Quotations from In the Shadow of the Sword by Tom Holland

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His history, far from tracing changes in the doctrines and institutions of the Church, aimed to demonstrate that they had never changed in the slightest. And Christianity itself? Christianity, Eusebius presumed, had existed since the dawn of time: "For, obviously, we must regard the religion proclaimed in recent years to every nation through Christ's teaching as none other than the first, the most ancient, and the most primitive of religions."6 To many of us today, familiar as we are with Neanderthal burial sites and Cro-Magnon cave art, this claim does not seem obvious at all. Nevertheless, its underlying presumption—that religions have some mysterious and fundamental essence, immune to the processes of time—remains widely taken for granted. In large part, this is due to Eusebius and others like him. The great innovation of late antiquity was to fashion, out of what might otherwise have been an inchoate blur of beliefs and doctrines, individual templates for individual religions, and then to establish them as definitive. How this was accomplished is a fascinating and remarkable tale—for it touches upon the highest politics and the profoundest human emotions. The clash of great empires and the wretchedness of slaves; the shimmering of mosaics and the stench of plague pits; the clamour of teeming cities and the silence of empty deserts: all must feature. Beginning in a world recognisably ancient and ending in one medieval, it ranks as a transformation as momentous as any in history. Yet the story is, for all that, a treacherous one to tell. Partly, this is due to the inevitable gaps and contradictions in the sources that bedevil all periods of ancient history. Take, for example, the story of Yusuf's death. There are some accounts which describe him as falling in the heat of battle, rather than riding out into the sea. – (page 13)

A narrative that features the persecution of veiled Christian women in Arabia by a Jewish king is clearly one set in a world at some remove from our own. – (page 14)

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an Arab by the name of Muhammad. Aged forty, and with a moderate career as

a merchant behind him, he had experienced—if Ibn Hisham were to be believed—history's most epochal mid-life crisis. Restless and dissatisfied, he had begun to roam the wilderness which stretched beyond his home town, "and not a stone or tree that he passed by but would say, 'Peace be unto you, O prophet of God.' " – (page 20)

Nevertheless, Muslim scholars had insisted, there did remain gold, priceless gold, out there amid the dross. Accordingly, concerned to identify which sayings of the Prophet could be enshrined as genuine and authoritative, and which were to be junked, they had toured all the various lands of the Umma, collecting hadiths wherever they could find them, and then subjecting each and every one to the most rigorous examination. – (page 40)

What the jurists of the early Caliphate had succeeded in pulling off, by means of "a fiction perhaps unequalled in the history of human thought,"41 was the ultimate in lawyers' tricks: a quite breathtaking show of creativity and nerve. Stitching together a whole new legal framework for the infant empire, it had become the habit of these ingenious scholars to attribute their rulings, not to their own initiative or judgement, but rather to that ultimate in authorities: the Prophet. – (page 41)

"We must abandon the gratuitous assumptions," he declared flatly, "that there existed originally an authentic core of information going back to the time of the Prophet."42 In other words—as a source for the origins of Islam, the hadiths were worse than useless. – (page 41)

As Schacht, with the knowing disillusion of a Poirot, put it: "The more perfect the isnad, the later the tradition."43 The lavish name-dropping of references, in anything affecting to cite the Prophet, was a mark, not of reliability, but of precisely the opposite. – (page 42)

To be sure, there are still those who will recount the Battle of Badr as though it were an episode as rooted in history as, say, the Battle of Waterloo, carefully analysing Muhammad's strategy, calculating the size of his forces, and illustrating his tactics with arrows on maps.48 Yet this, to many others, appears a spectacular misreading of the evidence, a confusion of history with something very different: literature. – (page 44)

Over the course of almost two hundred years, the Arabs, a people never noted for their reticence, and whose motivation, we are told, had been an utterly consum-

ing sense of religious certitude, had set themselves to conquering the world—and yet in all that time, they composed not a single record of their victories, not one, that has survived into the present day. How could this possibly have been so, when even on the most barbarous fringes of civilisation, even in Britain, even in the north of England, books of history were being written during this same period, and copied, and lovingly tended? – (page 45)

Even the sole exception to the rule—a tiny shred of papyrus discovered in Palestine and dated to around AD 740—serves only to compound the puzzle.50 Reading it is like overhearing a game of Chinese whispers. Over the course of only eight lines, it provides something truly startling: a date for the Battle of Badr that is not in the holy month of Ramadan. Why should this come as a surprise? Because later Muslim scholars, writing their learned and definitive commentaries on the Qur'an, confidently identified Badr with an otherwise cryptic allusion to "the day the two armies clashed"51—a date that fell in Ramadan. – (page 45)

Startlingly, were it not for all the commentaries elucidating its mysteries, all the biographies of the Prophet, and all the sprawling collections of hadiths—none of which, in the form we have them, pre-dates the beginning of the third century after the hijra—we would have only the barest reason to associate it with a man named Muhammad at all. – (page 46)

What might have happened to earlier versions of his life we cannot know for certain; but one possibility is strongly hinted at by none other than Ibn Hisham. Much that previous generations had recorded of the Prophet, he commented sternly, was either bogus, or irrelevant, or sacrilegious. "Things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters which would distress certain people; and such reports as I have been told are not to be accepted as trustworthy—all these things have I omitted." – (page 48)

It has been argued that the wellspring of the Qur'an lay not in Arabia but in Iraq; that it was written originally not in Arabic but Syriac, the lingua franca of the Near East at the time; that "Muhammad" was originally a title referring to Jesus.60 By and large, when a book attempts to redraft the origins of a major world religion on quite such a jaw-dropping scale, the cover will feature a picture of the Knights Templar or the Holy Grail. – (page 49)

For a non-believer to claim that the Qur'an might have originated outside of Arabia, or derived from Christian hymns, or been written in Syriac, is liable to be no less shocking to Muslims than has the Muslim denial of Jesus's divinity always been to Christians. – (page 50)

One appalled Muslim scholar has argued that "even the crusaders' fury pales to nothing" in comparison with modern academics' "iconoclastic attack."63 Implicit in this bellow of indignation is the presumption that non-believers have no business poking their noses into Islam's origins. – (page 51)

Taken to its logical extreme, of course, this would mean that only worshippers of Jupiter could legitimately write about the Romans, and only Odinists about the Vikings. Nevertheless, it is hardly necessary to be a Saudi theologian, or even a Muslim at all, to find something profoundly destabilising in the thesis that the stories told by Islam about its own origins might obscure as much as they reveal. – (page 51)

Forty years ago, any querying what Muslim tradition taught about its own origins might have been dismissed as mere crankish trouble-making: one that no more merited a response from heavyweight experts than did, say, the attempt to ascribe Shakespeare's plays to Francis Bacon or the Earl of Oxford. – (page 52)

"The controversy about the Qur'an," she has lamented—whether it is an authentic record of the Prophet's utterances or an anthology, stitched together from various different sources—"permeates the entire field of Qur'anic studies." – (page 52)

I had vaguely assumed, based on my reading of numerous biographies of the Prophet, that I would find a whole wealth of sources dating from his lifetime just waiting to be quarried. – (page 53)

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in the memorable formulation of one historian, "a monument to the destruction rather than the preservation of the past." – (page 53)

From where precisely does the tradition of Muhammad's first terrifying encounter with Gabriel in a cave derive? There is no reference to it in the Qur'an; nor to the Prophet's initial agony when receiving the revelations; nor even to the hearing of any supernatural voice. – (page 54)

Muslims were no more likely to ask whether the Prophet had been influenced by the writings of other faiths than were Christians to wonder whether Mary

had truly been a virgin. – (page 55)

Prophet might have been in the business of filching – (page 56)

To Muslims, however, everything that had preceded the revelations of their Prophet, all its manifold splendours and achievements, had been the merest phantom show, a shirk-haunted wasteland, to which Islam owed precisely nothing. The effect of this presumption was to prove incalculable. To this day, even in the West, it continues to inform the way in which the history of the Middle East is interpreted and understood. – (page 58)

It is noteworthy, for instance, that the conquerors are described on the back of the receipt, not as Muslims, but as something altogether more enigmatic: Magaritai. What precisely this might have meant, and how it was to be linked to the unfamiliar dating system employed by the newcomers, and whether, if at all, it had been inspired by some novel understanding of God, the document does not reveal. – (page 60)

Does the Qur'an really date from the Prophet's lifetime? Where, if not in Mecca, might he have lived? Why are the references to him in the early Caliphate so sparse, so enigmatic, and so late? The answers I have given to these questions are all of them unashamedly provisional—as I believe they have no choice but to be. That said, my ambition has been to sift and weigh the awesomely complex sources, to try and take account of all the many gaps and inconsistencies that exist within them, and then, albeit tentatively, to marshal them into something resembling a narrative. – (page 62)

Just as the great banner that billowed above his tent glimmered with fabulous adornments, so did the king himself: for it was his habit to sport, in addition to all his other sumptuous jewellery, "a pearl of wonderful whiteness, greatly prized on account of its extraordinary size"8 as a stud in his ear. Foreigners may well have viewed such obsession with personal adornment as effeminate, but the Persians themselves knew better. – (page 71)

Conscious that the days when it had been sufficient for the House of Sasan to trumpet an exclusively Persian descent were gone, Peroz had settled upon a simple but audacious expedient: he had ordered its past rewritten. – (page 75)

A new family tree, one more acceptable to Parthian sensibilities, more inclusive, more multicultural, was now required. So it was, obedient to their master's requirements, that scholars in the royal service had set themselves to a comprehensive upgrading of the Sasanian lineage. Fortunately, preserved in ancient texts and in the memories of priests and poets, the perfect ancestors had been waiting shimmeringly to hand. The Kayanids—like Kava, the blacksmith from whom the Karin claimed descent—were heroes from the fabulously distant past, with biographies that featured talking birds, flying chariots, fortresses raised by demons and other fantastical wonders. – (page 76)

Meanwhile, in order to buttress the plausibility of this fraud, centuries of history were simply erased. The end result was a lineage that perfectly served the desperate needs of the time. – (page 77)

That Peroz had resurrected the antique title of Kai; that he had named his eldest son "Kavad," after the first of the Kayanids; that he had stamped his coins with any number of allusions to the legendary dynasty: here were no mere idle self-indulgences. – (page 77)

They had left only the centre intact, to facilitate their own retreat; meanwhile, the pursuing Persians had blundered directly into the death-trap. – (page 79)

For the first time, the Supreme Creator had revealed Himself to a mortal as He truly was: the fountainhead of all that was good. Over the succeeding years, Zoroaster witnessed many more visions. The nature of the cosmos was revealed to him, and the rituals by which he and all mortals should lead their lives. Forced into exile by the refusal of his own people to listen to his teachings, he succeeded in winning converts in a strange land. These new followers, despite all the efforts of neighbouring tribes to crush them, eventually triumphed in war; their infant religion endured and thrived. – (page 83)

As one foreign commentator observed, "Nothing is held to be lawful or right among the Persians unless it is first ratified by a priest." – (page 84)

But the priests were not done with their labours yet. The process of transcribing the mathra—the word of God—had begged a couple of obvious questions: where and when had Zoroaster received it? – (page 87)

For decades, this had served to foster eerie whisperings: that a new prophet was destined to appear, one who would serve as the seal of all who had gone before him and would usher in, for his followers, a golden age of equality, justice and peace.55The Zoroastrian establishment had found it increasingly difficult, amid the miseries of the age, to ring-fence such talk. – (page 93)

Unfortunately, however, the murk that veils the lives of so many prophets from our gaze has, by and large, served to swallow up Mazdak as well. Although, in histories written a century and more after his lifetime, he is portrayed as a towering figure, no contemporary makes reference to him. Consequently, when attempting to make sense of his career, we are left with more questions than answers. – (page 94)

Certainly, the sheer audacity of Kavad's attempt to neutralise the nobility is the best evidence we have that Mazdak did after all exist. It is hard to believe that a Sasanian would ever have identified himself with peasant insurrectionists had he not possessed an inner assurance that he was truly fulfilling the divine purpose. – (page 95)

It is hard to believe that the Persians themselves were wholly ignorant of this alternative history.b Anything that touched on the glory of their ancestors was bound to tickle their fancy. Sure enough, distorted echoes of what the Greeks had recorded about Cyrus and his descendants could sometimes be discerned in the fables of the Kayanids: the majesty of their rule, the vastness of their empire, even, on occasion, their names. Yet ultimately, to the Zoroastrian priests who were responsible for chronicling the past of Iranshahr, history such as the Greeks understood it was of only incidental significance. – (page 97)

Even the non-existence of ancient books of Zoroastrian lore was attributed by the priests, not to the fact that they had only just come up with a script capable of recording their holy scriptures, but to Alexander's imagined taste for burning libraries. There was just a single mercy, in short: that the fiend had ended up "plunged into hell."62 – (page 99)

The last serious attempt made by a Caesar to overthrow the House of Sasan had taken place back in AD 363, under the command of a would-be Alexander named Julian, and had ended with the death of the emperor himself, and the imposition upon his successor of gratifyingly humiliating peace terms. From that moment on, the Roman high command had come to accept a painful and unsettling truth: Persia could not be beaten. To continue ignoring that lesson would result only in an endless haemorrhaging of blood and gold. – (page 101)

Reports were starting to be brought in by travellers from the distant-most limits of the steppes of the rise to prominence there of a whole new breed of savages: a hitherto unknown people named the Turks. It appeared that the Hephthalites themselves might be suffering from their own nomad problem. Manifold indeed were the blessings of Ohrmazd. – (page 108)

To nominate Kavus as his successor would be to entrench Mazdakism in Iranshahr for good; to nominate Khusrow would be to entrust the throne to the man best qualified to consolidate royal power. – (page 110)

When Khusrow dallied in arbours "fresh with the beauty of fruit trees, vines and green cypresses,"73 or wandered past paddocks boasting "boundless numbers of ostriches, antelopes, wild asses, peacocks and pheasants,"74 or rode with the lords and ladies of his court through his hunting grounds in pursuit of "lions and tigers of huge size," – (page 113)

