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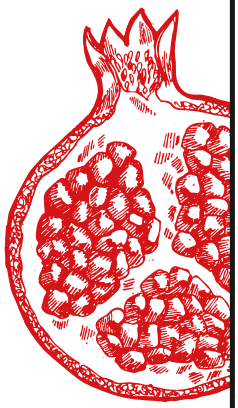

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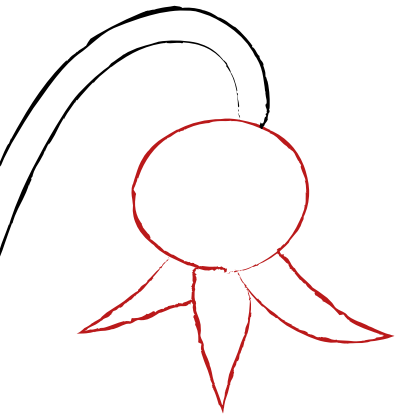

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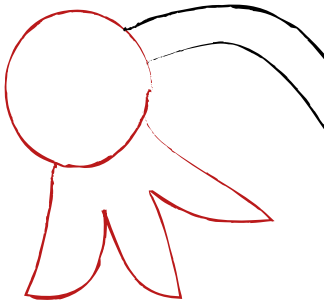

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THE SEED OF ABRAHAM: GENTILE ETHNICITY IN EARLY CHRISTIAN TEXTS AND THE QURAN

Ilkka Lindstedt

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In memory of Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila (1963–2023),
my teacher, advisor, and friend

Abstract

In this article, I discuss the reception and espousal of Gentile ethnicity in late antique Arabia and the Quran. I suggest that the Prophet Muhammad and many of his followers identified as Gentile (*ummī* or *ḥanīf*) believers, which they portrayed as carrying positive significations. I discuss various ancient and late ancient Christian texts that appear to be in the background of this development. I argue that the Quran recategorizes Jewish, Christian, and Gentile believers (here: those who believed in the Prophet Muhammad's mission and accepted it) as belonging to the same community of believers. The figure of Abraham is of the utmost importance in the ethnic reasoning of the Quran.

Dans cet article, je traite de la réception et du choix de l'ethnicité des Gentils dans l'Arabie de l'Antiquité tardive et dans le Coran. Je suggère que le prophète Mohammed et nombre de ses disciples se sont identifiés comme des croyants Gentils (*ummī* ou *ḥanīf*), qu'ils ont présentés comme porteurs de significations positives. Je prends en compte divers textes chrétiens anciens et tardifs qui peuvent fonctionner comme l'arrière-plan de cette évolution. Je soutiens que le Coran réorganise les croyants juifs, chrétiens et Gentils (ici, ceux qui ont cru en la mission du prophète Mohammed et l'ont acceptée) comme appartenant à la même communauté de croyants. La figure d'Abraham est de la plus haute importance dans le raisonnement ethnique du Coran.

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THE SEED OF ABRAHAM: GENTILE ETHNICITY IN EARLY CHRISTIAN TEXTS AND THE QURAN

Ilkka Lindstedt

Introduction

According to recent research, on the eve of Islam the Arabian Peninsula was, in contrast to the conventional picture, mostly inhabited by monotheists of different sorts:[1] Jews, Christians, and other religious groups

[1] I thank Nina Nikki, Anna-Liisa Rafael, Antti Lampinen, Kaj Öhrnberg, Riikka Tuori, Jarkko Vikman, and all the members of the University of Helsinki research group *Sosiaalisten identiteettien välittyminen juutalaisuudessa, kristinuskossa ja islamissa* for commenting on an earlier draft of this text. This study is based on three presentations that I have given over the years. I thank the audiences of those presentations for valuable feedback. The presentations were "Abraham as a Prototype in Paul and the Quran" (with Nina Nikki), EABS/ISBL Conference, Helsinki, July 31, 2018; "Abraham and Gentile Identity in the Quran," Medieval Philosophy and Theology Research Seminar, Helsinki, March 21, 2019; and "Religion and Ethnicity in the Quran," Leiden, January 28, 2020. In this article,

(Sinai 2019).[2] What is more, Arabia was multiethnic, with different languages spoken (and written), and the Arab ethnogenesis was still underway or in the future. The old notions of the peoples of pre-Islamic Arabia being "Arab Bedouin" and idolatrous polytheists have been rebuffed in recent research.[3]

Recent epigraphic finds (e.g., Nehmé 2017) reveal the early presence of Jews and Christians in Arabia, including western Arabia. Indeed, all sixth-century (the century when the Prophet Muhammad was born) epigraphic material is monotheist. Interestingly too, pre-Islamic Arabic poetry suggests that even some Gentiles of Arabia had become monotheists or, at least, henotheists.[4] The Quran, too, appears to indicate that the opponents of the Prophet Muhammad believed in a creator God who was above other supernatural agents, though they might have denied the existence of the hereafter (Crone 2016).

In Arabic poems, some of which are in all likelihood authentically pre-Islamic, God (*Allāh*) is sworn by and extolled (Sinai 2019, 20, 31). He is the creator: for example, a poet by the name of Bāʿith ibn Ṣuraym refers to God as the one "who raised the heaven in its place and the full moon" (trans. Sinai 2019, 27). The fate of human beings is in God's hands, though the notion of the afterlife is, by and large, missing in the poems. Though some poems by Jewish and Christian Arabic poets

the biblical passages are quoted according to the NRSV translation. The Quranic citations are cited from Muhammad Abdel Haleem's (2010) translation, though I have sometimes changed his renderings somewhat. This is in particular the case when the context of the citation has required modifying his translation. The article has some overlap with my monograph *Muḥammad and His Followers in Context: The Religious Map of Late Antique Arabia* (passages reproduced with permission).

[2] For a study arguing for the conventional reconstruction, see Lecker 2005. According to him, polytheism was not diminishing. In Lindstedt 2024, I criticize Lecker's view.

[3] Macdonald 2009; Crone 2016b; Webb 2016.

[4] For this question, see Watt 1971; Sinai 2019; Grasso 2021.There are some questions on the authenticity of the poetic corpus, which are rather satisfactorily addressed by Sinai (2019, 19–26). I agree with his idea that much of the corpus is authentic.

are extant,[5] most of the poetic corpus appears to have been composed by poets who were neither Jewish nor Christian: at least neither the contents of the poems, nor the names of the authors suggest Jewish or Christian self-identity. Despite this, the poets still subscribed to a belief in a creator God (*Allāh*), and can be called Gentile monotheists or henotheists. This is, naturally, a categorization imposed upon them by modern scholars: we have no evidence in the corpus of any specific group appellation (except tribal ones) or religious identity that they themselves would have embraced and used.

In this article, I deal with the Abrahamic prototype[6] and its connection with the notion of Gentile ethnicity in the Quran as well as texts that function as the subtexts[7] of the Quran in this regard. I start by discussing Christian texts from antiquity and late antiquity where Abraham functions in a somewhat similar role as in the Quran. Of especial importance is the Pauline articulation of Abraham and its later reception. I also discuss how the Quran creates the ingroup identity for the group called "believers" through the process of *recategorization*.

I use the word "Gentile" in this article to denote people who did not self-identity, or were not seen by others, as Jewish or Christian. No pejorative significations are meant by this usage. Moreover, as I will argue in

[5] For a discussion of these poets, see Lindstedt 2024, 62–64, 111–16.

[6] A prototype is an abstract fuzzy set of attributes that the group members envision characterize a typical member of the group. A real person exhibiting these features cannot be called a "prototype"; rather, the word "exemplar" is used. However, a person can be "prototypical," and, in the context of Abraham we are in any case dealing with a fictional literary figure rather than a real person. See Esler and Piper 2006, 17–41, for a discussion of these terms and how they can be employed in the discussion of fictional figures. In this article, I speak of the "Abrahamic prototype" and "Abraham's prototypicality."

[7] That is to say, texts that are older than the Quran and that the Quran is in intertextual connection with—echoing them, alluding to them, and commenting on them. See Reynolds 2010, 2018. It is somewhat difficult to tell with precision what texts were known in western Arabia in the early seventh century CE (when the Prophet Muhammad was active), but scholars often look in particular at Ethiopic and Syriac, but also Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic texts for Quranic subtexts. The transmission of these texts (and their ideas) was partly oral.

some length, the Gentile appellation and identity were repurposed and laden with positive meanings in sixth–seventh century western Arabia.

While the similarities between the Pauline Abraham and the Quranic Abraham were noted in scholarship more than a hundred years ago,[8] my treatment offers new viewpoints by discussing what the Quranic Abraham meant for the Arabian religious map, social categorizations, and ethnic legitimization before Islam and in early Islam—that is to say, how a group of (mostly) Gentile believers articulated and buttressed its identity and standing vis-à-vis the Jews and Christians. As far as I know, there is no detailed and comparative study on how this Abraham-as-Gentile-believer figure functions in Christian texts and the Quran.

The Quranic Abraham figure is intimately linked with Quranic *ethnic reasoning*, to borrow a term used by Denise Kimber Buell (2005, 2–5) to describe how early Christians categorized and compared themselves through discourse on the conceptual plane of ethnic groups or nations.[9] The Quran utilizes its narratives of Abraham to argue for a positive interpretation of Gentile believer identity. Looking at the terminology denoting Gentile ethnicity in the Quran also requires discussing what modern scholars mean by the word "ethnicity," a word for which no exact correspondence in Quranic or Classical Arabic can be found. The arguments I put forward in this article also entail revisiting how Quranic words such as *dīn* and *milla*, often (and, I argue, misleadingly) translated as "religion," function in the text.

[8] D. S. Margoliouth (1903) was, as far as I know, the first to suggest that the Quranic depiction of Abraham might have its precursor in Romans 4. More recently, a number of scholars have authored studies that have a bearing on the issue of Gentile ethnicity in the Quran. See, e.g., Hawting 2011; Zellentin 2013; Shaddel 2016; Goudarzi 2018; Zellentin 2018; Goudarzi 2019; Zellentin 2019.

[9] In recent years, there has been a growing interest in studying how religion and ethnicity were conceived and intertwined among Jews, Christians, and other groups in antiquity and late antiquity. See Boyarin 1999; Fonrobert 2001; Boyarin 2004; Donaldson 2007; Hodge 2007; Barton and Boyarin 2016; Berzon 2016; Lieu 2016; Boyarin 2018.

Second Temple Judaism, Christianity, and Ethnicity

In the study of Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, there has been ample work, by scholars such as Paula Fredriksen (2018), on the question of the identity of the people commonly called "Jews," "Christians," and "Gentiles." Nowadays, many scholars hesitate to talk of Christianity as an existing religious identity before the second century of the Common Era or even later. There has also been much discussion and debate about the exact contours of the "Jewish" identity during and after the Second Temple period (until 70 CE). For example, Philip Esler argues that we should not use the word "Jews" to refer to a group in antiquity; rather the word "Judeans" should be preferred. Esler notes: "This is not simply a question of nomenclature, since it goes to the heart of how the identity of the people was understood by themselves and by their contemporaries" (2003, 62).[10] Esler indicates that the self-understanding of these people in antiquity was more ethnic than religious properly speaking.[11]

Now, "ethnicity" is of course a modern concept, as is "identity" (and some might say "religion" as well).[12] There is no reason to clearly separate

[10] Similarly in Islamic studies, Donner notes: "The scholarly and popular discussion of Islam's origins has long been hampered—even crippled—by the use of deeply entrenched conventional terminologies that are inappropriate to the historical realities we seek to understand. It is not just that we use 'inappropriate' names for various phenomena; more serious is the fact that these engrained terminological habits inhibit our ability to conceptualize clearly the true nature of the phenomena associated with Islam's origins" (2018b, 2).

[11] For a study on the later developments of the nomenclature related to "Judaism" and "Jews," see Boyarin 2018.

[12] A good definition for the concept religion is given in Jaffee 1997, 5: "Religion is an intense and sustained cultivation of a style of life that heightens awareness of morally binding connections between the self, the human community, and the most essential structures of reality. Religions posit various orders of reality and help individuals and groups to negotiate their relations with those orders." Naturally, it should be acknowledged that the various modern scholars that refer to "religion" might have diverging significations in mind.

ethnicity from other categorizations of identity (Armstrong 1982, 6).[13] However, in certain contexts the word "ethnicity" might bring analytical and conceptual clarity to studying the ways in which people in antiquity perceived themselves. To ground his argument in theories of ethnicity, Esler cites the six features of an ethnos that John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (1996, 6–7) have put forward. In this framework, an ethnic group is understood to possess the following characteristics:

1. A common proper name that the group is called by its members.
2. An imagined (mythic) common ancestry.
3. Shared memories or foundation myths of heroes, historical events, et cetera.
4. Aspects of common culture, for instance religion, language, or norms.
5. A connection with a homeland, which can be either actual living in that territory or a shared understanding of an ancestral land.
6. A sense of group solidarity, felt by at least part of the *ethnos*.

