

Methodes et debats



Further to the Pre-Muḥammadan Allāh

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the divinity of Allāh before Muḥammad. It is focussed on narrow and broad issues of method, and particularly on inferential evidence for the incidence and nature of this divinity on the evidence of Arabic poetry. It casts a critical look on retrojection Islamic theological concepts to the interpretation of earlier Arabic poetry, and proposes that the now common notion of “pagan monotheism” refers to no actually existing form of religious practice among pre-Muḥammadan Arabs. It reaffirms the salience of polytheism among the Arabs, and the pertinence of concrete historical evidence and of an anthropological sensibility in this domain.

Keywords

Qurʾān, Paleo-Islam, history of Allāh, polytheism, monotheism, ḡāhili poetry, pagan Arab religion, pre-Muḥammadan Arabs

Résumé

La présente étude porte sur une divinité nommée Allāh avant Muḥammad. Elle se concentre sur la question méthodologique des témoignages poétiques, sur l'envergure et la nature de cette divinité, et sur le contexte plus général des questions de méthode.

Elle jette un regard critique sur la projection a posteriori des notions théologiques islamiques dans le cadre des analyses déductives fondées sur la matière poétique. Elle propose que l'idée, bien répandue dans des milieux universitaires, des « monothéistes païens » parmi les Arabes ne fait pas référence à la réalité historique des pratiques religieuses des Arabes avant Muḥammad. Elle souligne l'importance du polythéisme chez les Arabes et la pertinence décisive des données historiques concrètes et d'une sensibilité anthropologique dans ce domaine.

Mots clefs

Coran, paléo-islam, histoire d'Allāh, polythéisme, monothéisme, poésie arabe pré-islamique, religions arabes païennes, Arabes avant Muḥammad

Under the striking, catchy title of *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler: Allāh in Pre-Quranic Poetry*,¹ Nicolai Sinai has made a welcome gesture towards recognising the salience of Arabia and Arabian material for the history of the pre-Muḥammadan divinity Allāh. This signal of appreciation for the necessity of considering historically Arabia and the Arabs has not generally been part of the normal equipment of recent scholarship on what was eventually the rise of the Muslim religion under the Arab empire of the Umayyads.

Arabian conditions in the sixth and previous centuries are often evoked in research on the Qur'ān, but generally in a telegraphic and impressionistic way. Only rarely have these conditions been, in recent years, approached with the degree of seriousness and application that would lend more to the evocation of Arabia and the Arabs than a vague general nod to what is supposed to be obvious. Overall, Arabian conditions have been taken for an ancillary setting for Biblicism and other allogenic presences, beheld more with a wary glimpse than with a gaze. Scholars have been given to referring to the names of, or cite chapter and verse, when these exist, from various early Christian sects, Judaeo-Christians, Syriac homilies, midrashic stories and other elements that ostensibly gave rise Muḥammad's new religion and its scripture. Existing in neither times nor places or milieux of circulation that can be determined, these fragments of text and doctrine are lent some colour by the local Arab setting. This was not always the case; great scholars, Wellhausen included, had

1 Nicolai Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler: Allāh in Pre-Quranic Poetry*, New Haven, American Oriental Society ("American Oriental Society Series, Essay," 15), 2019.

previously turned to Arabian ethnographic conditions to understand matters Biblical.²

The recognition of Arabian conditions raised by Sinai is especially pertinent as research into pre-Muḥammadan Arabia is a flourishing field with which more conventional Islamic Studies have not kept pace. Both archaeology and epigraphy call up issues of interpretation and analysis which have consequence for the historical study of the transition between Arab polytheism and the monotheist confession that came to predominate in much of the Qurʾān. Historical interpretation calls for consideration of context, and the context under consideration by Sinai in *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler* is that surrounding the emergence of Allāh.

The emergence of Allāh as an ultimately monotheistic deity in the Paleo-Muslim, Muḥammadan period of the history of western and central Arabia is a crucial issue which perhaps emblematises the nexus of Arab conditions and the emergence of what was eventually, in the late Umayyad era, recognisably to become Islam. In the specific case of *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, Sinai states that his essay was “inspired by, yet taking issue with,” aspects the present author’s recent treatment of “the pre-Islamic Allah.”³ This seems to refer to my dropping the assumption that this deity’s rise to indivisible pre-eminence was in some ways self-explanatory, and to affirming that it rather needs historical explanation. I shall return the compliment in the following paragraphs as I engage him and examine the lineaments of the pre-Muḥammadan Allāh as Sinai construed them, returning the compliment in double measure in that I have sought to read *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler* as carefully, and as fully, as he might have read the book to which he makes reference.

Sinai’s orderly contribution is as interesting for matters raised as it is for its lapses and for what it does not address. Its aim is to assess and interpret references to the theonym Allāh in pre-Muḥammadan and some *muḥadram* poetry of the Paleo-Muslim period (that encompassing Muḥammad’s career, the Medinan interregnum and the Umayyads well into the time of the Marwānids), and draw a profile of this deity. This corpus of poetry is sensibly

2 For Wellhausen, see especially Josef van Ess, “From Wellhausen to Becker: The Emergence of Kulturgeschichte in Islamic Studies,” in *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and Its Problems*, ed. Malcolm Kerr, Malibu, Undena Publications (“Giorgio Levi Della Vida Conferences,” 7), 1980, p. 29–51, and Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (“Publications of the German Historical Institute”), 2009, p. 186–190 and *passim*.