In addition to the written Torah, so they taught, there had also been revealed a secret Torah, never recorded, but passed down instead through the ages by word of mouth, from prophet to prophet, from rabbi to rabbi, and which they in turn, in their schools beside the Euphrates, had inherited and entrusted to memory. This was the same Torah that God Himself, before embarking on the Creation, had made sure to peruse, that the angels studied ceaselessly, and that a mortal, if sufficiently learned, might use to sway demons, to change the weather, or to communicate with the dead. – (page 124)

Yet it remained terrifyingly the case that never, not in all their long history, had the Jewish people faced a more insidious and oppressive danger than that posed them by the worshippers of Jesus. Insidious, because the heresy was sufficiently similar to their own faith to exert a secret and terrible fascination on many of them, including even some rabbis; and oppressive because there was nowhere, it seemed, not in the whole world, that it had failed to reach. – (page 130)

The Romans themselves, for much of their history, had never doubted the answer. If the heavens had favoured them, then this could only be because they were the most god-fearing of peoples. "We stand powerful as much by our piety as by our force of arms." – (page 133)

"Their state," pronounced Posidonius, a celebrated polymath who had died some fifty years before the birth of Christ, "is founded not only upon their manpower, but upon their traditional way of doing things." – (page 134)

Europe, a city by the name of Troy; and this city, within its walls, had sheltered a most potent talisman. It portrayed Pallas Athena, the virgin goddess who, way back in the mists of time, had dropped it from the heavens, and given it her name: the Palladium. – (page 134)

Augustus, he called himself—the "Divinely Favoured One." An immodest title—but well merited. – (page 137)

The light-touch autocracy established by Augustus had been transformed into something infinitely more heavy-handed: centralised, intrusive and absolute. It was a form of government that still retained the name of Roman; and yet there was a sense as well in which it marked a revolutionary change. So much so, in fact, that the new regime had gone so far as to found a second Rome. Byzantium, this new capital had originally been called. – (page 141)

Most strikingly of all, perhaps, Constantinople had been endowed with an ornament hitherto unique to Rome: an assembly of the great and good by the name of the Senate. – (page 143)

Two hundred years on from the founding of Constantinople, and it had become widely believed that Constantine's original plan had been to establish his new capital on the site, not of Byzantium at all, but of Troy. – (page 144)

Yet the most valuable relic of all to have been redeemed from the mists of the Trojan past, and the one that boded best for the future of the city, was not even on public display. Buried deep beneath the base of the column, so it was believed, lay an antique wooden statue: the Palladium itself. The story went that Constantine "had secretly taken it away from Rome, and placed it in his forum": – (page 144)

Previously, whenever a senator had entered the imperial presence, he had simply crooked his right knee. Now, under Justinian's more exacting code of etiquette, he was expected to fall flat on his face, stretch out his hands and feet as far as he could, and humbly kiss the emperor's slipper.25 Under such a regime, the Romans' proud habit of referring to themselves as "citizens"—a tradition

that reached back to the primordial days of the republic—fell increasingly into abeyance. – (page 151)

The order to attack was given; the troops advanced; the crowd was systematically hacked and trampled underfoot. Less a battle than a calculated atrocity, the massacre left the arena piled high with corpses. The death toll, so it was claimed, approached fifty thousand people.37 If true, then one-tenth of the city's population had been wiped out in a single day. – (page 158)

The rival pretensions of Dara and Nisibis, frowning at each other across the Mesopotamian flat-lands, could easily seem to make a mockery of both. "The nations are like a drop from the bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales."43 So it was written in the Tanakh. The Jews, lacking any empire of their own, treasured a distinctive perspective on international affairs. – (page 161)

A century and a half before Constantine, the circumcision of converts had been declared equivalent to castration: a crime that would see the perpetrator exiled to a desert island. – (page 162)

"Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith."51 The Gentiles too, so Paul had concluded, were heirs to the promise made by God to Abraham. – (page 164)

Little more than a generation after Jesus's crucifixion, Christians had already grown obsessed with the need for disciplined book-keeping. The paperwork of each individual church had duly been entrusted to an official chosen by the local congregation to serve as an "overseer," or "episcopos": a "bishop." – (page 168)

And how was it, if the Torah were a matter of sublime irrelevance, as Paul had taught, that Christ Himself had so emphatically stated the exact opposite: "till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished"? – (page 170)

Just as was required by the most exacting standards of the historians of the day, no gospel had been passed as "canonical" that could not be shown, to the satisfaction of catholic scholars, to derive from the authentic evidence of eyewitnesses to the events described. – (page 173)

When, for instance, a Christian named Basilides wished to demonstrate that Jesus had not died upon the cross, he made good the complete lack of evidence for this novel theory in the canonical gospels through a simple expedient: he wrote a whole new gospel of his own.69 The story of the crucifixion, in Basilides's reworking of it, contained a hitherto unsuspected twist. Christ, as He was carrying His cross through the streets of Jerusalem, had magically swapped bodies with Simon of Cyrene, a man who had come to His assistance. As a result, it was the unfortunate Simon who had been crucified. Christ Himself, meanwhile, watching from a safe distance, had stood "roaring with laughter." – (page 174)

The very document itself was still to be found in the city's archives: sure proof against scepticism. Nor was that all. Edessa laid claim to an even more sensational souvenir of Christ's correspondence: His only known self-portrait, painted and sent by Him, so it was said, in response to a royal fan-letter. – (page 177)

They celebrated the resurrection of Christ on a date arrived at by a specifically Jewish method of calculation.80 Even the title by which they habitually addressed their priests—rabban—sounded similar to, and had the same meaning as, rabbi. – (page 179)

Likewise, among the ranks of Christians, there were many who persisted in obeying the Torah and who regarded Paul, not as a saint, but rather as "a renegade from the Law"82—the heretic of heretics. – (page 180)

Memories of how Jesus had communicated with the King of Edessa were cherished precisely because they seemed to suggest that even great monarchs might be touched by the Holy Spirit. Clinching proof of this arrived in AD 301, when a Parthian king named Tiridates III, lord of the ruggedly mountainous and inaccessible land of Armenia, midway between the Roman and Persian empires, accepted Christ as his lord. – (page 182)

Christians themselves, of course, furiously rejected any suggestion that their powers of healing might owe anything to necromancy. Rather, the ability of their holy men and women to work miracles, to cast out malevolent spirits and even to defy the laws of nature, was due, in their devout opinion, to the precise opposite: a power derived from heaven. – (page 183)

The souls of those who died for Christ, ascending from the reek and shambles of the killing ground, were assured of eternal life. Nor was that the limit of their rewards—for the more spectacular their sufferings, so the more did they draw attention to the glory of Christ and His earthly Church. Each one perished as a "witness"—martyr, in Greek. – (page 184)

The word they increasingly used to describe those who spurned baptism was pagani—"civilians."e This, of course, was to cast the Church itself as a heroic band of warriors, soldiers of Christ engaged in a mighty battle against the demons of hell; but it also served, very effectively, to imply that "pagans," no matter the fabulous range and variety of their cults, their observances, and their gods, were all, in the sordid depths of their souls, essentially the same. The notion that there existed such a thing as "paganism" gave to Christians what any great army of conquest marching into enemy territory, trusting to its size and its superior fire-power, will always looks to find: a single body of adversaries that could be pinned down, brought to battle, and given a decisive knock-out blow. – (page 189)

Long before his vision of Christ, before he was even emperor, Constantine had been casting around for a divinity sufficiently powerful to sustain the formidable scope of his ambitions. It had been necessary for such a god, his own quite stunning lack of modesty being what it was, to be one of such might, potency, and magnificence as to reign, in effect, alone. At various stages in his career, Constantine had imagined that this supreme god might be Apollo—the twin brother of Artemis—or perhaps the Sun. In the end, however, it was Christ who had passed the audition. – (page 191)

As Arius's opponents were all too uncomfortably aware, any hint that the Son might be a secondary god, inferior to the Father, risked something truly monstrous: a blurring of what divided Christians from their pagan adversaries. – (page 193)

If God were anything less than One, after all, why not go the whole hog and fall to worshipping Athena or Artemis? Inevitably, then, Arius's teachings provoked outrage: outrage which in turn only encouraged Arius and his supporters to dig in their heels all the more. The result was deadlock. Yet again, it seemed that Christians were utterly incapable of reaching consensus on even the most fundamental points of their belief. There existed not one but a multiplicity of Christianities. – (page 193)

He restored subsidies to temples. He sought to undermine the Christian monopoly on charitable giving by organising his own. He even grew a beard. – (page 195)

Deep in their souls, Christians knew, as pagans did not, that "it matters not how you worship, but what you worship."107 Staining an altar with blood was not religio but superstition, plain and simple. Demons should be paid no honours, no sacrifices, no dues. There was One God, and One God only—and so there could be only one religio. – (page 196)

Justinian understood, as the pagans in their purblind folly did not, that there existed only the one true wisdom: the "Holy Wisdom"—Hagia Sophia—of God. What cult—what philosophy—could remotely compare for timelessness with that? – (page 204)

In 530 or 531,121 they fled Athens and brought down the curtain on a thousand years of philosophy in the city. Dreading to remain anywhere within the reach of Justinian, they threw themselves on the mercy of his only genuine rival: the Shahanshah. – (page 205)

Justinian himself, entering Hagia Sophia, was said to have cried out in triumph, "Solomon, I have vanquished you!"30 The Temple itself, though, had long since been obliterated: for in 586 BC, after some four hundred years of existence, all its gold and cedar-wood had gone up in flames, – (page 225)

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far-off hill was accounted a crime. The smoking ruins themselves were renamed "Aelia Capitolina" and rebuilt as a pagan city. This rebranding policy was so successful that by the time of Constantine, when the first Christian tourists began to turn up in the Holy Land and ask for the road to Jerusalem, many of the local officials had no idea where they were talking about, and pointed them vaguely in the direction of Persia. – (page 226)

Here, in the wake of repeated Jewish rebellions, a pagan emperor had raised a temple—the Kapitolion—to Jupiter, the king of the Romans' gods. Christian emperors had refined the humiliation. While the Kapitolion was left to crumble into ruins, the Temple Mount was converted into a sterquilinum—a refuse dump. What better proof than the reek of shit and pigs' carcasses that the Jews were no longer a Chosen People? It was to ram the point home that the Roman authorities, always suckers for a good procession, allowed the Jews, once every

year, on the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple, to star in a humiliating piece of street theatre. – (page 226)

Attempts by the imperial elite to spell out precisely what Christianismos might be had repeatedly led them to define its presumed opposite: Ioudaismos. Even at Nicaea, Arians and Catholics had furiously accused each other of being Jews in Christian clothing. Over the subsequent centuries, the same smear would invariably be applied whenever one faction of the Church wished to charge another with heresy. – (page 229)

Although the Roman state, like the Church, recognised Judaism as a distinct and officially sanctioned religion, that hardly implied beneficence. Rather, toleration was the flip-side of a mounting obsession on the part of Constantinople with regulation of the empire's Jews. A people hedged about with legal definitions, after all, were a people who could more readily be targeted with restrictions and indignities. – (page 230)

Jewish noses were repeatedly rubbed in the brute fact of their second-class status. They were forbidden to join the army; to serve in the bureaucracy; to buy Christian slaves. Synagogues, although protected by law from being burned down or converted into churches, were permitted only to be renovated, and on no account to be built from scratch. Many Jews, it was true, had felt perfectly free to ignore this prescription—so much so that the ban had coincided with a golden age of synagogue construction. Almost every Jewish village had come to boast one. Even the humblest and most remote might be built out of stone, while the larger, urban synagogues tended to be so sumptuously decorated that it was only their orientation towards Jerusalem that made them readily distinguishable from churches. – (page 230)

Justinian, who had thought nothing of driving the philosophers of Athens into exile, had no corresponding intention to force the closure of the schools of Tiberias. In fact, to a large degree, they served his purpose. The rabbis offered to the emperor a living assurance that there did authentically exist a religion such as "Judaism," one with authority figures and a clearly defined orthodoxy: the mirror-image of his own. The alternative—to acknowledge that in the great ocean of belief there might still be those who swam untrammelled beyond the twin dragnets of Christianity and Judaism—was infinitely more unsettling. – (page 233)

For a brief while, it seemed as though not only Palestine but the whole empire might be cut in two: for a warlord who shared with the long-dead pagan emperor

the sinister name of Julian, a man variously described as a king, a messiah, or "a bandit chief,"49 proclaimed the foundation of a Samaritan empire, blocking the roads from the north, and menacing Jerusalem. – (page 236)

Cyril, in the advice offered to his converts, had lingered on one particularly mortal threat: "If a book is not read in a church, then do not read it yourself, even alone." Specifically, he had cautioned against those seeming-scriptures that "bore the title of 'gospel,' but were false, and full of deceit."53 Such a warning, of course, would have been valid anywhere; but in the Holy Land, especially so. Not every Christian who flocked there was necessarily orthodox, after all. A yearning to walk in the footsteps of Christ did not necessarily imply obedience to the Council of Nicaea. There were grounds for alarm as well as self-satisfaction in the cosmopolitan character of the Holy Land. Nowhere else in the world, as Cyril had well appreciated, were banned gospels, banned doctrines, banned identities, likelier to be available. Moreover, immigrants were not the only heretics to be found in Palestine. – (page 239)

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in Hebrew that contained the noxious teachings of a sect called the Nazoreans. These, heretics who had the nerve to claim descent from the original Jewish Church that had existed prior to the arrival of Paul upon the scene, taught something truly shocking: that the Holy Spirit was not only female but the heavenly "mother"56 of Christ. – (page 240)

The Christians and the Jews of Palestine, cordially though they might detest one another, could at least agree on one thing: hybrids were beyond the pale. – (page 242)

As far back as the time of Jesus, a Jewish king had raised a large wall around both tree and well, with the aim of staking out the very place—the maqom—where Abraham "had stood before the Lord."63 Some three hundred years later, Constantine had gone one better by ordering a church to be constructed directly over the oak. – (page 244)

"Dwelling as they do in the distant desert, they know neither overseers nor officials": a state of affairs so mind-bogglingly unnatural that even a king of Mesopotamia, back in the distant days when Solomon's temple still stood in

