

JĀHILIYYA AND 'ILM

S. Pines

Franz Rosenthal points out in his work *Knowledge Triumphant*¹ that the derivatives from the root 'l.m.² form roughly one percent of the vocabulary of the Qur'ān. As far as frequency of occurrence is concerned only four words - *qāla*, *kāna*, *Allāh* and *Rabb* - surpass the derivatives of 'l.m. by a large margin.³ The hypothesis which I wish to set forth in the present paper may, if valid, go some way towards accounting for this statistical fact.

In the above-mentioned work (p. 32ff) Rosenthal also makes some observations concerning the term *Jāhiliyya*. He considers - correctly as I believe - that Goldziher's interpretation of the term as naming primarily "barbarity" rather than "ignorance" is not applicable in the case of the Qur'ānic passages - four in all - in which the term occurs. His own explanation is that it does not represent an abstract noun formation,⁴ but is a collective plural signifying "ignorant persons." The expression *al-jāhiliyya al-ūlā* (Qur'ān) could, as he admits, give rise, from his point of view, to a difficulty, but he believes that the expression could be understood as signifying "previous *jāhiliyya*," (in which case *jāhiliyya* could mean "ignorant persons"). Because of these linguistic considerations Rosenthal (p. 34) holds it to be extremely unlikely that *jāhiliyya* is, as has been suggested, "an attempted loan translation of a concept such as *agnoia* in the *Acts of the Apostles*, 17: 30, where *khronoi agnoia* clearly means the period of paganism. According to Rosenthal "*agnoia* would hardly have appeared in Arabic in such a peculiar type of noun formation. *Jahl* or the like would have [p. 176] been used." Rosenthal also remarks that "some notion akin to *agnoia* must have been in the mind of Muḥammad when he used the word (*jāhiliyya*) and that the latter understanding of the term is in agreement with the sentiment expressed in the passage of the New Testament."

If I read correctly Rosenthal's remark concerning Muḥammad, he does not wish to deny categorically the possibility that the choice of the term *jāhiliyya* by the author of the Qur'ān may have been influenced by Christian ideas; on the other hand, because of his linguistic approach, he feels unable to postulate such an influence as far as the Prophet is concerned; consequently he assumes on this point a non-committal position.

This attitude seems to me appropriate in the matter at hand, although, in my opinion, Rosenthal's linguistic argumentation is not quite convincing, since, as he himself points out, the formation of *rahbāniyya*, a word occurring in the Qur'ān, has some points of similarity with that of *jāhiliyya*. One might take into account the possibility that the latter word may have been created not by the author of the Qur'ān, but by Christian translators who tried to invent Arabic equivalents for terms used in the New Testament. It seems however likely that if this were the case their term of reference would have been the Aramaic Christian vocabulary, and the fact is that, in the Syriac translation of the New Testament known to us, *agnoia* in the passage

¹ Leiden 1970, p. 19f.

² Excluding the unrelated 'alam, "world."

³ "The root 'm.n. is found a few times more than 'l.m.," which occurs much more frequently than all other roots except those mentioned.

⁴ Because he holds that it would be anachronistic to suppose that the author of the Qur'ān had coined a word of this type.

quoted above is rendered by *ta'yūthā*, which in the first place means "error". All these reflections are clearly inconclusive. The term *Jāhiliyya* may however be approached from another angle.

Twenty-five derivatives from the root *j.h.l.* are found, and in most cases they denote people or, as in the case of *Jāhiliyya*, a society which neither knows nor accepts the teachings of a true prophet who has received "knowledge," *'ilm*, from God. The ignorance of such people may also be described in some other way. Thus the Qur'ān sometimes refers to them as those who "do not know", *lā ya'lamūna*. In fact the antithesis between those who participate in the kind of knowledge that has just been described and the ignorant seems to be an essential part of the self-definition of the community envisaged in the Qur'ān (though perhaps not necessarily of later Islam). In this respect, the community in question seems to me to differ both from [p.177] Pauline Christianity and from Talmudic Judaism.⁵ In the latter, the ignorant, i.e. those who are not versed in the Torah and the rabbinical teachings, are held in low esteem, but not excluded from the community.

If the following assertions are taken with a grain of salt, one may say that in the self-definition of Pauline Christianity, the members of the community are "the believers" as opposed to the unbelievers; "the believers" include both those who have been granted *sophia* or *gnōsis*, and those who lack this kind of knowledge. In that of Talmudic Judaism, they are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the proselytes and are under the obligation to observe the commandments of the Torah given to Moses. In the Qur'ānic community, they are "both the believers" and the participants in the knowledge revealed to Muḥammad. These statements are clearly over-simplifications.⁶ Nevertheless, they seem to have a certain validity.

In this paper I shall put forward a hypothesis purporting to answer two questions:

- 1) Why does the self-definition of the Qur'ānic community include a reference to knowledge and ignorance?
- 2) Why was the term *al-jāhiliyya* applied particularly to Arab Paganism, and was rarely used, or not at all, in connection with other people?

