

The Quranic *Mushrikūn* and the resurrection (Part I)

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Abstract

This article examines the attitudes of the Quranic *mushrikūn* to the resurrection and the afterlife, focusing on those who doubted or denied the reality of both. The first part of the article argues that the doubters and deniers had grown up in a monotheist environment familiar with both concepts and that it was from within the monotheist tradition that they rejected them. The second part (published in a forthcoming issue of *BSOAS*) relates their thought to intellectual currents in Arabia and the Near East in general, arguing that the role of their pagan heritage in their denial is less direct than normally assumed. It is also noted that *mutakallims* such as Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq and al-Māturīdī anticipated the main conclusions reached in this paper.

Keywords: Quran, Pagans, Afterlife, Resurrection, Arabia, Late Antiquity

I

One of the issues between the Messenger and the unbelievers in the Quran is the Messenger’s claim that the dead will be resurrected and judged, thereafter to live for ever in paradise or hell. This issue looms large in the Meccan suras. The unbelievers are depicted as reacting to this claim with a mixture of unconcern, doubt and outright denial. What follows is an examination of these reactions, especially those of the doubters and deniers. The first part of the paper examines the Quranic evidence in the light of pre-Islamic Near Eastern traditions with a view to determining the religious background of these unbelievers. The second part tries to relate them to intellectual currents inside and outside Arabia.

(a) Unconcern

Though the unbelievers in the Quran are often depicted as doubting or denying the resurrection, it is important to note that sometimes they are described simply as not worried by it. In sura 70:6 f. God says of the punishment ahead that the infidels “see it as far away (*ba‘īd*) and We see it as close (*qarīb*)”. Apparently, these infidels believed in the resurrection without regarding it as imminent. The passage could of course mean that they saw it as *ba‘īd* in the sense of

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implausible (as in 50:3); this is the position favoured by the exegetes. But God could hardly have replied that the punishment was *qarīb* in the sense of plausible, unless He was being sarcastic.¹ Arberry, Paret and Yusuf Ali all understand *qarīb* and *ba'īd* in a temporal sense in their translations, and this is also what the context suggests. The first five verses of the sura tell us that someone has asked about the punishment and that it cannot be averted, [but] that the angels and the spirit ascend to Him in a day, the measure of which is 50,000 years, so one should be patient (70:1–5). If 50,000 years are a mere day to God, it is not surprising that things may appear distant to humans even though they are actually close in terms of God's intentions. The message is that we should not lose sight of the judgement ahead even though it does not seem to be imminent. It is also with a view to explaining why God seems to be slow about His promise that 2 Peter 3:8 informs us that one day with the Lord is like a thousand years.

We may take it, then, that there were infidels who believed in the day of judgement without paying much attention to it. Other passages of the Quran are compatible with this interpretation. Those who break God's covenant in 13:25 f. are charged with simply liking this world better than the next; and those who are pleased with the present life rather than hoping to meet God are just heedless of His signs (10:7); indeed, we are told, most people only know "an outward portion of the present life and are heedless of the hereafter" (30:6 f.). That is what doomsday preachers normally find to be the case even when belief in the punishment ahead is universal.

Some unbelievers seem to be heedless for a somewhat unusual reason, however: they are sure that they will be saved. Thus a parable has a wealthy man go into his garden, where he first expresses disbelief in the day of judgement and then adds that "if I am [really] to be returned to my Lord, I will surely find something better there in exchange" (18:35 f.). This man is wavering between two positions, and in so far as he believes in the day of judgement, he is convinced that paradise awaits him. This conviction is also condemned in 41:50, on the ungrateful person in general, and again in connection with the Jews: an evil generation of Israelites were convinced that they would be forgiven (7:169), and the Jews in the Medinese sura 2:80 were convinced that they would only be punished for "a limited number of days".² Presumably they saw themselves as saved by the merits of their forefathers Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac: the Quran explicitly mentions these patriarchs (and also Jacob) in its condemnation of the doctrine that their merit can help later generations (2:133 f., 140 f.).

1 The exegetes usually construe *qarīb* as meaning *kā'in* here: thus Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, ed. 'A. M. Shihāta (Beirut, 2002), iv, 436; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān an tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, 1988), part xxix, 73; al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, ed. B. Topaloğlu et al. (Istanbul, 2005–10), xvi, 95 (claiming that everything *kā'in* is *qarīb*). According to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *qarīb* here means easy or not impossible (*al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, Tehran 1413, xxx, 125).

2 For the Rabbinic view that Gehenna is of limited duration, see S. P. Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD, 2009), 144 f.

(b) Doubts and denials

More commonly, however, the *mushrikūn* are depicted as doubting or denying the reality of the day of judgement, or even of the afterlife altogether. They are quoted as asking in a tone of disbelief whether they would really be raised up again (*mab'ūthūn*) or become a new creation (*khalq jadīd*) when their bodies had disintegrated: "when we are dead and dust and bones, shall we be raised up again, and our forefathers too? (*wa-ābā'unā al-awwalūn*)" (37:16 f.; similarly 13:5; 17:49, 98; cf. also 50:3); "when we die and become dust and bones, will we be judged?" (37:53); "who can give life to decomposed bones?" (36:78); "who will cause us to return?" When the Messenger replies, "He who first created you", they shake their heads and ask when that might be (17:51). "Does man think that We cannot assemble his bones?" (75:3), God retorts, telling them that "if you are in doubt (*fī raybin*) about the resurrection (*al-ba'ith*), [remember that] We created you from dust..." (22:5). It was thanks to Iblīs that those who were in doubt (*fī shakkin*) about the afterlife were distinguished from those who believed in it (34:21). The wealthy man who goes into his garden says that "I do not think that this will ever perish, nor do I think that the hour is coming (*qā'ima*)", before expressing his conviction that he would do well if the hour really came (18:35 f.; similarly 41:50).

It is not always clear whether those who ask the doubting questions are doubters or deniers, but many other passages present the opponents as categorically denying the resurrection and judgement, and the afterlife altogether. "The unbelievers say, 'the hour will not come to us'" (34:3). "They deny the hour" (25:11). They "do not believe in the hereafter" (*lā yu'minūna bi'l-ākhirā*) (34:8; cf. 6:150; 7:45; 16:60; 17:45; 23:74; 27:4; 53:27). They would ridicule the idea of the second creation (34:7) and declare outright that "there is nothing but our life down here, we will not be resurrected" (*in hiya illā ḥayātunā 'l-dunyā wa-mā naḥnu bi-mab'ūthīn*) (6:29). Unbelievers in past nations are credited with the same stance: Pharaoh and his hosts conjectured (*ẓannū*) that they would not return to God (28:39). 'Ād told Hūd that they would not be punished (26:138). An unnamed past nation, perhaps also 'Ād, "denied the encounter of the hereafter (*liqā' al-ākhirā*)", declaring that they would not be resurrected (lit. brought out) after having turned into dust and bones and that "there is nothing but our present life (*in hiya illā ḥayātunā 'l-dunyā*), we die and we live, and we shall not be raised up again" (23:33–7). The Messenger's contemporaries similarly said, "there is nothing apart from our present life. We die and we live, and nothing but time (*al-dahr*) destroys us" (45:24). The Quran repeatedly assigns the deniers of the afterlife to hell, on one occasion remarking that "this is the hell that the sinners deny (*yukadhdhibu bihā 'l-mujrimūn*)" (55:43). Those who are sent to hell will explain that they were sent there because they did not pray or feed the indigent, but "waded in along with the waders" (*kunnā nakhūdu ma'a 'l-khā'iḍīn*, on which more below), and "used to deny the day of judgement (*kunnā nukadhdhibu bi-yawm al-dīn*)" (74:43–6). "How can you still deny the judgement?" (*mā yukadhdhibuka ba'du bi'l-dīn*), another passage asks (95:7; cf. 82:9). The Quran also shows us a scene, set in the future, of people in paradise chatting as they pass the cup around. One of the blessed tells of how he had a friend who did not believe in the resurrection, or at least had doubts about it: "when we die and become dust and bones, will we [really] be judged (*madīnūn*)?",

this friend would ask. Looking down, the speaker now sees his friend in hell and marvels at the fact that but for the grace of God he would have gone the same way. “So will we [really] not die more than our first death and will we [really] not be punished?” (*a-fā-mā naḥnu bi-mayyitīna illā mawtatanā 'l-ūlā wa-mā naḥnu bi-mu'adhdhabīna?*), someone asks in the next line, perhaps the speaker or the people he has been talking to, but it sounds like the Messenger’s own sarcastic question (37:45, 51–9).

In short, the unbelievers in the Meccan suras are depicted now as believing in the resurrection without paying much attention to it, now as doubting it, and now as denying it outright, rejecting the very idea of life after death. Their emphasis on the impossibility of restoring decomposed bodies could be taken to mean that some of them believed in a spiritual afterlife, but there are no polemics against this idea, nor against other forms of afterlife such as reincarnation. In so far as one can tell, the disagreement is never over the form that life after death will take, only about its reality. The choice is between bodily resurrection and no afterlife at all.

(c) Polemical exaggeration?

If we accept that some *mushrikūn* were simply unconcerned about the resurrection, could the doubters and deniers be mere caricatures with which the Messenger hoped to shake his audience out of its indifference? The answer surely has to be no. For one thing, doomsday preachers do not normally accuse their audience of doubting or denying the reality of the day of judgement, let alone the afterlife altogether, when all they are guilty of is ignoring it in their daily lives. For another, the Messenger devotes a great deal of attention to proving that a “new creation” is within God’s ability, and indeed bound to come about, showing that disbelief in this tenet was a serious problem to him. One might perhaps wonder whether polemical exaggeration is at work when the audience is presented as denying the afterlife in categorical terms rather than simply doubting it, for in sura 45 the deniers seemingly turn into mere doubters as we go along. After introducing the hardliners who categorically rule out the existence of any form of afterlife and classifying their view as mere conjecture (*in hum illā yazunnūna*) (45:24), the sura tells of how every community (*umma*) will be judged and how the unbelievers will be reminded of their past behaviour: “When it was said that the promise/threat of God is true and that there is no doubt about the hour, you would say ‘We do not know what the hour is, we are just conjecturing and we are not convinced’” (*in nazunnu illā zannan wa-mā naḥnu bi-mustayqinīna*) (45:32). At first sight the categorical deniers are now depicted as mere doubters. But we are not to take it that they actually declared themselves to be engaging in conjecture back in their days on earth; rather, the Messenger is making them voice his own evaluation of their doctrine as mere conjecture, by which he means fallible human reasoning rather than divine revelation. “They conjectured (*zannū*) that they would not return to Us”, as God says of Pharaoh and his troops (28:39). “They have no knowledge about it, they are just following conjecture (*al-zann*)” (53:28), as another sura says of believers in female angels who deny the resurrection. When the wealthy man in the parable says, “I do not think (*mā azunnu*) that this will ever perish, nor do I think (*wa-mā azunnu*)

that the Hour is coming” (18:35 f; cf. 41:50), the choice of verb is doubtless also meant to convey the arbitrary and uncertain basis of his convictions. But this man is in fact presented as a doubter, too, for he is willing to contemplate the possibility of a return to God; the same is true of his double in 41:50. He and his double are probably exemplifying the two main attitudes to the day of judgement current among the Messenger’s opponents: either they denied it or else they were sure they would be saved. At all events, we may take it that the deniers were real. We need not, of course, assume that they formed a separate group from the doubters, or for that matter from those who were simply heedless; many may have wavered between acceptance, doubt and denial. But the whole spectrum of attitudes must in fact have been represented.