Jerusalem, had thought to make a note of it.66 A thousand years on, opinions had barely improved. The Arabs appeared as reluctant as ever to put down roots. They were despised not merely as pagans, but as pagans who lived in tents. – (page 245)

What other peoples condemned as shiftlessness, they prized as liberty. "I journeyed with a brown whip, its handle bare of its original thonging, with its lash hanging from its loop":69 to ride like this, alone with the horizon infinite all around, was to know oneself, with a rare and vaunting conviction, the utter opposite of a slave. – (page 245)

All men who could claim descent, however implausibly, from a single imam—a founding father—were to be reckoned his sons. Bound by a single inheritance of custom and achievement, of Sunna, warriors who might otherwise have torn each other to shreds were enabled to unite without loss of face, and turn on all those neighbouring bands of rivals who might have done the same. – (page 246)

As early as AD 106, the kingdom of Nabataea had been gobbled up entire, and reconstituted as the province of Arabia—and although Edessa held out against formal assimilation into the empire for a further 150 years, it had never been left in any doubt as to its thoroughly subordinate status. Riches and sophistication: these, it appeared, might certainly be obtained by the Arabs. – (page 248)

His captor, of course, had been a rival monarch, the lord of a dominion no less intimidatingly formidable than Rome's: the recently established empire of Iranshahr. By using a Caesar as his mounting block, Shapur had proclaimed—in terms that no Roman emperor would ever again be able to discount—the arrival of an authentic equal upon the global scene. – (page 249)

Even prior to the emergence of the Persian threat, back in the second century AD, the Romans had successfully bribed and cajoled a number of tribes into serving as a desert police force; and the example of this confederation, the Thamud, would long be commemorated by Arab poets.71 Understandably so, perhaps: for what it had served to demonstrate was that even the proudly and inveterately fractious tribes of the desert might, under certain circumstances, be forged into a shirkat—a "partnership." – (page 249)

It is telling that Roman authors, from the fourth century onwards, began to use a new word to designate the Arabs, one that seems ultimately to have derived from shirkat: "Saracens." – (page 250)

Hira—a sprawl of settlements that alternated mud-brick walls with encampments, gardens with desert scrub, and wheat fields with herds of camels—provided the Lakhmid chieftain with the perfect showcase for this trend-setting fusion of royalty and banditry. – (page 251)

Unsurprisingly, it attracted a steady stream of migrants from across the desert, all hungry for the patronage that Mundhir could so swaggeringly provide. "A day and a night at Hira," it was said, "are better than a whole year of medicine."76 – (page 252)

The Nabataeans, and many other tribes too, had been citizens of Rome for centuries. One of their number had even risen to become Caesar: Philip, the same emperor who had presided over the capital's millennial celebrations, had hailed from a city on the frontier, to the east of the Sea of Galilee, and been derisively nicknamed "the Arab." – (page 252)

At certain times, in certain places, tribes who might otherwise have slaughtered one another with ferocious abandon would assemble upon ground staked out as hallowed—haram—and there join in festivities quite as joyous and peaceable as those staged every summer at Mamre. Of the Arabs' major shrine, which lay surrounded by palm trees somewhere in the desert south of Palestine, and where the local people were reported to gather twice a year for a whole month or more at a time, it was rumoured "that even the wild beasts live in peace with men, and among themselves." – (page 256)

A second deity, al-'Uzza—the "Mighty Queen"—was graced with an even more spectacular draught of blood when, in 527, Mundhir sacrificed no fewer than four hundred Christian virgins in her honour. – (page 256)

To Christian scholars—whose dread of demons such as Artemis was often a form of reluctant tribute paid to their inherent glamour—the Arabs' gods seemed reassuringly dull. Even attempts to condemn them risked making them more interesting than they were. – (page 257)

When Epiphanius, the same energetic cataloguer of heresies who had condemned the Ebionites, turned his beady eye on Dushara, he reported that the god's worshippers, in a blasphemous parody of Christian belief, believed the deity to have been born of a virgin—a ka'iba. The bishop, however, had misheard:

Dushara was not a god of a ka'iba but of a ka'ba—a "cube." The allusion was to the stone, black and uncarved, that the Nabataeans worshipped as an incarnation of the god, somewhere in a shrine to the south of the Dead Sea.86 Dushara certainly had nothing so sophisticated as a virgin mother. – (page 257)

What if the Saracens' knowledge of their ancestry did not necessarily lead them to Christ? What if it led them in a different direction altogether? After all, their origin being what it is, they practise circumcision like the Jews, refrain from the use of pork like the Jews, and observe many other Jewish rites and customs. That they deviate at all from the Laws of the Jewish people can only be ascribed to the lapse of time, and to the influence upon them of other, pagan peoples.95 It was a devastating insight—and had an obvious corollary. Cleanse the Arabs of their paganism, and it might not be a Christian people at all that emerged from beneath the ordure, but something alarmingly different: whole tribes of Jews. – (page 260)

"There are those of them who, by coming into contact with Jews, learn the truth of their origins, and so return to the ways of their kinsmen, and are persuaded to adopt Jewish customs and laws."96 Who precisely these Jews might be, Sozomen did not think to say; but it certainly suggested that Christianity, beyond the reaches of Roman control, was not the only option available to Arabs embarked on a spiritual quest. – (page 261)

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the ancient capital of Sheba, the king had publicly dedicated it to the God of Israel: Rahmanan—"The Merciful."97 The same identical title, as it happened, was one much bandied about in the Talmud; nor was it surprising that the rabbis of Palestine, resentful as they were of their Christian masters, took a good deal of interest in the Himyarite monarchy. – (page 262)

Meanwhile, at Najran, a domed monument named the Ka'ba, on account of its cuboid base, was raised above the ruins of the cathedral: a memorial to the priests and virgins left slaughtered by Yusuf. – (page 263)

One of them, seeking to demonstrate New Rome's palpable supremacy over Iranshahr, placed two gold coins in the local king's palm—one stamped with the image of Caesar and the other with the head of the Shahanshah. The Roman currency was magnificently and self-evidently the heavier: a fact that owed much to the watchful financial stewardship of Anastasius, but also, and more transcendently, to the favour of the Almighty. – (page 265)

If the empire ruled from Constantinople were truly—as Justinian believed it to be—an earthly reflection of the monarchy of God, then its current truncated state was not merely a crisis of geopolitical proportions, but an offence against the heavens. Christians could not be truly Christian unless they were Roman as well. A – (page 266)

Theoderic, for all the sheen of his classical education, had been given to murdering courtiers with his own hands, and sporting a moustache.5 And even that was not the worst. Monstrously, two whole centuries after the Council of Nicaea, there were churches standing in Ravenna in which it was openly denied that the Son was "of one Being with the Father." – (page 268)

Long hair, an aptitude for running people through with lances while ululating loudly on horseback, and an emphasis on the humanity of Christ: such were the markers of Italy's new elite. "A Goth on the make," so Theoderic had once ruefully observed, "wishes to be like a Roman—but only a poor Roman would wish to be a Goth." – (page 270)

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forces. "So it was," as an aide to Belisarius exulted, "that Rome once again, after a period of sixty years, became subject to the Romans." – (page 272)

Certainly, to the Italians themselves, the news that they were being liberated came as something of a surprise. If there were many who welcomed with open arms what Justinian grandly termed a "renewal" of the Roman world, then there were many more who despaired of the slaughter and impoverishment that this "renewal" seemed to mean in practice. – (page 272)

Food shortages were so severe that innkeepers, so it was credibly reported, were reduced to spit-roasting the occasional guest, just to get by. – (page 272)

Alexander, travelling to the spit of land on which he would found his great city, had journeyed from Siwa, an oracle in the depths of the western desert, where Amun, the ram-headed king of the Egyptian gods, had revealed to him the secrets of his destiny—and instructed him, it may be, to found Alexandria.23 This was why, on coins minted by his successors, the great conqueror – (page 280)

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Amun, the ram-headed king of the Egyptian gods, had revealed to him the secrets of his destiny—and instructed him, it may be, to found Alexandria.23 This was why, on coins minted by his successors, the great conqueror had often been shown sporting the two curling horns of Amun: an image that had perfectly fused traditions of Greek portraiture with those of the ancient and mysterious land that Alexander had brought beneath his rule. In similar manner, the greatest temple in Alexandria—a massive complex of shrines, libraries and lecture halls named the Serapeum—had been raised in honour of Serapis, a deity who combined a thoroughly Greek beard and robe with a primordially Egyptian lineage. – (page 280)

The trend-setter here was Athanasius, the bishop who had first definitively catalogued the books of the New Testament. Back in the fourth century, he had ruled Alexandria with a rod of iron, not hesitating to have his opponents beaten up or kidnapped if the situation demanded it. A century later, and it had been the turn of another patriarch, Dioscorus, to blend rarefied theology with the tactics of a gangland boss. – (page 282)

Travelling to Ephesus in 449 for a showdown with the Nestorians of Antioch, he took with him an escort of paramilitaries so rowdy and intimidating that his fellow bishops, shocked to find themselves howled down every time they opened their mouths, termed the summit in outrage the "Robber Council." Parabalani, these thugs of Dioscorus had been called: black-robed enforcers who worked ostensibly as hospital attendants, but who, whenever summoned by the patriarch, would cheerfully demonstrate their devotion to Christ through often spectacular displays of violence. Pagans, Jews, heretics: all felt their fists. – (page 282)

"For Constantinople and all the region around it are fed, in the main, by Alexandria." – (page 284)

Certainly, to those who lived through that summer in Constantinople, the entire city appeared condemned. The streets were empty of the living; no business of any kind was undertaken, save for the burying of corpses; the butchers' shops stood empty, the markets deserted, the bakers' kilns unlit. "So it was, in a city prodigiously full of good things to eat, that starvation ran riot." – (page 287)

Never before in history had so much of humanity been united by a common experience of – (page 289)

Never before in history had so much of humanity been united by a common experience of suffering. – (page 289)

By 545, just three years after the departure of the plague from Constantinople, Justinian was appalled to discover that wages in the capital had more than doubled. – (page 290)

In Italy, for instance, no matter how shrilly his propagandists might seek to deny it, "victory" had left the peninsula immeasurably less Roman than it had ever been under Theoderic. Over the course of two decades, the bloody and wearisome slog to overthrow the Ostrogoths had witnessed the abolition of the consulship, the flight to Constantinople of almost every senator, and even, during the winter months of 550, the most shocking of all the breaks with the past: the complete, albeit temporary, depopulation of Rome itself. Not since the time of Romulus had the Eternal City stood so empty, so abandoned to grass and swamps. – (page 292)

That his reign had seen "the entire world drenched with human blood"47 was due, not to his desperate struggle against evil circumstance, but to the startling fact that he had literally been an agent of hell. Even his tireless burning of the midnight oil might be interpreted as evidence, not of his devotion to the Roman people, but of his diabolic nature. One servant had reported seeing Justinian late at night without his head; another that the emperor's face had suddenly metamorphosed into a hideous and shapeless lump of flesh. "How, then, could this man have been anything other than a demon?" – (page 292)

By the time of Justinian, it was known for a fact that the gates had been faced with bronze; that the peoples they had served to imprison had been none other than Gog and Magog; and that Alexander, upon whom "the Spirit of the Lord rested,"58 had built them with the direct encouragement of an angel. – (page 295)

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previously viewed the Lakhmids: as cynosures – (page 298)

From the north to the distant south—where Najran's Ka'ba preserved the glorious memory of the city's martyrs—the margins of Arabia increasingly bore the physical signs of the Christian faith. To ambitious warlords, these promised not merely heavenly salvation in the hereafter, but ready access within their lifetimes to the dimension of the angelic. – (page 298)

By 600, entire populations of emigrants—muhajirun, in Arabic—had settled between Palestine and the Hijaz, the region of Arabia that abuts the upper half of the Red Sea. Tribes completely unknown to the imperial authorities only a few decades earlier—the Judham, the Amila and the Bali—now joined the roster of foederati. Whether they were truly to be reckoned as friends of the Roman people, however, or as troublesome intruders bought off with danger money, was not altogether clear. Bluff, even at the best of times, worked best without an excess of scrutiny. Indisputable, however, was the fact that the authorities in Palestine did need allies to patrol a buffer zone for them. – (page 301)

Under normal circumstances, the costs of overland transport would hardly have made it worth the while of Arab merchants to trade in such basic commodities; but circumstances, in the wake of the plague, were very far from normal. The Arabs, for the first time in many centuries, found themselves major players in a sellers' market. Nor was it only the Romans who offered them ripe opportunity for doing business. The same pestilence that had so devastated Syria had brought ruin to Mesopotamia as well. – (page 302)

Yet that victory had come at high cost. The battle had been won in alliance with the Turks: "an ugly, insolent, broad-faced, eyelashless mob."72 These new arrivals, gorging themselves on their winnings, had soon established themselves as a presence on Iranshahr's northern frontier no less menacing than the Hephthalites had ever been. Nomadic, and therefore largely unaffected by the plague, they were even more numerous than the Avars, whose khan they imperiously dismissed as a runaway slave. – (page 302)

Armenian by the name of Heraclius. "Handsome, tall, brave, and a born fighter,"78 the new emperor had already more than demonstrated his capabilities by seizing power in the wake of an almost unfeasibly ambitious operation: a naval assault from Carthage, where his father had been governor-general. – (page 305)

Three weeks later, the Persian army stormed the city. The slaughter was something prodigious: some fifty thousand corpses were said to have been left piled up in the streets. – (page 308)

No sooner had Jerusalem passed into Persian hands than a mysterious figure, "Nehemiah the son of Hushiel,"d stepped forward to lead the city's Jews up on to the Temple Mount, where they constructed an altar. Sacrifices, for the first

time in five hundred years, were offered on the sacred rock in accordance with the Law of Moses. The opportunity had come at last, it appeared, "to found a temple of holiness." – (page 308)