The hypothesis I intend to propose is closely connected with certain views set forth by me several years ago with regard to the capital role which seems to have been played by Jewish Christians in the formation of Islam: their influence may be inferred from the Christology of the Qur'ān, which to all intents and purposes is identical with that of certain Judaeo-Christian sects. It is also suggested by an analysis of certain verses of the Qur'ān. I may add here that the omission in the Qur'ān of any mention of the prophets other than [p. 178] Moses,⁷ whose books are part of the Old Testament Canon, has by and large a counterpart in Judaeo-Christian sects (as well as in the writings of the Samaritans). In the present paper, I am concerned with the Jewish Christians from another point of view: I shall adduce a number of texts proving that they regarded themselves as people whose knowledge and Scriptural learning contrasted with what used to be the ignorance of the Gentiles.⁸ [p. 179] One of the

⁵ Some sayings culled both from Christian and Talmudic (as well, of course, as Old Testament) writings, which seem to fault this generalization, can be found. Nevertheless, in spite of such instances to the contrary, the statement in question seems to be valid by and large with regard to the religions referred to above, namely Pauline Christianity and Talmudic Judaism.

⁶ Thus, for instance, they do not refer to the views prevalent in each community as to the status of sinners and evildoers.

⁷ And Jonas, but he is rather the hero of a story than the author of a prophetic story.

⁸ Pseudo-Cyprian in *Adversus Iudaeos* (probably written near the end of the 2nd century) states that, whereas the Jews, who in the past were learned in scriptural lore, are at present incapable of redeeming

Judaean-Christian texts I shall quote occurs in 'Abd al-Jabbār's *Tathbīt Dalā'il al-Nubuwwa*. The author, who lived in the second half of the tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh, incorporated into this work a series of texts that internal evidence shows quite unmistakably to be of Judaean-Christian origin. Some peculiarities of style prove that many of these texts or all of them are translations from the Syriac. It may be inferred from these contents that the originals pre-dated the Arab conquests, going back to the seventh sixth and fifth century or, in some cases, to an even earlier period. In one of these texts, which presents a brief and jaundiced overview of the history of Christianity (more precisely of Pauline Christianity) - regarded as a process of ever increasing corruption of the teachings of Jesus, who called for an observance of the commandments of the Torah - we find a passage stating that the early Christian leaders abandoned the Hebrew language, the language of Abraham and his sons as well as of Jesus, because the Hebrews were at that time the people of the Book and people of knowledge; for this reason, these leaders addressed their missionary activities to nations which, not being the people of the Book and having no knowledge of God's Books and his commandments, would not see through the deceptions they practiced in order to achieve domination. Some of these ignorant nations are mentioned, namely the *Rūm* (i.e. probably the Byzantines), the Syrians, the Persians, the Indians and the Armenians.⁹ The Arabs are not named in this list; possibly they were omitted by 'Abd al-Jabbār or by Jewish Christians who, living in an Arab milieu, did not wish to give offence, but this is not certain.

[p. 180] The other Judaean-Christian text which I wish to quote in the context of the present enquiry occurs in the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, a work which is believed by some scholars to have been written in the second half of the fourth century but maybe earlier; certainly it may be supposed to have drawn in some of its

the Scriptures and understanding scriptural things, those who used to be foolish and uninstructed in what pertains to the spirit now teach, know and understand the Scripture; see Dirk van Damme, *Pseudo-Cyprian, Adversus Iudaeos, Gegen die Judenchristen, die älteste lateinische Predigt* (Freiburg, Schweiz 1960), 76 (p. 136). In what follows there is a description of how the Gentiles turned the tables with the Jews with respect to knowledge (81, p. 138) "Discunt qui olim docebant, et iubentur qui praecipiebant, et intinguntur qui baptizabant, et circumciduntur qui circumcidebant." The last sentence may be compared with the following passage in *Passio Sanctorum Apostolorum Petri et Pauli*, 42 (*Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, ed. R.A. Lipsius. Reprint Darmstadt 1957, p. 157), the first phrase is supposed to be said by Simon Magus concerning Peter and Paul. "Simon dixit Sacratissime Imperator, nolī istis credere, quia hī sunt qui circumciduntur et circumcidunt. Paulus dixit: nos antequam ueritatem cognosceremus, carnis circumcisionem tenuimus, at ubi ueritas apparuit, cordis circumcisione et circumcidimur et circumcidimus." On Jews and Christians, see also Irenaeus, *Contra Haereses*, IV, 23-25. The claim that the Christians know the Jewish scriptures better than the Jews themselves is put forward in the 9th century by the Syriac Monophysite author Nonnos (or Nona; there are also other forms of the name; see A. Van Roey, *Nonnos de Nisibe, Traité Apologétique, étudié, texte et traduction*. Louvain 1948, part III), in the Syriac text the passage occurs, p. 23, in the Latin translation, p. 58. Nonnos may have had a special reason for making this claim, as he was the teacher of the earliest Jewish *mutakallim* and theologian David b. Marwān al-Muqammiṣ. Al-Muqammiṣ is said to have been converted for a period of time to Christianity and then to have returned to Judaism. *Inter alia* he is credited with having translated (*naqala*), clearly from Syriac into Arabic, two Christian biblical commentaries of Genesis (which he called *Kitāb al-khalīqa*, cf. Syriac *sefra de-brita* and of Ecclesiastes (see Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī, *Kitāb al-anwār wa-'l-marāqib*, ed. L. Nemoy, I, New York 1939, p. 44). The two translations, which are lost, may have had a considerable influence on the early Jewish commentaries of the Bible such as those at Saadia.