Religious background

What kind of religious community or world view did the doubters and deniers represent? They are repeatedly identified as polytheists (*mushrikūn*). Thus sura 41:6 f. refers to the *mushrikūn* who do not give alms or believe in the afterlife. Sura 6, a sustained attack on *shirk*, speaks of “those who do not believe in the afterlife, holding others to be equal to their lord” (*lā yu’minūna bi’l-ākhirā wa-hum bi-rabbihim ya’dilūna*) (6:150). When mockers ask the Messenger whether they and their fathers will be raised up again, the response is yes indeed, and the narrative proceeds to illustrate how the wrongdoers, their spouses and “that which they worshipped” will be gathered (37:16, 22). “Shall we give up our gods for a mad poet?”, the unbelievers ask later in the same sura (37:36), to be reminded of the reality of paradise and told of the man in paradise who saw his friend suffer in hell for his inability to believe that he would be judged after death (37:51 ff.). In sura 45 it is the people who have chosen protectors apart from God (45:10) who are later said to elevate their own fancy into gods (45:23) and to hold that all we have is this life, time being all that kills us (45:24), later to be reminded of how they used to reject the resurrection in favour of mere conjecture (45:32). Sura 53 explicitly tells us that “those who do not believe in the hereafter (*lā yu’minūna bi’l-ākhirā*) name the angels by female names” (53:27), presumably with reference to Allāt, Manāt and al-‘Uzzā, mentioned earlier in the same sura. In line with this, when Joseph, here typifying the Messenger,³ tells his companions in prison that “I have forsaken the religion of a people who do not believe in God and who deny the hereafter” (12:37), this is immediately followed by a (much longer) denunciation of the evils of attributing partners to God (12:38–40).

The Islamic tradition identifies the devotees of Allāt, al-‘Uzzā and Manāt as the polytheist Quraysh, and modern scholars usually agree. But the Quranic *mushrikūn* were not really polytheists, except from the Messenger’s point of view. It is clear from his own description of them that they were monotheists of the inclusive type (also called monists), that is to say they believed in one God and saw the lesser gods, also called angels, as manifestations of Him rather

3 Cf. J. Witztum, “The Syriac milieu of the Qur’ān: the recasting of Biblical narratives”, PhD dissertation, Princeton University 2011, 248 ff.

than as false deities who had to be renounced in His favour.⁴ They may still have been pagans in the sense of not being Jews or Christians, but there were too many gradations between Bible-based monotheism and gentile paganism in Late Antiquity for this to tell us very much.

For a more nuanced picture we may begin by noting that the Messenger's opponents use an argument of pagan, more precisely Greek and Roman, origin against the doctrine of the resurrection. "Shall we point you to a man who will tell you that when you have been completely torn apart (*muzziqtum kulla mumazzaqin*), you will [be raised] in a new creation?", the deniers would mockingly ask, adding "Has he mendaciously ascribed a falsehood to God or are there demons (*jinnatun*) in him?" (34:7 f.). The problem of bodies torn apart, i.e. by wild animals, was first raised by Greek and Roman pagans against the Christians; later it was also used by Christian believers in a spiritual resurrection body against adherents of the view that we would get our very own fleshy bodies back. Apparently, the sheer dispersal of the body was seen as a problem, but a body torn up by wild animals posed the further difficulty that it had been eaten and so passed into other bodies. Athenagoras (d. 190) responded that God had the ability "to separate that which has been broken up and distributed among a multitude of animals of all kinds".⁵ God could restore dead bodies because He had created them in the first place, he said, formulating an argument which came to be widely repeated: the creation guaranteed the resurrection.⁶ Tatian the Assyrian (d. 180) held that whether he was obliterated by burning, dispersed through rivers and seas, or "torn in pieces by wild beasts", he would be laid up in God's storehouse.⁷ Theodoret, writing in Syria around 460, assured sceptics that God could reassemble the body even after it had become decomposed, turned into dust and been scattered in all directions, in rivers, in seas, among birds of prey, or wild beasts, in fire or in water; it was easier to renovate something that already existed than to create it out of nothing.⁸ When the Zoroastrians began to stress that the renovation would give us our own bodies back, they too had to explain how it was possible to reassemble bodies which had been torn apart by dogs, birds, wolves and vultures, a particularly pressing problem to them in view of their funerary customs; like the Christians, they appealed to the fact that God had created the bodies in the first place: it was easier to repair

4 Thus P. Crone, "The religion of the Qur'anic pagans: God and the lesser deities", *Arabica* 57, 2010, 151–200, in agreement with G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* (Cambridge, 1999), esp. ch. 2, but taking the veneration of gods/angels more literally than he is inclined to do.

5 Athenagoras, *De resurrectione*, 3, 3; cf. L. W. Barnard, "Athenagoras: De Resurrectione. The background and theology of a second century treatise on the resurrection", *Studia Theologica* 30, 1976, 1–42, 10; H. Chadwick, "Origen, celsus, and the resurrection of the body", *Harvard Theological Review* 41, 1948, 89. For the problem of wild animals and chain consumption, see also C. W. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York, 1995), 32 f., 42 f., 55 f., 61, 63, 75, 80.

6 Athenagoras, "On the resurrection", 3, 1; cf. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 19; Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum*, I, 8. For the Jews, see *Babylonian Talmud* (hereafter *BT*), Sanhedrin 91a: "if He can fashion [man] from water [i.e. sperm], surely he can do so from clay".

7 *Oratio* 6, cited in Barnard, "Athenagoras", 21.

8 Theodoret, *On Providence*, tr. T. Halton (New York, 1988), 9:35, 37.

something than to build it anew, as they often said.⁹ Presumably they had picked up the argument from the Christians. “If you do not believe what I say, consider that man is first created from a drop. . .”, the Christian catholicus Babai reportedly told the Sasanian king Jāmāsp (496–8), here assumed not to believe in bodily resurrection.¹⁰ To the Messenger, too, the creation proved the resurrection (cf. 17:51; 36:77; 86:5 f.). “O people, if you are in doubt about the resurrection, [consider that] We created you of dust, then of a sperm-drop, then of a blood-clot” (22:5), as God says in the Quran.

Two points are clear from this. First, pagans though the Messenger’s opponents may have been, they were not pagans of a hitherto isolated kind now being exposed to the doctrine of the resurrection for the first time. The non-existence of the afterlife is a fully articulated doctrine to them, not simply an inherited assumption that had never previously been in need of defence; and this shift cannot be due to the Messenger himself, since he is still having a hard time gaining a hearing for himself in these suras. Like the Messenger, his opponents are drawing on a polemical armoury built up by participants in the debate about the resurrection outside the peninsula. Both sides, in other words, are contributing to a debate that had by then been going on for a long time in the Near East. Most Islamicists probably envisage the debate in question as closed by the victory of Christianity so that the Quranic deniers of the afterlife must have been marginal people cut off from developments in the wider world. But deniers of the resurrection, and of the afterlife altogether, never disappeared from the Near East, though their numbers certainly shrank. Indeed, as pagans they came to be rare outside Arabia. As will be seen, however, they lived on as doubters and deniers within the ranks of the Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians.

Secondly, the Messenger’s opponents were not just monotheists, but also believers in the same God as the Messenger, the God of the Biblical tradition.¹¹ For having highlighted the problem posed by bodies torn apart, they proceed to ask whether the Messenger is mendaciously (or, as we would say, deliberately) ascribing false claims to God or just suffering from demonic possession (*aftarā ‘alā ‘llāhi kadhīban am bihi jinnatun*, 34:8; similarly the hardliners in the past nation in 23:38; cf. also 42:24): they could not have found the Messenger’s claims about the resurrection offensive to *their* God, let alone accused the Messenger of fathering falsehoods on this deity, if he had not been talking about the same God.

The Messenger frequently accuses his opponents in their turn of *iftirā’ ‘alā ‘llāh*: the implication is that he too recognized their God as his own.¹²

9 *Anthologie de Zādspram*, ed. and tr. Ph. Gignoux and A. Tafazzoli (Paris, 1993), 34, 3 ff.; cf. M. Molé, *Culte, mythe et cosmologie dans l’Iran ancien* (Paris, 1963), 113 ff. (with text and translation of numerous passages); S. Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation* (London, 1994), 33, with further references. For the context, see P. Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Regional Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge, forthcoming 2012), ch. 15.

10 A. Scher (ed. and trans.), “Histoire Nestorienne”, part 2/1, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, ed. R. Graffin and F. Nau, vii (Paris, 1911), 130.

