This article deals with the problem of the pre-Islamic Lord of the Ka`ba. An attempt is made to critically review the accepted theory that Allah had been the main deity of this shrine long before Islam was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. The evidence of scripture and our other sources suggests that the heathen Arabs may have been not particularly familiar with the notion of Allah as the greatest deity reigning over a swarm of lesser idols. Deities other than Allah were apparently greatly revered in the Ka`ba, and their role as lords of the sanctuary cannot be easily discarded. As for the concept of Allah as the main deity in the Ka`ba, the evidence seems to stem from the early Islamic period, when the monotheistic notion of God prevailed and brought with it a new understanding of history as a sequence of monotheistic prophecies beginning with the very creation of the world. This concept appears to be mainly responsible for the emergence of the belief that Allah was present in people’s faith from the days of Adam until the final reincarnation of His religion in Muhammad’s da`wa.

I. The Koran includes two remarkable verses, which refer to the deity of the Ka`ba before Islam. Neither mentions the sanctuary’s god by name. In Koran 27:91 he is named “the Lord of this territory”: I have only been commanded to serve the Lord of this territory, which has He made sacred; to Him belongs everything. And I have been commanded to be of those that surrender.\(^1\) In Koran 106:3 he is referred to as the “Lord of this House (or abode)”: So let them serve the Lord of this House who has fed them against hunger. And secured them from fear.\(^2\) In both cases there arises the question to what extent Allah might be assumed to have been the Lord of the Ka`ba before Muhammad.

II. We possess a profuse body of accounts which trace the history of the Ka`ba back to the time of Creation or even prior to it. This chronological

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\(^1\) Trans. A. J. Arberry. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor J. N. Bell for his assistance with the last drafts of this article.

back projection introduces an inextricable link between the very existence of the sanctuary and the veneration of Allah. One of the legendary accounts reported by al-Azraqî on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih asserts that Allah told Adam shortly after his banishment to Earth that the sanctuary had been present in His intention prior to the act of creation. Then He chose the place of it on the day the Moon and the Earth were created. Further Allah stresses that the Ka’ba will be favored over all other sanctuaries on Earth for it will be named after God and made to elicit His mightiness. According to Mujähid, Allah had created the Ka’ba two thousand years before anything came into existence on Earth. In another story, with an isnād going back to ‘Ali b. Husayn, Allah entrusted angels with building for the people on Earth a sanctuary to Him akin to the heavenly abode that He created to be circumambulated by the angels. In a further report it is stated that angels built only the basement of the Ka’ba, and that every angel descending for some matter to Earth goes to ask Allah for permission to circumambulate the Ka’ba.

In other instances, Adam is represented as the one who erected the sanctuary at the command of Allah. Adam was ordered to circumambulate it as the angels did the Lord’s throne. The circumambulation rites present another important hint regarding the possibility of Allah being the “Lord of the Ka’ba.” According to some reports, during his pilgrimage to Mecca,

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4 Fa-inni ‘khurtu makânahu yawma khalaqtu ‘s-samâwâti wa-l-ard (al-Azraqî, Akhbâr, 1:46). It seems that al-Azraqî wanted to confirm the authenticity of this report by adducing isnâds to the effect that there were inscriptions discovered on the Maqâm Ibrâhîm or one of the basement stones of the sanctuary, which proved that the Ka’ba was created on the day of the creation of the Sun, Moon, Earth, and Heavens (al-Azraqî, Akhbâr, 1:78–79).
5 Wa-‘huhimu ‘alâ ba‘yti ‘l-ard kullihâ bi-smî fa-usammîhi baytî wa-unîiqhu bi-‘azamatî (al-Azraqî, Akhbâr, 1:46).
6 Al-Azraqî, Akhbâr, 1:32; at-Tabarî, Jami‘ al-bayan ‘an ta‘wil ‘ây al-Qur‘ân (Cairo, 1954), no. 1688 on Koran 2:127, no. 5866 on Koran 3:95, no. 28125 on Koran 79:29. During that period angels were performing the ḥajj rites (Akhbâr, 1:44, 45).
7 Al-Azraqî, Akhbâr, 1:34; Jalâl ad-Dîn as-Suyûtî, ad-Durr al-manthûr fi ‘t-tafsîr bi-l-ma‘thûr (Cairo: Dâr al-Fikr, 1983), on Koran 2:127.
8 Al-Azraqî, Akhbâr, 1:40.
9 Ibid., 1:35.
10 Ibid., 1:36; as-Suyûtî, ad-Durr al-manthûr, on Koran 2:36.
Adam cried the following formula of ritual invocation: *Labbayka, allâhumma, labbayk, labbayka ‘abdân khalaqtahu bi-yadayk, karumta fa-‘ātayt, qarrabta fa-adnayt, tabârakta wa-ta‘âålayt, anta rabbu ‘l-bayt:* “Here I am, O God, here I am, Here I am, Your servant, whom You created by Your hand, You are generous and benevolent, You make us near to You, You are most blessed and exalted, You are the Lord of the House.”¹¹ Thus Adam is assumed to have been the first believer in Allah, while Mecca with its shrine is declared the primeval cultic location of this deity.

Later on, when Abraham resolved to build a sanctuary to Allah on Earth, Allah lifted him to heaven from whence he could better determine a new location for the sanctuary. Despite the fact that the Ka‘ba had been lain waste by the deluge, Abraham was swift to choose its previous place and the angels acclaimed him for this wise decision: “O, friend of Allah, you have chosen the sacred place of Allah on Earth.”¹² The Muslims believe that the Ka‘ba has continued to serve as Allah’s abode during the ensuing ages. Muslim authors say that Gabriel appeared in front of Hagar, after she had been left alone in the arid valley of Mecca, and told her: “Here is the first sanctuary, which was built for the people of Earth, and it is the Ancient Abode of Allah.”¹³ In a version of the story of Abraham and Ishmael building the Ka‘ba, with another *isnād*, al-Azraqî reports that Abraham came to Mecca to inform his son that he had been commanded by Allah to build a sanctuary for Him.¹⁴

The most important thing for us is that the mythological strata, which underlie the extant Muslim accounts about the history of the Meccan sanctuary, formed the necessary background for the origin of the theory which makes the Ka‘ba the earthly abode of Allah. Traces of this belief can be found in a considerable number of accounts concerning the Jâhiliya. In many cases, the references to the relation between the Ka‘ba and the cult of Allah remain rather oblique—a detail which suggests that they are of an early ori-

¹³ *Wa-ashâhara lahâ ilâ mawdî‘i ‘l-bayti [wa-qâl]: hâdhâ awwalu baytin wu’dî‘a li-n-nâs, wa-huwa baytu ‘llâhi ‘l-‘attîq* (al-Azraqî, *Akhbâr*, 1:56). At-Tabârî points out that an angel appeared before Hagar and told her that she was standing in front of the ancient abode of Allah, which would be [re]erected by Abraham and Ishmael (*Jâmi‘ al-bayân*, no. 1687 on Koran 2:127).
gin, and something which made it easier for Islamic sources to accept them as convention. As a result, efforts to prove the relation between the Ka‘ba and the cult of Allah were not widespread among medieval Muslim authors, who preferred to fill their reports with hints about its existence.