Here, Second Temple Judaism appears to tick all the boxes. Hence, the English concept "religion" does not necessarily entail the important aspects that were part of the self-conceptions and practices of the Judeans, since they, for instance, put much weight on the notion of shared ancestry. It is, perhaps, number 2 in the above list—an understanding of a shared ancestry—that is most important in setting apart "ethnicity" from how "religion" is commonly understood in modern English parlance. After all, though some religions include the notion of ethnicity in the self-understanding of the people identifying with that religion, for the most part religions are conceptualized as sets of beliefs and practices that transcend ethnicity. In theory at least, nowadays people can identify with and convert to Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam whether they are South African, Icelandic, or Japanese in their ethnic or national

[13] See also Enloe 1996, esp. 199–200: "It may be futile and unrealistic to separate religion and ethnic identity. Many individuals behave as if their ethnic affiliation and professed religion are one and the same: to be born Croatian is to be born Catholic."

affiliation.[14] In the texts under consideration here, the Abrahamic prototype is regularly invoked as modeling a sense of past and belonging in this ethnic notion of lineage. Let me emphasize here that I am not suggesting that ethnic groups are somehow more "real," "concrete," or "bounded" units than, for instance, religious groups. All groups larger than, say, some dozens of individuals are, to an extent, imagined communities.[15] Toward the end of this article, we will come back to this six-point list and see how the Quran's notion of Gentile believer might fit on it.

Abraham as An Example for Gentile Believers in Early Christian Texts

Abraham as a figure prototypical for the Gentile believers in Jesus in particular was essentially an invention of the Apostle Paul, who probably reacted to what his opponents claimed about Abrahamic descent.[16] Some other early Christian texts also invoked and echoed this Pauline notion of Abraham as a vehicle transferring the Gentiles from the outgroup to the community of believers.[17] The secondary literature on the

[14] But as we are reminded by Buell, this is in all likelihood a markedly modern understanding (and one that only exists in certain contexts): "Instead of positioning Christianness as *not-race*, or aracial, many early Christian texts defined their version of Christianity as a race or ethnicity, sometimes in opposition to other rival articulations of Christianness, and sometimes in contrast to non-Christian groups and cultures (including, but not limited, to those defined as 'Jews')" (2005, 9).

[15] To refer to the name of the classic study by Benedict Anderson (1983). Or, as Kwame Appiah puts it: "Once you move beyond the village world of the face-to-face, a people is always going to be a community of strangers" (2018, 74).

[16] However, it can also be understood that, for Paul and his Gentile believers, believing in Jesus was a pathway for becoming the descendant of Abraham. I thank Nina Nikki for this remark. In any case, the idea is that Abraham functions as an example for the Gentile Jesus-believers.

[17] While the topic is outside the scope of this article, it is interesting to note that in rabbinic Judaism as well Abraham functions as a vehicle for Gentile converts. Male

New Testament and later Christian texts is vast. I restrict the citations to those works that deal mainly with the early Christian texts from a social identity perspective.

Paul's Letters

As is well known, the most important writer in the New Testament to argue for an Abrahamic ancestry and prototype for the Gentiles is Paul.[18] This issue is raised in particular in Galatians 3 and Romans 4, and is

converts sometimes adopted the name Abraham the son of Abraham our father. But the label Abraham does not mean that the proselytes of Gentile background were a group set apart in rabbinic Judaism, since they were considered, at least in theory, as fully Jewish and expected to follow the law *in toto*; see BT Yevamot 22a (for the Babylonian Talmud, see https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Talmud). Things naturally functioned a bit differently for the God-fearers (*theosebeis*), who did not adopt most Jewish practices; see Jaffee 1997, 131–32. Paul and later Christian authors (and, I would claim, the Quran as well) put forward the notion that Gentile believers have to obey the law in only a limited fashion, if at all, so the context is different from the proselytes to Judaism but somewhat similar to the God-fearers. It should also be noted that the idea of Abraham as an exemplar for the proselytes might already be present, or at least stem from, Jubilees (the original version of which was composed in the second century BCE). Jubilees 11–12 describes how Abraham stands up to his people and his father Terah and forsakes idolatry and adopts monotheism. He is, in a sense, a convert himself. See Fredriksen 2017, 105, and, in more detail, Nickelsburg 1998.

[18] It must be noted and emphasized that the recipients of Paul's letters were Christ-believing groups that were in majority Gentile. Polemics against the law have to be understood in this context: they were written with the Gentile audience in mind. Paul argued that the Gentile Christ-believers do not have to take up the law, but he nowhere says that Jewish Christ-believers (such as himself) should recant the law. While the issue is outside the scope of this article, it appears that Paul was reacting to opponents (anonymous other Christ-believers of Jewish background) who, so the hypothesis goes, invoked Abraham to claim that the (male) Gentiles should undergo circumcision. Paul rejected this idea and adduced a different Abrahamic exemplary aspect: that of faith. On Paul and the Gentiles, see also Fredriksen 2017, in particular 105–6, 148–66; 2018, 23–29.

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connected with the issues of circumcision, law,[19] belief (that is, belief in Jesus as the resurrected Messiah), and eschatology.

The pertinent chapter in Galatians, chapter 3, is too long to cite here in its totality. I will quote here the most relevant verses, namely, 6–14:

> Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,"[20] so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the Gentiles [or: peoples, *ethnē*] shall be blessed in you."[21] For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.
>
> For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law."[22] Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith."[23] But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, "Whoever does the works of the law will live by them."[24] Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"[25]—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

In this rather convoluted passage of his letter, Paul presents Abraham as a believer[26] first, before he was law-bound. All believers in Jesus

[19] My usage of the concept of "law" in this article always also covers aspects that fall under "ethics" in modern parlance.

[20] A reference to Genesis 15:6. "Righteousness" is an important term for Paul in this letter. See Esler 1998, 141–77 for an analysis.

[21] Cf. Genesis 22:18.

[22] Cf. Deuteronomy 27:26.

[23] Cf. Habakkuk 2:4.

[24] Cf. Leviticus 18:5; Ezekekiel 20:11.

[25] Cf. Deuteronomy 21:22–23.

[26] The Greek word translated as "belief" in NRSV is *pistis*. Fredriksen (2017, 36) forcefully argues that this is a wrong rendering since *pistis* means first and foremost "steadfastness," "fidelity toward," or "conviction." However, since the exact contours of the Pauline usage of *pistis* are not crucial for the arguments of my article, I will simply reproduce the NRSV translation as is.

are children of Abraham, and he functions in particular as a medium through which the Gentiles can and will receive the attributes of faith and the promise of the Spirit, since in Jesus the blessing of Abraham is manifested to them as well.

Esler has analyzed the relevant Pauline passages from a social identity perspective, utilizing the concept of prototypicality.[27] I will cite his analysis both here regarding Galatians 3 and below when I discuss Romans 4. In his reading of Galatians, Esler (1998, 173) submits that Paul sees Abraham's righteousness and blessing as stemming from fidelity toward God rather than obedience to the law. This juxtaposes Abraham and the Gentile believers. According to Esler, this is "an excursion into social creativity, an attempt by a subordinate in-group to improve its actual social location *vis-à-vis* the dominant outgroup with respect to their respective access to scarce resources and status. Paul is trying to reverse the position of the two groups on the salient dimension of Abrahamic ancestry" (1998, 173–174).[28]

In Galatians 3 and Romans 4, Abraham and the issue of the law are linked. This is clear, for example, in Galatians 3:15–18. The question of the law in the Pauline corpus is too broad a topic to pursue here, but I simply note how the Abraham discourse is linked to the issue of the law in Galatians 3.[29] Based on Esler's (1998, 191–94) interpretation, Paul's argumentation goes as follows: the Abrahamic covenant, stemming from faith (or fidelity, *pistis*) and righteousness, is the first and primary covenant that humankind has made with God. This covenant is still in effect, notwithstanding the later Mosaic covenant, which included the notion of the law. The arrival of Christ does not then nullify the primordial covenant, which is not, opines Paul in Galatians, the Mosaic but the

[27] Esler 1998, 2003. For prototypicality in the New Testament, see also Esler and Piper 2006.

[28] In addition to Esler, Nikki, for example, has analyzed Galatians 3 and Romans 4 from a social identity perspective, comparing them with Philippians. According to her interpretation, in Galatians and Romans Paul strives to articulate a Gentile Christ-believing ingroup that possesses an Abrahamic lineage. These letters are past-oriented texts. See Nikki 2016.

[29] For a treatment of the law in Galatians, see Esler 1998, 178–204.

Abrahamic one. Rather, only the secondary layer (the Mosaic covenant and law) is rendered redundant (for the Gentiles at least; see Fredriksen 2017). Indeed, Abraham's and Christ's covenants are one and the same. In this connection (Gal 3:16), Paul introduces a scriptural reference and a striking interpretation of it:

> The promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. It [the scripture] does not say, "and to his seeds," as concerning many but as concerning one, "and to his seed," which is Christ.[30]

Referring to Abraham's descendants as his seed is common in Genesis.[31] The word functions there as a collective noun (Esler 1998, 173). However, Paul's reading of these passages is brazen. According to him, the word "seed" does not apply to all of Abraham's children but to one, Jesus Christ. The Mosaic law was only a phase in the history of humankind. With Jesus, (at least some of) the believers can revert to the original, Abrahamic, covenant in which the law plays only a limited role.[32] This Pauline argument, moreover, reinterprets the conventional Judean notions of ethnicity. The ethnic makings of Israel—Abrahamic lineage, the law, purity, and dietary regulations—lose some of their significance or (in the case of Abraham) are projected to the totality of the believers, whatever their origins.[33]

Let us discuss Romans 4 now. In this passage, many of the same themes are present as in Galatians 3. Paul emphasizes that Abraham was a believer even before undergoing circumcision. Hence, he is the

[30] Here, the translation is adapted from Esler 1998, 192, and not from the NRSV.

[31] For example, Genesis 12:7, 13:15.

[32] But cf. Fredriksen 2017, 108–30: she powerfully argues for a much more complex Pauline understanding of the law—as also regards the Gentiles. Once again, it has to be underscored that Paul was writing to Gentile Christ-believers. Paul was of the opinion (*pace* some other apostles working with the Gentiles) that they do not have to take up the law. His comments do not (at least not necessarily) affect how the Jews (e.g., Paul himself) should behave toward the law. As Fredriksen argues, it is more than likely that the Jewish Christ-believers continued to be Torah-observant.

[33] Buell calls this an argument "where the identifying practices of a group are linked to a common ancestor" (2005, 46).

father of both the circumcised (Jews) and the uncircumcised (Gentiles). He is the father of all. Jewish Christ-believers were already Abraham's children. Now, the Gentiles are also his adopted sons.[34]

In the community of Galatia, Paul faced opponents that demanded that the (male) Gentiles undergo circumcision and (both men and women) take up the Mosaic law (Esler 1998, 145). Paul's reply to these demands is that the Gentile believers are not bound by these requirements, since through faith in Christ they have already gained a place among the descendants of Abraham. What matters in the Abrahamic prototype is not circumcision but faith and obedience. In the letter to the Galatians, the law received mostly negative undertones as a prison of the past. Paul's opponents only possess a fleshly lineage to Abraham, whereas the social group that Paul champions are Abraham's true children through faith (Nikki 2016, 247). True, Paul says the Gentiles were idol worshippers before the coming of Jesus, but now they (or some of them) are true believers (Nikki 2016, 249).

In Romans, Paul's tone is much more conciliatory, and this letter contains many positive statements about the law. He is not reacting to a threat posed by some opponents that claimed that the Gentiles too are bound by the law. The law and circumcision are not negative attributes in Romans, but something that the Jewish believers can continue to practice,[35] while the Gentile believers are not bound by them. The existing ethnic identities are reinterpreted as accepted subidentities in the community of the believers (Nikki 2016, 250). Abraham's circumcision is mentioned as a somewhat positive symbol, but this is preceded by his righteousness (Rom 4:12; Nikki 2016, 250–51), which is an identity marker available to all peoples. Whereas Galatians is not very interested

[34] Hodge 2007, 26–36, 43–66; Fredriksen 2017, 106, 148–51.

[35] For example, Romans 3:1–4: "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means!" And 3:31: "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law."

in the future, Romans pays special attention to eschatological expectations (Nikki 2016, 251).

The Gospel of John

Abraham as a means for the inclusion of the Gentile believers is most marked in the letters of Paul among the New Testament texts. Nonetheless, the theme pops up in other parts of the canon as well, in particular John 8 and Hebrews 11. I will only discuss the former case. Here, I am guided by Raimo Hakola (2005, 2015), who has interpreted the Gospel of John from the point of view of social identity.

The Gospel of John is a much later text than Romans and Galatians. The Gospel of John contains interesting and varying identity discourses as well as the most marked criticism of the Jews among the canonical Gospels. However, it would be wrong to say that the text articulates a clear, distinct Christian identity that is distinct from Judaism. The community in which the Gospel of John and other Johannine texts were produced and read had *begun* to view themselves as different from the Jews, but, in the context of the first- and second-century eastern Mediterranean, "it is conceivable that the boundary between those Jews who came to believe in Jesus and other Jews remained open and that it was possible for Jesus's followers to interact with synagogue communities and their members in various ways" (Hakola 2015, 30).