3 Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, p. 4. The reference is to Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 279–306.

assessed for the purpose of Sinai's discussion, its authenticity being valued positively and carefully. Its occasional recalcitrance as a source is mitigated by cumulative evidence, thereby serving as a resource for contextualisation.⁴ The thematic scale of the essay – and of the context covered – is not especially commodious, and the topic to be discussed is designed carefully to evade sighing polytheism. The word “polytheistic” occurs once only, and without consequence, in the seventy-nine pages of Sinai's essay. Recent systematic work on Arab polytheism and its contexts seems to have gone unread, or to have been confined to casual mention or fragmentarily used for target practice; the same would apply to older work which has not lost its interest.⁵

Sinai starts his essay by taking his reader through some rather random samples of divine names in North Arabian epigraphy which have morphological relations to Allāh. Parsimony of argument will have been required in order avert the difficult issues of interpretation regarding various theonyms arguably related to Allāh morphologically, including *al-ilāh*.⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sinai finds that Allāh, the “the god par excellence” corresponding to the status of a potentially monotheistic divinity, might conceivably be said to have been really the one intended in all incidence of theonyms occurring in morphologically-related forms. Absent here are the crucial issues arising from the distinctions between, and the relations among, generic, common and proper names of deities, no less than the important issue of epithets and epiclesis, all of which is normal fare in the study of polytheism and of divinities more broadly.

4 Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, p. 3, 22-26.

5 Thus a casual mention of Linstedt, and minor details from Wellhausen and others. In addition to concretely contextualising works cited in above, one might also mention, in European languages, Jacqueline Chabbi, *Le seigneur des tribus : l'islam de Mahomet*, Paris, Noesis, 1997, and *ead.*, *Le Coran décrypté : figures bibliques en Arabie*, Paris, Fayard (“Bibliothèque de culture religieuse”), 2008. Of older work, one would mention William Robertson-Smith, who had close intellectual connections with Wellhausen. Neither has lost interest or analytical significance, despite archaisms. See especially Rudolf Smend, “William Robertson Smith and Julius Wellhausen,” in *William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. William Johnstone, Sheffield, Sheffield Academy Press (“Journal for the History of the Old Testament. Supplement Series,” 189), 1995, p. 226-242.

6 For issues arising here and issues of interpretation, n. 3 above and, more recently, Christian Julien Robin, “*al-'ilāh* et *Allāh*; les deux noms de Dieu chez les Arabes chrétiens de Najrān,” in *Hawliyat*, 19 (2020), p. 57-112, and Aziz Al-Azmeh, “Afterword,” *Hawliyat*, 19 (2020), p. 151-196, at p. 173-177. Robin subsequently included the material in the article just cited, and material from other related work, into his broad-ranging and systematic “Allah avant Muhammad,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 49 (2020), p. 1-145 – the issues of interpretation just noted remain however.

These issues have been clearly raised and amply discussed in religion-historical studies, especially those with anthropological sensibility and pertaining to antique and late antique religions. Among the most salient points that arise is that epithets, in conditions such as those of relevance here, are more cultic than theological. Their analysis is normally conducted by the study of the specific locutions of the languages of ritual relating to the points of concrete cultic performance, in a religious system structured by rhythms and places of worship rather than driven by a theology; their chief and only stable creedal element in these circumstances is quite simply belief in the awesome and uncanny energy of divinities. Epithets like “master of destiny” in themselves do not bespeak stable and determinate theologies, although they give themselves easily to over-interpretation. Theologies properly speaking presuppose determinate conditions of societal differentiation for their conceptual elaboration, circulation, institution and conservation; later Muslim theologians invested considerable effort and ingenuity converting God’s epithets, designated as Names, into metaphysical and mythological Attributes. This required a different discursive, enunciative and social register than that encountered in the use of epithets in worship, or in the beatific audition which the Qur’ān has always been.⁷ This would apply not only to classical polytheism as received or echoed by later authors, including Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204/819 or 206/821), but also to transformations in the fifth and sixth centuries, in the Ḥiḡāz no less than in Naḡrān, and the use of hitherto uncommon names and vocabularies for the divine (including Allāh), of which epigraphic evidence is now being recorded.⁸

Such simplification is of course related to Sinai’s perspective, which is overly theologising, and arises from disciplinary habits with little sympathy for anthropological considerations and scant interest in comparative religion. This simplification is also serviceable for interpreting the polytheistic *ilāh* in terms of a notion of Allāh familiar from the Qur’ān.⁹

Sinai notes the necessity of caution towards the default translation of *’lh* or *lh* as Allāh, but this circumspect note remains incidental. Sinai accepts

7 On the structures and workings of polytheism, Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, p. 49-73, 164-183.

8 For brief comment on Ibn al-Kalbī and for some discussions around his work on Arab deities, see Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity: A Critique of Approaches to Arabic Sources*, Berlin, Gerlach Press (“Theories and Paradigms of Islamic Studies”), 2014, p. 43-45. Later forms of Arab polytheistic worship are only recently coming to be fragmentarily known, based on epigraphic evidence which is as yet unpublished, which still awaits proper interpretation in terms of itself as well as of Ibn al-Kalbī and of discussions indicated in n. 6 above.