In 626, when Khusrow ordered Shahrbaraz to advance directly to the shores of the Bosphorus, Heraclius did not waver in his conviction that the Christian people of his capital lay secure beneath the watch of the heavens. Not even the fact that the Avars were simultaneously descending from the north, complete with the very latest fashion in siege-towers and catapults, could persuade him to abandon his plan of campaign, and retreat from Iranshahr. His confidence, in the event, was to be richly rewarded. The Virgin Mary—whose silhouette, "a woman alone in decorous dress,"91 was said to have been glimpsed by the Avar Khan himself upon the battlements—stood directly on guard over the capital. It helped as well that the Byzantine navy, sallying out into the Bosphorus, succeeded in sinking the entire Persian transport fleet. The great siege lasted only a couple of weeks before both Shahrbaraz's army and the Avars withdrew. The citizens of Constantinople, steeled by such an ultimate test, could know themselves truly the people of God. Meanwhile, far distant in Iranshahr, Heraclius was busy demonstrating to the fire-worshipping subjects of "the destructive and ruinous Khusrow"92 that their own lord was heaven-cursed. – (page 310)

The victory belonged, decisively, to Heraclius. His insight, that in a world rendered a living hell by plague and war what mattered most was to have a convincing claim upon the favour of the heavens, had been proved correct in the most resounding fashion imaginable. Khusrow had not been defeated militarily: the walls of his capital would certainly have stood proof against the tiny Roman invasion force, and his western conquests were still staked out by Persian garrisons. – (page 312)

In 632, the same year that saw Heraclius issue his decree on the forcible conversion of the Jews, barbarian horsemen, "harsh and strange,"98 descended upon Palestine, ravaging the undefended margins of the province and then disappearing as suddenly as they had arrived. Who were they, and what did they portend? No one could be entirely certain. There were some Christians, however, notwithstanding the triumphant return to Jerusalem of the True Cross, who feared the worst. Dread that the end of time might be at hand had not entirely been abated by the great victory of Heraclius. "To see a savage people emerge from the desert and run through land that is not theirs, as if it were their own, laying waste our sweet and organised country with their wild and tamed beasts"99—what could be more ominous than that? Perhaps, then, indeed, when the End Times arrived, it would be upon the winding shadows of the indignant desert birds. – (page 314)

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by the 660s, there were many prepared to revise their understanding of what Daniel had meant by this vision. "He is saying," so a chronicler in Armenia suggested, "that this fourth beast, which arises from the south, is – (page 317)

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by the 660s, there were many prepared to revise their understanding of what Daniel had meant by this vision. "He is saying," so a chronicler in Armenia suggested, "that this fourth beast, which arises from the south, is the kingdom of the sons of Ishmael."2 – (page 317)

"We went to meet them with small abilities and weak forces, and God made us triumph, and gave us possession of their territories."3 By the tenth Christian century, when this self-satisfied assertion was penned, the defeat of the Persians and the Romans had come to be interpreted as something even more epochal than the replacement of two superpowers by a third. – (page 317)

The collapse of Persian and Roman power was attributed, not to the agonies of plague and war that had racked the Near East for decades, but to the revelation of the word of God to His Prophet in far-off Mecca. "When you encounter the unbelievers, blows to necks it shall be until, once you have routed them, you are to tighten their fetters." So Muhammad, serving as the mouthpiece of God, had informed his followers. "Thereafter, it is either gracious bestowal of freedom or holding them to ransom, until war has laid down its burdens."5 – (page 317)

Just as Constantine had discovered in Christ an infinitely more potent patron than Athena or Artemis had ever been, so those who turned to the pages of the Qur'an found revealed there a celestial monarch of such limitless and terrifying power that there could certainly be no question of portraying Him—as the Christians did with their own god—in human form. – (page 318)

Mecca, so the biographies of the Prophet teach us, was an inveterately pagan city, devoid of any Jewish or Christian presence, situated in the midst of a vast, untenanted desert: how else, then, are we to account for the sudden appearance there of a fully fledged monotheism, complete with references to Abraham, Moses and Jesus, if not as a miracle? In a sense, the entire history of secular enquiry into the origins of Islam has been an attempt to arrive at a plausible answer to this question. Muslims, understandably sensitive to any hint that the Prophet might have been a plagiarist, have always tended to resent the inevitable implications of such a project; and yet, once God is discounted as an informant, it is surely not unreasonable to wonder just how it came to be that so many characters from the Bible feature in the Qur'an. – (page 319)

Given that the Prophet's earliest biographers were writing almost two centuries after his death, how far can we legitimately accept their presumption that seventh-century Mecca was genuinely a place of great significance and wealth—the "Mother of Cities"? – (page 320)

A merchant from Alexandria might cheerfully discourse about the trading opportunities in entrepôts as far afield as India, and never even so much as allude to Mecca—on his doorstep though it effectively was.12 In gazetteers written by Muhammad's contemporaries—whether diplomats, geographers or historians—mentions of it are notable by their glaring absence.13 Even in the Qur'an itself, the word appears just once. "In the belly of Mecca, it was God who held their hands back from you"14—an allusion that might as well be to a valley as to a city. – (page 320)

Otherwise, in all the vast corpus of ancient literature, there is not a single reference to Mecca—not one.15 Only in 741, more than a hundred years after the Prophet's death, does it finally crop up on the pages of a foreign text—and even then the author locates it in Mesopotamia, "midway between Ur and Harran."16 Clearly, then, whatever else Mecca might have been in the early seventh century, it was no multicultural boom-town. – (page 321)

In the first flush of the Ishmaelite takeover, the Patriarch of Antioch assumed that his new masters' holy book was the Torah. – (page 321)

If the Qur'an truly originated in the lifetime of Muhammad, and had been preserved and cherished by his followers ever since as the unchanging word of God, why was it that so many Muslim jurists—and prominent ones at that—had disregarded it as a source for their rulings? The – (page 322)

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Four decades on from their discovery, however, these precious manuscripts remain shrouded in mystery. Only two researchers, both German, have been permitted to study them. When one of these, an expert in Arabic palaeography by the name of Gerd-Rüdiger Puin, publicly asserted that the fragments demonstrated that the Qur'an, no less than the Bible, had evolved over time and was a veritable "cocktail of texts,"20 the Yemeni authorities reacted with fury. To this day, the Qur'anic fragments in Sana'a remain unpublished—nor have any further Western scholars been permitted to study them. As a result, their true significance remains opaque. – (page 322)

In fact, nothing better testifies to the dread and reverence with which every last word of it, every last letter, was patently regarded than the fact that jurists were prepared to swallow even a glaring embarrassment such as its ruling on adultery. – (page 323)

Irrespective of all the revisions and variations Puin has traced in the Sana'a fragments, the bedrock of the Qur'an appears hewn out of solid granite. – (page 324)

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the greater the sense of awe with which a text was regarded, the more complete might be the amnesia as to the original circumstances of its composition. Back in the Iranshahr of Peroz, the Zoroastrian priests, resolved as they were to adapt their inheritance of ancient scriptures to the political requirements of their Church, had shown not the slightest hesitation in shifting the birthplace of Zoroaster to Media. – (page 324)

Of one thing, at least, we can be certain: its final form long post-dates the implosion of the Thamud, that large confederation of Arab tribes employed by the Romans, and who are commemorated by the Prophet as the exemplification of worldly greatness brought low. – (page 327)

All of which, for the historian, suggests a most welcome and promising conclusion. Compared to the bogs and quicksand of other sources for the life of the

Prophet, the book of his revelations does authentically appear to offer us something precious: something almost like solid ground. Unlike the witness provided by the hadiths, or the biographies of Muhammad, or the commentaries on the Qur'an, the text of the Qur'an itself does seem to derive authentically from the Prophet's lifetime. – (page 328)

Ever since the moment of creation, what had mattered to humanity was not the vagaries of history but rather a question as eternal as it was urgent: how best to choose between good and evil. This is why, in the pages of the Qur'an, it is not kings or emperors who feature, but prophets. Muhammad was, of course, only one in a long succession of messengers sent by God to summon people to repentance. – (page 331)

Just as Justinian had prescribed swingeing financial penalties for "all those who do not rightly worship God,"43 so was it decreed in the Qur'an that Jews and Christians should pay a special tithe, the jizya—and in such a manner as to render their inferiority manifest to all. – (page 333)

Taxation combined with triumphalism: here was bullying in the grand tradition of the Roman state. That it was Christians who now faced fiscal penalties for belonging to a superseded faith, rather than imposing the fines themselves, only compounded the irony, of course. – (page 334)

In fact, there are no Christians at all in its pages that the contemporary Church would have acknowledged as its own, save for the monks of the desert—and even these are so shadowy a presence that the Prophet can never quite decide whether to laud them as models of humility or condemn them as monsters of greed. – (page 334)

The Nazoreans—those curious heretics who held to the Law of Moses and believed that the Holy Spirit was Christ's mother—had long since vanished from their ancient Palestinian heartland. Yet, in the Qur'an—composed a full two centuries after Jerome had noted the Nazoreans as a mere fading curiosity—not only is their name used by the Prophet as shorthand for all the "People of the Gospel,"46 but their doctrines provoke some of his bitterest contempt. – (page 334)

Certainly, if the Nasara are indeed to be equated with the Nazoreans, then it might help to explain why the Qur'an, despite clearly having attained something like its final form early in the seventh Christian century, should seem haunted

as well by the whispers of some very ancient ghosts. The one-sided debate to be found in its pages on the nature of Christ—one which firmly rejects the Trinity and affirms that Jesus himself was only ever a man—has a breath about it that seems to rise from an eerily distant age. Older than Nicaea, let alone Chalcedon, it had raged most bitterly back when there was no single Church, merely a multiplicity of sects. – (page 336)

Nevertheless, the echoes of long-muted Christian heretics—of Gnostics and Nazoreans—are sufficiently loud in the Qur'an to make one wonder from where, if not from God, they might possibly have come. – (page 336)

Just as fossils, prior to a proper understanding of the earth's geology, provoked many a furrowed brow among those who found them, there are phrases and even entire passages in the Qur'an that have always perplexed the learned. – (page 337)

Even gods that were ancient when Alexander was born are not wholly absent from its pages: for what are the horns that Dhu'l Qarnayn sports, after all, if not the ram horns of Amun? Some would go further yet, and claim that the very visions of paradise contained within the Qur'an, complete with eternally boyish cup-bearers, handsome "like hidden pearls,"54 who are bestowed upon the Believers when they ascend to heaven, and beauteous, "wide-eyed maidens,"55 shimmer with the primordial glamour of the banished gods of Greece and Rome. – (page 339)

Muslim scholars would certainly find themselves both perplexed and unsettled by the Prophet's insistence that celestial maidens had "wide eyes," believing it a description better suited to cows. Their twitchiness would hardly have been improved if they had known that Hera, in the poetry of the pagan Greeks, was invariably hailed as "ox-eyed." – (page 339)

Muhammad is most unlikely to have realised it, but his claim to be setting a seal on the revelations of earlier prophets was not, in fact, original to him.57 "Wisdom and deeds have always from time to time been brought to mankind by the messengers of God."58 So it had been declared, some three and a half centuries prior to the composition of the Qur'an, by a man who had aspired, and with great self-consciousness, to write the ultimate in holy books. – (page 340)

Of the ancient habits of pagan worship that had once been so universal, only a few scattered outposts still held out. In Khorasan, for instance, all the empire-building efforts of the Zoroastrian priesthood had failed to topple Mihr—that awful and sleepless avenger of injustice—from his mountainous and dawn-illumined throne. In Harran, too, which had long relied on its position midway between Rome and Iranshahr to perpetuate its venerable cult of Sin, the majority of the inhabitants still persisted in defying their nominal lord in Constantinople and refused to worship Christ. Nevertheless, the future for the Lord – (page 342)

The Prophet, although implacably contemptuous of his adversaries' reverence towards al-'Uzza—and to other names summoned from the shadows of Arabian idol worship, those of al-Lat "and the third one, Manat"—never actually accuses the Mushrikun of worshipping this trinity of "females."64 The word "goddess" does not appear once in the Qur'an; nor does the Prophet so much as mention the existence of pagan sanctuaries or shrines. Idols too, despite all the triumphant smashing of images that the Prophet is supposed to have got up to at Mecca, are notable by their absence from his revelations—as also they are from the archaeological record.65 – (page 345)

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its portrait of the Mushrikun as owners of great – (page 347)

Mecca, a place notoriously dry and barren, is not, most agronomists would agree, an obvious spot for cattle ranching—just as the volcanic dust that constitutes its soil is signally unsuited to making "grain grow, and vines, fresh vegetation, olive trees, date palms, luscious gardens, fruit and fodder."b Yet God, according to the Prophet, had furnished the Mushrikun with all of these blessings. Nothing, of course, is impossible for the Almighty—but it would indeed have been a miracle had Mecca truly been adorned with spreading "gardens of vines, olives, and pomegranates." – (page 347)

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community a certain thrill of pride. Perhaps, then, it is telling that the Prophet, amid all the other charges he levelled against the Mushrikun, accused them of both ingratitude and conceit: of believing that it was they, and not the Almighty, who had made the dead land come to life. "Consider the seeds you sow in the ground—is it you who make them grow, or We?" – (page 347)

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the extensive details revealed by the Prophet as to how his opponents made their living would appear to suggest something rather unexpected: a context for Muhammad's revelations well to the north of Mecca. A far-fetched notion, perhaps—were it not for a striking fact. As with politics, so with topography:

the gaze of the Prophet was fixed on horizons infinitely beyond the local. – (page 348)

Yet the unsettling fact remains that not a shred of backing for either exists within the pages of the Qur'an itself. Moreover, the texts in which they first appeared were separated from the lifetime of Muhammad by several generations. The suspicion must be, then, that they are no more likely to reflect authentic tradition than did the nose of Palestinian landowners for previously forgotten biblical landmarks, back in the first flush of Christian tourism to the Holy Land. – (page 349)

A murk such as this spreads impenetrably. Where precisely Muhammad believed Bakka to have stood it is surely now impossible to say. Such evidence as might once have existed has long since been lost. Clues remain, but they are all of them ambiguous and fragmentary in the extreme. – (page 349)