11 Cf. Crone, “God and the lesser deities”.

12 Cf. Crone, “God and the lesser deities”, 153 f., with attestations.

Against this it may be argued that in 20:61 Moses accuses Pharaoh and his sorcerers of *iftirā'* 'alā'llāh, even though Pharaoh elsewhere makes it quite clear that he does not believe in Moses' God: he identifies himself as the one and only deity (26:23–9; 28:38; 79:24; cf. 20:49). But the presentation of Pharaoh as a self-deifier (rooted in the rabbinic tradition)¹³ coexists with Pharaoh as a polytheist ascribing partners to God: thus a believer from among Pharaoh's household or people (*āl*) asks his people whether they "call upon me to be ungrateful to God and associate with Him that of which I have no knowledge?" (40:38, 42, 45); and Pharaoh's counsellors ask Pharaoh whether he will "allow Moses and his people to spread corruption in the earth and abandon you and your gods" (7:127). There is in fact no contradiction between the two presentations from a Quranic point of view, for Pharaoh's self-deification lay in the elevation of his own all-too human reasoning and desires to a more authoritative status than God's words; the Messenger's own opponents are similarly accused of deifying their own arbitrary inclinations (25:43; 45:23); and a Medinese passage accuses the Jews and Christians of deifying their rabbis and monks (9:31; cf. 3:64). In short, anything allowed to override God's words (as understood by the Messenger) was a false deity.¹⁴ This is why Pharaoh was both a self-deifier and a polytheist.

The Messenger's opponents never react with accusations of *iftirā'* or other signs of disbelief when the Messenger identifies Allāh as the God of Abraham, Moses or Jesus, or tells Biblical or para-Biblical stories about Him; nor does the Messenger attack or distance himself from the God of the *mushrikūn*, only from the partners they ascribe to Him. Sura 109 could be read as an exception. Here he declares that "I do not worship what you (pl.) worship, and you do not worship what I worship; I will not worship what you worship, nor will you worship what I worship. You have your religion and I mine". But the disputed object of worship are presumably the lesser beings. "Have you come to tell us that we should worship God alone (*Allāha waḥdahu*) and leave off that which our fathers worshipped?", as 'Ād asked Hūd (7:70), confirming that there was no disagreement about God, only about the partners.

Like the Messenger, then, the *mushrikūn* believed in the God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus. However we are to envisage them, they must have been exposed to some kind of Judaism and/or Christianity for a long time before their disagreement with the Messenger, for they could hardly have come to associate the Biblical God with lesser deities/angels of local origin such as Allāt, Manāt and al-'Uzzā within a single generation. Like the Muslims, too, they were perhaps in the habit of praying for forgiveness for their sins (*allahumma ighfir li-. . .*, as a profusion of early Arabic inscriptions and graffiti say),¹⁵ for the Quran explains that "God would not punish them as long as you were among them (*wa-anta fihim*), nor would he punish them while they

13 Cf. H. Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Gräfenhainichen, n.d. [preface dated 1931]), 268 f.

14 V. Comerio, "Esdras est-il le fils de Dieu?", *Arabica* 52, 2005, 170; cf. also Hawting, *Idolatry*, 51.

15 Cf. R. Hoyland, "The content and context of early Arabic inscriptions", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 21, 1997, 79 f.

were praying for forgiveness (*wa-hum yastaghfirūna*) (8:33). Apparently, it was the Messenger's presence among them, coupled with their own prayers for forgiveness, that had protected them for so long. This interpretation runs into trouble with the fact that the Messenger elsewhere tells his audience to ask for forgiveness and repent (11:3), and that he presents his predecessors sent to the vanished nations as doing the same (11:52, 61, 90; 27:46), suggesting that he did not envisage prayers for forgiveness as part of the religious repertoire of his opponents. If so, the only solution is to take *wa-hum yastaghfirūnā* to indicate a future possibility: God would not destroy the unbelievers as long as they *might* pray for forgiveness.¹⁶ But it has to be said that this is not what a *ḥāl*-clause normally suggests. It is noteworthy that the believers' own prayers for forgiveness seem to have included the so-called polytheists, for Abraham is envisaged as praying for forgiveness for himself, his idolatrous parents and the believers (14:41; 26:86), while a Medinese sura prohibits the Prophet and the believers from praying for forgiveness for the *mushrikūn* even when they are close kin: the fact that Abraham had prayed for forgiveness for his father was now a problem, and we are assured that once God's promise had become clear to him, he dissociated himself from him (9:113 f.). The Quran identifies the *mushrikūn* as the Messenger's own people (43:57). One would infer that he and they alike had grown up as members of a religious community characterized by beliefs drawn from the Biblical or para-Biblical tradition: it was only when God's promise became clear to the Messenger that he too dissociated from his kinsfolk.

(a) Upright ancestors

Other passages, too, suggest that the Messenger and his unbelieving people both hailed from a monotheist community. In a review of the reasons the unbelievers might have for rejecting the Messenger's message, God asks whether the unbelievers have not pondered the *qawl* (the Quranic statement, God's words) or whether "anything has come to them which did not come to their ancient fathers?" (*am jā'ahum mā lam ya'ti abā'ahum al-awwalīna*) (23:68). God's point is that nothing the unbelievers were hearing from the Messenger departed from what their ancestors had heard. Some exegetes found this difficult to accept. According to them, *am* ("or") could be understood as *bal*, making God affirm that what had come to unbelievers was indeed new.¹⁷ But the list continues the questions with the same *am*: "or don't they know the Messenger . . . or do they say there is a *jinn* in him? . . . or are you (sg.) asking them for tribute?" (23:69–72). All the questions are about the unbelievers' bad excuses; the list is meant to incriminate them, not to explain why it might indeed be difficult for them to believe: those who do not believe in the hereafter have deviated from the path, as it concludes (23:74). The meaning is that the Messenger did not bring them anything that had not already been brought to

16 Some exegetes think that God may be referring to the Muslims among the infidels (cf. 48:25), but the passage says "while they are praying for forgiveness", not "while there are people among them who are praying for forgiveness".

17 Ṭabarī, *ad loc.* (part xviii, 41), attributed to Ibn 'Abbās; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf* (Beirut, n.d.), iii, 196.

their ancestors. As Muqātil explains, the warning had come to the fathers and ancient forefathers of the Meccans.¹⁸ The point of significance here is that the ancestors are envisaged as having believed in this warning: for if they too had rejected it, there would not have been much point in invoking them in legitimation of the Messenger's message here. The "ancient fathers" could be Abraham and his descendants,¹⁹ or they could be ancestors envisaged as followers of Abraham's religion. Either way, the Messenger's opponents must have recognized them as their own, since there would not otherwise have been much point in adducing them. The passage establishes that what the Messenger preached was ancestral religion and that accordingly the opponents were in error when they rejected it. It does not, of course, follow that what the Messenger preached was actually what the ancestors had believed. Presenting oneself as upholding the ancestral truth from which the opponents have departed is a well-known polemical ploy, but one can only use that ploy when there is a genuine overlap between the ancestral tradition and the new preaching, as for example when both sides are laying claim to the same ancestral heritage. The Christians could claim that the pagan Greeks had themselves believed in life after death on the basis of Plato and Pythagoras,²⁰ but they could not present their teaching as such as the true meaning of the philosophical tradition, only as the true meaning of what the Jewish prophets had preached. If the Messenger could claim that nothing he said departed from what the ancestors had believed, the ancestral tradition must have contained significant elements that allowed him to manipulate it to his advantage. The most obvious reading of the passage is that it affords us a brief glimpse of the religious community that the Messenger and his opponents had shared.

The same is true of two passages in which the Messenger accepts the existence of upright believers in the generation(s) immediately before him. In the one he promises paradise to those who fulfil the covenant of God, fear the reckoning, and otherwise do as they should, along with the righteous ones from among their *fathers* (*man ṣalaḥa min abā'ihim*), and their spouses and offspring (13:23). In the other he prays that God will admit the believers and their righteous *fathers*, spouses and offspring to paradise (40:8). The passages are formulaic and no fathers appear in the accounts of paradise, only spouses and offspring (36:56; 43:70; 52:21), and there were clearly fathers who could not be admitted. Those who counted as righteous, however, must have formed part of the shared monotheist community.

(b) Ancient fables

If the *mushrikūn* had grown up as devotees of the Biblical God, the chances are that they had also grown up as believers in the resurrection. In fact, as we have seen, some of them do seem to have believed in it, and even to have considered themselves assured of salvation; and others merely doubted it; doubt may well

18 Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, iii, 161; similarly Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt*, x, 47. Both Ṭabarī and Zamakhsharī have this interpretation too.

19 Cf. Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, iii, 196 f., identifying the ancestors as Ismail, 'Adnān and Qaḥṭān and citing a *ḥadīth* on Muḍar, Rabī'a and others as Muslims.

20 Cf. Nemesius and Theodoret below, part II.

have been more prevalent than outright denial. But even of those who denied it outright we are given to understand that they had long been familiar with this doctrine. God says that, “When our signs are recited (*tutlā*) to them, they say, ‘We have heard (it before); if we wanted, we could say the like of this; it is nothing but fables of the ancients’” (*asātīr al-awwalīn*) (8:31; cf. 68:15). The familiar message they rejected in this manner was, or included, the resurrection: “What, when we have become dust, we and our fathers, shall we be raised from the dead (*a’innā la-mukhrajūna*)? We and our fathers were promised/threatened (*wu’idnā*) this before, it is nothing but fables of the ancients” (27:67 f.; cf. 23:82 f.). Both the early exegetes and modern scholars have wondered what kind of body of material the unbelievers could have had in mind when they spoke of ancient fables (Biblical stories, legendary history, stories about Persian heroes picked up in al-Ḥīra?),²¹ but it is not obvious that the expression meant anything more specific than “old wives’ tales” or old nonsense:²² they are dismissing the Messenger’s message as “an old lie” (*ifk qadīm*), as another sura says (46:11).²³ What is so interesting about these passages is that the Messenger’s opponents rejected his message as old nonsense, not as a new kind of delusion. The Messenger is evidently not envisaging that they are hearing about the resurrection for the first time. Rather, he casts them as reacting along the lines of those early Christians of whom we are told in I and II Clement (c. 100) that they are “double-minded” and “doubt in their soul, saying, ‘We have heard these things even in the days of our fathers, and behold we have grown old and none of these things have happened to us’”.²⁴

In the Clement passages the double-minded people have lost faith in the things they heard in the days of their fathers, but the fathers themselves were not apparently doubters. When the *mushrikūn* are quoted as saying, “We and our fathers were promised/threatened this before”, it is unclear whether both generations or just the sons lacked faith in the resurrection. The simplest reading is that both fathers and sons were doubters, but there is not a single explicit statement to this effect. The Quran frequently says of the *mushrikūn* that the sons are following in the footsteps of their erring fathers, but the reference is to *shirk* (6:148; 7:70 f., 172 f.; 11:62, 87, 109; 12:40; 18:5; 14:10; 16:35; 25:17f.; 34:43; 37:69f.; 43:22–4; 53:23; cf. also 10:78; 18:4f.; 21:53; 26:70–6) and to wrong custom (2:168–70; 5:103 f.; 7:28). The unbelievers also invoke their fathers when they reject the messengers sent to them (23:24; cf. 10:78; 28:36

21 Cf. R. Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart, 1977), 6:25; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, ed. M. al-Saqqā and others, 2nd printing (Cairo, 1955), i, 300 (*aḥādīth Rustum wa-Isfandiyār*); Ṭabarī, part ix, 231; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xv, 156.