In a verse attributed to Qays b. al-Hudāya al-Khuzā‘ī, the poet swears by the House of Allah (bayt Allāh), where his tribesmen used to cut their hair during the annual pilgrimage. In a story related by al-Mas‘ūdi one Shahna b. Khalaf al-Jurhumī is reported to have said in a verse reply to ‘Amr b. Luḥayy (baṣḥīf): Yā ‘amru, innaka qad adhathta ālihata / shattā bi-makkata ḥawla ʿl-bayti anṣābā // wa-kāna li-l-bayti rabbun wāḥidun abadan, / faqad jaʿalā lahu fi ‘n-nāsī arbābā // la-ṭaʿrifanna bi-anna ʿl-lāha fi mahlin / sa-yawṣafī dānakum li-l-bayti hujjābā. (“O ‘Amr, you have introduced numerous gods in Mecca, who remain erected around the Ka‘ba. After there had always been only one god in the abode, you made many lords for the people. But you should know for certain that Allah, though in His own good time, will choose others [than your tribe al-Jurhum] to be custodians of the abode.”) In a report related by al-Azraqī ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib is said to have told the messenger of the Yemeni ruler Abraha, who set out to destroy the Ka‘ba: hādhā baytu ʿl-lāhi ʿl-ḥarām wa-baytu ibrāhīma khalilihi. (“This is the sacred abode of Allah and the abode of his friend Abraham.”) In turn Ibn Ishaq relates that when the Arabs heard of Abraha’s intention to destroy the Ka‘ba, which he undisputedly calls baytu ʿl-lāhi ʿl-ḥarām (the sacred abode of Allah), they called for jihad in defense of Allah’s

15 Ibn al-Kalbī, Kitāb al-asnām (Cairo, 1924), 21.
17 Al-Azraqī, Akhbār, 1:143; Ibn Ishaq, Sirat an-nabi (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, n. d.), 1:49; at-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh ar-rusul wa-l-mulūk (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, n. d.), 2:133; Jāmiʿ al-bayān, no. 29405 on Koran 105. Though a bit later, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib would say to Abraha himself only that the house had its lord who would defend it (Inna li-l-bayti rabban sa-yamnahu; at-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, 2:134) without mentioning Allah by name. It is worth pointing out that Kister referred to the same conversation, yet reported to have taken place in San‘ā between Abraha and some Meccan merchants residing there (M. J. Kister, “Some reports concerning Mecca from Jāhiliyya to Islam,” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 15 [1972]: 65).
18 Ibn Ishaq, Sīra, 1:46–47; at-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, 2:132; al-Azraqī, Akhbār, 1:141. In another report al-Azraqī consigns the events to an even earlier period when, as he states, one of the Yemeni kings (the tubbaʿs) wanted to lay waste the Ka‘ba and was counseled by his priests not to do so because it was “the sacred abode of Allah” (Akhbār, 1:133).
abode. Subsequently when the attack of the Abyssinians on the Ka‘ba seemed immanent, “Abd al-Muṭṭalib and a group of his tribesmen came to call upon Allah for help against Abraha and his troops.” Perhaps the ultimate source of a considerable number of accounts employing the story about Abraha might be sought in Sūrat al-fil, according to which Allah severely punished the Abyssinians for their attempt to destroy the sanctuary in Mecca.

The later commentator Ibn Kathīr, in his glosses on Koran 27:91 and Koran 106:3, mentions in a clear reference to Allah that rabbu ḥādihi ‘l-baladati is “the Lord of all and its possessor, except Whom there is no god.”

Medieval Islamic authors asserted the notion of Allah as the Lord of the Meccan shrine in numerous accounts. The review of this data suggests that Allah was the main deity worshipped in Mecca. There may of course be doubts about the reliability of the accounts concerning the early history and the building of the Ka‘ba, but as for the late Jāḥiliya there would seem to be little reason to doubt their reliability. Consequently the theory of Allah’s predominance in the Meccan sanctuary before Islam found its way into modern Western studies.

In many of these studies the assumption that Allah was already before Islam the Lord of the Ka‘ba is closely connected with the divine-hierarchy theory which proclaims Him to be the highest deity of all Arabs. Watt is prone to believe that the Koran, by speaking of God as the ‘Lord of this House,’ accepts the Meccan sanctuary as a sanctuary of God. According to him “the identification of the Lord of the Ka‘bah with God is taken for granted.” Similarly, according to Rubin, “the Ka‘ba was actually considered as ‘the sacred House of Allah.’”

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20 Thumma qāma ‘abdul ‘l-muṭṭalibi wa-qāma ma‘āhu nafarun min al-quraysh yad‘āna ‘l-lāha wa-yasta‘ānūnahu ‘alā abraha wa-jundihi (Ibn Ishāq, Sira, 1:51; also at-Ṭabari, Ta’rikh, 2:134).
24 U. Rubin, “The Ka‘ba. Aspects of its Ritual Functions and Position in Pre-
The analysis of Izutsu proceeds in the same vain. He is inclined to accept that Allah “was considered the ‘Lord of Ka‘bah’ the highest sanctuary of Central Arabia.” Yet despite his statement that “this we can prove by ample evidence from pre-Islamic poetry,” he confines himself to adducing Koran 106:3 and asserting that the idea of Allah being the Lord of the Ka‘ba is taken for granted.

Seeking evidence, Kister adduces the *talbiya* of Adam, quoted above, in order to emphasize the fact that Allah had been the Lord of the Ka‘ba before the rise of Islam. In a subsequent comment he points out that “[the ancient Arabic tribes] believed however in a supreme God, who had His House in Mecca.”

In general, a neat line of tradition when it comes to the Lord of the Ka‘ba before Islam may be observed. The Islamic monotheistic vision of history as a phenomenon of divine influence in the affairs of the earthly realm definitively posited that the Ka‘ba had always potentially existed in Allah’s creative intention. The period of latency ended when Allah initiated creation. One of the first acts of creation was to bring the Ka‘ba into actual existence as an earthly place for worshipping Allah, akin to the one already existing in the heavens. This concept was enhanced by the medieval Islamic authors to such an extent that any doubt about the identity of the pre-Islamic Lord of the Ka‘ba was ruled out. Closely related is the notion of the High God—another attribute of the Jähili Allah.

Finally, these two overlapping concepts were reinforced by the efforts of modern students of the Jähiliya and early Islam. Study of the late pre-Islamic

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26 Ibid.
27 This kind of argumentation is reflected in the position of G. E. von Grunebaum, who states that the assumption of Allah being the Lord of the Ka‘ba “seems quite defensible” (*Classical Islam*, trans. Katherine Watson [Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970], 25), as well as in that of the Russian author L. I. Klimovich, who posits that “the ancient god of Quraysh Allah assumed a dominant position within the gods of the dependent tribes” and that “Allah was the Lord of the Quraysh sanctuary Ka‘ba” (*Islam* [Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1962], 15).
28 Kister, “*Labbayka*,” 45.
29 Ibid., 47.
period showed that the Arabs believed in a deity named Allah who occupied a high position in their minds.\footnote{See, for instance, Carl Brockelmann, “Allah und die Götzten, der Ursprung des islamischen Monotheismus,” Archiv für Religionswissenschaft 21 (1922): 99–121.} Further, comparative study of adjacent regions, where ancient cultures had flourished, suggested that the Jāhili belief in Allah may well have been affected by the religion of Yemen or North Arabia, where Allah was known not only by name, but also as an elevated divine power. Again, around the time of the emergence of Islam, the Meccan belief in Allah became so similar to the Islamic one that Izutsu wonders “why such a right understanding of God does not finally lead the disbelievers to acknowledging the truth of the new teaching.”\footnote{Izutsu, \textit{God and Man}, 101. Brockelmann’s “Allah und die Götzten” attributes to the pre-Islamic Allah so many world-view notions that this deity appears completely identical with the Allah of Islam. However any presentation of this kind raises major questions. What are the differences between the concepts of the divine in the Jāhiliya and Islam? What were the causes of the transformation from the former to the latter, and why did it take place at all?} But if we return to the primary sources, rigorous scrutiny will reveal interesting data.