In the 660s, some two centuries after Theodoret had first reported the Ishmaelites' pride in their ancestry, a Nestorian chronicler on the Persian border with Mesopotamia alluded to the existence of a mysterious domed sanctuary, supposedly founded by Abraham and sacred to the Arabs. "Indeed," the chronicler added, "it is nothing new for the Arabs to worship there—for, from the beginning, from their earliest days, they have shown reverence to the father of the head of their nation."76 A most arresting detail—for this is almost identical to what is reported in the Qur'an. There, in the passage on the House at Bakka, the Prophet identified the man who founded it as having been none other than Abraham himself. – (page 350)

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The Bakka described by the Prophet shimmers with the same numinous aura that had long attached itself to another sanctuary: Mamre. "It is the place where Abraham stood to pray":78 so the Prophet describes Bakka. Of what, then, can this conceivably be an echo, if not the maqom? Certainly, between the Hebrew word for "place" and its Arabic equivalent, there was a manifest resonance. "Take as your place of prayer," it is recorded in the Qur'an, "the place where Abraham stood"79—the Maqam Ibrahim. – (page 351)

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if the Qur'an is to be trusted, and if Muhammad's opponents did indeed live within an easy journey of the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah, then the significance of the sanctuary at Bakka would hardly have been confined to the dimension of the heavenly alone. Back in the reign of Justinian, when a Roman ambassador had reported on the great desert shrine where "even the wild beasts live in peace with men," he had included another intriguing detail: that it was sacred to "a majority of the Saracens."82 Could this desert shrine have been Bakka? – (page 352)

And yet, in every register of the age, there is one intriguing absence. As with Mecca, the city in which the Prophet supposedly grew up, so with the Quraysh, the tribe to which Muhammad supposedly belonged—all is deafening silence. Once again, it is not until a century and more after the Prophet's death that the name makes its first, fleeting appearance in a datable text—and even then it is not entirely clear what is meant by the allusion.84 This is doubly puzzling: for not only were the Quraysh, according to Muslim tradition, the dominant power in the Hijaz, renowned far and wide across Arabia, but Muhammad's own ancestor, an adventurer named Qusayy, is supposed to have seized power in Mecca only after Qaysar—"Caesar"— "had extended him aid."85 Why, then, should the Romans appear never to have heard of the Quraysh? Such a group of people certainly did exist: they are described in four tantalising verses of the Qur'an as embarking on winter and summer journeys, and receiving both provisions and security from God. Yet, even eminent Muslim scholars might confess themselves puzzled by the precise meaning of the word "Quraysh." Perhaps, they mused, it derived from the name of a prominent travel guide, or else a breed of camel, or perhaps a type of shark? The truth was, however, that no one—not two centuries on from the Prophet's death—really knew any more. The derivation of "Quraysh" had long since been forgotten. – (page 354)

So perhaps it is not a total coincidence that Quraysh itself should seem to echo the same identical concept of "partnership"—but in Syriac. Qarisha, in the language that had increasingly come to be the Fertile Crescent's readiest lingua franca, meant "collected together"—"confederated."86 Is this, then, to what "Quraysh" had originally referred—those tribes brought together in a common partnership, as foederati of the New Rome? It is telling, certainly, that

the Ghassanid kings—and doubtless other Arab commanders—spoke at least a smattering of Syriac as a matter of course.87 The word qarisha, duly Arabised, might well then have been used far beyond the imperial frontier: a convenient shorthand for all those tribes that had grown fat on Roman patronage. – (page 355)

When, for instance, in the opening sura of the Qur'an, the prayer was raised to God, "Guide us to the straight path,"94 it represented a dazzlingly audacious act of appropriation. The great military roads—the strata—that for centuries had girded the eastern frontier, and served as both emblems and tools of Roman might, were being brought to fade before the radiance of a celestial sirat—a road eternally straight. – (page 357)

Like the rabbis of Mesopotamia and Tiberias, like Justinian and his great team of jurists, the Prophet appreciated that not only individuals but society itself required moulding to the purposes of God. This was why, it seems, he set himself to the founding of a state—first among the Mushrikun, and then, in the wake of their rejection, among the Muhajirun. And its capital? Here, at any rate, there is no contradiction between the Qur'an and the great spider's web of subsequent Islamic tradition. A battle fought against overwhelming odds, "a violent wind and invisible forces"103 sent by God against the Prophet's enemies, a glorious victory snatched from the jaws of defeat: all this, so the Qur'an records, occurred at a place that, for once, it actually names. Yathrib, that fertile oasis in the northern Hijaz, was indeed, it would appear, 'Madinat an-Nabi—the "City of the Prophet." Medina, just as tradition records, ranked as the very first bridgehead of the heavenly established by Muhammad on earth. – (page 360)

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as with so many details of his biography, all references to the Prophet's escape to Yathrib are frustratingly late in origin. – (page 361)

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circumstances, no matter their location. Far from alluding to a single journey into exile—whether to Yathrib or to anywhere else—it seems to imply a call to arms that is all-embracing, universal and unbounded by time or place. "Anyone who migrates for God's cause will find many a refuge and great plenty in the earth."105 Nothing could conceivably have sounded more radical or terrifying to the Prophet's audience. Abandoning family and tribe was the most stomach-churning prospect imaginable for any Arab. – (page 361)

"You are the best community ever brought forth among mankind, commanding virtue and forbidding vice, and believing in God." – (page 361)

"You are the best community ever brought forth among mankind, commanding virtue and forbidding vice, and believing in God." So the Prophet hailed the Muhajirun: as a band of warriors who had it within them not only to found a whole new order of society but to inherit, as their reward for doing so, the earth itself. – (page 361)

"Saracens," Roman strategists had always asserted with imperious complacency, "are by nature unable to conduct sieges"109—but now, to the horror of the authorities, this reassurance was proving a worthless one. – (page 363)

Inveterately barbarian as the Saracens were, perhaps it was only to be expected that they would once in a while turn rogue. Back in 582, for instance, when Ghassanid resentment at the exile of their king had provoked the foederati into open revolt, they had inflicted a crushing defeat on an imperial army in open battle and then ranged at will across Syria. A couple of centuries before that, an Arab queen named Mavia, "long celebrated in song by the Saracens,"111 had launched a series of devastating raids that had taken her all the way to Egypt. The Roman response, on both occasions, had been the time-honoured one of dazzling the barbarians with bribes. Both Mavia and the Ghassanids, despite the undoubted scares that they had given the provincial authorities, had been successfully pacified with a whole range of exotic gewgaws. – (page 363)

Fifty years later, a monk writing in Sinai would record what ensued: two terrible battles, one at the Ghassanid camp city of Jabiya, and the other a few miles to the west, on the Golan Heights above the River Yarmuk.112 The details are slight—and it is the measure of how impossible it has proved for historians to agree on the actual progress of the Arab invasion, and the struggle of the Romans to resist it, that not a single earlier reference to these fateful clashes exists in either Arabic or Greek.g The dates, the details and the course of the Syrian campaign—all are veiled by contradiction and confusion.113 Nevertheless, if the particulars of what happened during the campaigning have defied repeated attempts to arrive at a consensus, then not so the result. "For the Roman army," as the monk in Sinai would note with bleak finality, "it proved a defeat as fatal as it was terrible."114 By late 636, with the campaigning season drawing to a close, Heraclius seems to have bowed to the inevitable. – (page 364)

"In the past, those of us who came to you were obedient to you, they humbled themselves before you, they sought what was in your hands." So one Arab, as pious as he was lacking in personal hygiene, was supposed to have told the silken Persians on the eve of the great battle. "But now we no longer come

to you looking for the things of this world. Our desire and aspiration is for paradise."118 Hairy, – (page 367)

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A plausible characterisation? Certainly, as with Muhammad, so with Umar—his historicity is beyond dispute. An Armenian bishop, writing a decade or so after Qadisiyya, described Umar in a brief, throwaway sentence much as Muslim historians would subsequently do: as a mighty potentate coordinating the advance of "the sons of Ishmael" from the depths of the desert.122 Nor is that all. There do indeed seem to be found, preserved in the traditions that Muslims would record of the Sahabah, the "Companions," of Muhammad, authentic echoes of the God-haunted and strife-torn age that had witnessed the Futuh—the "Conquest." If there seems no reason to doubt that Umar, that model of ferocious piety, was directly inspired by the awesome thunder of the Prophet's revelations, then so too is it evident that the Prophet himself, in his summoning of the Arabs to holy war, was perfectly in accord with the spirit of the times. "In truth," he informed his followers, "the punishment of those who make war against God and His Messenger, and roam the earth corrupting it, is that they be killed, or crucified, or have their hands and feet amputated, alternately, or be exiled from the land." – (page 368)

Umar's threadbare robes, his diet of bread, salt and water, and his rejection of worldly riches would have reminded anyone from the desert reaches beyond Palestine of a very particular kind of person. Monks out in the Judaean desert had long been casting themselves as warriors of God. The achievement of Umar was to take such language to a literal, and previously unimagined, extreme. – (page 369)

The "Constitution of Medina," it has been termed: a series of eight brief treaties concluded between the Muhajirun and the natives of Yathrib, and which—not least because they refer to the emigrants as "Believers" rather than "Muslims"—are accepted by even the most suspicious of scholars as deriving from the time of Muhammad. Here, in these precious documents, it is possible to glimpse the authentic beginnings of a movement that would succeed, in barely two decades, in prostrating both the New Rome and Iranshahr. – (page 370)

What the Constitution of Medina does not tell us, however, is where the Muhajirun had originally come from; nor does it reveal precisely whom they felt called upon by God to fight. Most regrettably of all, it sheds no light on how an alliance stitched together in a remote oasis might conceivably have expanded to embrace the whole of Arabia, and then to take on the world. – (page 370)

Conflict between the upstart Umma and the Quraysh; eventual compromise on both sides, and the agreement between them of a treaty; a brutal crushing by the new confederation of any Arab tribes bold enough to stand in its way: such a process of state-building seems, at the very least, plausible. – (page 371)

Particularly striking, for instance, is the number of leading Qurayshi dynasts who, despite supposedly being based in Mecca, are said to have purchased estates in Syria during the Prophet's lifetime: an example of long-distance property speculation which, if genuinely conducted from the Hijaz, would have had no precedent in the entire span of Roman history. – (page 371)

Particularly striking, for instance, is the number of leading Qurayshi dynasts who, despite supposedly being based in Mecca, are said to have purchased estates in Syria during the Prophet's lifetime: an example of long-distance property speculation which, if genuinely conducted from the Hijaz, would have had no precedent in the entire span of Roman history. Previously, whether along the Rhine or in Armenia, the only barbarians who owned land on either side of the imperial frontier were those who directly bordered it. – (page 371)

Either the Quraysh truly came from Mecca, in which case they could not have owned property in Roman territory—or else they owned property in Roman territory, in which case they are most unlikely to have come from Mecca. – (page 371)

The likelihood is, in fact, that both imperial armies, as they sought to stem the Saracen onslaught, consisted themselves in large part of Arab tribesmen. Muslim historians, not surprisingly, would take an exultant delight in emphasising the immensity of the manpower available to the toppled empires: of how their troops numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and of how their blood, when it was spilled, had flowed in such prodigious quantities as to turn the wheels of local water-mills. – (page 372)

Contemporaries knew better, though. They understood the true condition of anaemia that had afflicted both superpowers. Heraclius, as one bishop bluntly put it, "could raise no more troops to oppose the Ishmaelites."127 Given the absence of regular troops, he had no alternative but to rely on foederati to defend Roman territory. The Ghassanids, and all the other tribes allied to them, repaid Heraclius's trust with fierce loyalty; but it ensured, when the Muhajirun first appeared across the Syrian desert, that the Roman military itself was reduced to something of a sideshow.128 Almost a century of pestilence, and whole decades of war: these, in their combined effects, had left the emperor with no clothes. – (page 373)

Was it any coincidence, they wondered, that "the horror of the invasion of the Ishmaelites"129 should have followed so fast upon Heraclius's campaign of forced baptisms? Dark rumours began to swirl: of how Jewish refugees from this decree had fled to Arabia; of how, upon their arrival in the desert, they had turned the head of the Saracens with honeyed talk of their shared descent from Abraham; of how Muhammad, looking to claim their birthright, had duly set off at their head to conquer Palestine. – (page 373)

Back in 634, with Sergius freshly entombed in his shroud of camel skin, fabulous reports of a Saracen prophet had swept through Caesarea. By Christians, of course, he had been scorned as the rankest impostor—"for since when did prophets come armed with a sword?" Among the Jews of the city, however, the reaction had been very different. Delight, no doubt, would have been their response to any Roman defeat; but their joy, in that spring of 634, had been blended with a fierce and familiar hope. "People were saying that the prophet had appeared, coming with the Saracens." And his message? "They say that he is proclaiming the advent of the Anointed One—the Christ who is to come."130 – (page 374)

It is not simply that the three Jewish clans mentioned by the historians do not feature anywhere in the Constitution of Medina. There is also another, and familiar, problem: that our only sources for the annihilation of these Jews are all suspiciously late. Not only that, but they date from the heyday of Muslim greatness: a period when the authors would have had every interest in fabricating the sanction of the Prophet for the brusque slapping down of uppity infidels.132 Certainly, if it were truly the case that entire communities of Jews had been expelled into the desert or else wiped out by Ishmaelites in a bloodbath, then no contemporary seems to have noted it. – (page 375)

Far likelier, it would seem, is that the compact recorded in the Constitution of Medina, between the Muhajirun and assorted bands of Jewish warriors, had held

firm—and that it had culminated in the conquest of Palestine. Christians, when they fingered their old enemies as the tutors of Muhammad, were undoubtedly indulging themselves in a familiar paranoia—but less so, perhaps, when they accused "the sons of Israel" of joining with the Arabs "to form a large army."133 Venerable the scorn of the Jews for the Ishmaelites may have been; but it was nothing like so savage as their loathing for the Romans. "Do not fear, son of man": So an angel was supposed to have reassured a twitchy rabbi. "The Almighty only brings the kingdom of Ishmael in order to deliver you from the wicked ones."134 – (page 375)