⁹ See 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Tathbīt Dalā'il al-Nubuwwa*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm 'Uthmān, Beirut 1966, p. 151, S. Pines, *The Jewish Christians of the Early Ages of Christianity*, Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, II (1968), p. 253 (17).

parts on considerably earlier materials. Written in Greek, it was probably composed in Syria.¹⁰

In designating the text I shall cite as Judaeo-Christian, I do not refer only to the heterodox opinions expressed in it (which do not occur in the passage translated below), but first and foremost to the fact that, as we shall see, it is quite evident that the passage was written by people who regarded themselves as belonging to the Jewish nation. It is also made quite clear that, in contradistinction to the text cited by ‘Abd al-Jabbār (see above), the passage in hand was composed by Jewish Christians who did not reject missionary activities aimed at converting the Gentiles, but believed that they had received a call to engage in this work. The passage, which is supposed to have been spoken by the Apostle Peter, may be rendered as follows:¹¹

...(As) Jesus spoke clearly of (the things) of which he wanted (to speak) (since he was addressing) a nation capable of thinking (or understanding),¹² to which we too belong; when we rarely did not understand something in what he said, we asked about it in private, in order that nothing in what he had said should be incomprehensible to us. Therefore, as he knew that we knew everything that he had spoken and were able to provide the proof,¹³ he commanded us, when he sent us to the ignorant peoples (*amathē ethnē*) in order to baptize them with a view to the forgiveness of (their) sins, first to teach them.

[p. 181] In this passage, even more than in the later one occurring in ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s *Tathbīt*, the distinction between “the nation (*laos*) capable of thinking”, i.e. the Jews of whom the Jewish Christians are a part, and “the ignorant peoples” (*ta amathē ethnē*) i.e. the Gentiles, stands out very sharply. As has been already indicated, no corresponding difference on the basis of knowledge between believers and unbelievers is postulated by the Pauline Christians, who, when they do speak of wisdom (*sophia*) or knowledge (*gnōsis*) within their community, refer to them as characteristic of a spiritual élite and not of the whole body of the faithful; nor does Talmudic Judaism explain in the first place the difference between Jews and non-Jews by pointing to the contrast between the knowledge of the former and the ignorance of the latter. Since the Jews in question are no longer in the business of proselytizing, their dealings with, and their attitude towards, the Gentiles are in the main conditioned by considerations of a different order.

The clear-cut self-definition of the Jewish Christians of which we have spoken may not only have determined their view of themselves; it may be plausibly argued that it was also stamped upon the minds of Arabs who may have been their neighbours. This impression may account, *inter alia*, for the reference in Qur’ān XXVI, 197 to ‘*Ulamā’ Banī Isrā’il*’.¹⁴ Their contact with Jewish Christians may have

¹⁰ There is a Syriac version which comprises texts belonging to, or reminiscent of, part of our *Homilies* and also texts standing in close relation to parts of the pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones*. Both the *Homilies* and the *Recognitiones* may be plausibly supposed to have been composed in a milieu which to some extent spoke Aramaic.

¹¹ *Homilies*, XVII, 6-7, ed. B. Rehm, J. Irmischer and F. Paschke, Berlin 1969, p. 232.

¹² *laōi noein dynamenōi*.

¹³ An interpretation of the passage is proposed by me in a forthcoming study.

¹⁴ Obviously the fact that the majority of the Jews, Jewish Christians included, did not recognize Muḥammad as a prophet, must have prevented the author of the Qur’ān from expatiating on the knowledge imputed to them. The verses of a Jewish peer, supposed to have been written about 625, attest, if they are authentic, to both the high esteem in which Jews (in this case I believe they may have been Jewish Christians) held the erudition of their own learned men and their wish to disparage

also instilled into some Arabs the conviction that knowledge is of supreme importance. Of this facet of the influence of the Judaeo-Christian system of beliefs and values on the Arabs more hereafter.

[p. 182] The hypothesis I wish to put forward, in so far as it relate to the *al-jāhiliyya* and cognate notions (see above) referring to “ignorance,” is based to a considerable extent on a passage in another work belonging to the pseudo-Clementine literature entitled *Recognitiones*. This work, whose Greek original is lost, has been preserved in its Latin version completed by Rufinus in 406.

The *Recognitiones* are closely connected with the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, it is believed that the *Recognitiones* may have been written between 360 and 380, but an earlier date is by no means out of the question, and the materials which the author has used may be still more ancient.

The various chronological problems that we have touched upon are however of no great importance as far as our inquiry is concerned; for the principal point that matters is beyond dispute. It is indubitable that the *Recognitiones*, including the passage that is translated below, were composed more than two centuries before the rise of Islam.

In¹⁵ the twenty-first generation, a certain wise man who belonged to the race (*genus*) of those who had been driven out¹⁶, was born of the seed of Noah's first son. The name of this man was Abraham, from whom our Hebrew race originates. At a time when the whole world was again suffering from various errors and, because of the atrocity of the crimes (which were being committed), was ripe for the destruction that was being prepared for it, this time not by means of water, but of fire, as this (instrument of) destruction,¹⁷ having begun in Sodom, threatened the whole terrestrial globe, he (Abraham) through his intimate friendship with God whom he had pleased, saved the whole world from a similar destruction. In the beginning however - while all the others were in the grip of error - he, being by profession an astrologer, was able to recognize, from the system and order of the stars, the Creator and thus understood that all things were ruled by Providence. Thereupon the angel who, appearing to his sight, stood by him, instructed him more fully concerning things which he had begun to be aware of. He showed him what was due to his race and posterity and promised that this region would be restored - rather [p. 183] than given - to them. Then, as Abraham wished to know the causes of things and reflected very earnestly by himself on this matter, the true Prophet, he who alone knows the hearts and intentions of men, appeared and revealed to him everything that he wished to know; he taught (him) the science regarding the Deity, made also known the origin and end of the world, showed that the soul was immortal...¹⁸ pointed at the rules of life by means of which he would please God and explained that the dead would be resuscitated, that there would be a future judgment that the righteous would be rewarded and the

Muhammad. I quote the translation given in Rosenthal's *Knowledge Triumphant* (p. 27), “I notice that he (Muhammad) is disapproved by the rabbis all, each of whom possesses knowledge and is well-informed, who have been studying every kind of knowledge spoken of by the Torah and the Psalter.” Rosenthal questions the authenticity of these verses, but believes that they are “quite old.”