III. In a remarkable conversation between the prophet Muḥammad and Saʿīd b. Muʿādh, the latter is reported by Ibn Ishāq to have said: \textit{Qad kunna . . . ʿalā sh-shirki bi-ilāhī wa-ʿibādati ʿl-awthānī, lā naʿbudu ʿl-lāḥa wa-lā naʿrifuhu.} (“Our practice towards Allah was shirk and idolatry. We did not worship Allah, nor had we knowledge of him.”)\footnote{Ibn Ishāq, \textit{Ṣira}, 3:239.} Another less explicit version of the conversation, this time between ʿUyayna b. Hasan and ʿAbbād b. Bishr is introduced by al-Wāqidi on the authority of Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab. Here ʿAbbād only points out that “we did not worship anything,”\footnote{Wa-na−hnu lā naʿbudu shay’ān (Kitāb al-Maghāzī, ed. Marsden Jones [London: Oxford University Press, 1966], 2:479).} but the general setting of the story clearly implies that not worshipping “anything” includes not worshipping Allah.

In another report, related by al-Wāqidi on the authority of ʿAbd Allāh b. Zubayr on the events involving ʿĀʾishā in year six of the Hijra, Abū Bakr aṣ-Siddīq himself is reported to have told the Prophet concerning the Jāhiliya: \textit{wa-mā qāla lanā hādhā fi ʿl-jāhiliyati, ḥaythu lā naʿbudu ʿl-lāḥa wa-lā nadʿū lahu shay’ān.} (“We have not heard such things [about us] even during the Jāhiliya, when we did not believe in Allah, nor did we call...
The direct statements of Sa’d b. Mu‘ādh and Abū Bakr as-Siddīq, and the oblique one by ‘Abbād b. Bishr, all suggest that the pre-Islamic spiritual milieu can hardly be assumed to have incorporated any concept of Allah. Hence a significant question arises. If the reports related by al-Waqidi and Ibn Isḥaq are to be lent credibility, do they indeed call in question the attested theory of the existence of Jāhili belief in Allah? And if so, to what extent may one doubt that which tradition has long since made to seem an ultimate truth?

There are many accounts in the sources that can shed additional light on this important question.

We can easily trace references to the Lord of the Ka‘ba back to the Jāhili period, when the genitive constructs rabbu ‘l-ka‘batī and rabbu makkatā were frequently employed in oath formulae. In a verse by ‘Adī b. Zayd we find an interesting relation between the Christian symbol of the Cross and the Lord of the Ka‘ba: Sa‘ā ‘l-‘adā‘u lā ya‘lūn sharran / ‘alayya, wa-rabbi makkata wa-s-salībī. ("The enemies came upon me without sparing their evil, by the Lord of Mecca and [by] the Cross.") In his analysis of this verse Izutsu identifies the Lord of the Ka‘ba as Allah and concludes that pre-Islamic Christians tended towards “identifying their Christian concept of Allah with the purely pagan Arabian concept of Allah as Lord of the Meccan shrine.” The poet has indeed juxtaposed these two so different religious concepts in an extraordinary way, but the verse does not present any tangible clue that could lead to the conclusion that rabbu makkata here is no one else but Allah. The Lord of the Ka‘ba is also present in the oath of Jalīla bint Murra addressed to her father at the end of ḥarb al-Basūs, but here again we discern only a strong veneration of that deity without any clue as to its possible identity.

The Muslim accounts about early Islam can yield additional details about the Lord of the Ka‘ba. Notions concerning this deity are clarified in the stories about the dogmatic altercations between Muhammad and his heathen foes. When Muhammad embarked on his early preaching, the polytheists apparently tried to mitigate the dissension he was causing by encouraging a convergence between their old religion and the new one. According to Ibn

Ishāq, al-Aswad b. Ṭabd al-Muṭṭalib, al-Walid b. Mughira, Umayya b. Khalaf, and al-Āṣ b. Wā’il went to Muḥammad and informed him that they and their people were ready to accept his belief, provided that he embraced their belief as well. It did not take the Prophet long to reject this proposition, as can be seen in the text of the Koran: “Say: ‘O unbelievers, I serve not what you serve and you are not serving what I serve, nor am I serving what you have served, neither are you serving what I serve. To you your religion, and to me my religion.’”

The story of the proposition to exchange beliefs and the reception it received contains a number of interesting peculiarities. In all the relevant reports the polytheists seem not to have had any positive knowledge of Muḥammad’s deity. They called it *ilāhuka* or *ma‘buduka* and viewed it as something in obvious opposition to their own objects of worship. Such lack of awareness of Muḥammad’s concept of divinity is quite perplexing, if we take for granted that the pre-Islamic Arabs knew of Allah and deemed him their highest deity and the Lord of the Kaʾba. The answer might be that Muḥammad’s understanding of Allah was such a great deviation from the Jāhilī tradition that the heathen Arabs were unable to discern in it any notions familiar to their way of thinking. But the question still stands how the polytheists in Mecca could disregard the fact that Muḥammad worshipped the same deity that they worshipped and refer to it by such generic terms as *ilāhuka* and *ma‘buduka* rather than mention it by name. If Islam intended from its very beginning to reform the already existing heathen concept of Allah, then Muḥammad’s foes would have felt offended by his attempt to change the way they worshipped their highest deity. Hence the

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dogmatic altercation between Muslims and heathens could be expected as a rule to mention Allah by name. In spite of this we find only a number of general references to an indistinguishable object of faith, whose name remains unknown.

In this respect attention has to be drawn to the relative pronoun mā used in the Koranic verse which rejects the polytheists' proposal. The generic mā signifies something highly unspecified, which prompts the conjecture that perhaps at this early stage of his daʿwa the Prophet did not have a clear notion of the supreme divine authority and that his proclamations stemmed from a somewhat erratic set of beliefs, “what I serve” (mā aʾbudu). The main feature of this early state of devotion was its conscious rejection of certain pre-Islamic values—“what I serve” (mā aʾbudu) vs. “what you serve” (mā taʾbudūna)—and some time was to elapse before this partial disparity could evolve into its final form as the total opposition of monotheism (with its single and absolute divine authority) to polytheism. The rough state of Muhammad’s conception of God during his early ministry is reflected in the Koran itself, the first Meccan suras being devoid of the name Allah.43

After his initial rejection of the proposal to converge the two religions, Muhammad’s intransigence softened somewhat. The Prophet was worried by the animosity of the majority of Quraysh towards him, and at a certain stage he agreed to some concessions. It is true that they did not amount to recognition of the Jāhiliya religion on equal terms, but still they conferred some authority on the pre-Islamic idols. The main condition seems to have been that those idols should be consigned to a position subservient to that of Muhammad’s deity. The ultimate purpose of the gharānīq or “Satanic” verses was to mitigate the conceptual rupture between the Jāhiliya and Islam. They can hardly be deemed an attempt to reinvigorate an already existing religious belief in shafāʿa, or intercession. When the heathens heard