22 *Lughat al-khurāfāt wa’l-turrahāt*, as Abū ‘Ubayda explains it (Ṭabarī, part vii, 171, 6:25); cf. Ṭabarī himself 23:83 (part xviii, 47), though he does think it refers to things written in books.

23 *Khuluq al-awwalīn* in 26:137 surely means the same, as many exegetes say, though others suggest “habit of the ancients” (cf. Ṭabarī *ad loc.*). Compare Ignatius, “Letter to the Magnesians”, in M. W. Holmes (ed. and trans.), *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, 1999), 8, 1, where he warns the Magnesians against Judaizing, telling them not to be deceived by “the myths of the ancients” (*mytheumasīn toi palaoiois*).

24 I Clement 23, 3; II Clement 11, 2 (in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*), both citing an unidentified prophetic writing condemning such people.

on the Egyptians) and refuse to follow God's revelation (31:21). But only one passage on the sons following in the footsteps of their fathers could conceivably be understood as a reference to denial of the resurrection on the basis of the context (37:69 f.); and given the number of times that *shirk* is identified as an ancestral error, there is a notable asymmetry here. The simplest explanation would be that the devotees of the lesser beings had generally believed in the resurrection, judgement and afterlife before the Messenger's time; perhaps they had even expected the lesser beings to plead for them on the day of judgement, since the Messenger goes out of his way to deny that they could or would.²⁵ If so, denial of the resurrection and afterlife was a new error.

There is some corroboration of this hypothesis in the vignette depicting "the one who says to his parents, 'Ugh, are you promising/threatening me that I will be resurrected [lit. got out]²⁶ even though generations have passed away before me?' And they [the parents] ask God's help [saying to the son], Woe to you, believe! God's promise/threat is true! But he says, it is nothing but fables of the ancients" (46:17). What is so striking about this passage is that it is the parents who play the role of believers and the son who is cast as an arrogant denier of the resurrection. If the Messenger had introduced the doctrine of the resurrection to pagans who had been holding out against this doctrine in opposition to outsiders trying to introduce it, it should obviously have been the older generation that typified denial of this doctrine while the son should have stood for the young who were willing to break with their parents for the sake of the truth. Again, this is how things are presented in connection with *shirk*: "We have enjoined kindness to parents on man, but if they strive with you (*jāhadaka*) to associate with Me that of which you have no knowledge, then do not obey them" (29:8; 31:15). In connection with the resurrection, by contrast, it is the parents who are believers and the son who is an infidel. The denial of the resurrection is described as a new doctrine that was leading the young astray. In line with this, it is a young man that Moses' mysterious companion kills in sura 18, explaining that his parents were believers who would have been grieved by his rebellious unbelief if he had lived (18:74, 80). It is also a son of Noah's who refuses to board the ark when Noah tells him not to be with the unbelievers: he has excessive confidence in his own ability to manage and is duly drowned, causing Noah grief (11:42 f., 45).²⁷ Believing parents who had unbelieving sons appear to have been a well-known phenomenon in the Messenger's city.

Shortly after listing the reasons the unbelievers may have had for rejecting their Messenger in sura 23:68–70, God declares that those who do not believe in the hereafter are deviating from the path (23:74), and reiterates that they

25 Cf. Hawting, *Idolatry*, 52.

26 For *mukhraj* in the sense of resurrected, compare 7:25; 23:35; 27:67.

27 Discussed in G. Newby, "The drowned son: Midrash and Midrash making in the Qur'an and Tafsi'r", in W. M. Brinner and S. D. Ricks (eds), *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions* (Atlanta, 1986), 29; followed by D. Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers* (Richmond, Surrey, 1999), 98 f. Both see the episode as expressive of Muhammad's concern for those who would not heed his message, but the latter are amply represented by Noah's people.

would say, “What, when we die and become dust, we and our fathers, shall we be raised from the dead (*a-innā la-mab’ūthūn*)? We and our fathers before us were promised/threatened this before, it is nothing but fables of the ancients” (23:82 f.; cf. 27:67 f.). The Messenger remarks that this was also how the ancients (*al-awwalūn*) responded (23:81), probably with reference to the vanished nations, who are cast as deniers of the resurrection elsewhere in the book (23:33, 37; 26:138), and none of this tells us anything new. But the sequel is interesting. The passage continues by asking a series of questions designed to bring out the absurdity of the unbelievers’ position. “Say, To whom does the earth and those in it belong? ... They will say, To God ... Who is the lord of the seven heavens and the lord of the mighty throne? They will say, God ... In whose hands is dominion (*malakūt*) over all things?” Again, their answer will be “to God”. “Then how can you be so bewitched?”, the concluding line asks in exasperation (23:84–9). The absurdity of the unbelievers’ position from the Messenger’s point of view lies in the fact that they believe in an omnipotent God, yet deny the resurrection: to the Messenger, the one implied the other. Once again it is clear that the unbelievers believed in the same God as the Messenger. Like him, they think in terms of seven heavens, envisage God as having a throne, and are familiar with the term *malakūt*, and it is in the name of this deity that they deny the resurrection: they will “swear their strongest oath by God that God will never resurrect those who die” (16:38). In short, their denial is made from inside the Biblical or para-Biblical tradition.

(c) “The first death”

This is confirmed by two unusual expressions used by the *mushrikūn*. We encounter one of them in the claim that “there is nothing apart from our first death (*mawtatunā ’l-ūlā*) – we shall not be raised up again” (44:35). One would have expected them to say that there was nothing apart from their first life. The problem does not seem to have worried the old exegetes. Al-Zamakhsharī, however, explains that life follows death (in the sense of non-existence) twice, first when we are born and next when we are resurrected: the unbelievers are saying that only the first death is followed by life, not the second.²⁸ It sounds far-fetched, and it rests on an interpretation of 2:28 that the unbelievers are unlikely to have shared.²⁹ 2:28 says, “How can you reject/be ungrateful to (*takfurūna bi-*) God, seeing that you were dead and He then brought you to life, then He will kill you, and then He will bring you to life again, and then you will return to Him?” Here people do indeed start dead, then live, die and undergo resurrection, but the verse is hardly describing the normal life-cycle. More probably, the reference is to God’s resurrection of the Israelites who had died when they heard and/or saw Him at Sinai (Q. 2:55 f.; cf. 4:153).³⁰ Al-Zamakhsharī’s explanation of the first death in 44:35 also

28 Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, iv, 279.

29 This explanation of 2:28 is found already in Muqātil (*Tafsīr*, i, 95 f.), who does not invoke it *ad* 44:35, however.

30 Speyer, *Biblischen Erzählungen*, 298 f.; P. Crone, “Angels versus humans as messengers of God”, in P. Townsend and M. Vidas (eds), *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen, 2011), 329, with further references.

fails to account for the fact that twenty verses later the Messenger himself says that the people in paradise “will not taste death there, except the first death” (44:56). The reference must be to the death that they have already died, and this is also how al-Zamakhsharī and others understand it.³¹ In other words, our death here on earth is the first death, not the second.

What then is the second death? The expression is not actually used in the Quran, and this is why “the first death” puzzled the exegetes: they understood very well what the unbelievers meant, but not how they were saying it. The idea of a second death appears in pre-Islamic literature in two quite different senses, both referring to the fate of the soul after death. In Plutarch’s “On the face of the moon”, there is a death which separates the soul from the body and another which separates the mind from the soul. In the second death (again the expression is not actually used) the soul is left behind on the moon, where it eventually dissolves, while its nobler part, the mind, travels on to the sun: the second death is ultimate liberation.³² In Jewish, Christian, Mandaean and Manichaean writings, by contrast, the second death is ultimate damnation. The expression occurs four times in the Book of Revelation, where we are told, among other things, that “he who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death”, and that the lot of sinners “shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death”.³³ The expression is quite common in the targums. Here it sometimes means exclusion from the world to come (“they shall die the second death and shall not live in the world to come”), a meaning it also has in the post-Quranic *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*.³⁴ But at other times it is in the world to come that the wicked will die their second death, and the Targum to Isaiah identifies the second death as Gehenna “where the fire burns all the day”, much as does the Book of Revelation.³⁵ It also means eternal damnation in two Pseudo-Clementine works originally composed in Greek, but preserved only in Ethiopic: in one of them foolish men deny that they will have a second death, not because they deny that there is life after death, but rather because they believe they are destined for immortality.³⁶ In the other Peter speaks much of his fear of

31 Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, iv, 283; Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xxvii, 254. Similarly, earlier exegetes such as Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, iii, 826; Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt*, xiii, 315 f.

32 Plutarch, “On the face which appears in the face of the moon” (*Moralia*, ed. and trans. H. Cherniss and W. C. Hembold, xii, Cambridge, MA and London, 1957), 943A, 944E ff.

33 Apocalypse of John, 2:11; 21:18; cf. 20:6, 14. My thanks to Caroline Bynum for directing me to this source.

34 *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*, tr. G. Friedlander (London and New York, 1916), 252 (ch. 34).

35 M. McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* (Rome, 1966), 117–25, with full details; P. M. Bogaert, “La ‘seconde mort’ à l’époque des Tannaim”, in A. Théodorides, P. Naster and J. Ries (eds), *Vie et survie dans les civilisations orientales* (Leuven, 1983), 199–207.

36 “Le mystère du jugement des pécheurs”, tr. S. Grébaut in “Littérature éthiopienne pseudo-Clémentine”, *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien* 2 (NS 12), 1907, 391; also cited in T. O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s Thoughts on Death: A Thematic Study of the Qur’anic Data* (Leiden, 1969), 25. (My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to O’Shaughnessy’s work.)