¹⁵ *Recognitiones*, I, 30-34, ed. B. Rehm - F. Paschke, Berlin, 1965, p. 26f.

¹⁶ This refers to a story told about the 19th generation.

¹⁷ *Plaga*, literally “blow”.

¹⁸ There seems to be something missing in the text.

wicked punished and that all things would be ruled by means of a just judgment. After having duly taught all (these things) in an adequate manner, (the true Prophet) departed again to his invisible abode.

Now while Abraham was still in a state of ignorance (*in ignorantia versaretur*), as we have told you before, two sons were born to him: one was called Ishmael and the other Heliosdros.¹⁹ From one of them the people of the Arabs²⁰ descended, from the other the peoples of the Persians, some of which followed the way of life and similar (?)²¹ rules of the Brahman (*Bragmanorum*).

Some have settled in Arabia, and some of their descendants were dispersed in Egypt. Hence some Indians and Egyptians have learned to be circumcised and to keep to a purer observance than the rest, which is a proof and indication of chastity, although most of them in the course of time turned to impiety.²²

[p. 184] Abraham, however, having had these two sons at a time when he still lived in ignorance of things (*in ignorantia rerum vixerat*), he being righteous, asked God, after he had achieved knowledge of Him, to (be considered) to merit to have offspring from Sarah who was his legitimate wife,²³ even though she was sterile. And (indeed) he received (a son) whom he called Isaac; from the latter Jacob was born; and from Jacob the twelve patriarchs and from those twelve the seventy-two.

I shall not try to discover the source of the statement that Abraham had a son named Heliosdros, who is not mentioned in the book of Genesis;²⁴ nor need the attitude implied in the text towards the Persian peoples, who are supposed to be descendants of Heliosdros, concern us in the context of the present inquiry. For the same reason no attempt will be made to understand the significance of the rather confused statements concerning Indians, Brahman and Egyptians.

As far as our inquiries are concerned the salient points in this text are the following:

- 1) As is stated twice in the text, Ishmael²⁵ and Heliosdros were born to Abraham while he was still in a state of complete ignorance.

¹⁹ Other variants are *Eliosdros*, *Heliosdrus* and *Elosodrus*.

²⁰ I follow a variant which reads: *tōn Arabōn* (in Greek characters) *gentes*. The printed text has *barbarae gentes*.

²¹ *Vicina*.

²² Cf. *Recognitiones*, VIII, 53, 2 (p. 250) "Iudaeorum quoque circumcisionem Arabicae gentes aliaque plurimae ad ministerium suae impietatis imitatae sunt". Sozomenos in his *Ekklesiastikē Historia*, written in the middle of the 5th century states (ed., Bidez-Hansen, p. 299, cf. fn. 26 for full reference), that all the Arabs are circumcised, and that they do not eat pork. Like the author of *The Recognitiones* he refers to the corruption which had befallen the conduct of life which they had inherited from Ishmael, for according to him the ancient Hebrews had before the law was promulgated by Moses unwritten customs. This corruption was due to the influence of the idolatrous practices of the neighbours of the Arabs. Bardesanes (b. 154) in his Syrian work *Liber Legum Regionum* refers to the recent conquest of Arabia by the Romans; the latter abolished there all the laws (*namusē*) that had existed before them, particularly circumcision, which was practiced there. The fact that the Arabs are circumcised at the age of thirteen is mentioned by Josephus (*Ant. Iud.* I, 193 and 214).

²³ *Coniunx legitima*.

²⁴ None of the sons of Abraham from Qetura or the descendants of these sons (Genesis, C. 25) has, according to the Hebrew Bible or to the Septuagint, a similar name.

²⁵ In the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, II, 16; p. 41, the unrighteous Cain is opposed to the righteous Abel, the impious Esau to the pious Jacob, and Ishmael to Isaac who was blessed by God. The epithet

- 2) On the other hand, Isaac was born when Abraham was in possession of perfect knowledge.

The implications of these statements are not spelled out, but they seem evident, if one holds, as the author of the texts clearly does, the statements to be significant.

[p. 185] The descendants of Isaac, more precisely the Jews, cannot but be people of knowledge. The descendants of Ishmael, on the other hand, i.e. the Arabs (and those of Heliosdros with whom we are not at present concerned), are, as it were, doomed to ignorance. (This circumstance appears to be considered by the author of our text as being of greater significance than the fact mentioned by him that they did not descend from Abraham's legitimate wife. On this point the text of *Recognitiones* contrasts with the *Ecclesiastical History*, written in the middle of the fifth century by Sozomenos, an Orthodox Christian, who does not refer to the ignorance of the Arabs, but writes at some length about the stigma of bastardy attached to them.²⁶)

If this interpretation is valid, it appears to entail the conclusion that the designations *al-jāhiliyya* and *al-jāhilūn*, or the equivalents of these designations, may have been originally given by Jewish Christians to Arab Paganism and Arab Pagans several centuries before the rise of Islam.