43 An even earlier instance of lack of recognition of Allah might be suggested by the Prophet’s conversation with Abū Ṭalib, which apparently took place shortly after the first revelations came to Muhammad. Here the Prophet expounded the principles of his religion to his uncle and invited him to embrace it with the words: Ayyuʾ ‘ammi, ḥādhā dinuʾ illāhi wa-dīnu malāʾikatihi wa-dīnu rusulihī wa-dīnu abīnā ibrāhīm (“O my uncle, this is the religion of Allah and his angels and his prophets, and it is the religion of our father Abraham”). Abū Tālib opposes himself to this bold description of the new religion, saying: yāʾ ‘bna akhī, innī lā aṣṭaffaʾu an ufārīga dinī wa-dīna ʿabāʾī (“O son of my brother, I can not leave aside my religion and that of my ancestors”). At-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, 2:313; Ibn Ishāq, Sīra, 1:265.
the gharānīq verses for the first time, they only acknowledged a limited sovereignty to Allah, and told Muhammad that if he would make a place in his system for their idols, they would share his belief.

In short order—according to at-Tabari’s second version of the events on the very same evening—the gharānīq innovation was abrogated. Perhaps Muhammad sensed that it would obliterate the difference between his message—his attempt to change the religious habits of Quraysh—and the tribe’s own ancient religion. If he were to accept the idols, both Muslims and heathens could conclude that Islam had failed to achieve its main objectives.

After the apparent failure of the convergence attempt, the heathens tried another tactic: to sever the two religions completely. Ibn Sa’d relates an interesting story about a conversation between Muhammad and the polytheists of Quraysh, who tried to persuade the Prophet to arrange a deal satisfying both sides: Qalâ: tada’unâ wa-âlihatanâ wa-nada’uka wa-ilâhaka. (“You leave us with our gods, and we will leave you with yours.”) Muhammad vehemently rejected this proposition and, in his turn, tried to persuade Quraysh to convert to belief in his deity. They felt obvious aversion (ishmi’zâz) towards this proposition, and, as Ibn Ishâq adds on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbâs, the heathens cried: A-turîdu, yâ muhammadu, an taj‘ala l-âlihatata ilâhan waḥidan? Inna amraka la-‘ujbun. (“Do you, Muhammad, want to make of the gods one god? Indeed yours is a presumptuous affair.”) Ibn Kathîr relates the same story, also on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbâs, who reckons it to the period of Abû ʿṬalîb’s illness. Actually, the story is situated in the Sîra around the same period, yet without any temporal hints.

On the other hand, sura 38:1–7 to which this gloss is attached is of later

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44 A-fa-ra‘aytumu ʿl-lāta wa-l-ʿuzzâ, wa-manâta ʿth-thâlithata ʿl-ukhrâ. Tilka ʿl-gharānīqu ʿl-ulâ. Inna shafâ‘atahunna la-turtajâ. (“Have you considered al-Lât and al-ʿUzzâ. And Manât, the third, the other. Those are the high flying cranes. Surely their intercession may be hoped for.”) At-Tabari, Taʾrikh, 2:338, 340.


46 Taʾrikh, 2:340.


origin than sura 109. Most noteworthy in this case is that when addressing Muhammad, the polytheists already speak about “your god,” a feature that indicates an important development within the early Islamic notion of the divine. The vague devotional concept conveyed by the relative pronoun mā has now turned into a rigorous assertion of a tangible divine authority, which in another gloss is referred to already by the definite relative pronoun alladhi. This development corresponds to the view of Welch that at the beginning the Arabs were not summoned to believe in Allah and that only later the divine name ar-Rahmān was introduced.49

The conceptual development of early Islam continued alongside the encounters between Muhammad and his foes, and a more stringent formulation of the Muslim doctrine of the divine soon became indispensable. In a gloss at Koran 4:108, Ibn Ishāq attributes to Abū Jahl the threat to revile Muhammad’s god (ilāhaka), if he did not cease to abuse the gods of the polytheists (ālhātānā).50 The opposition here is clear and indicates that a conceptual rupture now unquestionably existed between nascent Islam and the Jāhili notions of the divine. Particularly striking is the threat to abuse Muhammad’s God. It is perplexing to think of the Meccans as willing to vilify their own High God: an unavoidable conclusion if one accepts that to a degree he shared identity with the deity of Islam.

The opposition between Muhammad’s god and the Jāhili objects of devotion is not confined to the vituperation account. The heathens regularly spoke of “your god” and “our gods,” thus affirming verbally the difference between them. For instance, some heathens decided to plead with Abū Ṭālib to ask his nephew to desist from abusing their gods, upon which they would “leave him with his own god.”51


50 Ibn Ishāq, Sīra, 1:280–81; We find a similar account in Ibn Kathīr: La-nashtumannaka wa-ilāhaka ‘iladhi amaraka bi-hādhā (Tafsīr, 5:123). At-Ṭabarī reports: la-nashtumannaka wa-la-nashtumanna man ya’muruka (Jāmi‘ al-bayān, no. 10693 and no. 22843 on Koran 4:108 and 38:6).

51 Intaliqū binā ilā abī ṭālibin fa-nukallimahu fihi, fa-l-yunṣīfnā minhu, fa-ya’murahu, fa-l-yakuffa ‘an shatmi ālīhatinā, wa-nada’uhu wa-ilāhahu ‘iladhi ya’bud (at-Ṭabarī, Ta’rikh, 2:324). Cf. Fa-lammā dakhāli ‘alayhi qālī: yā abā ṭālib, anta sayyidinā wa-kabārunā, fa-nṣīfnā mini ‘bnī akhīka, fa-murhu, fa-l-yakuffa ‘an shatmi ālīhatinā, wa-nada’uhu wa-ilāhahu (at-Ṭabarī, Ta’rikh, 2:324). See also Jāmi‘ al-bayān, no. 10693 on Koran 4:108. There are numerous other instances where Muhammad’s deity is named “your god” or “your lord.” Thus in the conver-
Despite his prolonged preaching, Muhammad failed to attract his tribesmen to Islam, apparently because there was so little in common between their religion and his. The animosity of the heathens towards the Muslims and their religion increased in the course of time and probably reached its peak sometime around the end of the second decade of the seventh century A.D. 52

The conceptual rupture between the sides persisted until the ultimate triumph of the Islamic cause. That the break continued to prevail in the minds of the majority of the Prophet’s contemporaries, even after they formally embraced Islam, was spelled out by Abû Sufyân. According to al-Wâqidi, when Muhammad entered Mecca and the idols around the Ka‘ba were demolished, Abû Sufyân told az-Zubayr b. al-‘Awwâm: “I see that if there were another god along with the god of Muhammad, something else would have happened.” 53 Though already having accepted Islam, Abû Sufyân was unable to recognize Allah as a divine object native to his own beliefs, as would necessarily have been the case had there been a firm conceptual relation between this deity and the pre-Islamic Lord of the Meccan shrine.