John 8:30–59 presents a narrative in which Jesus has a dispute about the possession of the Abrahamic lineage with a group of Jews. The passage plays with the word "father," which refers to both Abraham and God. In the beginning of the passage (verses 30 and 31), the Jews are presented as believers in Jesus, and Jesus first accepts that the Jews of the narrative are descendants of Abraham,[36] but their portrayal becomes increasingly grim as the story proceeds. To quote verses 39b–44:

> Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.

[36] This is an interesting facet in the narrative: these Jews are actually said to be Jesus-believers. For an analysis of the mixed boundaries, see Hakola 2015, 120–24.

> You are indeed doing what your father does." They said to him, "We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

As the dialogue evolves, Jesus reveals who the real father of the group of Jews is: the devil himself. The Jews argue that they are Abraham's and God's children,[37] but the Johannine Jesus rejects both claims (Hakola 2015, 118–20). While John 8 does not really depict Abraham as a prototype for Gentile believers, it is significant that the passage tries to appropriate him from the Jews. Implicitly, Abraham is the property of another group: those Jesus-believers who did not self-identify as Judean/Jewish.

Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho the Jew

Moving outside the New Testament canon, the Christian texts of late antiquity (roughly, 150–750 CE) sometimes adduce Abraham as a prototypical Gentile believer. In what follows, I discuss some of these examples.[38]

Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* was written around 160 CE in Greek. Justin was born around 100 in Flavia Neapolis, Judea, and died around 165 in Rome as a martyr. The work *Dialogue with*

[37] This has some interesting Quranic parallels, in particular Quran 5:18: "The Jews and the Christians say, 'We are the children of God and His beloved ones.' Say, 'Then why does He punish you for your sins? You are merely human beings, part of His creation: He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. Control of the heavens and earth and all that is between them belongs to Him: all journeys lead to Him.'"

[38] In addition to the texts that I discuss in this article, one could adduce the writings of Prosper (fourth-century Gaul). Prosper made ample use of the Pauline conceptualization of Abraham; see Casiday 2011. However, since Prosper is a very unlikely candidate for a Quranic intertext (given the geographical distance), I will not discuss his work here.

Trypho the Jew utilizes the literary convention of a dialogue, in this case between Justin and a fictional Jew called Trypho. As Buell has shown, the discourse of ethnic reasoning was important to Justin, who is torn between presenting Christianity as universal, on the one hand, and, on the other, the original and true Israel, with a lineage going back to Abraham. The descriptions of Christians in the text are multifaceted and fluid, though Justin also attempts to ascribe fixity to the group.[39]

The Pauline notion of Abraham as a father of (also and perhaps primarily) Gentile believers is key for Justin, who claims the following lineage for the Christians:

> We, who have been led to God through this crucified Christ are the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants [or: the nation] (*genos*) of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham who, though uncircumcised, was approved and blessed by God because of his faith and was called the father of many *ethnē* [nations or Gentiles].[40]

The remark about Abraham as faithful before he was circumcised is of note here. Abraham is a paragon of a Gentile (in the sense: not required to follow the law) believer, whose lineage the Christians could participate in. Not only that, but they supersede the Jews, according to Justin. Later in the text, Justin continues this Abrahamic connection:

> For this [the nation of Christians] is the *ethnos* that God long since undertook to give Abraham, and promised to make him the father of many peoples (*polloi ethnē*), not saying father of Arabs or Egyptians or Idumaeans. For he also became the father of Ishmael, a great *ethnos*, and of Esau, and there are still a great number of Ammonites.
>
> And we shall inherit the holy land together with Abraham, receiving our inheritance for a boundless eternity, being children of Abraham because we have similar faith with him.[41]

Here, Justin emphasizes the purported universality of the Christian group, which, in theory at least, spanned different nations and

[39] Buell (2005, 94–115) discusses Justin's text from the point of view of ethnicity.

[40] *Dialogue* 11.5, trans. Buell 2005, 99. For the Greek text, see Marcovich 1997.

[41] *Dialogue* 119.4–5, trans. Buell 2005, 104–5.

ethnicities. These ethnic units formed the rainbow nation of Christians, Justin opined (Buell 2005, 105). Abraham cannot be claimed by a single entity, whether Arabians,[42] Egyptians, or Jews. In fact, Christians are the true spiritual descendants of Abraham (and this lineage, though spiritual, becomes flesh and blood through the notion of Abraham as the father of many peoples). The law (dietary or purity requirements and so on) is not imposed on Abraham's children, since he was already a believer when uncircumcised.[43]

Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History

Eusebius (d. c. 340), the bishop of Caesarea Maritima (on the coast of the Mediterranean in the province of Syria Palaestina), was the author of the important *Ecclesiastical History*, a history from a Christian point of view written in Greek. It was translated into, and survives in, a number of languages, including Syriac (the importance of Syriac subtexts to the Quran is discussed in the next section).

The work includes an important passage on Abraham. Eusebius appears to be much affected by the Pauline interpretation of Abraham as a pious believer living before the Mosaic law and of Jesus (and, hence, Christians) as Abraham's true *sperma*. Not only that, but Abraham was a believer in Jesus (as the Logos of God):

> [It] must be clearly held that the announcement to all Gentiles [or peoples, *ethnē*], recently made through the teaching of Christ, is the very first and most ancient and antique discovery of true religion of Abraham and those lovers of God who followed him … It was by faith towards the Logos of God, the Christ who had appeared to him [Abraham], that he was justified, and gave up the superstition of his father, and his former erroneous life, and confessed the God who is over all to be one; and Him he served by virtuous deeds, not by the worship of the law of Moses, who came later … it is only among Christians throughout the whole world that the manner of religion which was Abraham's can actually be found in practice.[44]

[42] The Abrahamic (and Ishmaelite) connection to Arabians is discussed below.

[43] Circumcision is an issue that Justin comes back to time and again; see Buell 2005, 108–9.

[44] Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, 1.4.10–14. On this passage, see also Reynolds 2010, 80.

This is a very notable passage by Eusebius, which underscores the figure of Abraham as a pre-Mosaic monotheist believer. The importance of Abraham and Jesus for the Gentiles is mentioned (if they in particular are who Eusebius meant by *ethnē*). Christianity is, according to Eusebius, the true way of Abraham, which in its original form did not include observance of the law. This passage shows that this interpretation of Abraham was alive and well in the late antique Near East. It was taken up and continued by the Quran.

The Syriac Bible Translations

The Syriac translation of the Bible is an important, perhaps the most important, piece of the puzzle. This is because it is generally conceived that the Bible in Syriac, rather than in any other language, was the best-known version of the scripture among Christians (and perhaps some non-Christians as well) in the Near East, including Arabia.[45] The Bible was not translated into Arabic or South Arabian languages before Islam (though oral, ad hoc, translations might have taken place in communal worship and other contexts; Griffith 2013). It is in particular in its Syriac, and perhaps also in some contexts Ethiopic,[46] translations that the Bible circulated and was known in and around Arabia. What is more, many non-canonical and exegetical Syriac texts seem to function as Quranic subtexts (Reynolds 2018).

There exist different versions of the Syriac Bible rendering. The Old Syriac Gospels are the oldest: manuscripts date from the fourth century CE; there are two different versions, known as the Syriac Sinaiticus and Curetonius. But, as the concept "Old Syriac Gospels" indicates, only the four Gospels are included. One should also note the Diatessaron, a Syriac Gospel harmonization that was produced perhaps in the second century but which does not survive in its original. More expansive than these, however, was the Peshitta, a Syriac translation of the whole Bible dated to the fourth–sixth centuries. There is also the Harklean version

[45] The Syriac connection has been explored in many studies in recent decades. See, e.g., El-Badawi 2009, 2014; Reynolds 2010; Zellentin 2013; Reynolds 2018.

[46] Dost 2017 emphasizes the importance of Ethiopic translations of canonical and non-canonical books as Quranic intertexts.

translated by Thomas of Harqel in the early seventh century (El-Badawi 2009, 5–6).

It is worth surveying some relevant passages in the Syriac Bible translations. It will be noted that the Syriac Bible, while being the most likely candidate for the dissemination of biblical Abraham discourse into Arabia, also evinces an important concept that is further elaborated in the Quran: that of *ḥanpā* (becoming *ḥanīf* in Arabic). While in Syriac the word *ḥanpā* has mostly negative meanings (and is not directly connected with Abraham), in the Quran *ḥanīf* is a word that appears categorically in positive contexts and is, for the most part, related to Abraham.[47]

The New Testament passages concerning Gentileness in the Syriac Bible translations have been analyzed in an article by François de Blois (2002), to which what follows is heavily indebted. The words used to refer to the Gentiles are *ḥanpē*, *ʿammē*, and *armāyē*. As mentioned below in some detail, the first two are reflected in the Quranic vocabulary.

The Syriac *ḥanpā* (singular of *ḥanpē*) has cognates and related words in many Semitic languages. The basic meaning of the verbal root in many forms of Aramaic is "to deceive." The Hebrew *ḥanēf* denotes "godless; hypocrite" or the like, while Mandaic *ḥ'nypy'* is used to refer to "false gods." A proto-Semitic meaning of "crooked," which is retained in the Arabic *aḥnaf*, is suggested for the root by de Blois (2002, 18–19).

In the Syriac Bible translations, the Greek word *ethnē* is rendered *ḥanpē* or *ʿammē*, whereas the word "Hellenes" becomes *ʿammē* or *armāyē* (literally, "Arameans"). De Blois notes that, in Syriac, the words *ʿammē* or *armāyē* are often used when the meaning of the text is neutral or positive (the Gentiles among the Jesus group). The word *ḥanpē*

[47] In later stages of Arabic, the word *ḥanīf* often functions as a synonym for Muslims or pre-Muhammadan monotheist believers who are treated as quasi-Muslims. However, the word *ḥanīf* is sometimes used to denote non-Muslims or pagans as well. For example, the historian al-Yaʿqūbī (fl. the late ninth century) uses the plural *ḥunafā'* to refer to pagans such as the Philistines; see al-Yaʿqūbī 1883, I, 51. It could be mentioned that in post-Islamic Christian Syriac texts the Muslims are often called *ḥanpē* (which functions, as earlier in Syriac, in an overwhelmingly derogatory sense) (Penn 2015, 56–57). See also Mattila 2022.

mostly occurs in a negative sense for outsiders: those Gentiles who do not accept Jesus (de Blois 2002, 21). Hence, for instance, when Paul talks about the Judean and Gentile Jesus-believers in Galatians 3 (see the quotation above), the latter are referred to in the Peshitta with the word *ʿammē*.[48] But the division is not clear-cut in the Syriac Bible translations, and there are some interesting instances where *ḥanpā*/*ḥanpē* are used for ingroup members (or potential ones at least). Acts 18:4 describes Paul preaching in Corinth to both the Jews and Gentiles; this is rendered in the Peshitta as *l-īhūdāyē wa-l-ḥanpē*. In the Harklean version of Romans 1:16 ("For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile"), the word used for "the Gentile" is *ḥanpā* (de Blois 2002, 21–22).

I have noted that the Syriac translations of the Bible often use *ʿammē* as a word denoting Gentiles, including in the positive sense. The word *ḥanpē* is mostly negative, denoting the outgroup, but in some instances also a part of the ingroup (the Gentile Christ-believers). However, as far as I have been able to ascertain, in no instance of the Pauline discourse where the figure of Abraham is mentioned does the word *ḥanpē* appear. These are strictly *ʿammē* passages. However, in an original Quranic innovation, the (positive) word *ḥanīf* is intimately connected with Abraham, whereas Muhammad receives the attribute *ummī*. The Quran continues and echoes the late antique discussion and debate on ethnicity and Abraham but does it in novel and fascinating ways.[49]

Conclusions on the Christian Texts

The above survey has shown that some Christian texts from antiquity and late antiquity, written in various languages in the Near East, suggest that the Gentile believers can become part of the offspring of Abraham through their belief in Jesus. This is primarily a Pauline innovation but was carried on by some late antique writers (e.g., Prosper,

[48] See the Peshitta text at https://www.syriacbible.nl/galatians/3.htm. I thank Anna-Liisa Rafael for navigating the passage with me.

[49] For a suggested interpretation of the process by which the (mostly negative) *ḥanpē* became the (positive) *ḥanīf*, see the Conclusion.

Eusebius). According to Paul, through the seed of Abraham, Jesus, the Christ-believers of any ethnicity have received the attributes of faith and righteousness and become part of Israel.