Another point may be significant. The story in our text (even if one abstracts from the references to Heliosdros) by no means corresponds to the story narrated in the Book of Genesis. The following detail, in particular, is important from our point of view: reading the book of Genesis, one gets the clear impression that Abraham, at the time of the birth of Ishmael, recounted in C. 16, was by no means in a state of complete ignorance. This is negated, to cite but one example, by the fact that, before the birth of Ishmael, God appeared in a vision to Abraham and concluded a covenant with him (C. 15). It seems likely that, whereas in many other points the author of our text tailored the story related in the Book of Genesis according to [p. 186] his theological beliefs, the story was altered as regards the particulars we have just referred to in order to single out the Arabs and the Persians as being congenitally condemned, because of their descent from Ishmael and Heliosdros, to a life of ignorance. Such a deliberate alteration would doubtless argue for a close contact between the Jewish Christians, who were responsible for it, and the peoples in question.

Let us sum up: there are some data that indicate that Jewish Christians set a particularly high value on knowledge, and that they held themselves and the other Jews or Hebrews, or Children of Israel, to be people of knowledge and the other nations to be ignorant. As we have seen, it would appear, according to one text, that ignorance was especially characteristic of the Arabs (and the Persians).

According to my hypothesis, some Arabs had accepted this system of values and these value judgments regarding the Children of Israel and the pagan Arabs but could not put up with the sense of inferiority the judgment in question gave them.

for Ishmael is missing in the MSS; by analogy to the other two pairs of brothers, it may be conjectured to have been: "who was cursed by God."

²⁶ See Sozomenos, *Ekklesiastikē Historia, Kirchengeschichte*, ed. J. Bidez-Ch. Hansen, Berlin, 1960 (*Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* 50), p. 299. According to our author, those who are called Ishmaelites call themselves *Sarakēnoi*, Saracens. He explains their having opted for the latter designation by the wish to have people believe that they descend from Sarah and thus escape the reproach of bastardy which might be directed against them because of their descent from a slave (Hagar). The appellation Hagarenes often applied to the Arabs in Christian sources is in many cases clearly motivated by the desire to call attention to this discreditable ancestry.

This malaise, the revolt against being relegated to the status of irremediably ignorant people, may have been an important factor in the genesis of the religious upheaval that was Islam.

The appearance of an Arab Prophet, who had revealed knowledge, *'ilm*, and transmitted it to the members of his community, just as had been the case with the Jewish prophets and their communities, proved that the Arabs no longer lived in the *Jāhiliyya*, were no longer *jāhilūn* - as we have seen, these terms in the sense in which they are used in the Qur'ān, may have been borrowed from the Jewish Christians or modelled upon expressions they used. The frequency with which derivatives from the root *'ilm* are used in the Qur'ān may be a consequence of the disappearance of the sentiment of inferiority with respect to knowledge which has been referred to above; this sentiment was no longer appropriate, and the impulse to make this clear may have been felt.

It has been long recognized that the reference in the Qur'ān to a written Arabic revelation may have sprung from a feeling of emulation with regard to the People of the Book. The references to "knowledge" may, perhaps, have been caused by a similar sentiment. Incidentally, Ishmael is vindicated in the Qur'ān; he was a prophet (Qur'ān XIX, 55).

According to the Qur'ān and other Muslim sources, people [p. 187] called the *Ḥanīfs* were in some ill-defined way the precursors of Muḥammad; the history of these people went back to Abraham, who was one of them: "Abraham was not a Jew (*yahūdī*) nor a Christian (*naṣrānī*), but a *Ḥanīf*, a Muslim" (Qur'ān III, 60).

In verses that belong to the same passage in *sūra* III, the author of the Qur'ān claims to have more trustworthy information about Abraham than the People of the Book (i.e. the Jews and the Christians). "People of the Book, why do you argue about Abraham, (since) the Torah and the Gospel (*al-injīl*) were made to descend after him, do you not understand?" (Q. III 58). This verse may be interpreted as meaning that Muḥammad believed that he was privy to a tradition about Abraham that was more ancient than the Torah and the Gospel.

"In truth the people that are the closest to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet and those who believe" (*la'lladhīn 'ttaba'ūhu wa-hādhā al-nabī wa-'illadhīn 'āmanū*) (Q. III 61). Possibly a distinction is made in this verse between those who followed Abraham before Muḥammad on the one hand, and the Prophet himself and those who believe in him on the other; i.e. the verse may be construed to refer to a sect, or a school of thought that took Abraham for a model.

Some non-Arab texts seem to indicate that such would-be disciples of Abraham did exist.

As I have pointed out elsewhere,²⁷ such people are referred to by Tertullian, who advises them to imitate (if they are so inclined) the Abraham of the earlier period of his life, when he was monogamous and uncircumcised. This might mean that these followers of Abraham preferred him as he was later on; as we have seen, this is also the opinion put forward in the text of the *Recognitiones* quoted above.

²⁷ See S. Pines, Notes on Islam and on Arabic Christianity and Judaeo-Christianity, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, IV, 1984, p.143 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 24, considers that the faith of Abraham before he was circumcised corresponds to the faith that in "*novissimis temporibus orta est in humano genere per Domini adventum,*" i.e. to the faith of the Christians, whereas circumcision (that of Abraham and of the Jews) and the law of works held sway in the intermediate time, that which extends from the circumcision of Abraham (or the promulgation or the law of works) to the advent of Christianity.