Another remarkable peculiarity is the Prophet’s constant call for submission to Allah. While at the outset of his preaching, supposedly, Muhammad had confined himself to speaking only of his Lord, and not of Allah, on many subsequent occasions, when his doctrine had taken on a clearer shape, he began calling the heathens to Allah. We cite again the vituperation story, which goes on to say that Muhammad, after the encounter with Abû Jahl, went to an assembly of Qurayshites in order to yad‘âhum ilâ ‘Ilâh, to call them to Allah. 54 Hence the vituperation report may be considered from another angle. The position of Muḥammad’s foes seems strange if the jarâ‘î between the heathens and Muhammad, mentioned by Ibn Isḥâq (Sīra, 1:316–17), when asking Muhammad to call upon his God to produce miracles, they always resort to the compound sal rabbaka (“Ask your Lord”). The same phrase was used by Abû Tâlib. Sīra, 1:399.

52 Ibn Isḥâq gives the following gloomy picture of the situation in Mecca upon Muhammad’s return from at-Ṭâ‘if: Thumma qadima rasūlu ‘Ilâhî makkata wa-qawmi mawṣûla ma’ kânâ ‘ala yhi min khilāfihî wa-firaqî dinîhi. Sīra, 2:31.


54 Ibn Isḥâq, Sīra, 1:381. In a later development, just before the battle of Badr, Muhammad is reported to have passed by an assembly of heathens and begun calling them to Allah. Ibn Kathîr, Tafsîr, 1:617.
they were capable of abusing their own deity. However, the issue becomes further blurred with the Prophet’s call to them to believe in Allah. How could he demand from them faith in an already long accepted deity? Perhaps the Islamic concept of Allah was so different from the Jâhili one that Muhammad’s god had become unrecognizable in the eyes of the heathens. However, is it possible to conclude as well that the very name Allah itself had become unrecognizable? If Allah had existed in the Jâhili sacred realm, His name at least should have been deeply rooted in the mentality of the people of Mecca.

The results Muhammad achieved in his endeavor to propagate the belief in Allah among the Arab tribes were not unlike those he achieved with Quraysh. Ibn Ishâq furnishes an ample account of Muhammad’s attempt to persuade some Arab tribal groups to adhere to his religion during the pilgrimage season at Mecca, probably in the summer of 620 A.D. Here again frequent use of the expression “call them to Allah” (yad‘uhum/da‘ahum illâ ‘llâh) may be observed, with the occurrence of “enjoin to serve/worship Allah” (ya‘murukum an ta‘bud¢u ‘llâh) as a variant. It is important to note that in all these accounts Muhammad’s god proved unrecognizable to the vast majority of tribes, so unrecognizable that even a tribal fraction of Banû Kalb, allegedly called Banû ‘Abd Allâh, failed to embrace the new religion, though the Prophet was keen to assert the sameness of his god and the deity named in the genitive construct representing the eponym of this particular lineage. In at least one case Muḥammad’s da‘wa was confused with the majallatul, or “revealed message,” of Luqmân, a clear indication that the initial teachings of Islam were easily associated with some earlier mythological strata of homiletic rather than theogonic essence. Even the subsequent success that was Muḥammad’s after he turned to Khazraj arouses suspicions as

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56 Ibn Ishâq, Sîra, 2:32; at-Tabârî, Ta‘rikh, 2:348.
to the original motives behind the assent of the representatives of this tribe to follow Islam. Though, as in all other cases, they were summoned to submit to Allah, in this particular case Ibn Ishâq suggests that the recognition of Allah on the part of these Arabs be may have been abated by their long-standing contacts with Jews. Whatever the nature of this relationship, it prompts the conjecture that an acquaintance with some principles of monotheism may have facilitated accurate communication between Muhammad and his hearers in this particular case. Yet, if true, the report implying Jewish influence as a factor in the Arab’s acceptance of Islam would suggest that any acquaintance with monotheistic divine notions before the rise of Islam may well have originated from a realm extrinsic to the Jâhilî conceptual milieu.

As for the Koranic evidence, there are indeed verses which imply that the Jâhilî Arabs believed in Allah. However, this faith is depicted in general terms and there is a lack of positive clues as to the possible relation of this belief to the deity which was venerated in the Ka‘ba. The structure of the verses in question is quite uniform: the polytheists are usually asked who is the creator of the Universe, and they answer “Allah” without a trace of hesitation: Wa-la‘in sa‘altahum man khalaqa ’s-samî‘ati wa-l-arda, wa-sakhkhara ’sh-shamsa wa-l-qamara, la-yaqâlunna ’llâhu, fa-annâ yu‘fakûn? (“If thou askest them, ‘Who created the heavens and the earth and subjected the sun and the moon?’ they will say, ‘God.’ How then are they perverted?”)

According to the Koranic evidence, then, the pre-Islamic Arabs not only knew of a god named Allah, but also associated with him such important world-view concepts as the creation of the Universe, of the heavenly bodies, and of mankind itself. The conclusion that concepts of creation (khalq) broadly circulated in the Jâhilî milieu has indeed a firm scriptural foundation. Nonetheless, one ought not to overlook two important points.

The first of them is the rhetorical question “How then are they perverted?” (fa-annâ yu‘fakûn) or other locutions implying doubt or unbelief on the part of the respondents which recur in the majority of the creation verses. Why were heathens prone to accept Allah’s highest authority on the one hand,

61 Fa-annâ tusharûn (23:89); bal akharuʃ humility lâ ya‘gilûn (29:63).
while the Koran reproaches them on the other? One of the possible answers may be related to the intercession (shafâ‘a) phenomenon. The polytheists are said to have believed in the high deity Allah, with whom they associated a number of lesser deities. According to the Islamic tradition, this was a recent innovation, which represented a deviation from the original monotheism of Abraham and Ishmael. Nonetheless, it is hard to determine in this particular study the extent to which the divine hierarchy concept was rooted in the Jâhili mentality and whether the concomitant notion of the consecutive reappearance of monotheism and heathenism should be lent credibility. Though Koren and Nevo show that such religious alternations might have taken place in central Negev, data similar to theirs have not been found in the Hijaz, while the conjecture that the phenomenon of Arab paganism has nothing to do with the Hijaz seems far-fetched.

Secondly, although the creation verses indubitably assert Allah’s preeminent role during the Jâhiliya, they do not imply the existence of a link to the sanctuary of Mecca. Naturally, this is not a proof that such a link did not exist, but any conclusion to the contrary must remain in the realm of the tentative until other more convincing evidence can be produced.

Apart from the creation verses, the Koran contains a number of other revelations which are often adduced by scholars concerned with the question of Allah before Islam. Izutsu points out Koran 46:27–28 as a clear vindication of “the existence of a god called Allah and even his highest position among the divinities.” But the use of the divine name Allah in this verse is not so much historical evidence of its existence during the Jâhiliya as it is a reproach of the polytheists who oppose the bold teaching of Islam. The

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65 Wa-laqad ahlâknû mâ āhâlakûm min al-qurû wa-sarrafûn ‘l-âyâti la‘allahum yarjî‘ûn. Fa-lâw lâ naṣarâhûm ‘lladhîna ‘takhadû min dînî ‘llâhi qurbânûn âlîhatan; trans. Arberry: “And We destroyed the cities about you, and We turned about the signs, that haply they would return. Then why did those not help them that they had taken to themselves as mediators, gods apart from God?”
66 Izutsu, God and Man, 14.
Koran does provide examples of how ancient peoples were requited for their deviation from the monotheistic faith, and this may be deemed evidence of the already mentioned archaic Abrahamic monotheism, subsequently forsaken by the Arabs. However, the relation between this ancient stratum and the belief in Allah is a problem which requires additional study.