In what follows, I will look into the Quran and argue that it, in effect, echoes this Christian Abraham/Gentile discourse. In the Quranic communication, the word "Gentile" (*ummī* or *ḥanīf* in Arabic) refers not only to non-Jews but also to non-Christians. This is naturally what one expects: the late antique Christians did not see themselves as Gentiles. The former ethnic subcategories of Jews and Gentiles among the Jesus-believers were of no importance to the majority of Christians, though this distinction might have been maintained among the so-called "Jewish Christian" groups in particular.

The Quran

Abraham and Muhammad as Gentile Prophets

Next, we will turn to the scripture of Islam, the Quran, consisting of revelations of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632 CE) collected into a single volume in all likelihood rather soon after his death (probably in the 650s).[50] In the text, both Abraham and Muhammad are called Gentile believers and prophets. For Muhammad, the word that was used is *ummī*, while Abraham received the attribute *ḥanīf*.[51] The Quranic social characterizations are rather multifaceted and sometimes contradictory. For instance, the Jews and Christians sometimes receive very positive portrayals and some of them are treated as members of the believer

[50] Sinai 2014; Déroche 2021. Recently, Stephen Shoemaker (2022) has challenged the consensus with a suggestion that the Quran contains much post-Muhammadan material (and perhaps pre-Muhammadan as well). However, his argument is based on a premise (which I disagree with) that there were (next to) no Christians in Mecca and Medina or their vicinity, so Quranic notions and narratives of Christian origins have to be post-Muhammadan. For a criticism of Shoemaker's views, see Lindstedt 2024, 14–22.

[51] For a lucid interpretation of Abraham as the Gentile monotheist in the Quran, see Reynolds 2010, 71–87.

group, while other verses castigate them and emphasize that only a small number of them are believers (Donner 2002–2003).

In the fully fledged, ninth-century CE and later, Islamic exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the Quran, the word *ummī* is understood as meaning "illiterate," while the attribute *ḥanīf*, in particular connected with Abraham, is deemed to mean something like "proto-monotheist; true believer."[52] The medieval Muslim scholars usually thought it derived from the Arabic verb *ḥanafa*, "to turn; to bend; to incline," understood to refer to the fact that Abraham turned away from idolatry and toward monotheism.[53] But modern scholars, operating with the methods of comparative linguistics and Semitic Studies, have suggested that the Prophet Muhammad and his contemporaries in all likelihood understood these words differently. The next two paragraphs explore the etymologies of the two words.

The word *ummī* is naturally derived from the Arabic word *umma*, which means "people, ethnos, community." However, in Quranic Arabic in particular the word *umma* appears to be similar in usage to the Hebrew *gōy* and *ʿammīm* and Greek *ethnos*, all of which refer not only to "people" but also to "Gentile people" (the plurals have more or less the same meaning as the singulars). Moreover, in Syriac the word *ʿammē* signifies "(Gentile) nations" (a borrowing from the Hebrew *ʿammīm*; de Blois 2002, 21). Looking at cognates for the Arabic word *umma* (root *ʾ-m-m*), Hebrew *ummōt hā-ʿōlām* means "the peoples of the world,"[54] while Syriac has *ūmtho* for "nation, people" (Payne Smith 1903, 6).[55]

It is unclear whether the Arabic *umma* is, etymologically speaking, a borrowing from a form of Aramaic to Arabic or whether, in late

[52] Goudarzi (2023) argues that the word *ḥanīf* denotes "a cultic worshipper" in Quranic Arabic. My interpretation differs from Goudarzi's understanding, though I deem his study well-argued and intriguing.

[53] These semantic developments are detailed in Shaddel 2016.

[54] Josef Horovitz (1926, 51) suggested that Arabic *ummī* derives from the Hebrew *ummōt hā-ʿōlām*.

[55] The meaning "Gentiles" is not given by Jessie Payne Smith (1903), however, and does not appear to be operative in Syriac.

antiquity, the Syriac *ʿammē* (or perhaps a cognate in another form of Aramaic) influenced the usage of the Arabic *umma* to acquire meanings of Gentileness. In any case, in the Quran Gentiles are mostly referred to with the word *ummī*, plural *ummiyyūn*. In the Quran, *ummī* refers to "one coming from the community, ethnos; a Gentile."[56] While the words *ummī*/*ummiyyūn* occur six times in the Quran, all with the meaning "Gentile(s)," I would suggest the word *umma* is more ambivalent, sometimes denoting the Gentile people, sometimes simply an ethnic group in general (an ambivalence that is present in the Greek *éthnos* and its equivalents in Hebrew and Aramaic too).[57] However, since the word is used to designate Muhammad's community (though not exclusively—other groups are also referred to with this word) and since Muhammad and many of his followers identified as "Gentile believers," the meaning "Gentile people" might be implicit in some verses. One example is Quran 3:110: "You are the best *umma* singled out for the people (*ukhkrijat li-l-nās*): you order what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in God. If the People of the Book also believed, it would be better for them. For although some of them do believe, most of them are transgressors." In this verse, the word *umma* might perhaps be translated as "community of Gentiles," since they are here contrasted with the People of the Book.[58] Moreover, Quran 43:23 addresses the disbelievers, noting: "Whenever We [God] sent a messenger before you [the Prophet] to warn a township, those corrupted by wealth said, 'We saw our fathers *ʿalā umma*; we are only following in their footsteps.'"[59] Here, the phrase *ʿalā umma* is somewhat difficult, but appears to mean that the disbelievers are quoted as saying: "We saw our fathers to be

[56] The formulation by Gabriel Reynolds (2018, 112) is rather apt. He interprets *ummiyyūn* as meaning "'gentiles' in the sense of those people to whom God has not yet given part of the revelation." But, as I argue in this article, the Gentile identity that the Quran articulates is not limited to revelation.

[57] The word *umma* appears altogether fifty-one times in the Quran (Badawi and Abdel Haleem 2008, 47).

[58] But this sense of *umma* is not functional in many other occurrences. In Quran 2:128, it refers to the Israelites, for instance. Moreover, verse 2:213 reminisces about a primordial state of people, when they were all one *umma*.

[59] Here, I modify Abdel Haleem's (2010) translation somewhat.

Gentiles" or "to follow the Gentile way." The Quran asserts that the disbelievers use this reply to justify their disbelief, though the Quran itself claims that it is possible to combine being a Gentile and a believer.

The Arabic word *ḥanīf* is, quite often in modern scholarship, assumed to derive from the Syriac *ḥanpā*.[60] While in the extant Syriac texts this word refers to Gentiles mostly in a negative sense—non-Jewish but also non-Jesus-believer—in Arabic the usage is positive—a true believer, albeit of Gentile background. The word *ḥanīf* appears ten times in the Quran, while its plural *ḥunafāʾ* appears twice (Badawi and Abdel Haleem 2008, 239).

It is unclear why the Prophet Muhammad is associated with the term *ummī* (and not *ḥanīf*, except in verse 10:105) while Abraham is called *ḥanīf* and never *ummī*. Since the words are rather rare in the Quran, this division might be simply happenstance. In any case, the Prophet's audience and followers (or a part of them) are called both *ummiyyūn* and *ḥunafāʾ* (plurals of the words under discussion).[61] Here, it suffices to refer to some of the verses calling Abraham and Muhammad Gentiles. In the following sections, I will deal at length with the way the terms *ummī* and *ḥanīf* are tied to notions of religion and ethnicity, since the latter in particular appears quite often in connection with words such as *dīn* and *milla*, which are conventionally translated as "religion."

As stated above, it is Abraham in particular who receives the attribute *ḥanīf* in the Quran. Verses 3:67–68 state: "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. He was a devoted Gentile (*kāna ḥanīfan muslima*n), not an associator, and the people who are closest to him are those who follow him: this Prophet and those who believe. God is close to the believers." In these verses, Abraham is contrasted with both Jews and Christians as well as the *mushrikūn*, "those who associate other beings

[60] Reynolds 2010, 80–87; Azaiez et al. 2016, 121; Reynolds 2018, 430; Sinai 2023, 242. Interestingly, some premodern Arabic authors also suggested a derivation from Syriac (see de Blois 2002, 20). François de Blois (2002) himself equates the Arabic *ḥanīf* with Greek *ethnikos*, though it seems to me that the word *ummī* is rather a calque on *ethnikos*.

[61] In the Appendix, I list all the instances from the Quran where the words *ummī*, *ummiyyūn*, *ḥanīf*, and *ḥunafāʾ* appear.

to God." Notably, verse 68 links Abraham explicitly with Muhammad ("this Prophet") and his community of believers.

Indeed, verses 3:95–97 note that the present-day believers should emulate Abraham the *ḥanīf*: "[Prophet], say, 'God speaks the truth, so follow [plural] the *milla* of Abraham *ḥanīfan*;[62] he was not an associator.' The first House [of worship] to be established for people was the one at Mecca. It is a blessed place; a source of guidance for all people; there are clear signs in it; it is the place where Abraham stood to pray; whoever enters it is safe." The Abrahamic prototypicality is not linked simply with the outlook of Muhammad's community as (for the most part) Gentiles but also adduced in connection with the sanctuary at Mecca, where Abraham once stood.[63]

The Abrahamic lineage of the present-day believers, that is, the followers of Muhammad, is cemented in these key verses. In Quran 2:127–129, Abraham and Ishmael are depicted as laying the foundations of "the sanctuary," which is not identified but is conventionally interpreted to refer to the Kaaba. At the same time, they address God, praying that the Lord will "make our descendants (*dhurriyyatinā*)[64] into a community (*umma*) devoted to You" and "make a messenger of their own rise up from among them." Although Muhammad is not named, it seems that the identification is clear.

[62] Here, the meaning could be understood in two ways: "follow the *milla* of Abraham as Gentiles" or "follow the *milla* of Abraham [who was] a Gentile." The syntax is difficult, since the imperative "follow" is in the plural, while the word *ḥanīfan* is singular. The word *milla* will be discussed in the next section.

[63] I am naturally far from being the first to suggest that the Abrahamic prototype is important for Quranic discourse. For instance, Neuwirth has noted: "At the same time that the biblical Abraham is appropriated as a prototype of the new believers, *al-muslimūn*, (Q 2:135–136), Abraham is installed as the founder of the fundamental rites of the Arabian pilgrimage that culminate with the slaughter of a sacrificial animal" (2009, 502).

[64] Though, as far as I know, none of the dictionaries of Classical Arabic gloss *dhurriyya* as "seed," it should be noted that the basic meaning of the verbal root *dh-r-ʾ* is "to create; to multiply" (al-Zabīdī 1975–2001, I, 233), which is not particularly far from the semantic field of the Greek *sperma*.

Quran 98:4–5 polemicizes against the Jews and Christians, saying that they would be better off if they followed God's *dīn* ("law") as *ḥunafāʾ*, Gentiles: "[Yet] those who were given the Scripture [before] became divided only after they were sent [such] clear evidence though all they are ordered to do is worship God, sincerely devoting the *dīn* to Him as *ḥunafāʾ*, keep up the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, for that is the true *dīn*." This polemical discourse appears to be connected with other Quranic passages, such as Quran 2:113[65] and 3:65,[66] where it is said that Jews and Christians argue with each other about, for example, who owns Abraham rather than simply being obedient to, and believing in, God. The Quran claims that Jews and Christians are more interested in group affiliations and designations than in being pious and worshipping God. Gentiles, *ḥunafāʾ*, are free of this historical baggage, according to the Quran.

This contrasting of the Jews and Christians (often grouped together as "the People of the Book" in the Quran) with the Gentiles is apparent in other verses as well. Verse 3:75 asserts: "There are People of the Book who, if you [Prophet] entrust them with a heap of gold, will return it to you intact, but there are others of them who, if you entrust them with a single dinar, will not return it to you unless you keep standing over them, because they say, 'We are under no obligation towards the *ummiyyūn*.' They tell a lie against God and they know it." Here, the Gentileness of (some of) the Prophet's followers is communicated with the word *ummiyyūn*. Quran 62:1–2 can be taken as an implicit reference to Muhammad—to his own Gentile background and that of many of his followers: "Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies God, the Controller, the Holy One, the Almighty, the Wise. It is He who raised a messenger, among the *ummiyyūn*, to recite His revelations to them, to make them grow spiritually and teach them the Scripture

[65] "The Jews say, 'The Christians have no ground whatsoever to stand on,' and the Christians say, 'The Jews have no ground whatsoever to stand on,' though they both read the Scripture, and those who have no knowledge say the same; God will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning their differences."

[66] "People of the Book, why do you argue about Abraham when the Torah and the Gospels were not revealed until after his time? Do you not understand?"

and wisdom—before that they were clearly astray." In verses 7:155–158, Moses is described as praying to God, who responds (verse 157) by declaring that He will send as a messenger "the *ummī* Prophet they find described in the Torah that is with them, and in the Gospel."

The words *ummī* and *ummiyyūn* function, for the most part, in a positive sense. However, in one instance (Quran 2:78) the reference is to disbelievers among the Gentiles: "Some of them [the disbelievers] are *ummiyyūn*, and know the Scripture only through wishful thinking. They rely on guesswork."[67] Clearly, the Quranic conceptualization of Gentile ethnicity is, in itself, not automatically and categorically affirmative. There are believers and disbelievers in different groups, be they Jews, Christians, or Gentiles (the main ethnicities in the Quranic communication).

