We notice some obvious affinities and commonalities. The Ebionite Jesus is not divine; He is only a teaching prophet as in Islam. One scholar writes, —Most scholars consider that early second-century Ebionitism was characterized by a 'low Christology' — that is, an understanding of Jesus of Nazareth that interprets him as spiritually superior to ordinary human beings but not

³⁷ —Ebionites, EB 11, Vol 8, 842

³⁸ —Irenaeus..., Origen..., and Epiphanius... alluded to this sect. Supposedly some monks of the Qumran Dead Sea Scrolls community joined this sect after the destruction of Jerusalem's Temple. They immigrated to the Hijaz area where other Arab tribes merged into this sect. Azzi, 9.

³⁹ —Ebionites, EB11, Vol 8, 842-843.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

otherwise distinct.⁴¹ —The Ebionites perceived Jesus of Nazareth as a reforming Hebrew prophet.⁴²

We note that in the Ebionite view, the Holy Spirit is not divine, but only a female angel. In Islam, the Holy Spirit is not divine (in fact, Mohammed claimed that the New Testament prophecies concerning the Holy Spirit were predictions of his own advent); and consistent with the Muslim misunderstanding of the Christian Trinity, she is a female. (Muslims are taught that Christians believe in a Trinity consisting of Father, Son, and the Virgin Mary.⁴³) The Ebionite legalism, with its circumcision, ritual washings, and the like, correlates nicely in detail to Islam. Of course these similarities are not conclusive, but they point to the likelihood of influence rather than coincidence.

Genealogically, Mohammed and his first wife Khadijah, both of the Quraysh tribe, were distantly related in that they shared a common ancestor, Qussayy. To Khadijah, Qussayy was a great-great grandfather. To Mohammed, he was ancestral by one additional —great.

It turns out that within this bloodline Khadijah had a first cousin named Waraqa ibn Nawfal who was a priest in a sect of Meccan Christians. That particular Christian sect were called

⁴¹ McGrath, 106.

⁴² Ibid., 110.

⁴³ —The Qur'anic representation of the doctrine of the Trinity has caused some bewilderment to Christians. Even allowing for a modest degree of textual ambiguity, the Qur'an appears to represent Christians as worshipping a trinity of three distinct persons – God, Jesus, and Mary. Although a number of scholarly Islamic writers have been careful to present what Christians actually believe, this curious tritheistic representation of Christianity remains perplexingly influential within Islam. McGrath, 225.

The persistence of this teaching is not so —perplexing! if we consider that it supports the idea that Christians are polytheists, a favorite accusation against Christianity that popular Islam would be loath to abandon.

Nasorani, which name appears in the Qur‘an (Surahs 2:62, and 5:18). That name is the Arab rendering of *Nazarene*.⁴⁴ Remember, as we noted above, that the Ebionites were alternatively called Nazarenes. The significant connection here is that Khidajah‘ s cousin Waraqa, who was a member of the Meccan *Nasorani*, was an Ebionite —Christian priest! That fact alone lends considerable strength to the hypothesis that, as the *Britannica* said, Islam absorbed Ebionite views in the seventh century.

In his intriguing biography of Waraqa, Lebanese Christian author Joseph Azzi writes: —Waraqa belonged to the religion of Moses before his conversion to Nosrania. He followed the monotheism of Moses as well of Jesus, i.e., the Pentateuch and the Gospel. Azzi adds, —When Waraqa converted to the sect of Nosrania, he accepted the belief that Jesus Christ was a prophet who came to complete the law of Moses, without assenting to the Orthodox creed that Jesus was God or son of God. Azzi recounts that a number of members of the Qurayysh clan were Nosranians, both before Mohammed and contemporaneously. He says that they accepted most of the obligations of the Jerusalem Apostolic Council (Acts 15, A.D.49), but they rejected the creedal provisions attributed to James the Apostle, namely, Jesus‘ divine Sonship and his crucifixion and resurrection as recorded in the four canonical Gospels. —The sectarianism of Waraqa and his colleagues rejected the divinity of Jesus Christ and some went as far as questioning the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This creed corresponded to a well-known Nazarean [sic] sect called Ebionism to which belonged Waraqa and a large number of his fellow Qurayysh tribemen.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Azzi, 1-3.