Another piece of evidence is the verse: 

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Mā ta‘budūna min dānihi illsū asmā‘an sammyatumūhā antūn wa-ābā‘ukum. Mā anzala ʿllāhu bihū min sulṭānin. \]

(“That which you worship apart from Him, is nothing but names you have named, yourselves and your fathers. God has sent down no authority touching them.”)\(^67\) This part of the Koran is also related to the general course of the dispute between Muhammad and the heathens about the nature of the divine. Even more conspicuous is the second part of the verse omitted by Izutsu: 

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In(i) ʿl-hukmu illā li-llāhī, amara allā ta‘budū illā iyyūhū, dhālika ʿd-dīnī ʿl-qayyimu, wa-lākinna ankharī ʿn-nāṣī lā ya‘lamūn. \]

(“Judgment—or authority—belongs only to Allah. He has commanded you to worship only Him. That is the true religion, but most people do not know.”) Here the Islamic concept of \(hukm \ Allāh\), the authority of Allah, is imposed over the Jāhili substratum. It hardly refers to any pre-Islamic notion. The end of the verse, moreover, “but most people do not know,” is reminiscent of the rhetorical questions found in the creation verses. Finally, even if these Koranic passages imply a positive reference to a belief in Allah during the Jāhiliya, they are still void of evidence of a relation between such a belief and the Meccan sanctuary.

The foregoing review of the early stages of the development of Muhammad’s concepts of the divine entitles us to formulate a number of important conclusions.

When Muhammad began to preach for the very first time, he does not seem to have recognized his call as a revelation sent to him from a specific well-known and conceptually defined divine authority. The Prophet only made admonitions in the name of his Lord and reproached Quraysh for their “presumption” and “pride in wealth.”\(^68\) At that time his teaching had an ethical nature, while the theological elaboration was yet to come.

With the escalation of the conceptual standoff between the Prophet and his heathen foes, the concept of the High God germinated and developed, and finally acquired its ultimate nominal shape, \(Allāh\). Muhammad may have borrowed it from the Jāhili milieu in order to help the heathen public accept it. There must have been some kind of nominal correspondence be-

\(^{67}\) 12:40, cited in Izutsu, \(God\ and \(Man\), 15.

\(^{68}\) Watt, \(Muhammad\ Prophet\ and\ Statesman\), 28–29.
tween the Lord of Muhammad and a divine name familiar in the Jähiliya. Otherwise, the quarrel between him and his foes would have been baseless, and “there could have been neither debate nor discussion at all.”69 This being the case, one still can ask whether the vituperation story at least points to some degree of interaction and discussion. If so, the Prophet and the heathens behaved as if their deities were completely different and unknown to the other party. The proposal to exchange deities evokes a similar conclusion. Finally, most of the Arab tribes were more or less completely unable to recognize Muhammad’s deity.

While Muhammad may indeed have built his concept of the divine upon an already established name, there still remains the question whether this name was borrowed from the existing sanctuary of Mecca. We have no reliable references in the sources to the existence of such a deity in the Meccan Ka‘ba. The widespread theory about the development of al-ilāh into Allah70 may not be without some basis, but to rely on it here would only lead to the conclusion that every Jähili idol was called ilāh thus leaving the question about the Lord of the Ka‘ba unanswered.

Finally, the concept of the High God may have come from another region, such as the Yemen, where during the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. a monotheistic cult of a god named “the Merciful” (Rahmān-ān) and “Lord of Heaven” became ubiquitous.71 We can further suppose that the name Allah may have been a general designation for a Semitic high deity reigning over the idols. However, in this instance, it could hardly be associated with any specific shrine where idols were worshipped. In any case, the question about the Lord of the Ka‘ba can only be resolved through study of the Meccan cult.

IV. It is quite difficult to propose a reliable theory about the Jähili Lord of the Ka‘ba. The days of the Jähiliya are shrouded with great uncertainty, and even the accounts we have, which go back to the second or third century after the Hijra, may well have been forged or tampered with. Despite this, we can consider certain stories which contain some useful cues that may shed light on the main question of this study.

One of these accounts is the story about ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib’s oath to sacrifice one of his children. According to Ibn Ishāq, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib swore in

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69 Izutsu, *God and Man*, 96.
70 Ibid., 97.
the Jāhiliya that if he should be granted ten sons capable of defending him, one of them would be sacrificed to Allah. The continuation of the story is even more striking. After it was decided that ‘Abd Allah—the future father of the Prophet—should be slain, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib took him to Hubal inside the Ka’ba and began seeking an oracle (yastaqsimu bi-l-azlām) in order to save his son. With every cast of the lots, ten camels were granted to the deity. When this action was repeated ten times and Hubal had received one hundred camels, the idol was appeased and agreed to release ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib from his oath. The remarkable feature here is that the oath had been given to Allah, while redemption was sought from Hubal. Although Ibn Ishāq points out that ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib called upon Allah every time he cast the lots, a feature which evokes the intercession notion, it is hard to say whether Hubal was among the interceding deities, or whether the name of Allah was just embedded in the story to conform to the formal introduction.

It is possible to discern within the sacrifice story a variety of mythological and chronological strata. The first which comes to mind is the striking resemblance with the Biblical/Koranic story of Abraham and his son Isaac. Possibly this scriptural passage prompted some Islamic authors to invent the account. It may explain as well how the concept of Allah could have been incorporated into the otherwise heathen strata which constitute the inner structure of the whole story. Another problem with the authenticity of the story is the extraneous tenfold ritual invocation of the divine name Allah while an oracle was being sought from Hubal, not to mention the fact that one hundred camels had been the customary amount of blood money for manslaughter during the Jāhiliya.

\[\text{Ibn Ishāq, } \text{Sira}, 1:164.\]


73 Cf. also: Qāma ‘abdu ‘l-muṭṭalibi ‘inda hubalin yad’ū ‘llāha. Ibid., 1:166.

74 Ibn Sa’d (Tabaqāt, 1:88–89) relates the same story on the authority of al-Wāqīdī, but does not mention Hubal or Allah. But al-Wāqīdī is known as a weak authority on Jāhiliya matters.

75 Ibn Sa’d says that before the event the amount was ten camels, and only afterwards it became one hundred camels (Tabaqāt, 1:89). Nevertheless al-Iṣfahānī reports that Harim b. Sinān paid one hundred camels for the slaughter of a man from
Yet if the first monotheistic layer enshrouding the story may be considered forged, the heathen strata are more convincing. The first attests to the significance of Hubal, who represented one of the greatest divine objects in the Ka’ba during the pre-Islamic age. The ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib story is clear evidence of his elevated status, and even if it should not be considered authentic, there is an abundance of other accounts which unquestionably bear witness to Hubal’s authority.\(^{77}\)

There are many reports attesting Hubal’s being the most important or one of the most important idols of Mecca during the days of the Jāhiliya.\(^{78}\) The significance of this idol in the theogony of Quraysh is highlighted by the fact that he was placed within the Ka’ba.\(^{79}\) His anthropomorphic statue was made of carnelian, and his right arm, which the tribe had found broken off, had been reproduced in gold.\(^{80}\) All important questions facing Quraysh were considered before Hubal by divination through casting lots using arrows. Ibn Isḥaq relates that the number of arrows was seven,\(^{81}\) comprising the central fields of decision, such as kinship (nasab), water, and the rather generic “yes” and “no”, which could apply on any matter submitted to the idol, as was the case with ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib’s pledge or with the distribution of duties among the clans of Quraysh during the rebuilding of the Ka’ba at the beginning of the seventh century A.D. Al-Azraqi, preserving another indication of the place of Hubal at Mecca, records that every Meccan returning from a journey used to go to Hubal upon his entrance into the city.\(^{82}\)

Yet another proof of the dominant position of Hubal may be the rite of Banū ʿAbs at the end of the Dāḥis and al-Ghabrā’ war (Aghānī, 10:342).