9 Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, p. 12-13.

without further ado al-Ḥalīl b. Aḥmad's (d. 175/791) morphological derivation of Allāh (*ilāh* ⇒ *al-ilāh* ⇒ Allāh), later circulated by Sībawayh (d. 180/796) and become standard. The derivation is morphologically sound, but cannot on its own be taken for a sequence of moves in historical linguistic causation, or considered to be a substitute for a sociolinguistic, semiotic and pragmatic-historical study of the profiles and emergence of the theonym Allāh in its various settings and uses.¹⁰ Etymology's consequence is limited to technical facilitation; it is rather a catalytic than a causative agent. Similarly, morphology might rather be considered a catalytic than a causative agency, except if one adhered still to the "etymological fallacy," which operates on assumptions of correspondence between the lexematic and morphological aspects of a word. This had long been cleared away from Biblical studies and other philological study better advanced than Islamic studies.¹¹ Instead of considerations internal to morphology, one might approach the matter by widening the scope of possible analyses, and by regarding the theonym Allāh to be both a generic appellation for specific deities otherwise left unnamed, and as the proper name of a specific god – in a way parallel to 'Īl – at moments of evocation or worship and in the context of cultic practice.¹²

One might appreciate what I have been suggesting about actually existing conditions of cult if one were to cast even a casual look at the possible meanings and uses in North Arabian Safaitic inscriptions of these morphologically related theonyms.¹³ That Allāh in qur'ānic form, as "god par excellence" according to Sinai, might have been "latent" in various related morphological forms¹⁴ is credible only by assuming the clarity, self-evidence, paradigma-

10 Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, p. 287-292, 295-302.

11 James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 100 ff., 158, and ch. 6, *passim*. On a related phenomenon, see Samuel Sandel, "Paralellomania," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 81 (1962), p. 1-13, at p. 1, 6, defines "paralellomania" as "the extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceed to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction," in which the excerpt (or indeed proof-text) takes precedence over context. This academic habit was described as a "seductive pastime" by John Wansbrough, "Gentilics and Appellatives: Note on the Aḥābiṣh of Quraysh," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 49/1 (1986), p. 203-210, at p. 203.

12 Similar point has been made in very interesting ways by David Kiltz, "The Relationship between Arabic Allāh and Syriac Allāhā," *Der Islam*, 88/1 (2012), p. 33-50, at p. 39-40 and 39 n. 28.

13 Most recently, Ahmad Al-Jallad, *The Religion and Rituals of the Nomads of Pre-Islamic Arabia: A Reconstruction based on Safaitic Inscriptions*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, forthcoming, Appendix 1 – with kind permission of the author.

14 Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, p. 9.

tic plainness or theological naturalness of such a most excellent Being, and the seamless simplicity of His history. According to such a theological script, related morphological forms of the theonym Allāh might be deemed to have been, quite simply, budding or incomplete, grappling for the fullness of divine excellence in terms of which other or earlier and perhaps embryonic forms might be considered. It should be noted that this description applies to the flow of Sinai's principal argument. He is clearly aware that the devil is in the detail, and is adept at a form of precise scholarship practiced at noting and probing minute syllabic and phonetic variations. Yet his awareness that there are serious problems with an argument set out in such blunt terms, and his consideration of matters that might have lent due complexity to the issue, are decommissioned, cloistered in footnotes, with no consequence for the central argument which is thereby shielded.¹⁵

Sinai then goes on to make some observations on "Quranic pagans," ostensible non-denominational, non-specific monotheists rather than polytheists, the holders of a seemingly featureless religion, to whom we shall return. It is at this point that he scans poetical material for Allāh. This deity appears in terms of attributes that Sinai, like many others, takes for no very good reason to be the mythographic and theological attributes of the specifically monotheistic deity. He appears as creator, provider of rain, bone-breaker, master of human destinies and "equalizer of moral scores" – the reference to morality, incidentally, seems rather incongruous in a religious setting where the maleficent action of divinities to be appeased cultically is directed towards cultic insufficiencies or infractions, including breaches of oath made by a divinity, while leaving social mores and values alone.

These capacities for creation and mastery are read anachronistically as conventional theological attributes in Sinai's essay, rather than as devices of nomenclature, as epithets, and as hyperbolic terms of exultation by elevation and amplification familiar to all languages of invocation, worship and supplication, polytheistic no less than monotheistic. This applies equally to the attribution of the epithet "One" in a polytheistic setting, which is not uncommon in moments of worship or supplication. Among others, it was used for the Nabatean Dusares, when mentioned in association with Allāt;¹⁶ more famously, it occurs as *heis theos* in polytheistic settings, to be revisited below. One might clarify this by resorting to analogy with amorous language in which the lover is addressed as the only one, to remain so to eternity.