“the second death”.³⁷ The expression passed into Syriac too, probably via the targums, as it is attested well before the Book of Revelation had been made available in that language. A Christian martyr who died in *c.* 306 told the governor conducting his case that “We are dying for the name of Jesus our Saviour, so that we may be delivered from the second death, which lasts for ever”. Aphrahat and Ephrem identify the second death as condemnation to Gehenna in the final judgement,³⁸ and this is also what it means in Mandaean and Manichaean usage.³⁹ The expression “the first death” does not seem to be attested in either Syriac or Aramaic, but it appears in St Augustine,⁴⁰ in the sixth-century Oikomenios, who observes in his commentary on the revelation that the first death is physical whereas the second is spiritual, and in the Ethiopian Pseudo-Clementines: sinners die, “that is their first death”, we are told; they will die the second death after the resurrection.⁴¹ The Manichaean *Kephalaia* (*c.* 400 AD) similarly explains that there are two deaths and that the first is temporary, whereas the second, “the death in which the souls of sinful men shall die”, is eternal.⁴² The Quranic unbelievers understood the first and the second death in the same way. What they mean when they say that “there is nothing apart from our first death” is that they will not go to hell because

- 37 “La seconde venue du Christ et la resurrection des morts”, tr. S. Grébaud, “Littérature éthiopienne pseudo-Clémentine”, *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien* 15 (NS 5), 1910, 320 f., 433; partly cited in O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s Thoughts on Death*, 25. This Pseudo-Clementine work is the text that contains the complete *Apocalypse of Peter*, composed before 150 and incompletely preserved in Greek; but the passages on the second death come after the *Apocalypse*. The Pseudo-Clementine work is not known from elsewhere; its date of composition is uncertain, and so is the date of its translation into Ethiopic; it is not even known whether the translation was made directly from Greek or via intermediaries (thus M. Peshty, “Thy Mercy, O Lord, is in the Heavens, and thy Righteousness reaches into the Clouds”, in J. N. Bremmer and I. Czachesz (eds), *The Apocalypse of Peter* (Leuven, 2003), 42; differently O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s Thoughts on Death*, 24n, where both Pseudo-Clementines are held to be eighth-century Ethiopian translations of an Arabic work based on the third-century Greek original of the *Apocalypse of Peter*). One manuscript may date from the 15th or 16th century, the other from the 18th (D. D. Buchholz (ed. and tr.), *Your Eyes Will Be Opened: a Study of the Greek (Ethiopic) Apocalypse of Peter* (Atlanta), 188, 129, 134). For the fate of the sinners in this work, see Peshty, “Thy Mercy”, and I. L. E. Ramelli, “Origen, Bardaisan, and the origin of universal salvation”, *Harvard Theological Review* 102, 2009, 14, 143 f.
- 38 S. P. Brock, “Jewish traditions in Syriac sources”, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30, 1979, 220 f.; Aphrahat, *Demonstrations*, ed. and tr. (Latin) J. Parisot in *Patrologia Syriaca*, ed. R. Graffin, I/1 (Paris, 1894); tr. (English) K. Valavanolickal, Kerala, 2005, nos. VII, 25; VIII, 19; cf. XXII, 15.
- 39 K. Rudolph, *Gnosis: the Nature and History of Gnosticism* (Edinburgh, 1983), 359; below, note 41.
- 40 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 21.3.1, cited in T. O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s Thoughts on Death*, 16.
- 41 Oecumenius [= Oikomenios], *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, tr. J. N. Suggit (Washington, 2006), 11: 14, 174; Grébaud (trans.), “La seconde venue du Christ”, 320.
- 42 I. Gardner and S. N. C. Lieu (trs.), *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2004), 202 ff.; cf. W. Sundermann in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Eschatology”, 572.

they will not be resurrected: there is no such thing as a second death or hell and eternal damnation.⁴³

This is confirmed by 40:11, where the unbelievers in hell tell God that now they realize that “twice you have made us die (*amattanā*) and twice you have made us live (*ahyaytanā*)”: they are now suffering the second death in the form of the eternal damnation that they used to deny. Here some exegetes hold the second death to be the punishment of the grave, while others fall back on the interpretation of the Medinese 2:28 that we have already encountered.⁴⁴ But in the story of the believer in paradise who saw his friend suffering in hell for doubting or denying the resurrection, the believer and/or other inhabitants of paradise or the Messenger comments: “so will we (really) not die more than our first death and will we (really) not be punished?” (*a-fa-mā naḥnu bi-mayyitīna illā mawtatanā’l-ūlā wa-mā naḥnu bi-mu’adhdhabīna?*) (37:58 f.). Once again, the first death is clearly the death we suffer at the end of our lives, and the hapless friend is suffering the second death in hell that the unbelievers denied. In short, the concept of eternal damnation as the second death makes effortless sense of all the passages in which the expression “the first death” occurs.

One would assume that the *mushrikūn* were familiar with the expressions “first death” and “second death” because they had learned them as part of the religious vocabulary of the community in which they had grown up. They are denying the resurrection and eternal damnation in the language in which these doctrines have been taught to them, and in which those close to them presumably continued to speak about them. They are certainly not likely to owe their familiarity with these expressions to the Messenger, for the Messenger barely speaks of the “first death” himself and he never uses the expression “the second death”. Of the four passages in which the expression “the first death” occurs, two are put in the unbelievers’ mouths (40:11; 44:53), while one appears to turn their own words against them (37:58 f.). In the fourth passage the Messenger himself says that the people of paradise shall not taste death, except for the first death (44:56). But in other accounts he says of the one who enters the fire/Gehenna that “he will neither die there nor live” (87:13; 20:74), or that he will never die there (35:36), or that death will come to him from everywhere, yet he will not die (14:17); rather, he will cry out for death and annihilation (25:13; 43:77; 69:27; 84:11).⁴⁵ The Messenger seems to have preferred this image of hell because it emphasized the eternity of the suffering ahead, whereas “the second death” was suggestive of extinction. In short, it is overwhelmingly

43 The meaning of the first and second death was clear to W. Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum* (Stuttgart, 1922), 14; K. Ahrens, “Christliches im Qoran”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 84, 1930, 53 and 171; K. Ahrens, “Christliches im Qoran. Eine Nachlese”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 84, 1930, 171; and O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s Thoughts on Death*, 14 f.; but none of them pays attention to the fact that the speakers are *mushrikūn*.

44 Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, iii, 707; Ṭabarī, *juz’* 14, 47 f.; Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt*, xiii, 201; Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xxvii, 39, the latter with a variant version of death before life and also the simpler solution preferred by some: *hādhā kalām al-kuffār fa-lā yakūnu fīhi ḥujja*.

45 For these and other passages, see O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s Thoughts on Death*, 17 ff.

his opponents who are presented as using the traditional terminology. One would infer that those who did not believe in eternal damnation continued to deny it in the formulation in which they had learned this doctrine, whereas the Messenger was developing new imagery to express his own view of it.

(d) “We die and we live”

The second unusual expression used by the *mushrikūn* is “we die and we live” (where one would expect them to reverse the word order). In the guise of an ancient nation they say that “we die and we live, we shall not be raised up again” (23:37); as themselves, they say that “we die and we live, and nothing but time destroys us” (*namūtu wa-nahyā wa-mā yuhlikunā illā'l-dahru*) (45:24). Why don't they say “we live and we die”? The word order is not to be understood as an affirmation of belief in reincarnation (though al-Bayḍawī considers this possibility),⁴⁶ for as noted already, this doctrine is not mentioned or combatted in the book.

Some exegetes fall back on the by now familiar idea of death as non-existence before we are born: the unbelievers are saying that they start dead, then they live – and that, they say, is all there is to it.⁴⁷ But more commonly the unbelievers are taken to mean that “some of us die and some of us live”, or “we die and our children live on”; one generation follows the other.⁴⁸ This more popular explanation has the disadvantage of failing to account for the fact that the Quran uses the same word order in the passage in which the unbelievers in hell will admit to God that “twice You have made us die (*amattanā*) and twice You have made us live (*ahyaytanā*)” (40:11). Again some exegetes fall back on the idea of death as non-existence before birth: the unbelievers are saying that God made them dead before they were born and again when they died, and that He brought them into life after the first “death” and resurrected them after the second. Alternatively, He made them dead when they died and again by subjecting them to the punishment of the grave. But as we have seen, the second death is eternal damnation. In other passages, moreover, God says that the false gods have no power over “death, life and the resurrection” (25:3) and that “it is He who brings death and gives life (*wa-annahu huwa amāta wa-ahyā*)” (53:44). Here no invocation of either death before life or the punishment of the grave can explain the word order. We seem to have to do with a fixed expression.

As O'Shaughnessy observes, the source of the expression is Deuteronomy 32:39: “I, even I, am He; there is no god besides me. I kill (*'myt*) and I make alive (*'hyh*). . . .”⁴⁹ In 1 Samuel 2:6 Hannah echoes that “The Lord kills (*mmyt*) and brings to life” (*mhyh*); and an Israelite king asks in 2 Kings 5:7, “am I God to kill and to make alive (*lhmyt wlhhywt*)?” Speaking of God's lifegiving

46 al-Bayḍawī, *Anwār al-tanzīl* (Beirut, n.d. [originally Cairo 1330]), v, 70, ad 45:24, on the grounds that reincarnation is what most idolaters believe in.

47 Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt*, xiii, 336, with both explanations.

48 Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, iii, 707; Ṭabarī, *juz'* xviii, 21; xxv, 151 f.; Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xxii, 98; xxviii, 268, ad 23:37, 45:24; Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt*, x, 28, ad 23:47, holds the former to be the meaning if it was said by dualists and Dahrīs, and the latter to be the meaning if it was said by others. See also G. Tamer, *Zeit und Gott* (Berlin, 2008), 195 ff.