\(^{77}\) It is remarkable that when Ibn Sa’d retells the story on the authority of al-Wāqīḍī the casting of lots is mentioned, yet not Hubal himself.

\(^{78}\) Wa-kāna hubalun min a’ẓami aṣnāmi qurayshin (al-Azraqī, Akhbār, 1:117); Wa-kāna a’ẓamahā ʿindahum hubalun (Ibn al-Kalbī, Aṣnām, 27); Wa-ḥawla ‘l-ka’batī thalāthumī’ati ʿanāman wa-ṣittīnā ʿanāman muraṣṣaṣaṭan bi-r-raṣās wa-kāna hubalun a’ẓamahā (al-Wāqīḍī, Maghāẓī, 2:832); Kāna hubalun a’ẓama aṣnāmi qurayshin bi-makkata (at-Ṭabarī, Jāmī’ al-bayān, no. 8701 on Koran 5:3); A’ẓamu aṣnāmi qurayshin sanamun kāna yuqālū lāhu hubalun (Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 2:237); Wa-hubalun a’ẓamu ‘l-ʿasnāmi ʿindahum (ash-Shahrastānī, al-Milal wa-n-nīḥal [Beirut, 1993], 2:585).


\(^{80}\) Ibn al-Kalbī, Aṣnām, 28.


\(^{82}\) Al-Azraqī, Akhbār, 1:117.
cutting hair. Although the poet Qays b. Hudâyda al-Khuzá‘í swears by the House of Allah (bayt Allāh), where his fellow tribesmen used to cut their hair during the pilgrimage, many reports associate this custom with Hubal. Al-Azraqî reports that after ‘Amr b. Luḥayy erected Hubal inside the Ka‘ba, people began to cut their hair near him.\footnote{Ibid.} Abū Sufyān is reported by al-Waqidî to have cut his hair in front of Hubal after the victorious battle of Uhud.\footnote{Al-Waqidî, \textit{Maghāzī}, 1:299.}

It is clear from the sources that Hubal played an important role in the martial rites of Jahili Meccan society. Thus before the battle of Badr some Meccans went to query Hubal as to whether they should go to war against Muhammad.\footnote{Ibid., 1:33–34.} One of the battle cries of Quraysh during their wars against the Muslims was “Exalted be Hubal!” (a‘lī hubal).\footnote{Ibn Isḥāq, \textit{Sûra}, 1:33–34.}

Newborns were also brought to Hubal by their parents, who apparently wanted to invoke his blessing on their offspring. Even Muḥammad, after his birth, was brought before him by his grandfather ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, who went to thank God for what he had bestowed on him.\footnote{Ibn al-Kalbi, \textit{Aṣnām}, 28; \textit{Dīwān} Hassan b. Thābit, ed. Sayyid Ḥanafī Ḥusayn (Cairo, 1983), 95; at-Ṭabarî, \textit{Taʻrikh}, 2:526, \textit{Jāmi‘ al-bayān}, no. 6413 on Koran 3:153; al-Iṣfahānī, \textit{Aghānī}, 15:193.} According to al-Azraqî, Hubal dominated such important customs as the circumcision of boys, marriages, and the burial of the dead.\footnote{Al-Azraqî, \textit{Akhbār}, 1:118; Ibn Isḥāq, \textit{Sûra}, 1:165.}

As for the relation between Hubal and the Lord of the Ka‘ba, it is important to note that the term rabb al-bayt (the Lord of the House) is generic. It could be used to denote any divinity worshipped at any sanctuary, as, for example, Dhū ‘sh-Sharā in his sanctuary at Petra,\footnote{Beeston, \textit{The Religions of Pre-Islamic Yemen}, 262.} or a number of gods worshipped at shrines in the Yemen.\footnote{Ibid.} Hence, Hubal may well have been the


\footnote{Al-Azraqî, \textit{Akhbār}, 1:118; Ibn Ishāq, \textit{Sīra}, 1:165.}

Lord of the Ka‘ba in the Jāhiliya. He is mentioned as such by Zayd b. ‘Amr b. Nufayl, who became pious (ta‘alāha) during the Jāhiliya, and said (in verse) concerning his conversion: “I desisted from visiting Hubal, who was our Lord in the past, when my reason was little.”

A quick review of the etymology of the name Hubal is appropriate at this point. If the reading by Jawād ‘Ali of the first part of the name as the definite article “ha,”92 can be accepted, then the whole name Hubal may be rendered “the Lord.”

While any reading of Hubal as “ha-baal” would emphasize his dominant position before Islam, the term ilāh, which was also obviously associated with the deity, leaves more room for doubt. Ancient Arabs used to call their idols ilāh. Hubal surely was one of these ilāhs too, and the story of the pledge of ‘Abd al-Mu‘tţalib is probable evidence for this Jāhili belief. As for the causes of the confusion of Allah with ilāh in early reports, two reasons can be pointed out. The first is that a certain deity—perhaps Hubal—was elevated with the advent of Islam from the status of ilāh (one of many gods) to al-ilāh—the god. Subsequently, the natural course of linguistic transformation led to the reduction of hamzat al-qat‘, along with the initial vowel, and gradually “al-ilāh” was replaced with Allāh. Soon the term ilāh dropped out of circulation and people felt little need to use it even with respect to the heathen era. Nevertheless it can be found in a number of instances, one of them clearly related to the shrine of Mecca. In a verse, attributed to Nufayl b. Habīb after the ordeal of Abraha at Mecca, we read: Ayna ‘l-mafarru wa-l-ilāhu ‘t-ţālibî // wa-l-ashramu ‘l-maghlābu, wa-laysa ‘l-ghālibî? (“Where is the way to escape when al-ilāh is the hunter // and the one with the slit nose [Abraha] is vanquished, not victorious?”)93 If authentic, this account shows that the definite form al-ilāh had been in use even before Islam implying a well-known high deity. Despite this, the story as a whole does not provide any information about the real position of Hubal with respect to the other deities at Mecca. The idol may have been the enigmatic al-ilāh, yet another deity could as well fit the criteria.

None the less, it is conceivable that the Jāhili Arabs may have applied the name Allah to Hubal. On the other hand, the name Allah occurs predominantly in monotheistic passages attributed to Jāhili poets. These cannot be

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totally discarded, but there is considerable doubt concerning their authenticity. Yet even if Hubal were called Allah, the question about the possible subservience of the other deities to him still remains.

Perhaps the reading of Hubal as Allah (al-ilâh) helped A. G. Lundin draw the conclusion that “as the chief deity in Mecca Hubal was seemingly considered identical with Allah.”94 But this inference visibly derives its authority from the later Islamic notion of the transcendent Allah. Finally, Winnett’s assumption that the origin of the divine name Allah may have been foreign to the Arab milieu95 could suggest another point of resemblance with Hubal, who is said to have been imported to Mecca.96 True or false, however, this conjecture does not add anything concerning Hubal’s position at the Ka’ba.