15 For instance, Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, p. 20, n. 85; p. 22, n. 97.

16 Ahmad Al-Jallad, "The 'One' God in Safaitic Inscriptions," *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies*, 34 (2021), p. 37-48.

The ascription of unicity and singularity was commonly used in litanies of invocation (*talbiya*) directed to various deities, serially during moments of worship of each, in Mecca and elsewhere in Arabia, as a signal of special elevation appropriate to a cultic moment, using the generic epiclesis Allāhumma for the various deities addressed as a vocative enunciation – this was later to become an appellative for Muḥammad's deity as He eliminated others and monopolised the very notion of divinity.¹⁷ This is attested by, among others, verses of Ḥassān b. Tābit.¹⁸ Sinai takes such texts as demonstrations of the supremacy of the pre-Muḥammadan Allāh,¹⁹ with no support apart from classical Muslim traditions and the historiographic habits they transmitted of today's scholarship.

The author then proceeds to factor into the picture prayers and sacrifices to Allāh which, he believes, affirm this deity's status as divine lord of Mecca. He does this by allocating to Allāh invocations and prayers directed to unnamed divinities designated by *nomina* such as *rabb*, much as traditional Muslim historical scholarship would have it. In one case, Sinai diverts to Allāh what is rightfully due to Wadd,²⁰ by a manifestly improbable inference whose middle term remains a mystery. In the final analysis, this discussion results in the elimination of deities other than Allāh, who remains alone of any pertinence, as in traditional Muslim historical traditions for whom other deities were but flotsam that did not sully the allegedly better rooted reality of a primeval deity. Monotheistic historiography operates according to a salvation-historical teleological schema in which the triumphant monotheistic end (with Jesus or Muḥammad) re-enacts the primeval monotheistic beginning, preceded by a *mubtada'* (Ibn Ishāq, d. 150/767)/*praeparatio* (Eusebius, d. 339). Polytheism is cast as a polemical notion serving to exclude historical continuities and persistences.²¹ Sinai rounds off his discussion and closes with a reflection on Allāh, late antiquity, and "pagan monotheism."

17 Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, p. 229-232, 315-326. Readers interested in studying the texts of *talbiya* litanies and invocations would be well-advised to turn to Ḥalil Abū Raḥma, "Qirā'a fi talbiyāt al-'arab fi l-'aṣr al-ġāhili," *al-Mağalla l-'arabiyya li-l-'ulūm al-insāniyya*, 27 (1987), p. 94-131.

18 See Omar A. Farrukh, *Das Bild des Frühislam in der arabischen Dichtung von der Hīġra bis zum Tode 'Umars*, Leipzig, August Pries, [1937], p. 12-13.

19 Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, p. 55, n. 272.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 20, n. 85; p. 55.

21 Of interest are the comments of Gregor Ahn, "Monotheismus' – 'Polytheismus': Grenzen und Möglichkeiten einer Klassifikation von Gottesvorstellungen," in *Mesopotamica, Ugaritica, Biblica: Festschrift für Kurt Bergerhof zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres am 7. Mai 1992*, eds Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Lorenz, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Verlag Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer ("Alter Orient und Altes Testament: Veröffentlichungen zur Kultur

The diversion to Allāh of evocation and characterisation which are rather due to other deities, named and unnamed, is integral to what seems to be the overall direction of Sinai's essay. Central to *Bone-Breaker* seems to be the use Arabic poetry as a repertoire of prooftexts for a conception of Allāh which, in the author's view, corresponds to a conception of this deity held by "pagan monotheists," recoverable intact in the Qur'ānic Allāh. These alleged pagan monotheists were neither Christian nor Jewish, and purportedly attributed to Allāh the usual attributes of creation, control of destinies, rain-making; bone-breaking is one rather exotic extra well within Allāh's capacity. In this analysis, Sinai is careful to avoid poetical verses which might sound too Qur'ānic or display too much overlap with Qur'ānic phraseology.²² This may well be methodological caution, but it nevertheless begs the issue of generic enunciative and formulaic material pertaining to gods that is shared by Arab polytheists, the Qur'ān, "pagan monotheists," if they existed at all, and religious language in the region overall, and beyond.

Throughout, Sinai regards poetry explicitly as a repertoire of fragments that might be appropriated singly as prooftexts. A prooftext is normally adduced to justify doctrinal positions held independently of the text itself, and of the text's context. It is the operational name of a particular procedure of confirmation bias, which in Biblical interpretation is known as *eisegesis* as distinct from the more elaborate *exegesis*, and refers to the restatement of textual fragments as authoritative glosses upon doctrine and as testimonials of doctrine.²³ Context in this type of eisegetical reference to textual fragments is not relevant in itself, for the reference is entirely instrumental, and the fragment supportive of the position to be sustained is made to stand on its own.