In this section, I have argued that the Quran refers to the Prophet Muhammad's (and many of his followers') ethnic origins as being Gentile, though he and they are believers. The Arabic words *ummī* (plural *ummiyyūn*) and *ḥanīf* (plural *ḥunafāʾ*) can ultimately be traced to another Semitic language, Syriac in the case of *ḥanīf* and probably some form of Aramaic (but not necessarily Syriac) in the case of *ummī*. Since the words do not appear in the North Arabian epigraphic record, the exact time of borrowing cannot be established, and it could have taken place centuries before the Prophet Muhammad. The fact that the word *ḥanīf* operates with an Arabic broken plural *ḥunafāʾ* could indi-

[67] Reynolds (2018, 54) understands this verse differently. According to him, the verse "seems to be accusing certain Jews (the larger context of this Sura involves the Israelites and their sins) of not knowing the word of God and therefore being *ummī*. This polemic is close to that of several New Testament passages (Mat 15:7–9; Mar 7:1–9; Luk 11:39–42)." But this reading is problematic in my opinion. *Surah* 2 (the longest one in the whole Quran) includes a myriad of topics, not just the Israelites and their misdeeds. It is perfectly possible to understand Quran 2:72–82 as referring to not (at least only) the Jews but discussing the disbelievers more generally. It should be noted, in any case, that the Quran does not categorize all Jews as disbelievers but rather a part of them; see Lindstedt 2021, 2024, 145–272.

cate that at least the word *ḥanīf* was already well known and widely used among Arabic-speaking communities.[68]

Occurrences of the word *ḥanīf* are somewhat rare in pre-Islamic poetry, but two cases from the poems attributed to the Medinese Abū Qays ibn al-Aslat should be discussed in this connection.[69] They support the idea that *ḥanīf* means a non-Jew and non-Christian, that is, a Gentile. The poems of Abū Qays do not survive in a medieval collection of his poems but have been, rather, collected by their modern editor, Ḥasan Muḥammad Bājūda. Hence, the authenticity of the poems cannot be taken for certain. However, they are interesting even if they were forgeries by later Muslim scholars, because in that case they would provide more evidence that the word *ḥanīf* was still understood by some authors in early Islamic times to denote a Gentile, rather than a Muslim or proto-Muslim, since according to the Islamic tradition Abū Qays did not convert to Islam. Below, I quote the relevant verses of these two poems:[70]

> And remember the account you must render, for God is the best reckoner.
> The Lord of the people has chosen a law [for each group].
> So let none guard you but the Lord of heaven,
> and uphold for us the Gentile law (*aqīmū lanā dīnan ḥanīfan*).
> *

[68] Though, taking an analogue from modern Arabic dialects, this is not necessarily the case. Loanwords often start to function with a broken plural very soon after their borrowing. In the pre-Islamic Arabic poetic corpus, the word seems to indicate "Gentile" (de Blois 2002, 19).

[69] The first example is also discussed by Goudarzi (2023, 90), who interprets them as supporting his notion that *ḥanīf* means a "cultic worshipper." But this does not seem very plausible in this poem or in other instances adduced by Goudarzi, since they all contrast *ḥanīf*s to Jews and Christians. For other poems, see Sinai 2023, 241–42. He suggests that the word *ḥanīf* means "hermit, ascetic," in some of the early poems.

[70] Abū Qays ibn al-Aslat n.d., 68, verses 21–23; 87–88, verses 2–6; I adopt the translation of Guillaume (1955, 129, 201) with some changes. On the poem, see also Sinai 2023, 240.

Lord of humankind, if we have erred
Guide us to the good path (*maʿrūf al-sabīl*).
Were it not (*law lā*)[71] for our Lord we should be Jews,
But the law of Jews is not suitable [for us].
Were it not for our Lord we should be Christians
Along with the monks of Galilee.
But when we were created, we were created
Gentiles, our law distinct from other people (*ḥanīfan dīnunā ʿan kulli jīl*):
We bring the sacrificial camels walking in fetters
Covered with cloths but their shoulders bare.

In both poems—regardless of whether the verses are authentic vestiges from the pre-Islamic era or whether they are Islamic-era forgeries—the word *ḥanīf* can easily be translated as "Gentile." In the latter example, it is the only possible translation, since being a *ḥanīf* is contrasted to being a Jew or Christian. The end of the poem ("our law distinct from other people: / We bring the sacrficial camels walking in fetters / Covered with cloths but their shoulders bare") seems to refer to the idea that the Gentiles have their own law: they can, in contrast to Jews and Christians, perform animal sacrifices, for instance (on this, see more below).

Religion or Law: *Dīn* and *Milla*

Probing the Quran's understanding of ethnicity also entails investigating the words that are used in the context of the Quranic verses having to do with ethnic reasoning. Two Arabic words in particular are significant in this respect: *dīn* and *milla*. Both words are directly connected with Abraham too (Q. 6:161). In this section, I will trace how the Quran

[71] The editor notes that, in some attestations of this poem, this verse and the following (about Christians) begins *law shā* instead. The meaning then becomes "if God so willed, we would be Jews/Christians"; see Abū Qays ibn al-Aslat n.d., 87, nn. 4–5.

communicates these concepts. At first glance, the conceptual conundrums regarding ethnicity and religiousness that have been discussed in this article so far do not seem to apply to the study of the Quran or early Islam. There is, after all, much of a consensus that Islam formed a *religious* affiliation with rituals and a systematized structure of beliefs to worship God. Nowadays, Islam is thought to be a religion free of ethnic constraints, a religion that anyone willing can convert to, whatever her or his racial, ethnic, or cultural identifications happen to be. Moreover, there seems to be an Arabic word, already present in the Quran, namely *dīn*, which is customarily understood and translated into English as "religion."[72]

However, looking closer at the Quranic text, this becomes problematic. I will argue in what follows that questions of ethnicity and lineage are very relevant indeed in how the Quran addresses and articulates social categorizations. What is more, it is not quite clear if the word *dīn* should be translated as "religion" in most occurrences in the Quran—or at all in Quranic Arabic.[73]

To begin with, it should be noted that according to most scholars the Quranic Arabic *dīn* merges two etymologically different words. According to this view, the Quranic *dīn* fuses both a Semitic word denoting "judgment" and the Middle Persian *dēn*, which is usually translated as "religion."[74] However, a detailed study of the Middle Persian *dēn* would be needed to ascertain the semantic field and usages of the word. And, as I argue below, it is the meanings of "judgment" and "law" that dominate (perhaps exclusively so) in the Quranic *dīn* (*pace* Sinai 2023, 293–94).

[72] As Rushain Abbasi (2021) shows in great detail, in Classical Arabic the word *dīn* indeed acquires the sense of "religion."

[73] On *dīn* and *islām*, see also the interpretations put forward in Smith 1975; Cantwell-Smith 1991; Esack 1997, 126–34.

[74] For example, the Syriac *dīnā* denotes "judgment" (Reynolds 2018, 894; Sinai 2023, 292–93). For a detailed study discussing these words and issues related to them, see Donner 2018a. As regards the Persian derivation, see Abbasi 2021, 20–23.

The word *dīn* appears ninety-two times in the Quran (Kassis 1983, 382–83). Of these, thirteen times it occurs in the word pair *yawm al-dīn*, "judgment day."[75] In this expression, the word *dīn* translates effortlessly as "judgment." Translating the phrase as "the day of *religion*" would simply be nonsensical and wrong, since the context is the eschatological events that will happen on that day. In some other instances as well, we can see from the context that the meaning is "law" or "judgment" rather than "religion." In Quran 12:76, the words *dīn al-malik* quite clearly mean "the king's law." Moreover, verse 51:6 proclaims that "the judgment will come (*inna al-dīn la-wāqiʿ*)."[76]

In the rest of the cases—seventy-six in total according to my calculation—the word *dīn* is somewhat ambiguous in meaning. It could mean "law; judgment," but, as is commonly understood, it could mean "religion" as well. Medieval Arabic lexicographers adduce a further meaning for the word *dīn*, "habit, custom,"[77] which would also be appropriate in many of the Quranic contexts.

One of the notable aspects of this term's usage is that several verses state that *al-dīn* belongs to God or is God's.[78] Moreover, the disbelievers try to prevent the believers from following this *dīn* by fighting them.[79] Verse 98:5 explains that the true *dīn* consists of worshipping God alone, keeping up the prayer, and paying the alms. A crucial part of *al-dīn* is obedience (*al-islām*).[80] These two words often go together

[75] Verses 1:4, 15:35, 26:82, 37:20, 38:78, 51:12, 56:56, 70:26, 74:46, 82:15, 82:17, 82:18, 83:11.

[76] Similarly, in the eschatological context of verse 24:25 the word means "judgment" or perhaps "due recompense." Abdel Haleem (2010) translates: "On that Day, God will pay them their just due in full—and they will realize that God is the Truth that makes everything clear."

[77] See Lane 1863–1893, s.v., giving for instance the following meanings in this connection: "custom," "habit," "business," "a way, course, mode, or manner, of acting, or conduct."

[78] For example, Quran 2:193, 3:19, 3:83. The lexicographers state that *al-dīn lillāh* can be understood as "*obedience* is to God."

[79] Quran 2:193, 2:217.

[80] Quran 3:19, 3:85, 4:125, etc. I would understand the phrase *inna al-dīn ʿinda allāh al-islām* in 3:19 and elsewhere as "the true obedience in the sight of God

in the Quranic discourse. Furthermore, the word *ḥanīf* is often used to explain how the correct *dīn* should be pursued.[81] As mentioned above, I agree with the modern scholarly efforts to connect *ḥanīf* etymologically with the Syriac *ḥanpā*, meaning "Gentile." What the Quran articulates, then, is a distinct sense of "Gentile believerness" and obedience to the law. People like the Prophet and his followers, many of them coming from a Gentile background, could be believers despite their ethnicity.

There are quite a few instances where the word *dīn* is usually understood to convey the sense of a reified, bounded religious group, but this is unlikely in my opinion. One occurrence of such a use is verse 6:159, which states: "As for those who have divided (*farraqū*) their *dīn* and broken up into factions (*wa-kānū shiyaʿan*), have nothing to do with them. Their case rests with God: in time He will tell them about their deeds." I think it might make perfect sense to render the expression "their *dīn*" (*dīnahum*) as "their custom" or "their law"; the reference would be to people who have become divided in their understanding of the law or, perhaps, are portrayed explicitly as law-breakers.

Verses 3:19, 3:85, and 5:3 are often cited as Quranic prooftexts for the idea that the Quran already names the religion of the ingroup as "Islam" and, furthermore, that this religion is characterized as the best one (see, e.g., Abbasi 2021, 17–19). But I suggest another reading, translating *al-islām* as "obedience" (to God and the law) and (*al-*)*dīn* as "(the) law" (by law, I also mean matters of diet and purity and, moreover, ethics).

Let us begin with verse 5:3, where God is portrayed as saying, *inter alia*: "Today I have perfected your *dīn* for you, completed My blessing upon you, and favored *al-islām dīnan* for you" (all "you" pronouns are in the plural here).[82] This verse and other similar ones (e.g., 3:85) have been at the forefront in Islamic exegesis and theology as proof-

is devotion" or perhaps "the judgment of God is to be submitted to" (not: "the religion of God is Islam").

[81] Quran 10:105 (*aqim wajhaka li-l-dīn ḥanīfan*), 30:30 (*aqim wajhaka li-l-dīn ḥanīfan*).

[82] I have modified the translation of Abdel Haleem (2010) in this part, which reads: "Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed My blessing upon you, and chosen as your religion *islam* [total devotion to God]."

texts for the conventional exclusivist interpretation of other religions (Sirry 2014, 65–99).[83] However, it is hard to see *al-islām* signifying a reified and distinct religion, Islam, in Quranic Arabic. The word, after all, simply means "submission" or "obedience" to God and the law.[84] Nor should we translate *dīn* as "religion" here, but rather use the suggested Quranic meanings of "law" or "judgment." Indeed, the rest of verse 5:3 (a verbose verse indeed!) has to do with dietary and other regulations. The accusative form *dīnan* can be explained grammatically as a *tamyīz* accusative, which determines or restricts the predicate (Wright 1896–1898, II, 122). In such Arabic expressions, the accusative noun should be translated into English as "in/with/as regards (noun)." Thus, I suggest that, given the usual meanings in Quranic Arabic of the words *islām* and *dīn*, the most natural translation for this passage would be: "Today, I have perfected your law for you, completed My blessing upon you, and favored for you obedience as regards law." Similarly, I would render 3:85 (*wa-man yanbaghi ghayra l-islām dīnan fa-lan yuqbala minhu wa-huwa fī l-ākhira mina l-khāsirīn*) as: "Whoever pursues non-obedience (*ghayra l-islām*) as regards law (*dīnan*)—it will not be accepted from her/him, and she/he will be among the losers in the hereafter."[85]

[83] Classical exegesis often supplies the plural for the reading of the text; see, e.g., al-Bayḍāwī 2008, I, 255, who suggests that 5:3 means that God has chosen Islam as *the* religion "over all other faiths" (*ʿalā al-adyān kullihā*). The goal of these premodern exegetes was to solidify the hegemonic understanding of Islam as the best (indeed, the only authentic) religion.