When Jews, praising Umar for his scouring of the Romans from Jerusalem, and his cleansing of the Temple Mount, hailed him as the Messiah, there were certain Muhajirun who did not think to scorn the notion. Instead, caught up in the mood of excitement, they surrendered to it. Umar, so it was boldly proclaimed, ranked as none other than al-Faruq—"the Redeemer."136 Such, it appeared, was the true potency of the Temple Mount: that it could persuade Arabs to share in the fantasies of Jews. And – (page 377)

Meanwhile, the demand slapped on the city fathers of Herakleopolis for sixty-five sheep was an early indication of what the toppling of Roman rule might mean for those Christian officials left behind in Egypt. The Magaritai—the Muhajirun—still thought instinctively, as their ancestors had ever done, in terms of plunder and rustled livestock. Even when clattering down marble-paved high streets, past palaces and cathedrals, they retained instincts bred of the desert. – (page 379)

The Umayyads, according to Muslim historians, were Qurayshis who had made a fortune trading with the Romans, and had then invested it in Syrian real estate: a tradition that would seem to indicate an origin, not in the depths of Arabia, but somewhere along the imperial frontier. Certainly, they had enjoyed a track record of success during the conquest of the region that might well have suggested local knowledge: one brother, Yazid, is said to have ranged with a war band far and wide across the province, while another, Mu'awiya, had captured Caesarea, and been appointed governor of Syria by Umar. – (page 382)

All very well for the Umayyads to pose as the heirs of the Ghassanid kings; but Ali was a blood relative of Muhammad. Nothing, then, could have been more damaging to his prestige than to be dismissed as merely a latter-day Lakhmid—"the Amir of Hira."144 – (page 385)

Rather than gathering to hail his accession at Medina, the Arabs had assembled in the shadow of the Temple Mount: for Mu'awiya had "refused to go to the seat of Muhammad."148 Not even Umar, the Amir whose attentions to the sacred rock had seen him hailed by Jews as their "redeemer," had thought to demonstrate to quite such flamboyant effect the abiding status of Jerusalem as the holiest city in the world. – (page 388)

So it was, in addition to receiving the submission of the Arabs, that he had made sure to mark his investiture as Commander of the Faithful by going on pilgrimage around Jerusalem in the footsteps of Christ—"and he went up and sat down on Golgotha, and prayed there."149 Evidently, that the Prophet had declared the crucifixion a fraud – (page 388)

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In fact, there is precious little evidence that Mu'awiya paid much attention to the Prophet at all. Nowhere in his inscriptions, nor on his coins, nor in any of the documents preserved from his reign, is there so much as a single mention of Muhammad. Nor, despite the much later tradition that would attribute the compilation of the Prophet's revelations to Uthman, are there any Qur'ans—or even fragments of Qur'ans—datable to Mu'awiya's lifetime either. Records of the words spoken by Muhammad—"twigs of the burning bush, aflame with God"150—must surely have been preserved by those who still tended the light of his memory: the Muhajirun of Kufa, the Shi'a of Ali, the Kharijites. But the flame was guttering. Like Mani and Mazdak before him, Muhammad was a prophet whose memory had begun to fade before the encroaching shadow of the years. What value the example of his makeshift desert state, after all, to the ruler of an empire that had swallowed up the world? It was not the Prophet whom Mu'awiya cast as the interpreter of God to man, but himself. "Let the faithful profit by him"151—such was the prayer raised by his servants. Christians too, and Jews, and Samaritans, and Manichaeans: all of them, in Mu'awiya's opinion, were to be ranked as "the faithful," and all of them duly joined in the praise. – (page 388)

Although vines and pomegranates would have been grown in oases such as Yathrib, the cultivated olive would not. In late antiquity, it was indigenous to the Mediterranean region. d Hunayn—which, like Badr, is clearly identified in the Qur'an as the site of a battle—features in biographies of the Prophet

as the location of a decisive Muslim victory. Safa and Marwa are identified by Muslim tradition as small hills in the immediate vicinity of the Ka'ba, while Arafat is equated to a mountain that lies some twelve miles outside Mecca. e – (page 390)

Fredegar, a chronicler writing in Gaul some twenty years after the Arab invasion of Syria, refers to Heraclius's army being "smitten by the sword of God: 52,000 of his men died where they slept"—valuable evidence for the probable scale of the Roman defeat. – (page 391)

The date of Ali's assassination derives from Muslim historians, but it is typical of the general murk of the sources for the period that a near-contemporaneous Christian chronicle, written in Syria, dates it to 658. – (page 391)

Indeed, to an out-of-towner such as Arculf, it might have seemed that Roman rule had never ended. The travel documents issued to him were written in Greek. The coins in his purse were weighted according to standards set by the mints of Constantinople. Many of them were even stamped with that ultimate symbol of the Christian empire—a cross. Power, in the Holy Land, still sported a decidedly Roman look. – (page 392)

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he possessed something formidably precious: an assurance of God's favour that owed nothing to Rome or to any other earthly power. That he was perfectly content to pray at the site of the crucifixion, or to restore Edessa's cathedral after it had been toppled by an earthquake, or to have the odd public inscription on a bath-house adorned with a cross, implied, not that he was a Christian, but rather that he shared in that respect for Jesus, and for the Jewish prophets too, which had once united Muhammad and the Mushrikun.8 Whatever the precise doctrines in which Mu'awiya put his trust, though, they were certainly not supported by anything that could compare with the massive buttressing that rabbis, bishops and mowbeds, over the course of the centuries, had erected around their faiths. – (page 394)

The City of the Prophet, it is said, was put to the sword for three days; and nine months on from the sack, – (page 397)

The City of the Prophet, it is said, was put to the sword for three days; and nine months on from the sack, over a thousand babies were born. – (page 397)

Accordingly, rather than wait in Medina to confront Yazid's strike-force, he had headed for a spot that was even more redolent of holiness: the "House of God."11 Muslim historians, writing more than a century after the fact, would take for granted, of course, that such a sanctuary was to be identified with Mecca; but nowhere in the writings of contemporaries is this actually said. Instead, all is studied indeterminacy. "He came to a certain locality in the South where their sanctuary was, and lived there." – (page 398)

The founder of the first mosque in Kufa, so it was said, had fired an arrow to determine the qibla—the direction of prayer—and it had landed not to the south of the mosque, in a line with Mecca, but somewhere to its west. So, although no contemporary tells us explicitly where Ibn al-Zubayr took refuge, the weight of evidence would suggest a location to the north of the Hijaz, midway between Kufa and Alexandria. Since – (page 398)

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Ibn al-Zubayr was consciously aiming to defend the Prophet's legacy, the likelihood must surely be that the House of God in which he barricaded himself stood not in Mecca but between Medina and Palestine: in that "blessed place" named by the Prophet himself as Bakka. – (page 398)

All very helpful of a bishop to identify the sanctuary of the Muhajirun as "the Ka'ba"—except, of course, that there were Ka'bas reaching from Nabataea to Najran. To glimpse the sacred in a feature even as relatively mundane as a spring, or a well, or an oddly coloured stone was a time-hallowed instinct among the Arabs; and yet, while this indisputably spoke of a sensitivity to the numinous, it also betrayed a certain cavalier attitude towards the status of specific shrines. – (page 399)

Even the Prophet, while trying to define the direction in which his followers should pray, had been capable of the occasional volte-face: "The foolish people will say, 'What has turned them away from the prayer direction they used to face?' "14 What the original qibla might have been, and what its replacement, the Prophet had not thought to specify—but that one sanctuary had been promoted, and at the expense of another, was clear enough.a No wonder

then, descending upon the House of God, that Ibn al-Zubayr should have been concerned to make "his voice heard from a distance." – (page 399)

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the Syrians drifted aimlessly away from their – (page 400)

As the Syrians drifted aimlessly away from their siege, Ibn al-Zubayr set about constructing a sanctuary that could serve, without any further compromise or ambiguity, as a fit object for the veneration of all the Faithful. Taking a pick in his own hands, it is said, he levelled what remained of the incinerated shrine and raised an entirely new one in its place. The whiff of paradox in this was palpable, even by the standards of the Arabs—a people who traditionally had always been perfectly content to abandon sanctuaries with barely a second thought. A question as obvious as it was unsettling shadowed Ibn al-Zubayr's labours: how precisely could his new House of God be reckoned timeless when it had only just been erected? His propagandists, it would appear, had not stinted in providing answers. Centuries on from Ibn al-Zubayr's great building project, fantastical stories of the discoveries that were made during the course of the excavations would still be lovingly repeated. It was said that the original foundations, laid down by Abraham, had been miraculously brought to light. A mysterious text had been found, guaranteeing divine favour for all who visited the sanctuary. Most sensationally of all, when a black stone had been dug up, the whole sanctuary had begun to tremble. On this stone, so some reported, had been stamped the very name and title of God: "I am Allah, the Lord of Bakka." – (page 400)

So it was, in either 685 or 686, as the fitna continued to rage in Iraq, that one of his lieutenants minted a coin in Persia with a novel and fateful message. "Bismallah Muhammad rasul Allah," it ran—"In the name of God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God." – (page 403)

Ibn al-Zubayr's genius was to recognise, as Constantine had recognised long before him, that any lord of a great empire who claimed God's favour must ensure that the basis of that favour stood rock solid. Military action alone would never serve to bring the fitna to an end. Only a framework of doctrines that all the combatants could accept as authentic and bestowed of God had any hope of achieving that. – (page 403)

Abd al-Malik, having wrenched Iraq from Ibn al-Zubayr's grasp, did not hesitate to purloin his slogan as well. Even as the last embers of opposition to Umayyad rule were being stamped out in Basra, new coins were starting to circulate in the city: "In the name of God," they proclaimed, "Muhammad is the Messenger of God." The assertion was – (page 406)

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Nevertheless, it is clear as well that his abrupt parading of Muhammad's name—something that no other member of his dynasty had ever thought to do—was prompted by self-interest as well as piety. – (page 406)

Out of the scattered flotsam and jetsam of beliefs left scattered by the great floodtide of Arab conquests, something coherent—something manifestly God-stamped—would have to be fashioned: in short, a religion. And if the enshrining of Muhammad as its founder was a start, then it was only that—a start. No better way to appreciate the full scale of what remained to be done than to visit the city where Abd al-Malik, like Mu'awiya before him, had first been saluted as Amir: Jerusalem. – (page 407)

Not only did the dimensions of the new structure exactly replicate those of Constantine's great church, but its piers were to be surmounted, when completed, by a vast gilded cupola. Yet, what really served to fling back in the teeth of Christians all their arrogance and their pretensions was the deliberate positioning of this same "Dome of the Rock." Enclosed – (page 407)

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earth—Abd al-Malik and his architects attributed to it a no less awesome role. At the beginning of time, they believed, with the universe just completed, God had stood upon the rock and then ascended into heaven—leaving behind an imprint of His foot. – (page 408)

Abd al-Malik's grand projet proved a quite stunning success. "All the rough Arabs of Syria," so a Kharijite sneered, "go to it on pilgrimage."28 What was the Dome of the Rock, so locals might boast, if not "the holiest spot on earth"? – (page 408)

Since the Prophet had never stepped foot in Jerusalem, how could any notion of the Temple Mount as "the holiest spot on earth" be squared with Abd al-Malik's simultaneous promotion of Muhammad as the founder of his infant religion? Inexorably though the years had slipped by, and hazy though memories of the

Prophet had become, yet there could be no forgetting that he had dwelt beyond the limits of Palestine. – (page 409)

No mystery as to the location of the Dome of the Rock, of course—but where precisely was the enigmatic "House of God"? The poet did not think to specify. Nor did any of his contemporaries. Perhaps, however, this was only to be expected. Literate people, after all, did not tend to live in the desert—or visit it either. Even if the habit of going on pilgrimage to Arabia had become well established before the time of Abd al-Malik—and there is no evidence that it had—then the mounting anarchy of the times would surely have halted the practice. As a result, among those believers sufficiently educated to put pen to parchment, the precise details of the distant desert sanctuary, even down to its very name, appear to have been a blur. The surest pointers to its location were to be found, not in poetry, or in chronicles, or in gazetteers, but in stone. – (page 410)

The years that followed Abd al-Malik's pilgrimage to Arabia saw workmen tinkering with the layout of numerous mosques. From the busiest stretch of the Nile to the loneliest corner of the Negev, qiblas that had previously pointed east were painstakingly reoriented to the south. Meanwhile, in Kufa, the west-facing qibla was carefully angled in an identical direction.33 The House of God no longer seemed to stand where it had previously—between Medina and Palestine. Rather, if the calculations of the mosque renovators were to be trusted, it lay much further to the south, at a site in the depths of the Hijaz. A site that can only have been the one place: Mecca. – (page 411)

There were opponents of Abd al-Malik, a full sixty years on, who still damned him as the man who had "destroyed the sacred House of God."34 Already, however, even in the immediate aftermath of his conquest of Arabia, confusion as to what might actually have happened, and what constituted "the sacred House of God," was rife, and escalating. Umayyad propagandists, while not denying the destruction wrought by Al-Hajjaj, insisted that the true vandal had been Ibn al-Zubayr, and that Abd al-Malik had merely restored the Ka'ba to its original, pristine condition. Few Arabs thought to dispute this claim: the conviction that a sanctuary might be demolished and reconstructed, not once but several times, and still somehow remain numinously the same, was widely held. – (page 411)

Just as he would never have promoted Muhammad as the founder of his religion without truly believing that the Prophet had been an authentic medium for the words of God, so would he never have gone on pilgrimage to a site that lacked any aura of the sacred. Long before his arrival there, a Ka'ba must surely have stood on the spot. Perhaps, like the one at Bakka, it also had some association

with Muhammad. If not, then the Umayyads would certainly have had both motive and opportunity for promoting it as the shrine named in the Prophet's revelations as Mecca. – (page 412)

"At the time of the Prophet, may God save him and give him peace, our faces were all turned in one direction—but after the death of the Prophet, we turned ourselves hither and thither."35 So one Muslim scholar would recall. Others, in the reports given of Mecca itself, might betray similar anxieties. It was not only the Ka'ba, in these stories, that was forever being demolished and rebuilt—so too was the mosque that enclosed it. A sacred well was lost and then miraculously rediscovered on no less than two separate occasions. – (page 413)