Not uncharacteristically for such apologetic discourse, therefore, 'Antara's oath by the Lord of the House is taken for an oath by Allāh, on the assumption that the House must be Mecca, and that Allāh must quite naturally be the said lord. One would ask: why not the House at Dūmat al-Ġandal or elsewhere nearer to this hero's dwelling, mentioned by Sinai? A similar contrivance, also applied to Wadd – in fact, a severance of sense from actual context – is applied

und Geschichte des Alten Orients und des Alten Testaments," 232), 1993, p. 1-24; Martin Wallraff, "Tendenzen zum Monotheismus als Kennzeichen der religiösen Kultur der Spätantike," *Verkündigung und Forschung*, 52/2 (2007), p. 65-79, at p. 65-66.

22 Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, p. 4, 22.

23 This is otherwise known as "finalist interpretation" as distinct from operationalist philological interpretation, explored with exemplary clarity and economy in Tzvetan Todorov, *Symbolisme et interprétation*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil ("Collection Poétique"), 1978, p. 91-124. This book offers an excellent initiation.

to other proof texts,²⁴ as it was applied to the sequestration of Wadd's due and its allocation to Allāh. Overinterpretation is here performed by oversimplification, in terms of a simple pre-established template governing interpretation, and overriding context.

Ultimately, the main divine image that is sought from poetical prooftexts is one of Allāh largely in conformity with a putative qur'ānic *Leittheologie* which Muḥammad is thought to have shared with the audience he was, incongruously, trying to convert. That this might beg the question of why one needed to preach to the converted who shared the same deity – Allāh, as Lord of the Ka'ba, affirmed by denying, for no evident reason, that Hubal could have been such more appropriately²⁵ – seems irrelevant, apart from the minor matter of lesser deities. Similarly, it begs the question of the homogeneity of Muḥammad's audience. Sinai objects to my contention that an analysis in terms of "pagan monotheism" projects rhetorically onto Muḥammad's audience the views of Muḥammad, for no cogent reason except what seems to be an apology for a whole package of views on the religious life of pre-Muḥammadian Arabs to which I shall come presently. And indeed, as a conscientious and careful scholar, Sinai appreciates the difficulty of the position he sought to defend but, again, noted his own scepticism and, indeed, his most perceptive comments, in footnotes,²⁶ where they might know their place, and not be allowed to vitiate the central argument.

Overall, it is presumed that a formal theology was operative, and indeed, a *Leittheologie* which seems, as described here, fairly standard, constant, stable, familiar and without complexity or surprises. In terms of the structure of Sinai's argument in *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, the epithets and attributes attaching to Allāh in poetry, or those expropriated from other deities and allocated to Him, are meant to profile a divinity familiar from the Qur'ān, projected onto "pagan monotheists," and commensurate with what some might take for a common monotheistic template. In this way, an interpretation of poetic fragments in terms of an ostensible Qur'ānic template is substituted for the situated and contextual interpretation of these fragments; context is reconfigured in terms of Qur'ānic text.

To scholars attuned to the study of polytheism and of the history of religion, and with an anthropological sensibility, the reduction of enunciations about a deity to elements that might help with the construal of dogmatic formulae and theological elaborations, accounts for only a small part of religious

24 Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, p. 53-54.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 16, n. 68; p. 17, n. 70 and 71.

enunciations involving gods, and comes at the expense of other and more fundamental features inherent in the use of language at concrete points of religious practice. By this I refer to the performative nature of religious enunciations. Supplication, evocation, and associated forms of enunciation are speech acts deploying epithets and epicleses and directed towards effect. They are what are called illocutionary speech acts. One scholar has suggested arguably that the theonym Allāh be a qualification for a deity at the moment of worship or invocation, rather than a generic concept of divinity which it later became.²⁷

Further, the theologisation of religious language is relevant to some but not all types of analysis, and is pertinent particularly to the transformation of theologemes into theological discourse, which is not the case with pre-Muḥammadan poetry. Recourse to scholarly locutions of the early nineteenth century, today with a rather home-spun air, such as “high God”²⁸ helps little, bearing in mind that the epithet “high” (*‘alī, hypsistos*), like “one,” is often attributed to deities devotionally without this bespeaking a theology of high and low, of one or many. It does not bespeak a stable mythography of subordination, which is usually the specialty of epic poets and theologians, not to speak of the divine diplomacy that was part of Arab (and other) inter-group negotiations. An appreciation of the status and sociolinguistic nature of an utterance is needed in order to determine the type of analysis best suited to it, and to determine which utterance might be approached with philological or theological techniques and concepts, and which utterances might simply be misinterpreted by such logocentric concepts and techniques.²⁹ The complexity of issues pertaining to enunciations about the divine in their various registers and settings lends itself only most awkwardly to paraphrase and other, simpler forms of philological reading.

This is why performing an analysis of poetic material in terms of “divergence from quranic teaching”³⁰ does not take us very far analytically, and remains confined to tabulating similarities and differences. The pre-exegetical, Paleo-Qur’ān itself has no uniform and stable concept of God, as shown by recent research. The text moves through henotheism and monolatry, just as the Pentateuch did, and settles on monotheism, deploying many

27 Reinhard Schulze, *Der Koran und die Genealogie des Islam*, Basel, Schwabe Verlag, 2015, p. 379.

28 Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, p. 13, n. 55.