[p. 188] A second text is of a quite different character and I find it rather surprising. It occurs in a quotation from the neo-Platonic philosopher Isidoros cited by Photius and referring to Marinos,²⁸ who was of Samaritan origin and became the successor of Proclus as head of the Athenian Academy. The Greek original with a translation are given in M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, Jerusalem 1980, II, pp. 673-674. I here quote the translation:

He says that the successor of Proclus, Marinos, came from Neapolis,²⁹ a city situated near the mountain called Argarizon.³⁰ Then the impious writer uttered the blasphemy that on this mountain there is a most holy sanctuary of Zeus the Highest, to whom Abraham the father of all Hebrews consecrated himself, as Marinos himself maintains. Marinos, though originally a Samaritan, gave up their creed, since it deviated from Abraham's religion and introduced innovations in it and fell in love with paganism (*Samareites oun to ap'arkhēs ho Marinos gegonōs apetaxato men pros tēn ekeinōn doxan, hote eis tēn kainotomian apo tes Abramou thrēskeias aporryeisan to de Hēllēnōn ēgapēsen*).

The chronological sequence of the story is not clear, but it seems probable that Marinos' defection from the Samaritan religion was due in the first place to his belief that it had deviated from the faith of Abraham, and that he embraced Hellenism at a later stage. His identification of Zeus Hypsisto with the God of Abraham may date from this later period.³¹

[p. 189] The existence, before the rise of Islam, of followers of Abraham among the Arabs, should, in my opinion be considered, at least to some extent, in the context of similar attempts to take Abraham as a model. Such attempts are attested, as we have seen, both in the Christian or Judaeo-Christian and in the Samaritan communities. The earliest statement relating to the appearance of this religious phenomenon among the Arabs occurs in Sozomenos' *Ecclesiastical History*, composed in the years 443-450. Sozomenos' statement clearly refers to a period which pre-dates these years; it may accordingly be taken as certain that the developments which he describes preceded by a considerable margin Marinos' invocation of the authority of Abraham.

As we have seen, Sozomenos (p. 299) speaks of the Arabs having at first observed, as did their ancestor Ishmael, the unwritten customs, which were characteristic of the way of life of the ancient Hebrews (*hoi palaioi Hebraioi*) before the promulgation of the law of Moses. In the course of time, however, they

²⁸ He belongs to the second half of the 5th century.

²⁹ Nablus.

³⁰ *Har Gerizim*, Mount Gerizim.

³¹ A question which I am unable to answer is that relating to the "religion of Abraham" which the first Khazar king who is supposed to have been converted (in the second half of the 8th century) to Judaism is said to have adopted. The Judaism in question was apparently neither Rabbinite nor Qaraite. See A.N. Pollak, *Kuzariya* (in Hebrew), Tel Aviv 1951 p.141ff. The fact that an account of this conversion which is favourable to the man who is supposed to have brought it about occurs in 'Abd al-Jabbār's Judaeo-Christian documents may be relevant in this context. See S. Pines, *A Moslem Text Concerning the Conversion of the Khazars to Judaism*, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 13, 1963, pp. 45-55. As far as we know at the time in question neither Rabbinites nor Qaraites were keen on having proselytes among non-Jews.

succumbed, according to our author, to the influence of their neighbours and adopted the idolatrous practices of the latter.

Thereafter, however, some of them, having associated with Jews (*Ioudaiois*), learnt from whom they descended and, returned to that which conformed to the customs and laws of the Hebrew (*Hebraiōn*). As from then till now many among them have a Jewish way of life. Not long, however, before the present reign they also began to adopt Christian ways, for they came to participate in the faith in Christ through being in the society of priests and monks, who living near them in hermitages philosophized leading a good life and working miracles.

μετὰ δὲ ταῦτά τινες αὐτῶν συγγενόμενοι Ἰουδαίοις ἔμαθον, ἀφ' ὧν ἐγένοντο, καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ συγγενὲς ἐπανήλθον καὶ τοῖς Ἑβραίων ἔθεσι καὶ νόμοις προσέθεντο. ἔξ ἐκείνου τε παρ' αὐτοῖς εἰσέτι νῦν πολλοὶ Ἰουδαϊκῶς ζῶσιν. οὐ πρὸ πολλοῦ³² δὲ τῆς παρουσίας βασιλείας καὶ χριστιανίζειν ἤρξαντο. μετέσχον δὲ τῆς εἰς τὸν Χριστὸν πίστεως ταῖς συνουσίαις τῶν προσοικούντων αὐτοῖς ἱερέων καὶ μοναχῶν, οἳ ἐν ταῖς πέλας ἐρημίαις ἐφιλοσόφουν εὖ βιοῦτες καὶ θαυματουργοῦντες.