49 O'Shaughnessy, *Muhammad's Thoughts on Death*, 26 ff.

and life-destroying powers in inverted order had apparently become standard. Why God should have used this word order in His first book is a question we can leave aside, but it proved useful to the Jews when they began to look for proof of the resurrection in their scripture. It now seemed self-evident that God was talking about death and the resurrection, and the Deuteronomic verse was adduced in support of this doctrine in the Palestinian targums to the Pentateuch: “I am He who causes the living to die in this world and who brings the dead to life in the world to come”, as Targum Neophiti paraphrases Deut. 32:39.⁵⁰ *Sifre Deuteronomy* marshals the same verse first against those (Jews) who say that there is no authority in heaven, or that there are two authorities in heaven, and next against those who say that God has no power to kill and give life; and it carefully rules out the idea that “I kill and make alive” could be taken to mean that God killed one person and gave life to another.⁵¹ A baraita in the Babylonian Talmud similarly asks, “Could death be for one and life for another, as is customary in the world?”, to reply with *Sifre* that the next line of Deuteronomy 32:39, “I wound and I heal”, proves that God is talking about one and the same person; “from here there is refutation of those who say, the resurrection of the dead is not from the Bible”, it declares. Just as God healed whomever He had wounded, so he would resurrect those He had killed, as the Babylonian rabbi Raba (d. 352) explained.⁵²

Like the Jewish dissidents confronted by the rabbis, the *mushrikūn* are denying that God kills and makes alive in the word order used by God Himself: they die and they live, and time, not God, is what kills them, they claim in 45:24. The commentators on the Quran may well be right when they take the *mushrikūn* to mean that “some of us die and some of us live”, or “we die and our children live on”, but one needs to know the Biblical passage to understand why they expressed themselves as they did. One would infer that they had grown up in a community in which proof of the resurrection had been offered in the form of the inverted word order derived from the Bible. Once again we can be reasonably sure that they are not simply using the Messenger’s formulations, for although he does occasionally use the Biblical word order, as we have seen, more commonly he corrects it. God instructs him to say that “it is God who gives you life and then kills

- 50 P. V. M. Flesher, “The theology of the afterlife in the Palestinian Targums to the Pentateuch”, in J. Neusner (ed.), *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* 16, 1999, 26 f; cf. also *Wisdom of Solomon* 16:13–15, where the odd word order is corrected; cited in Y. Monnickendam, “‘I Bring Death and Give Life, I Wound and Heal’: two versions of the polemic on the resurrection of the dead”, Hebrew original in *Tarbiz* 76, 2007, 329–51, English translation forthcoming, note 14 (my thanks to Menahem Kister for drawing my attention to this study and to Dr Monnickendam for allowing me to see the English version before publication).
- 51 *Sifre Deuteronomy*, tr. R. Hammer (New Haven and London, 1986), 340 (piska 329); also translated in A. F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven* (Boston and Leiden, 2002) (first pub. 1977), 84.
- 52 Monnickendam “I bring death and give life”, with reference to *Babylonian Talmud*, Pesahim 68a; Sanhedrin 91b. Cf. also *Ecclesiastes Rabba* 1.4, §2, and parallels, cited in her note 32, where it is accepted that those whom God killed are not those he will bring to life, but only in the sense that those who died lame or blind will return healthy. Monnickendam relates this to the pagan argument, also refuted in one of the two versions of Raba’s statement, that the dead and the resurrected person could not be identical.

you (*yuhyīkum thumma yumūtukum*)” (45:26), and that “it is We who give life and We who bring death (*innā la-naḥnu nuhyī wa-numūtu*)” (15:23); and when Abraham professes that “My Lord is the one who gives life and death”, a self-deifying infidel responds that “I am the one who gives life and brings death (*qāla anā uhyī wa-umūtu*)” (2:258). There are many other examples (22:6; 7:158; 10:56, 116; 23:80; 40:68; 44:8; 57:2).⁵³ In short, like the expression “the first death”, the inverted word order shows the polytheists to be closer to the Biblical or para-Biblical literature than the Messenger.

It was probably from the para-Biblical literature that the *mushrikūn* knew the Deuteronomic expression. On one occasion they ask for a miracle, to which God responds, “Has a proof (*bayyina*) not come to them (already), (namely) that which is in the ancient scrolls/books (*al-ṣuḥuf al-ūlā*)?” (20:133). In other words, ancient books with probative value were already in circulation, presumably among the polytheists themselves since the response would not otherwise be effective. These books are elsewhere identified as the scrolls of Abraham and Moses (*ṣuḥuf Ibrāhīm wa-Mūsā*) (87:18 f.), and a verse directed against an uncharitable polytheist asks whether he does not know what is in the scrolls of Moses and Abraham: the scrolls showed, among other things, that “it is He who makes brings death and gives life (*wa-annahū huwa amāta wa-ahyā*)” (53:44). This does not, of course, suffice to prove that the Deuteronomic phrase was actually used in the scrolls, but it does at least point to them as a possible source. They certainly dealt with the resurrection (53:38–42, 47; 87:17–19), which rules out the possibility that the scrolls of Moses were the Pentateuch. They are also quoted as speaking of the resurrection as “the other creation” (*al-nashsa al-ukhrā*, 53:47), and they, or one of them (the scrolls of Abraham?), apparently also dealt with the vanished nations (53:50–54). Most probably, they were apocalypses.⁵⁴

The concept of damnation as the second death was common to Jews, Christians, Mandaeans and Manichaeans, but Deuteronomy 32:39 points in a Jewish direction. It was the Jews who had to find their proof texts of the resurrection in the Pentateuch.⁵⁵ The Mandaeans and Manichaeans (who believed in spiritual immortality) did not accept the Pentateuch as authoritative, and the Christians had splendid proof texts in the Gospels and the Apostles, most obviously the passage in which Jesus confronts the Sadducees who denied the resurrection (Matthew

53 They are discussed, along with related passages, in O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s Thoughts on Death*, 27 ff., again without attention to the fact that many of the statements were made by Muḥammad’s opponents.

54 This had been suggested several times before, cf. H. Ben-Shammai, “Ṣuḥuf in the Qur’ān – a loan translation for ‘Apocalypses’”, in H. Ben-Shammai, S. Shaked and S. Stroumsa (eds), *Exchange and Transmission across Cultural Boundaries: Philosophy, Mysticism and Science in the Mediterranean (Proceedings of a Workshop in Memory of Prof. Shlomo Pines, the Institute for Advanced Studies, Jerusalem; 28 February–2 March 2005)*, Jerusalem, forthcoming.

55 For what they used, see *Sifre Deuteronomy*, 340 (piska 329), adducing “four sure allusions” to the resurrection, translated in Segal, *Two Powers*, 84 (from the edition of Finkelstein, 379); in Monnickendam, “I bring death and give life” (from the edition of Kahana, 329); cf. also P. V. M. Flesher, “The resurrection of the dead and the sources of the Palestinian Targums to the Pentateuch”, in A. J. Avery-Peck and J. Neusner (eds), *Judaism in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 2000), 311–31; McNamara *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum*, 4.

23–32; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–38), but also Paul’s long account of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 35–49). Nonetheless, there were Christians who shared the Rabbinic understanding of the passage. Tertullian (d. c. 220) uses it to prove that the resurrection would be physical.⁵⁶ Origen (d. 254) adduced the fact that the verse was about the resurrection against those to whom it proved that the Old Testament God was cruel.⁵⁷ The Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, probably composed in Antioch or Edessa around 300–320, tell us that God kills and makes alive: He kills with His left hand, the evil one, and saves with His right hand, which rejoices in the good deeds of the righteous.⁵⁸ Syriac authors also liked the phrase. Ephrem uses it to praise “Him who makes to die and also makes to live”, and Babai says of Christ that he makes all things to live “as it is said: I make to die, even I, and I too make alive”.⁵⁹ None of the above authors, however, use the passage as scriptural proof of the resurrection itself, which is not an issue in these statements. By contrast, Aphrahat (d. c. 345), a Christian from the Sasanian side of the border, tells us that it is right for us to fear the second death and that terrible suffering awaits the wicked who do not believe in the resurrection, to conclude (after diverse other points) that the living mouth testifies, “I kill and I make alive”.⁶⁰ Elsewhere he interprets Paul’s statement that “death reigned from Adam to Moses” (Romans 5:14) to mean that Moses proclaimed the resurrection, and cites Deuteronomy 32:39, Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:6, and another Pentateuchal passage used by the rabbis as proof text.⁶¹ Aphrahat represents a Christianity that is both close to the traditions of the rabbis and deeply hostile to Judaism, a combination which has been construed as evidence that the local Jewish and Christian communities were not fully distinct in his time.⁶² The deep hostility of the Messenger to the Jews, and the fact that he consistently uses arguments with which the Christians had dissociated themselves from Judaism could be taken to suggest that he found himself in a comparable situation.⁶³

To this one may add that there does not seem to be a Christian precedent for calling the resurrection the “other creation” (*nash’a ukhrā*), the expression perhaps used in

56 Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* (Ante-Nicene Christian Library, iii, ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson and A. C. Coxe) (Edinburgh, 1885), 28, 5–7, attributing the verse to Isaiah.

57 Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah*, 1:16 (tr. J. C. Smith, Washington, 1998), 20 f. On Christian and Jewish use of the verse in an anti-dualist vein see also the attestations in Monnickendam, “I bring death and give life”, notes 20–21.

58 *The Clementine Homilies* (Ante-Nicene Christian Library, xvii, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson) (Edinburgh, 1870), xx, 3.

59 Both cited in O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s Thoughts on Death*, 29, cf. also Ephrem’s modification of the statement at p. 32.

60 Aphrahat, *Demonstrations*, viii, 19–25. My thanks to Joseph Witztum for alerting me to Aphrahat’s use of the passage.

61 Aphrahat, *Demonstrations*, viii, 10; xxii, 1–3. The other passage is Deut. 33:6 (“Let Reuben live, and not die. . .”), on which see McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum*, 120 f.

62 A. H. Becker, “Beyond the spatial and temporal *Limes*: questioning the ‘parting of the ways’ outside the Roman Empire”, in A. H. Becker and A. Y. Reed (eds), *The Ways that Never Parted* (Tübingen, 2003), 376 f.

63 For the Christian origin of the Messenger’s polemics against the Jews, see Ahrens, “Nachlese”, 156 ff.; for their Syriac provenance, see Witztum, “Syriac milieu”, 271 ff.; cf. also G. Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (London, 2010), 251.

the scrolls (and often in the Quran), or the “new creation” (*khalq jadīd*), as the unbelievers often call it when they doubt or deny it (13:5; 17:49, 98; 32:10; 34:7; 50:14). The parallel between the creation and the resurrection was a commonplace in the Christian tradition, of course, as it was to all believers in bodily resurrection;⁶⁴ but to the Christians the “second” or “new creation” was Christ’s resurrection, which renewed and restored the world.⁶⁵ Where we do find the future resurrection as the “new creation” is in 1 Enoch, a Jewish apocalypse read by Jews and Christians alike (and by others too), though both rabbis and churchmen had distanced themselves from it by the sixth century.⁶⁶ There can be no doubt, of course, that the Messenger himself is drawing heavily on the Christian tradition as available in Syriac. This appears to be true when he modifies God’s statement in Deuteronomy 32:39 or speaks of the sinner in hell as never dying rather than as suffering a second death.⁶⁷ But his opponents come across as closer to Judaism than he is, and his consistent recourse to the Syriac tradition should probably be seen as part and parcel of his attempt to reform the community in which he had grown up.