29 For a recent analysis sensible to these distinctions, see Elizabeth Key Fowden, “Schreine und Banner; Paläomuslime und ihr materielles Erbe,” in *Denkraum Spätantike: Reflexionen von Antiken im Umfeld des Koran*, eds Nora Schmidt and Angelika Neuwirth, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz (“Episteme in Bewegung,” 5), 2016, p. 405-430, at p. 408-409, 423, 426.

30 Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, p. 22, n. 97.

characteristics and moves of Arab polytheistic divinity, including the shading of various categories of preternatural beings into each other. Further, to maintain that Allāh was propelled to prominence “across the Christian-pagan divide”³¹ tells us little about what kind of Christianity there was, and where; it begs the question of why it was the Christian rather than the pagan element that was the more pertinent to the way in which this deity was configured in pre-exegetical times.³² Interpreting this religious ebullience in the light of late Muḥammadan and post-Muḥammadan times rather obscures than clarifies the pre-Muḥammadan picture. The Qur’ān itself runs parallel to the religious development of Muḥammad himself, with his initially divided heart and his occasional inconstancy, of which his Lord reminds him in the Qur’ān.³³ Sinai is a specialist on the textual chronology of the Qur’ān and is better placed than most to plot the chronologies of various divine names and degrees of exclusive or divisible divinity.

It seems clear from the foregoing that Sinai’s study of poetical fragments was undertaken on an assumption that, as the Meccans were “pagan monotheists,” pre-Muḥammadan Arab material will sustain the monotheism of these pagans, here understood, it seems, in the sense of non-denominated gentiles lacking scripturalist instruction. The designation of these pagans as monotheistic is puzzling, as they are meant to have not worshipped Allāh alone. One would assume that, on such an assumption, there is little need to look at Arab polytheism in any but a most cursory way, or at the religious and cultic life of the Arabs at the turn of the sixth-seventh centuries. This is in effect to expunge concrete historical, religion-historical and ethnographic context, and to render Arabia virtually invisible apart from fragments cherry-picked from here or there.

One might conclude that Sinai’s essay is designed in the main to salvage the thesis of pagan monotheism from more precise and verisimilar scholarship on pre-Muḥammadan Arab religions, however incongruent and incoherent this thesis would appear in the Arabian setting. The original habitat of the

31 *Ibid.*, p. 61-62.

32 On pre-Muḥammadan Arabia’s ambient monotheistic faiths, and the forms they took within, and the issue of Biblicism in general, Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, p. 248-276.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 315-357; the obliteration of divinities other than Allāh is discussed at p. 326-327. For a focus on the interesting connections and indeterminacies of polytheistic notions of divinity, and their extensions in the Qur’ān, see also Aziz Al-Azmeh, “Paleo-Muslim Angels and other Preternatural Beings,” in *The Intermediate Worlds of Angels: Islamic Representations of Celestial Beings in Transcultural Contexts*, eds Sara Kuehn, Stefan Leder and Hans-Peter Pökel, Beirut-Baden-Baden, Orient-Institut-Ergon Verlag im Kommission (“Beiruter Texte und Studien,” 114), 2019, p. 135-152.

notion of pagan monotheism is that of the history of late antique philosophy in former east Roman territories, which yielded highly subordinationist neo-Platonic notions of an ultimate divinity generally regarded more as a cosmological than a religious or providential idea, if one excepted sacramentalist philosophers such as Iamblichus of Apamea and Damascius, a tradition generally called Chaldeanism, and of course Church Fathers such as Origen of Caesaria and Clement of Alexandria. The term was used initially with promising flourish and without specific monotheist historiographic prejudices in studies of late antique polytheism. In this context, the assonances between Christian and pagan philosophy is remarkable, to my mind more an indication of homology of Christian to pagan philosophy, than of later pagan philosophy to Christianity, to the extent that one might wonder why Christians might have called themselves monotheistic had it not for the polemical purpose of separation from non-Christian philosophical homologues.³⁴

The thesis of pagan monotheism becomes somewhat questionable when transposed from philosophy to religious practice. This transposition was made in relation to the record of *heis theos*, first put together famously by Erik Peterson in 1926³⁵ and enhanced considerably since; that *heis theos* is an entirely epigraphic phenomenon would lead one to confirm that this was an epithetic term of acclamation and exultation, unrelated to any theology of indivisible divinity, and of an order of discourse entirely distinct from that of theology. Yet, like *theos hypsistos*, it was transposed to the domain of religious as distinct from philosophical theology. Stephen Mitchell set *theos hypsistos* adrift in an allegedly Judaising and Judaeo-Christianising environment, in support of a thesis of incipient or implicit monotheism. From late antique philosophy, it was imported by rhetorical legerdemain into analyses of pre-Muḥammadan Arabia and of Paleo-Islam. Two books to which he contributed are sometimes cited as if they did sustain the idea of a pagan monotheism. Both books contest the transposition between philosophy and religion vigorously, and neither can lead to the conclusion that either “hypsistarians” or the associated *theosebeis* (commonly rendered as God Fearers), were really a gentilic rather than quite simply an appreciative appellative, as indicated by religious practices on the

34 See especially Michael Frede, “Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity,” in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, eds Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999, p. 41–68.