[84] This is indeed how some classical exegetes understand this as well: see, e.g., the view of al-Ṭabarī, who explains that in verse 5:3 the phrase *al-islām dīnan* means "submission to My [God's] command, holding onto My obedience, according to what I have decreed of limits and ordinances" (2001, VIII, 84). He then doubles down and paraphrases *dīnan* as *ṭāʿatan minkum lī*, "in your obedience toward Me." Clearly, al-Ṭabarī's understanding of *dīn* relates the word to the law, and *al-islām* does not refer to the name of a religion, but to obedience toward God and the law. For another interpretation of the word *al-islām*, see Cole 2019.

[85] Quran 3:85 relates to 3:83, which states: "Do they pursue other than the law of God? Everyone in the heavens and earth submits to Him, willingly or unwillingly; they will all be returned to Him."

Examples of similar usage of the word *dīn* as "law" are rather manifold in early Islamic-era Arabic poetry (Farrukh 1937, 86–87, 93). For instances, in a verse ascribed to one Ḥārith ibn ʿAbd Kilāl, it is stated: "And your law is the law of truth, in it there is purity (*wa-dīnuka dīnu l-ḥaqqi fī-hi ṭahāratun*)" (Farrukh 1937, 110). Here, as well as in Quran 5:3, the word *dīn* is explicitly connected with purity and dietary rules.

Moreover, it is significant, I think, that the plural of the word *dīn* never appears in the Quran, though it exists in later stages of Arabic (*adyān*).[86] Thus, the Quranic *dīn* is, as it were, uncountable. The uncountable nature of the noun *dīn* in the Quran seems to be corroborated by Quran 9:33 and other instances (48:28, 61:9) where the expression *al-dīn kullihi*, "the law in its totality," appears. However, almost all translators interpret this in the plural,[87] even though the Arabic noun is in the singular. For example, Abdel Haleem translates: "It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, to show that it is above all [other] religions (*al-dīn kullihi*), however much the idolaters may hate this." The *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* also glosses *al-dīn kullihi* as *jamīʿ al-adyān al-mukhālifa lahu* as "all other religions."

All in all, it is probable that translating *dīn* in most cases as "religion" (e.g., Sinai 2023, 293) clouds our understanding of the Quranic connotations of the word. I believe that there would be no unease in translating the word as "law," "judgment," or "custom" in all or most of its occurrences in the Quran. In any case, in the Quranic understanding religiousness and law are intertwined.[88]

[86] Mun'im Sirry notes insightfully: "Even the word '*al-dīn*' is never used in the Qur'ān in its plural form, *adyān*, which indicates that religious life at the time was not yet fully reified" (2014, 98). This had earlier been noted by Farid Esack (1997, 145).

[87] The different translations can be browsed at https://quran.com/9/33.

[88] See Zellentin 2013, 2018, 2019 for detailed discussions of how the Quran continues the legal cultures of Judeo-Christian groups by adopting the ritual laws meant for Gentiles in Acts 15:29 and late antique Near Eastern religious literature. Though in this article I discuss Quranic Arabic, it should be noted that the word *dīn* sometimes clearly means "law" in later stages of Arabic as well, such as in some Prophetic traditions, as noted by Pavel Pavlovitch (2023, 84). For a discussion of Arabic poetry ascribed to pre-Islamic figures, see the prooftexts adduced in Sinai

It needs to be emphasized that by "the law" I do not mean to say that the Quran is or that the Quran is to be understood as a law book (which is an old Orientalist stereotype). Rather, the Quranic concept of law includes understandings of ethics and a way of life that is more general than what people might today associate with the word "law." Indeed, "the law" encompasses moral teaching, ethical discourse, ritual requirements and purity, food regulations, and so on—not unlike the later concept of *al-sharʿ* (this was naturally the understanding of the law that, for example, Paul and other Jews held as well).

Quran 6:161 connects the word *dīn* with something called *millat ibrāhīm*, "the *milla* of Abraham."[89] The word *milla* is often understood to be synonymous with *dīn* and, accordingly, translated as "religion" in English (or, sometimes, "creed"). However, this Quranic concept, too, requires some probing.[90]

Like *dīn*, the word *milla* never appears in the plural in the Quran, though the plural (*milal*) exists in Classical Arabic. The word *milla* appears fifteen times in the Quran. In seven of these instances, the *milla* is mentioned in connection with Abraham, who is said to have pursued it as a *ḥanīf*, as a Gentile believer, not as a Jew or Christian. Related to this is Quran 16:120, which states that Abraham was not only *ḥanīf* but also *umma*. Both words probably convey the same meaning of Gentile believerness.[91] Here, the word *umma* is connected with the word *ummī*,

2023, 295–98. However, in my opinion the texts do not for the most part support Sinai's understanding of *dīn* as "religion" but often have to do with "law."

[89] Interestingly, the Quran never uses the word pair *dīn ibrāhīm*, though it is common in later Arabic literature (Hawting 2011, 480). Note, however, Quran 6:161, which juxtaposes *dīn* and *millat ibrāhīm*: "Say, 'My Lord has guided me to a straight path, an upright *dīn*, the *milla* of Abraham, as a *ḥanīf*, he was not an associator.'"

[90] For an overview of these verses, see Tottoli 2002, 7–11.

[91] Though it might also echo Genesis 18:18, where it is stated that "Abraham will become a great and powerful nation." Reynolds notes: "The Qurʾān here calls Abraham a 'nation' (Ar. *umma*), a term which expresses the way a people would be descended from him, and thus reflects Genesis 18:[17–18]" (2018, 429). Also, regarding 16:120, Reynolds notes aptly: "In fact this description [Abraham as an *umma*] is meaningful in two ways. First, it reflects the Biblical description

meaning "Gentile," which is one of the attributes of Muhammad in the Quranic communication.[92]

How should *milla* be rendered in English? It should be noted that the Arabic exegetes and lexicographers give varying meanings to the word. In addition to understanding it as "religion" (often in the countable sense), they also proffer the meanings "custom" and "way of conduct."[93] Interestingly, Angelika Neuwirth has suggested a more technical meaning for the word *milla*. She argues that the word pair *millat ibrāhīm* can be traced to the Hebrew expression *berit millah*, "covenant of circumcision." The idea of male circumcision would then be included in—indeed central to—the Quranic notion of "the *milla* of Abraham" (see Neuwirth 2008, 502). However, I wonder how this interpretation functions in the context of verse 2:135, where *millat ibrāhīm* is contrasted with Jews (who practiced circumcision) and Christians (who in some cases might have) (Crone 2015, 2016a). Understanding the Quranic concept *milla* as denoting exclusively or primarily male circumcision seems problematic for this reason.

Indeed, a Syriac derivation seems preferable. As for Arthur Jeffery (1938, 268–69), he suggests a derivation from the Syriac *meltā*, literally "word," which often renders the Greek *logos*. Juan Cole (2020, 626) notes that in "late antiquity, with the vast influence of Greek, a 'word' or λόγος [*logos*] implied a system of religious belief." But, as noted by Milka Levy-Rubin (2011, 24, 31), in the context of war and peace the Syriac *meltā* also translates the Greek *pistis*, the basic meaning of which is "conviction, allegiance, faithfulness," but which also means "a guarantee or promise of security or protection." Sometimes, the Greek *logos* also signifies "promise" in a similar context. Might we have here a clue about the signification of the Quranic *milla*? I deem it probable—that is, the Quranic *milla* is derived from the Syriac *meltā*, itself translating the

of Abraham as a nation (*gōy*; Gn 18.18), itself an epithet that reflects the divine promise of blessing. Second, it separates Abraham from the Jews and Christians, making him—like the Qurʾān's own prophet—a prophet of the gentiles" (2010, 85).

[92] For more on this, see Shaddel 2016.

[93] See Lane 1863–1893, s.v. *milla*.

Greek *logos* and *pistis*. Hence, I would suggest that *millat ibrāhīm* is to be understood as the "faithfulness" or "steadfastness" (*pistis*) that Abraham showed toward God,[94] or, more precisely, the "word" or "promise" of that fidelity.[95] The Quran underlines that this *milla* can be pursued as a *ḥanīf* and, by doing this, the Arabian Gentiles too can become part of the biblical pedigree and community of believers. The crucial passage in understanding the Quranic concept of *milla* is, in my opinion, verses 2:126–132, which are adduced in what follows in this article and in which Abraham and Ishmael are portrayed as laying the foundation of the shrine (*al-bayt*) and praying to God to make them (Abraham and Ishmael) obedient and their descendants obedient. Moreover, in verse 2:132 Abraham is said to have "bequeathed it (*waṣṣā bi-hā*, scil. the *milla*) to his sons, as did Jacob, [saying]: 'My sons, God has chosen for you the law (*al-dīn*); do not die except as obedient [to God and the law].'"[96] The *milla* is, then, the word of promise of being obedient and faithful to God.

Gentile Law in the Quran

If the arguments of the preceding two subsections are accepted, what does it mean for those verses in the Quran that state that the *dīn* is to

[94] Abraham's *pistis*, often translated as "faith," is a significant motif for Paul. See, e.g., Romans 4:13: "For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of *pistis*."

[95] This is not to say that this meaning is operative in the Quranic word *milla* in all its contexts. In Quran 38:7, the opponents of Muhammad are portrayed as rejecting his message because they have not "heard of this in the last *milla*," in which the word appears to denote "discourse," "proclamation," or the like, significations that are also operative in the Syriac *meltā*. See Payne Smith 1903, 274–75, for the diverse meanings of the word *meltā*.

[96] Cf. Abdel Haleem 2010: "And commanded his sons to do the same, as did Jacob: 'My sons, God has chosen [your] religion for you, so make sure you devote yourselves to Him, to your dying moment.'"

be followed *ḥanīfan*, "Gentilely"?[97] What is the Gentile way of following the law? Though this might sound surprising, even bizarre, at first blush, it is exactly this detail that provides more evidence for my case.

Holger Zellentin (2013, 2018, 2019) has studied the issue of the Quran's legal discourse and its connections with Jewish and Christian literature impressively. He points out that the Quranic dietary and purity regulations resemble what some Jewish and Christian texts of antiquity and late antiquity put forward as regards the Gentiles. In Christian literature, the starting point is the Apostolic decree (Acts 15:19–21, ultimately echoing Leviticus 17),[98] which mentions the requirements for Gentiles:

> Therefore I [James] have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.

To summarize, the Apostolic decree forbids (1) food offered to idols (and perhaps idolatry more generally); (2) sexual "depravity"; (3) meat coming from animals that are not properly slaughtered ("whatever has been strangled"); and (4) blood. It is important to note that the category of "strangled" was understood more broadly to mean meat that was improperly slaughtered (Zellentin 2018, 131, 136–37). "Things strangled" signified, to many Christians, all sorts of carrion.

As Zellentin shows with an impressive amount of evidence,[99] the Gentile dietary and purity regulations were upheld in much of early Christianity, and the classification of Christ-believers into those of Jewish and Gentile background functioned "in most forms of Christianity" for at least a few centuries (Zellentin 2018, 117). This was, then, the majority position (at least according to the texts of the

[97] For example, Quran 10:105: "[Prophet], set your face towards the *dīn* as a *ḥanīf*."

[98] Zellentin 2018, 130: "While the text [of the Acts] does not 'cite' Leviticus in our sense of the word, it can be shown to take knowledge of the laws for granted."

[99] See the texts cited and analyzed in Zellentin 2018, 132–48.

Fathers of the Church). Zellentin suggests that the fourth century CE represents a watershed moment when the Gentile regulations start to be downplayed or rejected in the surviving evidence. But even after this, the Gentile laws are still very much present in some late antique texts, such as the *Clementine Homilies* and the *Didascalia* (Zellentin 2018, 147).[100] Interestingly, these texts add pork and wine as illicit items in the viewpoint of some Christian groups. And this is exactly what we find in the Quran.

The Quran, then, follows what the Christians[101] of the early era and late antiquity viewed as the Gentile purity and dietary regulations. Important passages in the Quranic communication on dietary regulation are 2:173, 5:1–5, 6:145–146, and 16:115.[102] The Quran forbids carrion, pork, blood, and idol meat, and is skeptical toward wine.