And certainly, in his determination to shape the world as he saw fit, Abd al-Malik was nothing if not a revolutionary. Even before his final victory over Ibn al-Zubayr, he had been plotting how to stamp his vast empire as he had already stamped Jerusalem: as hallowed by the authentic religion of God. In 691, the coins that had given Arculf the reassuring delusion that Palestine still belonged to a Christian order had been re-minted with images that owed nothing to Constantinople: a spear in a prayer niche, Abd al-Malik himself girt with a whip. Meanwhile, in Iraq, a matching programme of reform saw the erasure from the coinage of every last trace of the House of Sasan. Nothing or no one was permitted to obstruct this policy. All the coins were to be standardised, and all were to promote the authority of Abd al-Malik's new religion. "Long have you pursued a course of faction and followed the path of waywardness—but now, by God, I will beat you as one does a camel not of the herd at the watering-hole."36 – (page 414)

Posterity would claim that it was Uthman, decades previously, who had first collected and pieced these together, to compile what was from that moment on a fully formed scripture—but the snatches of verse patched together by Abd al-Malik on the Dome of the Rock suggest something rather different. So too, of course, does the resounding lack of even a single Qur'anic inscription dating from the reigns of his predecessors; and so too do the scattered hints from contemporaries. Christian scholars, noting for the first time the existence of writings attributed to Muhammad, described them not as a single book but rather as a jumble of fragments with such titles as "The Cow," "The Woman" and "God's She-Camel."c If true, then who might have been tracking down these various scraps of text, and piecing them together? Certainly, that Abd al-Malik's reign had indeed seen the Qur'an subjected to a state-sponsored makeover was something that no Muslim scholar would subsequently think to deny. In – (page 415)

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In the vanguard of this editing process, as of so much else, was Al-Hajjaj. Peerless warrior, formidable governor, he would also enjoy a splendid posthumous reputation as a proof-reader of the Qur'an. Some traditions, however, would ascribe to him a role infinitely more intriguing. Rejecting the presumption that God, in the wake of Muhammad's death, no longer permitted His purposes to be known through the agency of mortals, Al-Hajjaj is said to have retorted, "I work only by inspiration!"37 Ever the loyal servant, though, he always emphasised that his own role in collecting, collating and distributing the revelations of Muhammad—heaven-sanctioned though it might be—was as nothing compared to that of Abd al-Malik. – (page 416)

Certainly, the title of "Caliph"—introduced to the public gaze for the first time by Abd al-Malik's agents in the imperial mints—implied a dominance over realms that were no less supernatural than earthly. – (page 417)

Abd al-Malik himself was a noted connoisseur. "He who wishes to take a slave girl for pleasure," the great Caliph sagely advised, "let him take a Berber; he who wishes to take one as a domestic servant, let him take a Roman; and he who wishes to take one to produce a child, let him take a Persian."54 In Iraq, however, where the markets were particularly well stocked with women plundered from Iran, Persian girls' value was boosted by more than mere fecundity. – (page 425)

Daughters from Zoroastrian families, each of whom was expected to kneel three times a day before her husband and humbly beg of him his desires, were famously

well conditioned to obedience. At the absolute top end of this market were princesses of the House of Sasan: one raised the fabulous sum of fifty thousand gold pieces, while another, a granddaughter of Khusrow II himself, was installed in a specially built palace in Basra that supposedly had a thousand gates. – (page 425)

Predictably, the Arabs, far from welcoming these converts as brothers, placed as many roadblocks as they could on the "straight path." Those who wished to convert faced a whole host of indignities. It was not enough to submit to God. Only by submitting to an Arab patron as well might a Persian, or an Iraqi, or a Syrian come to be ranked as a Muslim. Here, – (page 426)

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Converts from the Zoroastrian Church did often, it was true, bring with them into Islam notions that might have seemed distinctively their own: that apostates should be executed, for instance, or that prayers should be offered up five times a day, or that it was a singular mark of piety to use a toothbrush.e Certainly, there was no direct support in the Qur'an for any of these presumptions: hell, not execution, was the fate that it prescribed for apostates; prayers were mandated, not at five, but "at three times of day";62 while of toothbrushes there was no mention at all. How strange it might have seemed, then, and how striking a coincidence, that Muslims, when dictating what the penalty for apostasy should be, or how many times a day they should pray, should increasingly have opted to side with Zoroastrian proscriptions and ignore the Qur'an altogether. – (page 431)

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What was more, they had developed a positive craze for dental hygiene. – (page 431)

Only by compiling the sayings of the Prophet could they possibly hope to trump the forbidding authority of the Khalifat Allah. If a Sunna—a body of law capable of taming the extravagances and injustices of the age—were indeed to be fashioned without reference to the Caliph, then its origins would need to be grounded, and very publicly so, in the life and times of the Prophet himself. No other source, no other wellspring, would possibly do. But how to authenticate Muhammad's sayings? Such was the question, a century on from the death of the Prophet, that confronted the first generation of a whole new class of scholars: legal experts whom Muslims would come to know as the ulama. – (page 432)

The rabbis of Sura, after all, had been labouring for many centuries to solve precisely the sort of problem that now confronted the ulama. The secret Torah, so it was recorded in the Talmud, "had been received at Sinai by Moses, who communicated it to Joshua, who communicated it to the elders, who communicated it to the prophets"64—who, in turn, had communicated it to a long line of rabbis, right down to the present. Nowhere in the world, in consequence, were there scholars better qualified to trace the chains of transmission that might link a lawyer and the sayings of a prophet than in the yeshivas of Iraq. Was it merely coincidence, then, that the earliest and most influential school of Islamic law should have been founded barely thirty miles from Sura? It was in Kufa, at around the same time as Walid, far distant in Damascus, was building his great mosque, that Muslim scholars first began to explore a momentous proposition: that there existed, alongside the Prophet's written revelations, other, equally binding revelations that had never before been written down. – (page 433)

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by bringing these previously unrecorded snatches of the past—these hadiths—to light, Muslim scholars were following a trail that had been blazed long before. Islamic though the isnads were, they were also more than a little Jewish. – (page 433)

The mosques of Iraq were coming to offer what no synagogue, or church, or fire temple had done for centuries: a venue for enquiry into the nature of God where the terms of debate had not already long since been set in stone. More than that—in the teeming warrens of Kufa and Basra, people from various religious backgrounds were free to meet, and collaborate, and merge their perspectives in a way that had never previously been possible. – (page 434)

But what of those Muslims who had once been rabbis—was the same to be observed of them? If so, that would certainly help to explain why the Sunna—just like the Torah—aimed to regulate every dimension and aspect of human existence; why it should have forged for itself chains of transmission such as rabbis, and only rabbis, had ever previously deployed; and why, in direct contradiction of the Qur'an, it prescribed death as the punishment for adultery rather than whipping. – (page 434)

Shards gleaned from the Torah, and from Zoroastrian ritual, and from Persian custom: all featured in the edifice pieced together by the ulama. The consequence of their labours, taking on an ever more clearly delineated form as the decades of Umayyad rule slipped by, was a guide to the wishes of God of quite astounding potency: one that even the most chauvinistic governor might learn to ignore at his peril. – (page 435)

The ulama, whether descended from prisoners-of-war, or Zoroastrians, or Jews, were overwhelmingly comprised of the victims of the conquest. Yet they had won for themselves, by their collective efforts, a rare and impregnable dignity. It was they, not their ostensible masters, who had become the arbiters of the will of God. The jumble of beliefs and doctrines carried by bands of overwhelmingly illiterate warriors from the desert had been transformed, over the course of barely a century, into a religion of lawyers. Such an achievement, secured in the face of such odds, was a truly astounding one. – (page 435)

Consequently, the Sunna was founded upon a paradox: the more the ulama of Iraq, in their eagerness to fashion a just society, drew upon the incomparable legacy of those who had laboured in a similar cause for millennia, the more did they identify the source of that wisdom with a barren and peripheral desert. Experience of the perfect society, so they taught, had been granted to one single place, and to one single period of history: Medina, in the lifetime of the Prophet. The role of the Sunna, and its supreme glory, was to serve the Muslim people as a signpost: one that could point them the way—the shariah—back to paradise lost. – (page 435)

It was not merely the right of Abd al-Malik and his heirs to their privileged status as "deputies of God" that risked being undermined. The entire legitimacy of their regime was grievously threatened too. Cast the Prophet as the only acceptable wellspring for Islam, after all, and everything that had followed him was bound to seem a decline and fall. – (page 436)

Almost a hundred years on, and the once-prosperous province of Cilicia—as the coastal lowlands were known—was a weed-choked and corpse-littered wilderness: the most dangerous place on earth. The very wildlife had turned carnivorous. Lions, descending from their customary haunts in the mountains, had taken to lying in ambush for human prey in overgrown marshes and fields. Not even an innovative attempt by Walid to trample down such hideaways through the introduction of Indian water buffalo had served to neutralise the menace. – (page 437)

At Pergamum, an ancient city just north of Ephesus, the sight of Maslama's army camped outside the walls reduced the citizens to such terror that a necromancer was able to persuade them to slice open the belly of a pregnant woman, boil her foetus, and then dip their sleeves in the resulting casserole. The spell proved signally ineffective. Maslama stormed Pergamum, ransacked it, and converted it into winter quarters for his army. Then, with the coming of spring, the invaders continued their advance. When they reached the straits directly opposite Europe, the Arab fleet, freshly arrived from Cilicia for the purpose, ferried them to the far shore. Nothing now stood between Maslama and the Roman capital, that abiding object of all his dynasty's fondest dreams. In mid-summer, guards on the walls of Constantinople were able to mark a haze of darkness spreading towards them from the western horizon, as fields and villages were burned, and dusty roads were trampled by a great multitude of marching feet. Then Arab outriders began to appear, approaching the landward bulwarks of the New Rome, and ships from Maslama's fleet, churning the waters directly below the great palace of the Caesars. By 15 August, the encirclement was complete: Constantinople was besieged, enclosed in a ring of foes. Well might her citizens have offered up desperate prayers. Almost a century had passed since the Persians and the Avars had appeared before the city's walls, and in that time the calamities that had afflicted the empire had hardly spared the capital itself. Her former greatness now seemed to hang loose about her, like a giant's robe on a dwarfish thief. Harbours once crowded with colossal grain ships had contracted to a quarter of their former size; beneath the triumphal column where ambassadors had once been greeted with splendid and awful ceremonial a pig market now stood; entire stretches of the city consisted of nothing but farmland interspersed with ruins, from which masonry would periodically crash. Yet even if much in the great city had crumbled, so equally much had not. The Hippodrome, the imperial palace and Hagia Sophia: all endured. Above all, monuments to an age when the New Rome's resources had truly matched her pretensions, there loomed the giant walls of Theodosius, and which now, once again, proved their impregnable worth. Nor, as the Arab sea captains would soon find out to their horror, had the Romans permitted their primordial habits of attack to atrophy either. The sheer scale of Maslama's navy, its vast expanse of timbers, rendered it mortally vulnerable to a counter-strike. In the still of late summer, with the Bosphorus glassy calm, the Arab war fleet sought to force the city's sea walls: a fatal error. The Romans, launching their own

ships from the Golden Horn, unleashed the deadliest weapon at their command: fire. Blazing hulks crashed – (page 441)

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Hygron pyr, this devastating invention was called: "liquid fire." That the secret had been brought to Constantinople a few decades earlier by an architect called Callinicos did not obscure for the city's defenders, as they watched the blazing Arab ships sink, or else drift helplessly into one another or out to sea, its ultimate derivation. Clearly, it was God who had shattered all the invaders' plans—"at the intercession of His wholly chaste Mother." – (page 442)

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longer, it seemed, be taken entirely for granted. In 732, for instance, in the distant wilds of Gaul, a Muslim raid on the Franks' wealthiest and most cherished shrine, a great church in a town named Tours, was met by a phalanx of outraged locals, and murderously put to flight. Eight years later, near the town of Acroinum, beyond the Taurus Mountains, it was the turn of the Romans to corner an Arab war band, and inflict on it a decisive defeat. Thirteen thousand were killed, and many more taken prisoner: a serious loss of manpower. This, the first victory ever won by the hated Rum in pitched battle against a Muslim army, seemed to confirm that God, in His ineffable wisdom, did indeed intend to leave entire swaths – (page 444)

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deprivations of Cilicia, an awkward paradox. When Abu Ishaq risked a whipping to upbraid a local commandant, when Ali ibn Bakkar wept until he went blind, when other scholars fasted, or ate dust, or wore rags, or refused to wash, they were not following the example of Muhammad. Rather, they were aping Syria's famously ascetic monks. This, in the context of the interminable war with the Christians, could hardly help but appear a mounting embarrassment. – (page 445)

No dynasty in history had presided over a more staggering array of conquests than the Umayyads. It was under their rule that the faithful had witnessed the fall of Carthage and Merv, the conquest of Spain and Transoxiana, the reaching of the Loire and the Hindu Kush. Clearly, then, the approval of God for their rule was something beyond dispute. And yet, like rodents burrowing and gnawing their way beneath some particularly glorious citadel, the ulama did dispute it. – (page 448)

Even the proud assertion first made by Abd al-Malik—that to rule the Muslim people was to serve as the "Deputy of God"—might be turned against his dynasty. The earliest Commanders of the Faithful, so the ulama began to point out, had never thought to arrogate to themselves such a haughty title. – (page 448)

Many Muslims would doubtless have been shocked to learn that the moon continued to be worshipped anywhere in the House of Islam. The cult of Sin might almost have been designed to provoke their horror. Yet the pagans of Harran—who had suffered brutal persecution in the final years of Roman rule—had found their new masters, if not exactly more tolerant, then more laissez-faire, at least. Christians would snidely attribute this to the gullibility of the Muslim authorities, who were supposed to have been tricked into accepting that the moon worshippers were in fact the enigmatic "Sabaeans" mentioned in the Qur'an—and therefore, according to the Prophet, one of the three "Peoples of the Book."81 Whatever the truth of such a tall-sounding story, Harranians were certainly still studying the future by sacrificing animals and then "examining their livers,"82 directly under Marwan's nose. – (page 451)