35 Erik Peterson, *Heis Theos: Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (“Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments,” 41), 1926.

ground, with indications of immoderate piety.³⁶ After all, all pagans feared their gods and propitiated and appeased them, as did Jews, Christians and Muslims, and as they still do. There is no indication that such fearers or hypsistarians, or indeed the more generically conceived Judaeo-Christians, existed in Arabia.³⁷

The robust assertion of dubious theses inhibits curiosity. The fact that no Arabic sources or Arabian remains are used to support the assumption of “pagan monotheists” suggests strongly that proof is unwanted, and that, by extension, local contexts are overridden by the long but inevitable march of some original monotheism which comes to make a late appearance in Paleo-Islam, carried by “pagan monotheists.” In this, Arabia and its inhabitants are absent, ventriloqual echoes. This dovetails very well with much of recent studies of the Qurʾān which neglect local contexts, including linguistic contexts, in favour of citations from random writings in Syriac, Greek or Ethiopian.³⁸ I think it is clear

36 These books are Athanassiadi and Frede (eds), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, and Stephen Mitchell and P. van Nuffelen (eds), *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, in which I should especially note Nicole Belayche, “*Deus deum ... summorum maximum*: Ritual Expressions of Distinction in the Divine World in the Imperial Period,” at p. 141-166. Both are cited *in toto* by Patricia Crone in articles frequently quoted in Islamic Studies scholarship (and in Sinai’s essay) to sustain claims to the existence of Fearers and the claim that Muḥammad had been one – different scholars working in the field have a preference for spotting Fearers, other (like Sinai) for detecting Hypsistarians for no clear reason, both variations on the theme of the spectral Judaeo-Christianity. See for instance, Patricia Crone, “Pagan Arabs as God-fearers,” in *Islam and its Past*, eds Carole Bakhos and Michael Cook, Oxford, Oxford University Press (“Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions”), 2017, p. 140-164, at p. 143, n. 13. Sinai is a scrupulous scholar and confines his citation to an article by Mitchell (Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler*, p. 60, n. 291-293). See the most pertinent comments of Wallraff, “Tendenzen zum Monotheismus als Kennzeichen der religiösen Kultur der Spätantike,” p. 69-70, 73, 78. For this whole body of issues concerning late antique philosophy and religion in relation to polytheism and monotheism, see, synoptically, Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, p. 79-92.

37 There is much scholarship on the spectral Judaeo-Christian Arabs. For a sensible outlook, see the suggestive article by Carlos A. Segovia, “The Jews and Christians of Pre-Islamic Yemen (Ḥimyar) and the Elusive Matrix of the Qurʾān’s Christology,” in *Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam*, ed. Francisco del Rio Sanchez, Turnhout, Brepols (“Judaïsme ancien et origines du christianisme,” 13), 2018, p. 91-104. One would have wished for closer definitions of Christianity and of the Christian/pagan syncretism on the Arabian, including on Naḡrānī ground, remote and distinct from that of the bishops (see Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, p. 260-261).

38 See Aziz Al-Azmeh, “Implausibility and Probability in Studies of Paleo-Qurʾanic Genesis,” in *Islam in der Moderne, Moderne im Islam: Eine Festschrift für Reinhard Schulze zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds Florian Zemmin, Johannes Stefan and Monica Carrado, Leiden-Boston,

now that poaching for evidence of an Allāh who would correspond to Sinai's expectations is unavailing.

Clearly, there is an odd incongruity in this practice of history. Sinai regards the issue of pagan monotheism to have been established for Mecca definitively and beyond question, just by citing Patricia Crone,³⁹ and Crone's confirmation of Gerald Hawting's view that there were really no polytheists among the Qur'ānic *mušrikūn*,⁴⁰ allegedly pagan monotheists of one description or another, or simply a later historiographic contrivance. But these theses carry conviction only on an assumption of historiographic incapacity, assuming that Arab sources are irretrievably fictional. Once this hyper-sceptical assumption is made, the *tabula rasa* thus created, and voided of concrete context, is filled in by a variety of fancies figuring as alternative facts, some interesting and extravagant, others less imaginative, including the fictions of pagan monotheists, or of the composition of the Qur'ān by a Christian cabal in Palestine, or of Muḥammad, if he existed at all, having been a Nabatean, in a manner rather more akin to science fiction than to scientific history.⁴¹

Pagan monotheism is an unnecessary conjecture. It serves to foist a biblicising and monotheising paradigm upon Arabian conditions that, from literary and epigraphic material, yields more plausible, verisimilar and demonstrable historical reconstructions that recognise the actuality of polytheistic cults and the imbrication of Arab Christianity with them. The substitution of biblicism for local cultic and social conditions as the mainspring of Paleo-Islam and of its scripture is of course far too simple to be historical, and belongs conceptually and methodologically to epigonic techniques and conceptions of the philological craft and to conceptions of religion that belong to a previous era. It takes as its primary material second-order phenomena of religion, namely, theology and texts, and neglects the first order of religious practices, rituals, the special features of devotional language, cultic locutions and so forth. The text and, in the case of the Qur'ān, text and intertext, are in turn taken for an autonomous, self-reproducing agents, text begetting text, words with no body or sound, set in a scriptorium rather than emerging from encounters in the marketplace, on the battlefield, or in a setting of devotion and exhortation, each generating

Brill ("Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia," 119), 2018, p. 15-40.