⁴⁵ Azzi, 6-7.

It is noteworthy that the Ebionite/Nosranian denial of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection agrees closely with Gnostic teachings on the same subject. We will examine that similarity a little later.

Professor Azzi indicates that in addition to the Ebionites, there were two other Jewish-Christian sects in the seventh-century Hijaz: Cerinthism and Elksaism.

Cerinthus, the founder of Cerinthism, taught that paradise is designed for sensual pleasure. According to Eusebius, Cerinthus —... believed that this kingdom would lead to all the pleasures that he coveted, namely food, drinks, and carnal delights.¶ The similarity between this and the

Qur'anic paradise is obvious. Cerinthus taught that Jesus' mission was socio-political, to liberate

Jewry from Roman occupation.⁴⁶ Curiously, the *Eleventh Edition* says that the Ebionites —held Cerinthian views on the person of Christ....¶⁴⁷ That would seem to imply that the Cerinthians preceded the Ebionites and influenced them. Whether or not that was the case is a subject for further research.

The Elksaists were called —people of science.¶ Like Gnostics, they believed that knowledge was the key to mystical treasures and hidden secrets. They did not deny Jesus' martyrdom, but they held that before Jesus died, he was separated from —the Christ personage.¶ Thus his death was that of an ordinary man. They held an indecisive variety of bizarre views about the Holy Spirit. The sect's founder, an Arab named Elkasai, —claimed that Gabriel had

⁴⁶ Superficially, this sounds like the NPP (New Perspective on Paul), the recent, reductionist view of N.T. Wright, Sanders, *et al.*

⁴⁷ —Ebionites,¶ EB11, Vol 15, 842.

brought him from heaven with _the well preserved book in a holy frame.¶⁴⁸ Since that Elksaite teaching predated

Mohammed’s revelations, the question of plagiarism arises concerning heavenly books delivered by Gabriel.

Getting back to the subject of the priest Waraqa and Ebionism, the relationship between Waraqa and Mohammed is fascinating. Not only was Waraqa an avuncular relative to Mohammed and a close cousin to Khadijah, Waraqa was actually a spiritual mentor to Mohammed, and tutored him for a time. When Mohammed accepted Khadijah’s marriage proposal, Al-Qiss [holy man] Waraqa performed the wedding ceremony.⁴⁹

Following the wedding, according to biographer Azzi, —Waraqa and Khadijah cooperate together to prepare Muhammad for his mission. This requires a continuous tutelage with a particular spiritual emphasis.¶ For the next fifteen years, Waraqa tutors Mohammed, retreating to a cave on Mount Hara for a whole month each year. —In this cave retreat, Khalwah, Waraqa, good practitioner of divine and human affairs, instructs Muhammad.¶ Throughout this time, Waraqa is grooming Mohammed to be his successor as a leading priest and the head of the Meccan Nosrania (Ebionite) community.⁵⁰

Professor Azzi provides a wealth of examples of Qur’anic —borrowings¶ from Nosranian and biblical sources. Our scope does not allow cataloguing them all; but suffice it to say that the

⁴⁸ Azzi, 9.

⁴⁹ Azzi, 18.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 20-29.

parade of exhibits in evidence is impressive. In his conclusion, Azzi summarizes: —After years of study on the origins of the Qu‘ran, I can now claim that the teachings of al-Qiss Waraqa Ibn Nawfal are thoroughly embedded in the Qu‘ran. This embedding process means that the faith of the early Meccans played a major role in forming Islam as a definite People of the Book who were instructed by this heterodox priest.¶⁵¹

As we mentioned before, there are evidences of Gnostic influence in the Qu‘ran. Most of the Gnostic schools, like most of the early-church heresies, arose out of Alexandria, and it is generally acknowledged that Gnosticism grew out of Neo-Platonism and the hermetic and Pythagorean traditions. The Gnostic elements probably reached Mohammed indirectly through the teachings and lore of the sects that were themselves influenced by Gnosticism. One ex-Muslim scholar declares broadly: —Islam‘ s conception of Christianity came through its gnostic [*sic*] and heretical forms.¶⁵² While Gnostic influence does not account for the Qu‘ran as a whole, we turn now to look at some of the examples that do appear.