Disputations

According to the Messenger, the deniers of the resurrection were basing themselves on mere conjecture (*in hum illā yazunnūna* (45:24, 32; 53:28; cf. Pharaoh in 28:39); they were elevating their own arbitrary inclination (*hawā’*) to divine status (45:23); and they were following their own reason rather than revelation. The Christians had said much the same against the pagans: Plato admitted that he was speaking conjecturally and guessing, there was no truth to his claims, Theophilus of Antioch declared;⁶⁸ the true religion received its proof from prophecy, while philosophy presented its proofs from conjecture, as we read in the Pseudo-Clementines.⁶⁹ But what kind of “conjecture” did the Messenger have in mind? Deniers of the resurrection have often been men and women with little or

64 Cf. Aphrahat in T. O’Shaughnessy, *Creation and the Teaching of the Qur’ān* (Rome, 1985), 73, and part II of this article.

65 They also speak of the first and second creation in the quite different context of the order in which God created the different parts of the world. For Christ’s resurrection as the new creation, see 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Athanasius of Alexandria, “De sabbatis et circumcissione”, *PG* XXVIII, 138; Gregory of Nazianzus, “In novam Dominicam”, *PG* XXXVI, 612. The difference is noted in Ahrens, “Christliches im Quran”, 48, where it is nonetheless deemed possible that the Quranic expression is rooted in Paul’s. No Syriac precedent is adduced by O’Shaughnessy (*Creation*, ch. 5), who does not note that the “new creation” stands for different things in Christian and Quranic usage.

66 *1 Enoch* (tr. G. W. E. Nickelsburg and J. C. VanderKam, Minneapolis, 2004), 72:1; noted by O’Shaughnessy, *Creation*, 85. For other echoes of this work in the Quran, see P. Crone, “The Book of Watchers in the Qur’ān”, in H. Ben-Shammai, S. Shaked and S. Stroumsa (eds), *Exchange and Transmission across Cultural Boundaries: Philosophy, Mysticism and Science in the Mediterranean (Proceedings of a Workshop in memory of Prof. Shlomo Pines, the Institute for Advanced Studies, Jerusalem; 28 February–2 March 2005)*, Jerusalem, forthcoming.

67 O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s Thoughts on Death*, chs 3–4.

68 Theophilus of Antioch (d. c. 185), *Ad Autolyicum*, iii, 16, here with reference to the age of the world. Cf. also I. L. E. Ramelli, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Piscataway, 2009), 63n.

69 *Clementine Homilies*, XV, 5; cf. *The Clementine Recognition*, tr. T. Smith (Ante-Nicene Christian Library, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, iii) (Edinburgh, 1867), viii, 62; N.

no education who based themselves on their own common sense. “I swear to God that hell and paradise are nothing more than a way of frightening us, like people saying to children, ‘the bogeyman will get you’”, as a certain Diego de Barrionuevo told the inquisition in Spain in 1494.⁷⁰ “All good and bad is in this world ... Well, has anybody ever been taken to that world and then come back?”, as a Muslim peasant from a village in the Zagros mountains told an anthropologist in the 1970s. “Maybe they are lying when they say that heaven and hell exist. Nobody has come to life again to tell us how things are there”, another villager said. “After death the soul leaves and the body decomposes. Beyond this we don’t know”, as yet another put it.⁷¹ The Iranian villagers were doubters rather than deniers, but Diego was a hardliner, and his counterparts in the Quran could have denied the resurrection on the basis of the same commonsense thinking. There are suggestions, however, that they moved in a more developed intellectual environment.

It is clear from the Quran that the Messenger was living in a highly disputatious society.⁷² Those who did not believe would dispute (*yujādilūna*) with falsehood to weaken the truth and treat God’s signs and warnings as a jest (18:56). They would dispute not only God’s signs (40:4; 40:35, 56, 69; cf. also 42:35), but also about God Himself (13:13; 22:3, 8, cf. 19; 31:20) and “the names you have devised, you and your fathers”, i.e. the false deities/angels (7:71, of ‘Ād; cf. also 43:58), about ritual (22:67 f.; probably also 6:121), about the truth of something unspecified (8:6), and apparently also about the resurrection (22:3, 5). They would come to listen to the Messenger in order to dispute with him (*yujādilūnaka*) and say, “This is nothing but fables of the ancients” (6:25). They would engage the believers in disputation too: the demons (*shayāṭīn*) were always communicating (*yūhūna*) to their friends that they should dispute with you (pl.), and the believers are warned that if they comply, they will be *mushrikūn* (6:121), though they are also told to dispute with the People of the Book “with that which is better” (*bi’llatī hiya aḥsan*) (16:125; 29:46). Noah’s people disputed with Noah (40:4 f.), and Noah frequently disputed with them (11:32). Man is declared to be disputatious (18:54), an open disputer (*khaṣīm*) (16:4; 36:77); and a Medinese verse declares that there is to be no *jidāl* during the months [*sic*] of the pilgrimage (2:197).

How technically should we understand the term *jidāl*? The Quran uses the same roots *jdl* and *khṣm* in connection with forensic pleading,⁷³ advocacy⁷⁴

Kelley, “Problems of knowledge and authority in the Pseudo-Clementine romance of recognitions”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13, 2005, 320, 338 f.

70 J. Edwards, “Religious faith and doubt in late medieval Spain”, *Past and Present* 120, 1988, 25.

71 R. Loeffler, *Islam in Practice: Religious Belief in a Persian Village* (Albany, 1988), 192, 198, 222, with others expressing themselves similarly at 68, 82, 206f. 209; cf. also 276 f.

72 Cf. *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. J. D. McAuliffe (Leiden, 2001–06), s.v. “Debate and disputation” (McAuliffe).

73 God has heard the statement of the one who pleads with you (*tujādiluka*) about her husband (58:1), followed by legislation about divorce by *zihār*.

74 Abraham pleads with God (*yujādilunā*) for Lot’s people (11:74); every soul will plead for itself (*tujādilu ‘an nafsihā*) on the day of judgement (16:111); “you” (sg.), perhaps

and legal disputing,⁷⁵ so both roots could be used in a technical sense rather than simply for ordinary wrangling, arguing and debating. One wonders whether the *jidāl* in which the *mushrikūn* would engage the believers should be understood as formal disputation.

That the unbelievers were engaging in formal disputations is suggested above all by 43:58: “And they say, Are our gods better or he [Jesus]? But they only mention him to you for the sake of disputation (*jadalan*); indeed, they are a contentious people (*qawmun khaṣimun*)”. Apart from the verse in which the unbelievers come to the Messenger to dispute and dismiss his preaching as fables of the ancients, this is the only time we hear what they actually said when they disputed, and what is so striking is that they are quoted as asking a dilemmatic question. Formal disputations, an extremely popular pastime in the Near East before the rise of Islam, typically began with one person giving another a choice between two positions (“is the sun God or not?”). The opponent would answer, thereby eliciting further questions, often also dilemmatic, and always designed to drive the opponent into a corner from which he could not escape (“If they say X, then we ask . . . and if they say Y, the absurdity is patent”); victory was achieved when the opponent was reduced to silence.⁷⁶ Not all disputations were about theology, and a good disputer could argue for and against anything. People disputed in private and in public, at courts and in the streets, in the Byzantine and in the Sasanian empire, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes by arrangement, and disputations in public drew crowds. Conversely, crowds could draw disputations: when a crowd gathered around the Syrian philosopher Iamblichus (d. 325) and his Alexandrian colleague Alypus, the latter postponed all questioning about philosophy and switched to dialectics, asking, “Tell me philosopher, is a rich man either unjust or the heir of the unjust, yes or no? For there is no middle way”.⁷⁷ Skilled participants in such verbal contests would rise to fame, and disputation had a special appeal to the young because it was a game which rewarded cleverness and speed rather than experience and learning. People continued to engage in disputation after the rise of Islam, and the Muslims continued to use the Quranic word *jidāl*, though they also adopted the new word *kalām* for this way of examining a problem, and for the subject matter debated in this manner.

Serious thinkers in the pre-Islamic Near East deplored this reduction of complicated questions to simplistic verbal games (“theological noughts and crosses”,

the Messenger, should not plead on behalf of those who betray their own souls; “you” (now pl.) have pleaded on behalf of such people in this world, but who will plead for them with God or be their *wakīl* (advocate?) on the day of judgement? (4:107, 109).

75 Thus 2:204; 3:44; 4:105; 38: 21f., 64; 43:48; 50:28; perhaps also 43:18.

76 Cf. M. Cook, “The origins of *Kalām*”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43, 1980, 32–43, with further Syriac evidence in J. Tannous, “Between Christology and *Kalām*? The life and letters of George, Bishop of the Arab Tribes”, in G. A. Kiraz (ed.), *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone: Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock* (Piscataway, 2008), 680 ff. For the entire phenomenon, see R. Lim, *Disputation, Power, and Social Order in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1995).

77 Lim, *Disputation, Power, and Social Order* 49.

as Cook calls them).⁷⁸ Basil the Great (d. 379), for example, says that heretics would use dialectical syllogisms such as “Do you worship what you know or what you do not know” and that each answer would elicit such and such further questions: “the question, therefore, is only put for the sake of dispute”.⁷⁹ The reaction of the Messenger is similar: “They only mention him [Jesus] to you for the sake of disputation (*jadalan*)” (43:58). Attack being the best form of defence, Basil also informs his readers what opening questions they could use themselves: “The following counter-question may also be put to them: what of the Father did the Only-begotten Son declare, His essence or His power? If his power, then ... If his essence, tell me ...”. In the Quran God similarly instructs the Messenger, “Now ask them (*fa’stafihim*) if your lord has daughters while they have sons or did We create the angels female while they were watching?” (37:149 f.). This is not a proper dilemmatic question, however, and there is no further “if they say yes, then say” in this pericope. But as van Ess notes, there are other passages in which the Quran uses *kalām* structures and assumes “the character of a manual for argumentation”.⁸⁰ It could have been through participation in disputations that the young had come to dismiss their ancestral doctrines as ancient fables.