39 See n. 36 above.

40 Gerald Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press ("Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization"), 1999.

41 The description in terms of science fiction is taken from Clive Foss, "An Unorthodox View of the Rise of Islam," *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 18 (2005), p. 771-774, at p. 771.

enunciations with distinct properties and pragmatics of reception. In other words, we have texts and religions bereft of an historical *Sitz im Leben*.

Hyper-sceptical historiography, declared or undeclared, has sought to invalidated relevant sources, thereby obscuring Arabian conditions, beheld with a sideways glance rather than a gaze. It is puzzling why blithely tendentious scholarship is taken on trust, without giving oneself pause for a moment's reflection, and considering whether one may have adopted central propositions based on an *isnād mağrūh*. Sinai, an eminent scholar of the Qur'ān, has worked on the assumption that the standard traditional narrative of Qur'ānic composition is *grosso modo* sound, appreciates the force of cumulative evidence for the authenticity of pre-Muḥammadan poetry, and accepts the traditional Muslim salvation-historical narratives of the pre-Muḥammadan Allāh. It is therefore not a little surprising that he should choose, on the issue of polytheism, to accept the cancellation in this domain of Arabic sources (and archaeological remains) and the cumulative compulsion they provide for the requisite *Sitz im Leben* of pre-Muḥammadan Arabian religion.⁴²

As my remarks come to a close, I would suggest that one might try to comprehend this incongruity of adopting counter-factual propositions as central arguments by considering the *Sitz im Leben* of this type of scholarship. Academic paradigms are cognitive formations which have institutional moorings, and are in this sense cognitive institutions, which invests them with regulatory energy. What is clear is that, working in the flow of hyper-sceptical erosion of Arabic sources, and inventing substitutes for what the sources might have yielded had they been considered properly, has taken hold of important transatlantic institutional moorings and networks, and established academic niche where it is regarded as a regnant orthodoxy in studies of Arabia and the Qur'ān. This setting lies at the junction of many disciplinary formations and paradigms, the history of ideas, mentalities, and political and ideological currents that crystallised in the 1990s under a specific culture-political sensibility and *Zeitgeist*. This niche condition is signalled by the relative institutional marginality of the central thrust of the discipline concerned thematically with the Qur'ān, Muḥammad and the Paleo-Muslim period in the history of the Arabs. In this academic domain, conceptual and methodological archaisms are allowable and hallmark the distinction between this discipline and the wider conceptual and technical equipment of historical research as understood today. The niche condition is, further, affectively intensified as it engenders a habitus of

42 This and other matters relating to Arabic literary sources, including varieties of scepticism and the incidence and weight of cross-confirmation, receive a detailed consideration in Al-Azmeh, *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity*.

avowed institutional commitment and in-group loyalty reminiscent of sectarian milieus, with patristic figures, emblems, relics, bonding gestures, polemics and, of course, apologetics.⁴³ Characteristic of such milieus is a dedication to in-house concerns, a preference for the exercise of influence over the appeals of reflection and persuasion, and an aversion to unfamiliar ideas conjoined with a blunting of curiosity.⁴⁴

Ultimately, if progress were to be made in the pursuit of Allāh's historical theogony, a placid preference for the commonplaces that His emergence was somehow self-evident and self-explanatory, and that his primacy was only to be expected, would need to be relaxed in favour of more interesting and complex probing. Continuing to maintain the idea of Allāh's historical plainness would pronounce the issue closed before it is opened, and confine scholarship to the quest for reassuring confirmation of what appears to be familiar. Now that the issue has been raised, it would be a pity if Allāh's emergence and His transposition ultimately to the register of monotheism were regarded simply as premise for commonplace interpretation rather than as a problem for research.

43 These scholarship-historical matters are elaborated by Aziz Al-Azmeh in "Islamic Origins for Neo-Conservatives," available at https://www.academia.edu/43195797/ISLAMIC_ORIGINS_FOR_NEO_CONSERVATIVES (unpublished), accessed 6 October 2021 – and the shorter version in narrower compass, *id.*, "Pagan Arabs, Arabian Prophecy, Monotheism," in *Marginalia: Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 1st, 2019, <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/pagan-arabs-arabian-prophecy-monotheism/> accessed 6 October 2021.

44 This orthodoxy is not infrequently taken for a blessed condition which warrants no self-reflexion. For an example of rectitudinous reflexes so conditioned and stimulated, see Michael E. Pregill, "Review Essay; Positivism, Revisionism, and Agnosticism in the Study of Late Antiquity and the Qur'an," *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association*, 2 (2017), p. 169-199, at p. 171-172.