One scholar makes this observation about the connection between Islam and the Gnosticism: —It is interesting to note that some of the mythological themes that are central to the Gnostic religion are distinctly similar in Islamic terms to the *Apocryphon of St John*.¶ He identifies seven distinct themes as examples.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid., 135.

⁵² Rassamni, 73.

⁵³ Bernard Simon, *The Essence of the Gnostics*, (Hertfordshire: Eagle Editions, Ltd, 204), 113. Incidentally, author Simon discusses several groups of Islamic Gnostics, most notably the Ismailis. Of course the groups were post-Qu‘ran, but their existence illustrates the compatibility between Islam and Gnosticism.

The Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* probably came to the Hijaz through Coptic sources. The Qur'an tells a story about the infant Jesus making a live bird out of clay (Surahs 3 and 5). It tells another story about the infant Jesus speaking in his cradle. (Surahs 3 and 19)⁵⁴ Both of those stories are from the *Gospel of Thomas*. Professor McGrath writes: —The Gospel of Thomas proclaims that entrance to the kingdom of Heaven is restricted to males and to a select few females who are willing to sacrifice their gender identity. ... As the feminist scholar Kathryn Greene McCreight rightly points out, Gnostic writings _abound in antifemale statements....⁵⁵ Mohammed did not get his misogyny from the *Gospel of Thomas*, but considering that he was clearly exposed to the Gnostic text, he might have found support in it.

The Qu'an denies that Jesus was crucified. Of course that entails a denial of the resurrection as well. According to Islam, a look-alike substitute was crucified instead of Jesus, who escaped. Islam could not afford to acknowledge the historicity of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, because that would be to acknowledge the Christian Gospel in accordance with the New Testament, and it would blatantly demonstrate Jesus' divinity and his superiority over Mohammed. Where did the Qu'an get the story (Surah 4) that a substitute was crucified instead of Jesus? According to the pre-Islamic Gnostic text, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, the real Jesus sat on a tree as a spectator and watched the crucifixion of the substitute, laughing. This passage from the Gnostic text reads: —He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the

⁵⁴ Rassamni, 73.

⁵⁵ McGrath, 78.

living Jesus. But the one in whose hands and feet they drive the nails is the fleshy part which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness. But he who stands near him is the living Savior.⁵⁶

The Gnostic *Gospel of Judas* exemplifies how the Gnostic gospels deny the divinity of Christ. McGrath writes: “The *Gospel of Judas* portrays Jesus of Nazareth as a spiritual guru similar to Gnostic teachers of the second and third centuries yet bearing little relation to the portrait of Jesus found in the synoptic Gospels. ... It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth has been reinvented as a Gnostic teacher with Gnostic ideas.”⁵⁷ Surely the Gnostic portrayals of Jesus as non-divine supported the Qur’an’s notions of Jesus.

The *Gospel of Barnabas* is another example of a Gnostic text that, preceding the Qur’an, generally agrees with the Qur’anic concept of Jesus. It denies the writings of Paul. We could go on to treat of other Gnostic texts, including The *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Eve*, etcetera, but our scope here is finite, and the examples above should suffice to make our point.

Muslim apologists like to argue that the Council of Nicea illegitimately excluded Gnostic texts from the Canon of Scripture, but their arguments fail. Their motive is obvious: The Gnostic writings support Islam. Apparently that remarkable affinity is due to the fact that Gnosticism was a shaping force in Islam at the beginning.

In this short study we have sought to demonstrate that the Islamic claim about the Qur’an’s origin is false. Far from being revealed intact and verbatim from heaven, the book is a mixture

⁵⁶ Peter Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back: An old heresy for the New Age*, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co, 1992), 24-25.

⁵⁷ McGrath, 10.

of ideas and narrative elements from pre-existing sources that Mohammed had encountered. The conclusion is that the Qur'an is a human product and a fraud.