The goal of this subsection is not to claim that Quranic legal discourse and reasoning lacks originality or is fully borrowed from the Jewish understanding of the Gentile Noahide laws or the Christian Apostolic decree. There are varied legal ordinances and arguments in the Quran that cannot be traced back to a Jewish or Christian exemplar. And, in any case, the Quran presents a unique combination of injunctions. However, the point remains that the Quranic prohibitions and instigations come close to Jewish and Christian understandings of those laws that the *Gentiles* should follow. The Quran prompts, for example, "Say, 'My Lord has guided me to a straight path, an upright *dīn*, the *milla* of Abraham, as a *ḥanīf*, he was not an associator'" (6:161). That the law should be followed *both* "Abrahamicly" *and* "Gentilely" is not, in fact, incongruous. It is the very point.

[100] The text of the *Clementine Homilies* was redacted in the fourth or fifth century, while the *Didascalia* stems from the fifth century in its Latin version and the eighth century in its Syriac one.

[101] Interestingly, Zellentin (2018, 155) suggests that the Quran is more in dialogue with Leviticus than with late antique Christian literature.

[102] These passages are dealt with in Zellentin 2018, 149–58.

Ethnicity in the Quran

Let us start this section by discussing what the Quranic discourse of ethnicity does *not* entail. It is not Arab identity, though this has customarily been supposed and claimed in premodern and modern scholarship. True, the Quran states that its language is Arabic, *ʿarabī*, but the concept of Arabness or Arab group identity never surfaces in the Quran. Peter Webb (2016, 2020) has analyzed—and deconstructed—the ethnicity discourse in early Islam, and, according to his thesis, Arab ethnogenesis is a post-Muhammadan phenomenon. I am inclined to agree with that view. Webb (2021) notes that, according to evidence such as South Arabian epigraphy and Arabic poetry, the principal ethnic (or tribal) identification in western and central Arabia before and during early Islam was the tribal group Maʿadd, not *ʿarab*, though in Mecca and Medina other affiliations might have been dominant.

What is the Quranic classification of ethnicity, then, if it is accepted that its discourse does not categorize people into, for example, Arabs, Persians, and so on? I would call the ethnic (ingroup) discourse of the Quran as *Gentile Abrahamic*. Just as the Apostle Paul argued in his letters that the Christ-believers are the actual heirs of Abraham, so too the Quran contends that the followers of Muhammad are the true descendants of the patriarch (Hawting 2011, 485). Quran 22:78 reiterates this, calling Abraham the "father" of the community of the believers. Both Abraham and Muhammad were Gentiles, the Quran asserts. But this does not mean that they could not be righteous, monotheist believers.

What the Quran is doing, then, is continuing, expanding, and rearticulating this ethnoreligious communication prevalent in the ancient and late ancient worlds. Muhammad's believers are a Gentile ethnos, in Arabic *umma*, consisting of Abraham's descendants, *dhurriyya* (Q. 2:128).[103] Through and with Abraham, the community of the believers partakes in the whole lineage of the patriarchs. The sixth *surah* of the Quran, verses 83–87, adduces an astounding catalogue of these figures of sacred history: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Zechariah, John, Jesus, Elijah, Ishmael, Elisha,

[103] The descent is based on belief and Gentileness.

Jonah, and Lot. The first man, Adam, is naturally added to the list in other passages of the Quran. Moreover, we should not forget Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is an important figure in the Quran. These patriarchs and Mary form the lineage of Muhammad's community.[104]

Let us have a look at how this Gentile Abrahamic identity functions in the context of the six dimensions of ethnicity formulated by Hutchinson and Smith (1996).

First, the proper name of the group. The most common ingroup appellation is quite clearly "believers," *muʾminūn*, occurring hundreds of times in the Quran. However, other, more rarely used, names and attributes, such as *ḥunafāʾ* and *ummiyyūn*, emphasize the Gentile ethnicity of (perhaps the majority of) the group. The word *muʾminūn* functions on two levels: as a broader category including (also) some Jews and Christians (e.g., Q. 3:110, 199), and, at the same time, restricted to the Gentile faction in the community of the believers.[105]

Second, a mythic common ancestry. As I have argued, this ancestry is most significantly connected with the figure of Abraham, whose children the believers are. However, other patriarchs and Mary explicitly feature in the genealogy as well.

Third, shared memories of a common past. In the Quranic communication, the common memories consist mainly of the sacred history in which the patriarchs as well as Jesus and Mary act as exemplars and heroes. The Quranic conception of history includes recurring features:

[104] In the Quran, the lineage is often created through listing practices.

[105] That the same word, or category, can be used to denote different levels or factions of the group (or even different groups) appears to me to be common. Note how in modern political and other societal discourses different ethnonyms/nationalities function to refer to, often in a tense fashion, (1) a (putative) ethnic group; (2) speakers of a language; and (3) holders of a passport or other form of national ID. I also remark that the designation "believers" occurs in different contexts, and with different meanings, in the New Testament. For instance, Luke-Acts, in addition to employing the word to denote the Jesus movement more generally, "uses believer-designations on five occasions to emphasise different types of believers within the wider Christian movement or to designate ethnicity" (Trebilco 2011, 104).

the patriarchs, one after another, communicate the divine message to their people, most of whom do not believe.

Fourth, common culture. This is conveyed in the Quran with concepts such as *dīn*, which indicate shared religiousness, law, norms, and a way of conduct. The fact that the Quran is expressed in Arabic—and the Quran underscores that it is expressed in Arabic[106]—forms one of the aspects of these shared cultural traits, supposing that most of the believers used Arabic as their main vehicle of communication.

Fifth, a link with a homeland, symbolic or more actual. Here, the Quran is surprisingly quiet. No overarching sense of Arabia- or Hijaz-centeredness arises. Mecca and Medina are mentioned a few times only. However, the text mentions the sacred precinct, *al-ḥarām*, as well as the sanctuary, *al-bayt*, that Abraham and Ishmael built. It is important to note that the figure of Abraham is adduced not only for the mythic common ancestry and shared memories of the past but also for a link with Mecca.

Sixth, a sense of intragroup solidarity. This is of the utmost importance in the Quranic articulation of group identity and group behavior. The members of the group should assist and defend each other (Quran 2:216, 4:77, 47:20). They should help the needy and orphans among them with alms and other means (Quran 2:277). The free-riding hypocrites, *munāfiqūn*, form a subgroup among the believers that should be rejected and expelled (Quran 3:176). Their offense is that they do *not* act for the benefit of the group but constitute a fifth column, so to speak.

Ishmael as the Forefather of the Arabians

Above, I mentioned that Quran 2:127–129 portrays Abraham and Ishmael as building the foundations of *al-bayt*, "the sanctuary," probably a reference to the Kaaba,[107] and praying that God will make their

[106] See Hoyland 2022; but cf. Webb 2016, which suggests that, in the Quran, *ʿarabī* means "clear, lucid," rather than "Arabic."

[107] However, see Witztum 2009 for an identification of this word with the altar (in Syriac, *baytā*) mentioned in Genesis 22:9.

descendants devoted (*muslimīn*) to God and send a messenger, probably a reference to Muhammad, from among them to recite the scripture. Hence, the idea of Muhammad and his community belonging to the lineage of Abraham through Ishmael is palpable. Was this idea entertained in Arabia in pre-Islamic times as well?[108] This is certainly how Arab identity and the Prophet's biography was articulated after the life of Muhammad. For instance, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (*The Biography of the Prophet*) by Ibn Hishām (d. 833), begins by putting forward a lineage for Muhammad.[109] It runs through a series of "Arab," mythic, forefathers (Muḍar, Nizār, Maʿadd, and ʿAdnān), until aligning with a biblical genealogy at Ishmael, through whom the Prophet's purported lineage reaches all the way to Adam.[110]

When we look at earlier evidence, the notion of Arabians[111] descending from Ishmael seems to have been present in Arabia already before the Prophet's time. The Quran, and other Arabic literature after it, seems to be tapping into an old idea.[112] The Ishmaelite connection surfaces in a few texts, such as Flavius Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* and the Jubilees. Josephus's work was written in the 90s CE and contains the idea in passing that Arabians (or more specifically the Nabataeans) descend from Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar.[113] The same idea

[108] For an important, detailed treatment of this question, see Goudarzi 2019. See also Millar 1993.

[109] Ibn Hishām 1858–1860, 3–9; Savant 2013, 32–34. The similarities to the Gospel of Matthew are obvious.

[110] On this, see Varisco 1995 and Savant 2013, 33.

[111] I use the English word "Arabians" instead of "Arabs" to draw attention to the fact that the Arab ethnogenesis was still underway, as has been argued at length and in detail by Webb (2016).

[112] The fact that the Ishmaelite lineage was portrayed negatively in Genesis 21 and its Pauline interpretation in Galatians 4:21–31 (Penn 2015, 61) is not, naturally, mentioned in the Quran. The Quran portrays this genealogy in a completely positive sense, and there is no reason to think that the pre-Islamic Arabians, some of whom adopted the idea of being Ishmael's descendants, would have deemed their assumed lineage to be anything other than positive.

[113] Lans 2011; Cole 2018, 21–22. A similar idea is found in Galatians 4:24–25: "One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery.

is present in Jubilees, which is in all likelihood an earlier work than *Antiquities of the Jews*.[114] As in the latter, the Ishmaelite–Arab link is merely a sidenote in Jubilees. It occurs in verses 20:12–13, which read: "Ishmael, his sons, Keturah's sons, and their sons went together and settled from Paran as far as the entrance of Babylon—in all the land toward the east opposite the desert. They mixed with one another and were called Arabs and Ishmaelites" (trans. VanderKam 1989, 119).

The same idea appears in a text from late antiquity, namely the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*. The Syriac version of the text (1.33.3) notes that from Abraham's sons Ishmael and Eliezer "the tribes of Arabs and Persians descended." The Latin version renders this as follows: "From [Ishmael] the barbarian nations descend, while from [Eliezer] the peoples of the Persians descend."[115]

It has recently been convincingly demonstrated by Suleyman Dost (2017) that Jubilees was an important subtext to the Quran and known as a written text (in all likelihood in its Ethiopic rendering) or orally in late antique Arabia. For example, the Abraham figure of the Quran shares similarities with that of Jubilees, in particular when it comes to the smashing of idols (2017, 203–10). If stories and ideas from Jubilees—if not the text itself—circulated in Arabia, would it not then make sense that the Ishmael–Arabia connection was also known to Arabians? The Syriac Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* makes this even more probable. Nicolai Sinai's (2019) recent research on Arabic poetry suggests that pagan monotheism was an emerging phenomenon on the eve of Islam.[116] Might it have included ethnic reasoning and discourse adducing this mythic Ishmaelite connection as well?

Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia." However, Paul develops this into novel interpretations, equating Hagar with Jerusalem, the law ("Mount Sinai"), and the flesh. But behind his argument seems to be the idea that the descendants of Hagar, and probably those of her son Ishmael as well, were located in "Arabia," though it should be admitted that Sinai is naturally quite far removed from, say, Mecca and Medina.

[114] For the history of this text and its translations, see Dost 2017, 187–88. The Ethiopic text is actually titled *Maṣḥafa Kufālē*, the "Book of Division."

[115] Trans. Buell 2005, 72. For the text, see Jones 1995.

[116] See also Athanassiadi and Frede 1999.

This does not mean that there was a shared notion of ethnic Arab identity or that it would have been universally accepted that Arabians descended from Ishmael. Webb (2016, 60–109) has demonstrated the implausibility of both ideas before Islam. Rather, the appellation "Arab" carried a multitude of meanings before Islam. Not only that, but there were many "Arabias," some of them rather far in the north from what we nowadays call the Arabian Peninsula (Macdonald 2009). Epigraphic evidence and pre-Islamic poetry show that the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula self-identified in many ways as regards their tribal and ethnic affiliations, but the word "Arab" is almost completely lacking. What is more, a great number of languages were written and spoken in an around the Peninsula. Arabic was one of them, but it existed as a plethora of dialects with no written standard. The Quran itself refers to the possibility that there were non-Arabic-speaking people among the close circle of Muhammad: "We [God] know very well that they say, 'It is a man who teaches him [scil. Muhammad],' but the language of the person they allude to is foreign (*aʿjamī*), while this [revelation] is in clear Arabic" (verse 16:103). While at first glance this verse reads as defensive and polemical, with not much historical information, on further consideration one can distill an interesting conclusion on the basis of it: there were not only multiple languages spoken in Arabia more generally, but also in the immediate context of the Prophet Muhammad's community (*aʿjamī* would in all likelihood denote a form of Aramaic in the west Arabian context; Hoyland 2022). Not only that, but the Prophet himself was in conversation with this person.[117]

It is not until the eighth century CE that we have more evidence of an ethnos with an endonym "the Arabs" and with a notion of a shared language, Arabic (with a written standard emerging around the year 800). There were some curious developments in this Arab identity articulation, when South Arabians, most of whom did not speak Arabic before

[117] Also of interest is the beginning of Quran 41:44: "If We had made it a Quran [or: passage of revelation] in a foreign language (*qurʾānan aʿjamiyyan*), they would say, 'If only its verses [or script: *āyātuhu*] were clear! [Is it both] foreign language and Arabic (*aʿjamiyyun wa-ʿarabiyyun*)?'" This verse seems to suggest that the majority of the audience of the Prophet's revelations were Arabic-speaking.