In Khorasan—where great Parthian dynasts such as the Karin still jealously guarded their prerogatives against the upstart Muslim elite, and where most towns and villages remained wholly untouched by Islam—it often seemed as though Iranshahr had never fallen. That the world was divided into rival spheres of good and evil; that a great monarch was either a defender of truth or he was nothing; that the wickedness of an oath-breaker would bring ruin to his realm:

here were presumptions still widely taken for granted along the eastern marches of Iran. – (page 452)

In 745, even as the Kharijites were launching their latest insurgency, a mysterious prophet appeared in Khorasan. Dressed all in green—the colour of Mihr—brandishing a book of revelations written in Persian, and proclaiming himself familiar with the byways of heaven, Bihafarid was a revolutionary conjured, it seemed, from the most haunting mists of the Iranian past. Having died and then risen again—or so his disciples proclaimed—he announced his mission in terms that nakedly scorned all the pretensions of Muhammad: "O people, I am Bihafarid, the Messenger of God!"85 Of course, it could not possibly last. Muslim rule, whatever the hopes of the great multitudes of peasants who flocked in excitement to Bihafarid's banner, was not so easily overthrown. Sure enough, in 749, the self-proclaimed prophet was arrested, put in chains and hanged in a nearby mosque. Yet his executioners, for all that it would have appalled them to contemplate it, were not, perhaps, wholly dissimilar to the man they had put to death. Bihafarid's murderers were themselves followers of an insurrectionist who had emerged abruptly on the fringes of the former Iranshahr, and combined charisma with a dramatic claim to be an agent of God. "Father of a Muslim," he called himself: a name so obviously a pseudonym as to give away nothing at all. His glamour, in part at least, was that of a man in a mask. "The knowledge of my deeds," as he put it with a calculated show of mystery, "is better for you than the knowledge of my pedigree."86 Yet whether an Arab or an Iranian, an aristocrat or a former slave, one thing, at least, is certain: he was powerfully assisted in his preachings by the same identical swirl of yearnings and expectations as had inspired Bihafarid. – (page 453)

Although he did not, like Bihafarid, clothe himself in green, yet in the summer of 747, when he declared open rebellion against Marwan, he unfurled a banner dyed a single colour: black. That he did this in a village outside Merv, where the fugitive Yazdegird had been murdered, was hardly suggestive, of course, of any nostalgia on Abu Muslim's part for the House of Sasan; and yet, to Iranians, his preachings might well have stirred memories of the toppled monarchy. The cause proclaimed by Abu Muslim was that of a single family, appointed by God to the rule of the world; and if the mark of their claim to this awesome status was the possession, not of a farr but rather of a bloodline traceable back to the uncle of the Prophet, then that, in an Islamic empire, promised qualification enough. Abu Muslim, like so many other rebels trained in subterfuge and insurrection, was an agent of the Abbasids; and by raising the East in their cause, he had succeeded in fusing the past with the future, the Iranian with the Arab, the Sasanian with the Islamic. It was to prove a quite staggeringly potent combination—and the ruin of the Umayyads. – (page 454)

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due course, this tradition would become an embarrassment to Muslim theologians, since it implied that God had a body. In the eleventh century, an alternative explanation for the construction of the Dome of the Rock was enshrined: that it commemorated the ascension into heaven not of God but of Muhammad, who was supposedly transported from Mecca to Jerusalem specifically for the purpose. c – (page 456)

A monk in Iraq, writing in the early eighth century, alludes to a "Qur'an" but also to other writings by Muhammad, including a "Book of the Cow." John of Damascus, a high-ranking civil servant in the last years of Abd al-Malik's reign who took a deep interest in his master's faith, also refers to a "Book" composed by Muhammad, together with various other texts that had supposedly been written by him. "The Cow" ended up as the title of a sura in the Qur'an; "The Woman" seems to be the same text as the sura that appears under the title "Women" in the Qur'an; "God's She-Camel," despite scattered references throughout the holy book to such a beast, bears no resemblance to any existing Qur'anic sura. – (page 456)

In fact, as was invariably their way, the rabbis appended so many qualifications to the biblical proscriptions that they effectively abolished the death penalty in Jewish society. For instance, it could be enforced only if the adultery had been committed before two valid witnesses, and even then only after multiple warnings had been delivered. – (page 457)

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Despite the descent claimed by the Abbasids, the family they most closely resembled was not that of the Prophet but the House of Sasan. Increasingly, the comparison of a Caliph to a Shahanshah was no blasphemy, but a statement of the obvious. When the Commander of the Faithful sat in majestic inaccessibility upon his throne, or staggered in his silken robes beneath the weight of his jewels, or strolled through his gardens past cooling fountains and leopards, he was no less the lord of a Persian empire for claiming descent from an Arab. – (page 458)

By 1258, when Baghdad was flattened by the Mongols, and the heir of Haroun al-Rashid, wrapped up in a carpet, was trampled to death by horses, the victory

of the ulama had long since been secured. For centuries, Caliphs had played no more than an ornamental role. The death of the last Abbasid to rule in Baghdad had no effect whatsoever on the fortunes of the ulama. – (page 460)

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The paradigmatic example of the problems that can be faced by Muslim revisionists is the series of misfortunes that were suffered by an Egyptian academic, Nasr Abu Zayd, when he published a reading of the Qur'an as a work of literature that had evolved over the course of time. His book provoked a storm of outrage, and led to him being condemned as an apostate, having his wife declared divorced from him by virtue of his offence, and ultimately fleeing into exile. For a brief but suggestive account of how Abu Zayd himself views his intellectual pedigree, see his book, Reformation of Islamic Thought, pp. 53–9. At least, though, he was not defenestrated: the fate suffered by the unfortunate Palestinian historian Suliman Bashear. 62 Muhammad Sven Kalisch. See http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-478/_nr-812/i.html 63 Manzoor, p. 34. – (page 499)

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See also Donner's frank admission that, "Those of us who study Islam's origins have to admit collectively that we simply do not know some very basic things about the Qur'an—things so basic that the knowledge of them is usually taken for granted by scholars dealing with other texts" – (page 500)

There are strong parallels generally between the Qur'anic account of Mary's life and various Christian apocryphal writings. For more detail, see Horn. Suleiman Mourad, in a stimulating essay, has convincingly argued that the Christian legend of the palm tree that fed the pregnant Mary itself derives from the Greek

myth of Apollo and Artemis, whose mother Leto was similarly nourished by a palm tree. – (page 502)

The stern admonition of a leading historian of the period is worth bearing in mind: "none of the information which [Tabari] presents should be accepted unless it receives some corroboration from independent sources of provable worth" (Howard-Johnston (2006), p. – (page 505)

An alternative theory derived the word religio from relegere—"to write or reflect upon over and over again." Whatever the derivation, religio itself signified practice, rather than belief. – (page 536)

For the possible influence of Samaritan notions of "submission" to God on early Islam, see Crone and Cook, p. 19 and Crown, Pummer and Tal, p. – (page 547)

From a report by Nonnosus, a Roman diplomat whose father and grandfather had both served as ambassadors to various Arab chieftains, and who himself was sent by Justinian on a mission to Ethiopia and the central and southern reaches of Arabia. What Gibbon describes as "a curious extract" from his memoirs was preserved by Photius, a ninth-century Patriarch of Constantinople, in his Biblioteka. The precise location of the shrine mentioned by Nonnosus is unknown, but the specifications that he does give, although frustratingly vague, make it clear enough that it was not Mecca, but somewhere in northern Arabia. See Crone (1987a), p. 197, n. 127. – (page 553)

As Ward-Perkins (p. 73) points out, "there is not even a word in the Latin language for 'moustache.' " – (page 556)

2005 DNA study of two skeletons found in Germany conclusively proved that the pestilence of the 540s was caused by Yersinia pestis. In the words of the scientists who conducted it: "The identification of Y. pestis–specific DNA sequences in these two skeletons, buried in the second half of the 6th century AD, constitutes molecularly supported evidence for the presence of Y. pestis, the causative agent of plague, during the first pandemic recorded" (Wiechmann and Grupe, p. 48). It is worth noting that the prevalence of plague during the winter as well as the summer months and the description in contemporary accounts of some of the symptoms suggest that one of the strains might have been pneumonic, the most deadly and infectious of all. – (page 561)

We now know that the sixth-century pestilence was humanity's first experience of bubonic plague, so it is probable—indeed, almost certain—that its impact (upon a population that had no immunity whatsoever) was even greater than that of the Black Death in the fourteenth century. Historians are still in the process of making their calculations in light of this. – (page 562)

As early as the second century AD, pagans across the Roman Empire were interpreting the gods of their various pantheons as the angels of one supreme deity, and by late antiquity this process had become near universal. – (page 566)

This has been most radically argued by Günter Lüling, who proposes that the Meccans were largely Christian, and that the original core of the Qur'an consisted of Christian hymns. For the suggestion that Jews had settled in Mecca, and powerfully influenced Muhammad, – (page 572)

Qur'an: 6.92. Muslim tradition takes for granted that the phrase refers to Mecca, but there is nothing in the Qur'an itself that would justify such a presumption. Adding to the general fog of mystery enveloping it is the fact that the phrase literally means the "Mother of Settlements." – (page 572)

Crone (1987a), p. 6, and for the implausibility of Mecca as a great trading hub, the entire book. – (page 572)

See Cosmas Indicopleustes. 13 Most striking of all is the absence of any mention of Mecca in Procopius, since in one passage of The History of the Wars (1.19), the historian provides a remarkably detailed survey of the western coast of Arabia. This is testimony to the range and depth of Roman knowledge of the peninsula, and to the seeming lack – (page 572)

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As Crone (1987a, p. 134) points out, the silence "is so striking that attempts have been made to remedy it." For the forced nature of these attempts, see ibid., pp. 134–6. – (page 573)

For a detailed and intellectually thrilling exposition of this point, see The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam by Gerald Hawting: a ground-breaking work that has resulted in a paradigm shift in the way that scholars understand the role of the Mushrikun in the Qur'an. – (page 575)

The Qur'an refers to them as al-Majus, or Magians (22.17): the word applied by the Greeks to Persian priests since the time of Cyrus. – (page 577)

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name. 57 According to much later Muslim sources, Mani's followers actually termed him "the Seal of the Prophets"—but this is most likely to have been a backward projection. Manichaeans did use the word "seal" to refer to Mani—but implying "confirmation" rather than "terminus." – (page 579)

Qur'an: 6.99. Mecca, in the laconic phrase of Donner (1981), "is located in an area ill suited to agriculture" (p. 15). 73 Ibid.: 56.63–4. 74 The poem is exceedingly obscure. A commentary by a later Muslim commentator sought to explain its meaning: "Badr and Kutayfah are two places, the distance between which is vast. It is as though they have come together due to the speed of this camel." Poem and commentary alike appear in Six Early Arab Poets, p. 95. My thanks to Salam Rassi for the translation. – (page 582)

The Quraysh, along with Mecca, Muhammad and someone called Majid, are mentioned in the final line of the papyrus fragment that also name-checks the Battle of Badr for the first time. Its editor dated this fragment to the mid-eighth century (Grohmann (1963), text 71). A group of people called the Qrshtn are mentioned in a south Arabian inscription dating from the AD 270s, and some scholars have interpreted this as a possible allusion to Qurayshi women. However, that theory is most implausible, because the Qrshtn seem to be ambassadors on a trade mission. – (page 584)

It is telling that a theory floated by Muslim commentators suggests that "Quraysh" derived from the Arabic word taqarrush—"gathering"—another word that powerfully conveys a sense of foederati. The great scholar al-Azraqi wrote, "It is said that the Quraysh were so named on account of [their] gathering (tajammu) around Quşay … For in some dialects of the Arabs, tajammu (= meeting/gathering) is referred to as taqarrush" – (page 584)

As with the origins of the Qur'an, so with the course of the Arab conquests: the range of scholarly opinion is dizzying. Christian sources are contemporary, but too patchy to provide anything like a coherent narrative; Arabic sources are plentiful, but frustratingly late. The contradictory nature of the evidence from Arab historians for the Battle of the Yarmuk is best set out in Donner's magisterial survey of the Islamic conquests (1981, pp. 133–48). However, even he comes across as a model of guarded optimism when compared to Lawrence Conrad, whose ground-breaking essay on the conquest of the obscure Levantine island of Arwad served as a landmine beneath the entire project of reconstructing the Arab invasions from Muslim sources. For the most recent attempt to clear up the mess, see Howard-Johnston (2010), who locates the decisive Roman defeat not at the Yarmuk but near Damascus. – (page 588)

Contemporaneous reports on the battle outside Gaza seem to imply that Muhammad was still alive at the time. The first text to mention the existence of an Arabian prophet, and which has been most plausibly dated to the summer of 634, refers to "the prophet who has appeared to the Saracens" (Teachings of Jacob: 5.16) Another, dated to around 640, and the first to mention him by name, describes the battle as having been won by "the Arabs of Muhammad" (quoted by Hoyland (1997), p. 120.) For a survey of later Christian and Samaritan sources that presume the survival of Muhammad into 634, see Crone and Cook, pp. 152–3, n. 7. As they point out, "The convergence is impressive"—and proof of just how slippery is our evidence for the Prophet's life. – (page 590)

Subsequent Islamic tradition would explain this as a title bestowed on Umar by Muhammad. However, it is clear—from both contemporaneous Jewish records and later Muslim histories—that the title actually derived from the Jews of Jerusalem and was prompted by Umar's activities on the Temple Mount. – (page 592)

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Mu'awiya is hailed as "Commander of the Faithful" on an inscription in the main hall of the bath-house of Hammat Gader, a few miles from Tiberias, which was one of the Amir's favourite winter resorts. Accompanying this very public articulation of Umayyad legitimacy is a cross—which, inevitably, has always deeply puzzled scholars committed to the notion that Mu'awiya was a Muslim. In the words of Clive Foss (2008), "the further implications of this phenomenon remain to be explored" (p. 118). – (page 596)