This has been only one critical approach that discredits the sacred text. We could have focused on historical inaccuracies, internal contradictions, textual emendations, missing passages, foreign vocabulary elements, variant versions, and so forth, any of which approaches would suffice to discredit the Qur'an's preposterous claim. We have chosen here to focus on the pre-Islamic sources that shaped the Qur'an.

Muslim apologists will counter with the objection that the Qur'an itself openly acknowledges earlier revelations that it alludes to. For example, Muslim scholar Farid Esack writes: —The presence of Christians, Jews, and the Hunafa led to considerable speculation by non-Muslim scholars about their impact on Muhammad's ideas and the shaping of the Qur'an — with not a few direct allegations that Muhammad had borrowed his ideas from one or more of these communities. I place the word allegations in inverted commas because the Qur'an itself is quite explicit about Muhammad's message being both a continuation and a purification of the earlier revealed religions.⁵⁸

Yes, the Qur'an does explicitly acknowledge some earlier revelations, namely, the Scriptures of the Jews and the Christians, but that fact fails the —So what test. Just because the Qur'an acknowledges the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, it hardly follows that Mohammed is cleared of the charge of plagiarism.

⁵⁸ Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A user's guide*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005), 35.

First of all, nobody is accusing Mohammed of plagiarizing from the Old Testament or the New Testament. Since the objection bypasses the real accusation and speaks of a phony one instead without engaging the real point, Esack's argument is a straw man.

Then notice that Esack speaks of —earlier revealed religions.‡ The word *earlier* concedes that Islam came after the other religions in time. But the Islamic claim is that the Qur'an has existed eternally in heaven with Allah. Therefore, nothing could have preceded the Qur'an in time. Incidentally, if the Qur'an existed in eternity past and is uncreated and co-eternal with God, as Islam claims, then the Qur'an possesses attributes of deity. As Aquinas and others have shown, attributes of deity are not separable; each one implies and necessarily entails all of them. So to ascribe attributes of deity to the Qur'an is to imply that the book possesses deity; that is, that the Qur'an is God. How ironic that these self-proclaimed champions of *tawhid* and strict monotheism actually worship two gods – Allah and the Qur'an!

Esack's argument also fails to address the fact that numerous other —borrowings‡ remain unacknowledged. Any one of those would support the charge of plagiarism.

The more we learn about Mohammed, the more we recognize that the Prophet of Islam was an immoral and dishonest criminal. Plagiarism and fraud were just two of his crimes.

Likewise, the more we learn about Islam – Islam itself, as contra-distinct from individual Muslims -- the more we recognize in it the mind, character, and motivation of Satan. By all indications, the religion is energized by a spirit, a powerful spirit opposed to the true Word of God. We can say the same thing of Islam that Dr. Peter Jones observes of Gnosticism: “This

rapid overview of ancient Gnosticism reveals a diabolically inspired ... system of beliefs. It is a system dedicated to the overthrow of orthodox Christianity....”⁵⁹

Christian scholar James Murk asks, —If Satan were to create a religion, what would it be like?‖ He then follows up with three pages of deliberation on that thought-provoking question. His studied conclusion: —There can be no doubt that Islam is a satanic creed.‖⁶⁰

In John 10:10, Jesus says, —The thief cometh not but to steal and to kill and to destroy.‖ Plagiarism and blasphemy are two forms of theft. We reflect that the original thief sought to steal God’s own glory. Mohammed and his imitators follow suit. Based on John 10:10, we should not be surprised that the rest of their agenda is simply to kill and to destroy.

African evangelist M. Ali (*sic*), himself an ex-Muslim, says this: “Jesus did not wage a Jihad against innocent souls, but against His archenemy – Satan. He defeated Satan on the cross of Calvary about two thousand years ago. Satan is only using Islam to launch a counter-attack against Jesus.”⁶¹ No doubt Satan delights in snaring human souls with a sacred text that is a ridiculous and blasphemous fraud.

⁵⁹ Jones, 34.

⁶⁰ Jim Murk, *Islam Rising: The never-ending jihad against Christianity*, (Springfield: 21st Century Press, 2006), 162-167.

⁶¹ Ali, 104.

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