[p. 190] The following conclusions can, it seems to me, be drawn from the texts that have been quoted or paraphrased:

Sozomenos shares the belief of the author of the *Recognitiones* that the religion and way of life of the Arabs had been corrupted in the course of time, but goes into greater detail than the Judaeo-Christian writer or redactor. According to him the Arabs had, once upon a time, observed the unwritten customs of the ancient Hebrews, as these had existed prior to the Mosaic legislation. Clearly the customs that were current at the time of Abraham and Ishmael are meant. Neither Sozomenos nor the author of the *Recognitiones* (who, as has been noted, appears to imply that the Arabs were congenitally doomed to live in a state of ignorance) makes any allusion to any lingering remembrance on the part of the Arabs (who, as Sozomenos states, had been corrupted by the idolatrous practices of their neighbours) of the purer religion and way of life, which had been part of their heritage. Sozomenos does not leave room for doubt on this point. According to him, the Arabs who learnt about their being descendants (of Abraham and Ishmael) received this information from Jews. He states further that this newly acquired knowledge about their ancestry led to their adoption of the customs and laws of the Hebrews. It is significant that in this sentence, in contradistinction to the one that follows it (in which it is stated that many live “up to now” like Jews), Sozomenos uses the designation Hebrews and not Jews. He clearly refers here to the unwritten customs which, as he has remarked a few lines above, had existed before the promulgation of the Law of Moses, and which had been abandoned and probably forgotten by the Arabs. Accordingly, one may plausibly infer - this is not stated by Sozomenos - that the Jews who revealed to certain Arabs the truth about their descent were also instrumental in instilling into them their conceptions concerning these unwritten customs. In other words, some Jews - or

³² According to Sozomenos (pp. 299-300), the first Arab tribe to have been converted to Christianity was one headed by a chief named Zākēmos. The latter was childless, and embraced Christianity together with his tribe, when the promise made to him by a Christian that a son should be born to him was fulfilled.

rather, as I believe, some Judaeo-Christians - had renounced the conviction implied in the *Recognitiones* as to the congenital ignorance [p. 191] of the Arabs and wished to persuade the latter to adopt the way of life of “the ancient Hebrews,” as they imagined it; in other words, they wished to convert the Arabs in question to *dīn Ibrāhīm*, to which presumably they themselves adhered. At a later date, not long before “the present reign”, i.e. a short time before the accession to the throne in 408 of Theodoseos II, some Arabs, influenced by monks and priests who lived in their neighbourhood, adopted the Christian way of life.

To sum up: Sozomenos refers in our text to partisans of three religions (if one abstracts the pagan Arabs): (i) the adepts of the religion of Abraham,³³ (ii) the Jews, i.e. the people who observe the Law of Moses, who may have been Judaeo-Christian, and (iii) the Christians.

These three religions are likewise mentioned in the two [p. 192] Qur’ānic verses quoted above: (III, 58) “People of the Book, why do you argue about Abraham (since) the Torah and the Gospel were made to descend after him, do you not understand?”; (III, 60) “Abraham was not a Jew, nor a Christian, but a *Ḥanīf*, a Muslim.” The connection of Abraham with the adepts of the religions of Abraham and with the followers of Muḥammad is made clear in the following verse: (III, 61) “In truth, the people that are the closest to Abraham are those who followed him and his Prophet and those who believed.”

It is, I think, in order to round off this paper by an exposé of a theory concerning a much debated problem, namely the origin and the primary meaning of the term *Ḥanīf* known to us from the Qur’ān and the Muslim tradition. None of the Arab sources offers us a credible explanation of its etymology and original signification. Nor can the Moslem use of the term, *pace* P. Crone and M. Cook,³⁴ be derived from the Syriac *ḥanpe*, “Pagan,” “Gentile,” a word whose etymology cannot be explained if one restricts oneself to the Syriac data.³⁵ This can, however, be done by resorting to the theory I have referred to above. A clue to the enigma we are dealing with is given in a phrase occurring in *Bereshit Rabba*, section 48 (18, 1) ed.

³³ Ibn Hishām’s *Sīra* contains a report on four men of the Quraysh who embarked on a quest for the religion of Abraham (*dīn Ibrāhīm*). One of these four was Warāqa b. Naufal, a relative of Muḥammad’s first wife Khadīja, who consulted him when the revelation of the Qur’ān first began “to come down.” It would thus appear that Warāqa, who is often mentioned in other sources (as well probably as his three companions), belonged to the generation that immediately preceded Muḥammad. As we have seen, Sozomenos, referring to a much earlier period, also mentions the wish stirred up among some Arabs to restore the religion of their ancestor Abraham. I am accordingly inclined to think that Ibn Hishām’s report on the quest may reflect (however inaccurate or fictitious some of the details may be) a religious and social phenomenon which could be encountered some time before the advent of Islam in the milieu to which Muḥammad is supposed to have belonged. Warāqa was eventually converted to Christianity and studied the books (*al-kutub*) of that community; thus he acquired knowledge (belonging) to *ahl al-kitāb* (Ibn Hishām *Sīra*, ed F. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen 1858, I, p. 143ff.). According to al-Bukhārī’s *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* I, 1 ed. Ludolf Krehl, Leiden 1862, p. 5, Warāqa b. Naufal, who was converted to Christianity at the time of the *jāhiliyya*, wrote in the Hebrew script (*kataba al-kitāb al-‘ibrānī*) and wrote out a part of the Gospel in the Hebrew script (*fa-yaktub min al-injīl bi’l-‘ibrāniyya*). This appears to mean that he copied parts of a Gospel which was written in the Hebrew script, as there is no reason to suppose that he knew any other. We are not told what Gospel was available to him; but we may conjecture that initially it belonged to Jewish Christians; for as far as our information goes, no other group possessed Gospels written in the Hebrew script. Graf’s suggestion (G. Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, I Città del Vaticano, 1944, p. 34), that in the context Hebrew may mean Syriac (script) seems to me to be unnecessary and most improbable.

³⁴ See *Hagarism*, p. 13f.