Islam, were categorized as part (and sometimes the primordial source) of the Arab ethnos (Webb 2016, 177–239). And though early Islamic identity contained an emphasis on the settled nature of the people participating in that affiliation, with notable stereotyping of the nomads,[118] the formatted Arab ethnic identity harkened back to an imagined nomadic past (Webb 2020).

All this would mean that we should not place too much weight on the Ishmaelite connection. There were a number of ethnolinguistic groups in Arabia (or the Arabias) before Islam, and not all, perhaps, accepted or emphasized the idea of being Ishmaelites. However, it makes sense to assume that the connection to Abraham and Ishmael is not a Quranic novelty but an idea that was disseminated among at least some Arabians before Muhammad's revelations. Even Gentiles might have biblical pedigrees. Indeed, they should have had such if they wanted to be considered a community of believers.

Recategorization in the Quran

Gentile ethnicity and the Abrahamic prototype are key to understanding early Islamic identity articulation. Though this has not become the new consensus, scholars such as Fred Donner (2002–2003) have suggested that distinct Islamic identity (in the sense of being different from Judaism, Christianity, and other faiths) was not articulated during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. Rather, it appears to have been a much slower, piecemeal process.

This process could be clarified with the concept of *recategorization*, as theorized by scholars writing about the social identity framework. Recategorization is a process that entails "changing the basis of categorization … [which] can alter who is a 'we' and who is a 'they'" (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000, 15). This is often done by increasing "the level of category inclusiveness" (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000, 43). The hoped-for result of this process is a common ingroup identity that is shared by groups that did not, in the past, categorize themselves under a shared

[118] Athamina 1987; Crone 1994; Lindstedt 2015.

label. Since calls to relinquish former identities often raise opposition, it is best if the former identities can instead be reinterpreted as subidentities under a big-tent identity (the recategorized common ingroup identity). This is called the "dual-identity model" (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000, 49).

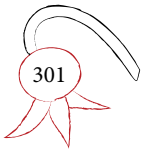
It can be argued that the identity that the Quran and the so-called "Constitution of Medina" put forward is a recategorized, superordinate believer identity (Lindstedt 2021). In these texts Jews, Christians, and Gentiles who believe in God and His Prophets (including Muhammad) are recategorized as one group, the believers. It should be noted that this does not mean that the Quran and the "Constitution" accept all Jews and Christians (or, on the other hand, Gentiles) as believers. Rather, the Quran states: "Among them are believers, but most of them are transgressors" (3:110).

Jews and Christians of western Arabia (and recent research suggests that there were rather many of them)[119] were proud possessors and readers of scriptures and traced their lineage to patriarchs such as Abraham. Their identities were ethnoreligious in the sense that they often conceived (what we would call) their religious identity as having (what we would call) an ethnic component. Nonetheless, there were a multitude of others present in the Arabian milieu as well. The Jews and Christians would pejoratively call these others "Gentiles" (or "pagans"; *ummiyyūn* in Arabic, *ḥanpē* and *ʿammē* in Aramaic, etc.). This (originally derogatory) word was not rejected by the Prophet Muhammad but adapted and repurposed. He himself is called the "Gentile Prophet" in the Quran (7:157), who was sent to the Gentiles in particular (Q. 62:2), and, it would seem, many of his early followers came from this group of non-Jews and non-Christians (though they included Jews and Christians as well, as mentioned explicitly in verses such as Q. 29:46).

One can hypothesize that the idea of a prophet arising amid a Gentile *ethnos* was met with criticism from some Jews and Christians. To answer the criticism, the prototypical figure of the *ḥanīf* Abraham was put to use. Like the Prophet Muhammad, the Prophet Abraham was not a Jew or Christian but a Gentile submitting to God according

[119] Nehmé 2017; Sinai 2019; Lindstedt 2024.

to the Quranic reasoning. This Abrahamic prototype was one that was known to Christians too and actually present in their scripture, and one that also had some analogues in other Christian texts. In the Quran, Abraham functions as a rhetorical device for the Gentiles to be accepted as believers alongside "those who have been reading the Book before you [scil. Muhammad]" (Q. 10:94). Abraham is the pathway for the Gentiles to be(come) believers. Like Paul, who made the (in his time probably outrageous) claim that the Christ-believers are Abraham's true children, the Quran puts forward the idea that it is Muhammad and his community of believers that are closest to Abraham (Q. 3:68) and his progeny, *dhurriyya* (2:128). This Gentile believer Abraham figure of the Quran functions as an exemplar from the past for the Gentile believers of the Quranic present.[120] In verse 2:128, which contains Abraham and Ishmael's prayer, they implore God to make their progeny into an *umma muslima*. As argued in this article, the word *umma* (and not just the word *ummiyyūn*) sometimes carries the connotation of "Gentile people" in the Quran. The word pair *umma muslima* might then be rendered into English as "an obedient community of Gentiles."



Though the Quran engages in social competition about the proprietorship of Abraham and claims that the Jews or Christians do not possess him, this does not mean that the People of the Book would automatically be outside the community of the believers. Rather, the Quran (3:20) instructs the Prophet Muhammad: "Ask those who were given the Book as well as the Gentiles, 'Do you submit [to God]?' If they do, they will be guided, but if they turn away, your only duty is to convey the message. God is aware of His servants."

Conclusion

In this article, I have endeavored to explore notions of ethnic legitimization in the Quran, which invokes Gentile Abrahamic ethnicity as an

[120] This has already been noted by Zellentin: "The 'gentile' self-identity of the Qurʾān is actually reflected in its use of the Arabic term *ḥanīf* to depict the original gentile form of worship, going back to Abraham" (2013, 10).

identity that the believers participate in.[121] This ethnicity discourse in the Quran is often overlooked in modern scholarly literature. The underscored Gentile affiliation did not automatically mean that, at least some, Jews or Christians could not become part of the community of the believers. There are early and late Quranic passages that accept some Jews and Christians as believers (for example, 3:110: *minhum al-muʾminūn*, "among them are believers"). However, the emphasis on Gentileness in the Quran probably points toward the hypothesis that the majority of the believers came from a Gentile background. This does not mean that the identification "Gentile" (*ḥanīf* or *ummī*) was the only or salient affiliation that many of them accepted and cherished. Rather, it was a categorization that worked on the same conceptual level as "Christian" or "Jew." People identify with multiple groups at any point of their lives and emphasize different identities in different contexts. For example, the ethnoreligious identities "Jew," "Christian," and "Gentile believer" were reconcilable with ethnotribal identities such as Kinda, Maʿadd, Aws, Khazraj, Lakhm, Ghassān, Ṭayyiʾ, and Quraysh that were present in northern, central, and western Arabia.[122] The so-called "Constitution of Medina" explicitly mentions that there was a Jewish component among the Aws and other tribal groups of Medina, the immediate context of the Prophet and the Quran.[123] In addition to this, individuals

[121] To quote Joane Nagel, ethnicity is the "result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual's self-identification and outsiders' ethnic designations—i.e. what *you* think your ethnicity is, versus what *they* think your ethnicity is" (1994, 154).

[122] Webb 2021, 72. See Sinai 2019 for a suggestion (based on Arabic poetry) that pagan monotheism was on the rise on the eve of Islam. Cole (2018) also interprets the Prophet's movement as one of Gentile monotheists (for the most part), as does Crone (2016, 315–39). Both Cole and Crone suggest that they might have been, at least partly, so-called "God-fearers." In contrast, Sinai sees Arabian pagan monotheism as a local phenomenon.

[123] See Ibn Hishām 1858–1860, I, 342–43; Abū ʿUbayd 1986, II, 469; Donner 2021, 24. On the text, see Lecker 2004. Most historians take this to be an authentic document stemming from the time of the Prophet Muhammad, though it might have undergone some changes during its transmission (it does not survive as an original document but is quoted in literary sources).

would have put forward a number of identities related to, for example, gender, family, professional roles, and societal status. The Quran's identity parlance endeavored to put forward a novel believer identity in which the different followers of Muhammad were accepted as part of the same group regardless of their existing identities (which could be understood as subidentities) as Jewish, Christian, or Gentile. And, later, in the eighth century CE or so, the ethnotribal identities mentioned above were recategorized as part of a broader Arab ethnos.

In the social identity approach, much interest has recently been put on prototypicality in categorization and group formation (e.g., Haslam et al. 2011). Seen in this way, categories are created not through borders and oppositionality but through prototypes, and group members are assessed in accordance with how well they fit the group prototype. A Gentile monotheist group invoking a Gentile monotheist Abrahamic prototype is credible.

Why would Gentileness be invoked as a *positive* marker of identity?[124] How did the Syriac *ḥanpā*, often with negative meanings of outsiderness in the texts that are extant, become the positive insider term *ḥanīf* in Quranic Arabic? In this article, I have argued that we should conjecture a reinterpreting of this term by the community of the Quranic believers. We can speculate that some Jews and Christians in and around the communities where Muhammad lived described his followers pejoratively as mere Gentiles, *ḥunafāʾ* and *ummiyyūn*. The Quran appropriates these terms as labels with a positive dimension of belonging to the group, arguing that whereas the believers are, for the most part, of Gentile background, so was Abraham.

For an analogue from antiquity, it is quite commonly accepted in modern scholarship that the Jesus-believers were first called "Christians" by their opponents, not themselves (Trebilco 2011, 272–97). The word *christianos* is a Latinism, rather than Greek or Aramaic (which the early Jesus-believers themselves would have used) and was probably coined by outsiders and used pejoratively at first: it denoted "partisan adherence to" or "being a client of Christ." However, it was at some point

[124] This issue is also discussed in Sinai 2023, 243–44, with rather similar conclusions.

adopted by the Christ-believers themselves (already during the composition of the New Testament, as reflected in 1 Peter 4:16, but gaining ground only later) and received positive meanings.[125] I would suggest that something similar occurred with the (mostly negative) Syriac word *ḥanpā* in its Arabic garb as *ḥanīf*.[126] Though it was, I would suggest, first used as a slur by the opponents of the Prophet ("you are mere Gentiles," one can imagine his adversaries as saying), it was soon reappropriated by Muhammad and his followers. The phenomenon is probably also connected with the rise of Gentile monotheism in Arabia in the sixth century CE, as evidenced by Arabic poetry: perhaps those Gentiles believers living before the Prophet Muhammad were also called (and called themselves) *ḥanīf*s. Perhaps they had already projected positive attributes onto being a Gentile believer and connected their Gentile identity with Abraham (a notion that the Jews and Christians would have understood well).

I reiterate that the ethnic communication of the Quran is not, in my opinion, connected with Arabness or other such ethnoracial groups often mentioned in modern scholarship as inhabiting the late antique Near East. The moving boundaries and changing arguments

[125] For other analogues, this process can be compared with some modern cases where words that were used derogatively by outgroup members, such as "queer" or "fat," have been adopted by activists and ingroup members (the LGBTQ+ community and fat acceptance movement, in these examples). These terms are then used to promote positive self-esteem and to fight bias. These efforts to reinterpret hitherto derogatory words in a positive sense is not always successful, of course. Though there is an academic journal titled *Fat Studies* (a sign that there has been some popular attempts to reinterpret the word), the word "fat" is still employed as a common slur. However, endeavors to repurpose the word "queer" as a positive ingroup label have been very effective and, as far as I know, "queer" is rarely used by the outgroup as a pejorative word nowadays (that is not to say that there are not other slurs that are used to insult and target the LGBTQ+ community).

[126] In fact, Horovitz (1926, 56–59) suggested, almost one hundred years ago, a semantic development of the word *ḥanīf* that is similar to mine. However, he discusses this in a different context, the mythic stories about pre-Islamic Arabian *ḥanīf*s (a group about which there is no historical evidence). See also Reynolds 2010, 81–83.

in early-Islamic-era ethnic discourse can be demonstrated by the fact that, around one century after the death of the Prophet, early Muslims had recanted the identity based on Gentileness and, instead, began to emphasize their budding Arab identity. Arab identity itself was linked with Abraham through the idea that the Arabs are Abraham's progeny through Ishmael. Quranic concepts such as *ummī* and *ḥanīf* were re-interpreted. The word *ummī* was taken to mean "illiterate," while *ḥanīf* supposedly conveyed the general senses of monotheism, devoutness, and uprightness.

Appendix

In this Appendix, I list for reference the instances in the Quran where the words *ummī*, *ummiyyūn*, *ḥanīf*, and *ḥunafāʾ* appear.[127]

ummī
Q. 7:157, 158

ummiyyūn
Q. 2:78, 3:20, 3:75, 62:2

ḥanīf
Q. 2:135, 3:67, 3:95, 4:125, 6:79, 6:161, 10:105, 16:120, 16:123, 30:30

ḥunafāʾ
Q. 22:31, 98:5

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[Note: The Arabic definite article *al-* is not taken into account in the alphabetization].

[127] Identified on the basis of Kassis 1983.

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