The story about ‘Abd al-Mu’ttalib’s pledge to sacrifice his son to Allah may contain another, if more hypothetical, reference to the religion of the pre-Islamic Arabs. As some external sources point out, the ancient Arabs used to sacrifice human beings, and in certain cases young children, to the “mighty goddess” al-Uzzâ.97 If these reports are accepted as plausible, could the story of the sacrifice of ‘Abd Allâh b. ‘Abd al-Mu’ttalib be reminiscent of such rites? While it is not possible to answer this question with certainty, reports about the significance of al-Uzzâ at Mecca are to be found elsewhere as well.

Ibn al-Kalbî reports that “Quraysh and the Arabs dwelling in Mecca did not venerate any idol as they venerated al-Uzzâ, then al-Lât, then Manâî. As for al-Uzzâ they preferred her to the other [idols] by pilgrimage and

94 Mify narodov mira (Moscow, 1992), 2:606. One can not discard Jawâd ‘Ali’s point that there might have been a relation between the lunar cult and the emergence of belief in Allah (al-Mufâsâl, 6:174). If Hubal had in his turn also been associated with the moon sometime during the Jâhiliya, as M. ‘Ajîna would suppose (Mawsâ’at asâṣîr al-’arab ‘ani ‘l-jâhiliya, 1:195–99), and given that Jâhili Arabs used to call the moon ba’l, i. e., “Lord,” one might imagine the possibility of some generic relation between Hubal and Allah.


96 According to Ibn Ishâq, Hubal was brought to Mecca from al-Balqâ in Syria by ‘Amr b. Luḥayy (Sîra, 1:82). Al-Azraqî retells the same story, but traces the origin of Hubal to what he names hitun min ardî ‘l-jâzîra (Akhbâr, 1:100). Ibn al-Kalbî only points out that the idol was placed inside the Ka’ba by Khuzayma b. Mudrika, without speaking of its origin (Aṣnâm, 28).

gifts.” Al-Azraqī adds that the pre-Islamic Arabs ended their ʿhajj circumambulating al-ʿUzzā and stayed in her presence for one day. Another token of her significance is her presence beside Hubal in a war cry of Quraysh. The prophet Muḥammad is reported to have sacrificed a red ewe to al-ʿUzzā before the revelation, while the father of Khālid b. al-Walīd used to offer her the best animals from his flocks and herds.

That al-ʿUzzā indeed enjoyed great respect among the people of Quraysh is further indicated by the narratives about the concern of her custodian (sādīn) Aflah b. Naḍr ash-Shaybānī about her future. According to the Islamic sources, he foresaw her imminent downfall. Al-Wāqīdī recounts that Abū Lahab, the paternal uncle of Muḥammad, was swift to assert that he would be the one to take care of al-ʿUzzā after Aflah’s death, and he boasted that he would gain great favor with her. The significance of al-ʿUzzā during the late Jāhilīya and early Islam is perhaps the best explanation for Abū Lahab’s offer to look after the goddess and his eagerness to incur her favor towards himself. Probably the same cause lay behind Muḥammad’s determination to destroy the shrine of al-ʿUzzā. Al-Wāqīdī reports that Khālid b. al-Walīd was sent to demolish the sanctuary on two consecutive

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99 Fa-kānah idhā faraghū min ʿhajjihim wa-ṭawḍīḥihim bi-l-kaʾbatī lām yahillū ḥattā yaʾtī ʿl-ʿuzzā fa-yatīfuḥa bihā wa-yahilliḥa ʿindāhā wa-yaʿkifūna ʿindāhā yawman (Akhbār, 1:126).


102 Al-Azraqī, Akhbār, 1:128. Al-Wāqīdī adds on the authority of Saʿīd b. ʿAmr al-Hudhalī that the father of Khālid b. al-Walīd used to sacrifice one hundred camels and sheep to al-ʿUzzā, and then to remain in her presence for three days (Maghāzī, 3:874).

occasions, while another version of the report with another isnād recounts that he had to return to Nakhla not less than three times.

As one of the greatest pre-Islamic deities, al-Uzza may have influenced the emergence of the belief in Allah. In a commentary on Koran 7:180 at-Ṭabarî derives al-Uzza from al-ʿAzīz, one of the beautiful names of Allah. However, assuming the natural sequence of events which led to the transition from heathenism to monotheism, we may hypothesize that the derivation presented by at-Ṭabarî should be reversed. The theory saying that the polytheists derived their idols’ names from those of Allah is itself strongly influenced by the Islamic concept of history. Perhaps on the contrary, the resemblance of some of the names of Allah to the heathen numina may be a sign of the incorporation of many heathen traditions into nascent Arabian Islam. It is quite interesting to observe the wide-ranging similarity of the reports of the Islamic authors concerning al-Uzza and Hubal. Both deities are depicted as the most significant divine objects of Quraysh, and important devotional rites are likewise attributed to each of them. Yet whether al-Uzza was the second great deity in Mecca remains rather obscure. According to the existing reports, her sanctuary was in the Hurad valley near Mecca, just beyond the sacred territory (haram). However, if trust is to be put in Robertson Smith’s theory about associated male and female deities, al-Uzza might be deemed the female component of such a pair at Mecca, the male one being perhaps the Lord of the Kaʿba Hubal.

Conclusion

The Islamic understanding of history has greatly influenced the concept of Allah as the pre-Islamic Lord of the Kaʿba. The message revealed to
Muhammad presupposes that the belief in Allah has been an ever existing phenomenon. The ancient Arab and then Islamic shrine in Mecca became the main topos of this concept. The place of the Ka‘ba is said to have been designated for a sanctuary dedicated to Allah by the very creative intention of the divine will. As creation unfolded, the Ka‘ba was devoted to a sole deity, and only intermittent occurrences of polytheism or “associationism” (*shirk*) could blemish its intrinsically monotheistic role.

Compared with the notion of Allah’s everlasting presence at the Ka‘ba, the purely historical data may suggest a somewhat different picture of the sanctuary during the pre-Islamic era. Credible reports to the effect that Allah actually was the Jāhili lord of the sanctuary are lacking, while the accounts of the Islamic authors concerning the early Islamic period show that the Islamic concept of divinity unfolded gradually and rather slowly. Muhammad could not instantaneously disassociate himself from his ancestors’ customs; in the beginning he wanted only to admonish Quraysh. In the face of their ardent resistance to his message, he became inclined to a kind of compromise. Only later, after prolonged ideological clashes with his heathen opponents, did he articulate the concept of the solitary transcendent deity without any partners or equals (*shurakā*). Allah became the Lord of the Meccan shrine and the only deity of Islam.

As for the pre-Islamic Lord of the Ka‘ba, only tentative conjectures can be made. Our sources definitely show the importance of Hubal and al-‘Uzzā before Islam. Yet to what extent these reports can be trusted remains to be studied. Both Hubal and al-‘Uzzā, as well as other deities, were highly venerated at Mecca, but the extant data is insufficient to tell whether they were deemed lords of the Ka‘ba. The name Allah, which indubitably existed before Islam, evokes many questions. At present, we are unable to judge whether it denoted a supreme divine power elevated over the idols, or even to what extent this name might have designated one particular Jāhili deity and how it was related to the Meccan cult in general. Until more convincing sources or methodological approaches are forthcoming, the question of the identity of the Jāhili Lord of the Ka‘ba remains rather problematic.