³⁵ The occasional use by Arabic writers of derivatives from the root *ḥ.n.f.* to designate pagans of course derives from the Syriac.

Ch. Albeck, (Berlin 1927, p. 480). The sentence reads: “*amar R. Jonathan: kol ḥanupa she-neemar ba-miqra be-Minim ha-katuv medabber.*” While it is practically impossible to translate this Hebrew phrase literally, it can be correctly rendered as follows: “R. Jonathan says: Where a derivative from the root *ḥ.n.f.* occurs in the Scripture, the text refers to the *Minim*”.³⁶

[p. 193] Let us examine the two terms mentioned in this sentence. First the root *ḥ.n.f.*: all the derivatives from the root denote something reprehensible and evil, the most relevant among them in the context of the present inquiry being *ḥanef*, which means “flatterer”, or “hypocrite”, or “impious”, or “unjust”.

As for *Minim*, the term sometimes indubitably denotes Judaeo-Christians; this is possibly its earliest signification, as far as its use as a designation of a sect is concerned.

In my opinion, Jerome, in the statement that follows, was inaccurate in one point only, namely in restricting too much the range of significations of the term *Minim*. The statement reads (*Epistula*, 112, 13):³⁷

Usque hodie per totas orientis synagogas inter Iudaeos haeresis est, quae dicitur Minaeorum, et a Pharisaeis huc usque damnatur: quos uulgo Nazaraeos nuncupant, qui credunt in Christum, Filium Dei, natum de Maria uirgine, et eum dicunt esse, qui sub Pontio Pilato passus est, et resurrexit in quem et nos credimus: sed dum uolunt et Iudaei esse et Christiani, nec Iudaei sunt nec Christiani.

Now, as has been suggested, there is no reason to believe that Nazareans were the only sectarians to be called *Minim*. In fact, it has been argued that this designation was also applied to either Judaeo-Christian sects, to groups of Gnostics and to Christians of Gentile origin, and some of the arguments put forward in the course of this debate seem to be valid. This being the case, there is, as far as I see, no difficulty in adding the adepts of the religion of Abraham to this list of various denominations and sects.

All these have one thing in common: they were not approved of by the representatives of Talmudic Judaism. There is accordingly no reason to question the statement of R. Jonathan (who lived in the beginning of the third century) from which a tendency may be deduced to apply to the various heretics and unbelievers called *Minim* or to some of them the derogatory nickname *Ḥanefim*, singular [p. 194] *Ḥanef*. Now it is a well-known fact that there are sects and religious groups to whom disparaging nicknames coined by their adversaries are permanently attached: in the general usage they are called by no other name. The Quakers are a case in point,

³⁶ The following passage, which refers to the Biblical Enoch, occurs in *Bereshit R.* beginning of section 25 (p. 238f.): “R. Eybo (said): Enoch was *ḥanef*, sometimes he was righteous (*ṣadiq*) and sometimes wicked (*rasha*’). The Holy One, blessed be He, said: I will take him on high while he is righteous... The *Minim* asked R. Abbahei saying: We do not find (in the Bible) that Enoch died. He said to them: why (do you not find this)? They told him, *leqīḥa* (i.e. the verb *laqāḥ* to take) is used with regard to him; it is also used with regard to Elijah.” The word *ḥanef* may be applied here to Enoch because of the role he played in the teaching of various sects and groups which were not approved in Talmudic Judaism; the statement that he was *ḥanef* may refer to his heterodoxy. The plausibility of this supposition is enhanced by the fact that the *Minim*, as quoted in the passage, argue that Enoch did not die. For the words *ḥanef* and *ḥanupa* see also B. Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, 103a and *Soṭa*, 41b.

³⁷ Quoted from J. Labourt, ed. transl., *Saint Jérôme, Lettres*, VI (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1958): 31-32.

perhaps also the *Mitnagdim* as opposed to the *Ḥasidim*. I consider that the appellation *Ḥanef*, *Ḥanefim* can be accounted for on similar lines.

Given R. Jonathan's statement, and the remarks made above concerning the sects to whom the appellation *Minim* applied, the supposition that a partisan of the religion of Abraham was labelled in Hebrew *Ḥanef* presents no difficulty. This may have originally happened outside Arabia, but this is a matter of conjecture. What is certain is that in an Arabic transcription this Hebrew word gives and can only give *Ḥanīf*.

To sum up: according to my theory the appellation *Ḥanīf* was originally the Arabic form of the Hebrew *Ḥanef*, a term which was used with regard to the adepts of the religion of Abraham,³⁸ whether Jews or non-Jews.

³⁸ There is no doubt in my opinion that the Syriac *ḥanpe* which usually mean "Pagans", "Gentile", is also connected with the Hebrew *Ḥanefim*. It is a matter for further research whether the signification of the Syriac term evolved independently from the use of *ḥanefim* as an equivalent of *Minim*, or whether there was a connection between the two semantic developments. In this context it may be relevant to note that in Syriac the Manicheans and the Muslims are also called *ḥanpe*. Cf. the fact that in the Middle Ages a Muslim was called *paganus*, *paien* in the *Chanson de Roland*, *paynim* in medieval English. In the Peshitta the Hebrew *ḥanef*, *ḥanupa* are sometimes rendered by *ḥanpa*, *ḥanapta*; thus Isaiah 33, 14: *ḥanefim*, Syr. *ḥanpe*, Septuagint *asebeis*; Jeremiah 23, 15: Heb, *ḥanupa*, Syr. *ḥanputa*, Sept. *molysmos*.