The Quran sometimes refers to the unbelievers as engaging in an activity contemptuously dismissed as “wading into” things, explained by the lexicographers as meaning “to enter into false or vain discourse”. It was something done in groups, for the Messenger and/or the believer in general is cautioned to refrain from participation when the subject matter is the signs of God: “When you (sg.) see those who wade into our signs (*yakhūḍūna fī āyātina*), turn away from them until they wade into a different subject (*ḥadīth*). If *al-shayṭān* makes you forget, then do not sit with the wrongdoing people after remembering/being reminded” (6:68). A Medinese sura reminds the believers that “He has sent down to you (pl.) in the book that when you hear the signs of God being disbelieved and ridiculed, you should not sit with them until they wade into a different subject (*ḥadīth*)” (4:140), apparently referring back to 6:68 and glossing “wading” as disbelieving and ridiculing: so far, wading into things could simply mean poking fun at the Messenger’s preaching. (One is surprised that his opponents still felt free to mock him by the time of sura 4, but that is another problem.) “To wade into” is not an obvious expression for poking fun, however. The metaphor implies that the participants were venturing into subjects they would have been better advised to leave alone, and one takes it that it was in the course of so doing that they would mock the Messenger’s claims, not by the very act of wading into them: the believers were after all permitted to participate when the opponents waded into different subjects. Other passages imply that wading

78 Cook, “Origins of *Kalām*”, 40.

79 Basil, letter 234 (PG 32, 868–72A) in C. G. Bonis, “The problem concerning faith and knowledge, or reason and revelation, as expounded in the letters of St. Basil the Great to Amphilochius of Iconium”, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 5, 2004, 38.

80 J. van Ess, “Early development of *Kalām*”, in G. H. A. Juynboll (ed.), *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1982), 112 and note 12, citing 2:111, 135, 142; 3:20, 30; 10:15, 20, 38, 50 f. My thanks to Michael Cook for reminding me of this paper.

was a kind of game: “Leave them to wade and play until they meet the day which they have been promised/threatened with” (43:83; 70:42; cf. also 6:91), one passage counsels. “Leave alone those who take their religion to be play and amusement” (6:70), as another passage says shortly after mentioning wading. If one asked the hypocrites (about things they had said), they would say “we were only wading and playing” (thus the Medinese sura, 9:65; cf. 69). The unbelievers would “play in doubt” (*fī shakk yal’abūna*)” (44:9); the sinful liar (*affāk athīm*) would treat what he learned of God’s signs as a jest (*ittakhadhahā huzu’an*, 45:9), as other passages say. Though all the references could be to mere joking, irreverent banter and outright teasing, “wading into” things sounds like a contemptuous term for disputing (this is in fact how traditionalist exegetes understood it, taking the Quran to forbid *kalām*).⁸¹ It was in the course of disputing that the unbelievers would dismiss God’s signs as ancient fables (6:25), and also that they would treat God’s signs and warnings as a jest (*huzu’an*) (18:56): as in the case of Jesus, they turned deeply serious questions into mere games.

The subdivisions of the *mushrikūn*

So far we have seen that all the *mushrikūn* seem to have grown up as believers in the Biblical God in a community that drew its beliefs from either Judaism or a form of Christianity closer to its Jewish roots than was normally the case, and that some of them had lost their faith in the resurrection, perhaps by participation in disputations of the type popular all over the Near East at the time. It seems that we can classify them in terms of three groups.

The first group is constituted by *mushrikūn* of what we may call the traditional type, probably the vast majority. They believed in God and the lesser beings, saw God as the creator and ruler of this world, and fully accepted that He would resurrect them for judgement. They also believed in messengers, just not in the Messenger of the Quran.⁸² Their error from the Messenger’s point of view, apart from their rejection of him, lay partly in their ascription of partners to God and partly in their lack of concern with the day of judgement, which they regarded as remote and/or as nothing to be feared because they were bound to be saved.

The second group differed from the first only in that they doubted or denied the resurrection. We may call them the traditional deniers. They too believed in God, the lesser beings, God’s creation and government of this world, and also in messengers, but they were not sure that God would resurrect them, and some were adamant that He would not, apparently without believing in any alternative forms of life after death.

The Messenger reacts to both groups with utter incomprehension. He simply cannot understand how they can ascribe partners to God or deny the resurrection even while affirming that God has created them, the heavens and the earth (29:61; 31:25; 43:9, 87), that He sends down rain (29:63), and that He is the lord of the earth and everything in it, the lord of the seven heavens, the governor

81 Fakhṛ al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xiii, 25, ad 6:68; cf. the title of al-Ash’arī’s *Risālat istiḥṣān al-khawḍ fī ‘ilm al-kalām*.

82 Cf. Crone, “Angels versus humans”.

of all things (23:82–9). The bulk of the Quranic polemic against the *mushrikūn* is directed against these two groups.

The third group we may call the radical deniers. The Messenger does not usually distinguish them from their traditional counterparts, so that it is hard to draw up their profile, but two passages suggest that they denied God's role as creator and ruler of this world, which the other two groups accepted. The first is the vignette of the rich man who goes into his garden, saying, "I don't think this will ever perish (*mā azunnu an tabīda hādhihi abadan*), I don't think that the hour will be coming (*wa-mā azunnu 'l-sā'a qā'imatan*)" (18:35 f.). Why does he say he does not think that this will ever perish? Maybe he is simply speaking hyperbolically: all he means is that it will not perish in his lifetime, as al-Māturīdī suggests.⁸³ There are in fact numerous passages in the Quran in which "ever" (*abadan*) refers to people's lifetimes, but only because it refers to mortals ("They will not ever be guided", as we read in the same sura, 18:57). The word is meant quite literally in the numerous assurances that people will dwell as immortals in paradise or hell for ever (*khālidinā fihā abadan*), and also when Abraham and those with him declare themselves quit of their people, saying that enmity and hatred has appeared between them *abadan*, i.e. it will last for ever (60:4). One would expect the "ever" to be meant in an equally literal vein in the parable of the rich man. In short, one wonders if he is being cast as an eternalist: he does not believe in the resurrection because he does not think that the world will ever end.

If the rich man held that the world would never end, one would expect him also to deny that it had a beginning, meaning that he explained it and everything in it without recourse to the postulate of divine creation. That this is his position is perhaps implied by his friend's response: "Do you deny Him who (*a-kafarta bi'lladhī*) created you of dust, then of a sperm-drop, and who then fashioned you as a man?" (18:37). We are not given the rich man's answer, perhaps because there was no need to spell out the options here: either he would say that God had indeed created him, in which case the creation amounted to proof of the resurrection; or else he would deny that God had created him, in which case he was beyond the pale. That there were some who did indeed take the position beyond the pale is clear from the second piece of evidence, 45:24: "There is nothing but our life down here . . . nothing but time destroys us". If these unbelievers held time rather than God to kill them, they can hardly have believed that it was God who had created them. To this may be added a third piece of evidence, namely the fact that both they and other deniers of the afterlife are presented as expressing themselves in a reductionist vein. "There is nothing but our life down here", they say; "nothing but time destroys us"; the resurrection is "nothing but fables of the ancients". Reductionism is characteristic of positivists who hold human reasoning to rule out the claims of revelation. What the Messenger brands as mere conjecture and arrogant self-deification was in their view the road to genuine knowledge.

If the radical deniers were eternalists, did they believe in God at all and what could they have made of the lesser beings? As regards God, it is impossible to establish that they denied His existence, and it also seems unlikely. But they do seem to have denied the monotheist conception of Him as the creator, regulator

83 Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt*, ix, 56.

and judge of this world. Their view of the lesser beings is more difficult to discern, for the Meccan suras practically equate wrongheadedness about the resurrection with *shirk*. It was those who gave the angels female names who denied the afterlife (53:27); and “when God is mentioned on his own (*waḥdahū*), the hearts of those who do not believe in the hereafter contract in disgust (*ishma’azzat*), and when those apart from Him are mentioned, they rejoice” (39:45). These and other passages of the same nature could be directed against the traditional deniers, of course, but there is *shirk* even in the account of the probably eternalist rich man. Here, though, a literalist understanding of *shirk* may strain the evidence. As we have seen, the rich man’s friend responds by asking whether the rich man denies the one who had created him. Thereafter he moves on to a statement of his own convictions: “He is God, my Lord, and I do not associate anyone with my Lord (*lā ushriku bi-rabbī aḥadan*)” (18:38). The rich man has not said a word about lesser beings: what or whom has he associated with God? It is hard to see what the answer could be other than his own wilful inclination (*hawā*). The radical deniers of sura 45, who held time to destroy them, are explicitly said to have deified their inclinations: “have you not seen the one who adopts his own inclination as a god?” (45:23 f.; also 25:43). “*Hawā* is a deified object of worship” (*al-hawā ilāh ma’būd*), as a later scholar remarked.⁸⁴ It could be that these radicals were polytheists only in the sense of holding their own reasoning to be as authoritative as God’s revelation, or worse, to overrule it, making them self-deifiers after the fashion of Pharaoh. Maybe this is also what is meant in the verse on “those who do not believe in the afterlife, making [themselves?] equal with their Lord” (*wa-hum bi-rabbihim ya’dilūn* (6:150; cf. 27:60, in the form *bal hum qawmun ya’dilūn*). This would make good sense, for if the radical deniers regarded God as irrelevant to this world, it is hard to see what role they could have retained for the lesser beings. But the Quran does not give us a lot of evidence to go by.

The Medinese suras

The Medinese suras often refer to belief and disbelief in God and the last day, using a phrase which does not appear in the Meccan suras. People are exhorted to believe in God and the last day (2:162; cf. 4:162); the mosques are declared to be for those who believe in God and the last day, and who observe prayer, pay alms and fear God, not for the *mushrikūn* (9:17ff); piety is to believe in God and the last day, the angels, books and messengers, as well as to spend (2:177), and anyone who denies (*yukaffiru bi-*) God, his angels, messengers and the last day has gone astray (4:136; cf. 2:285). Those who did not believe in all these things could be taken to be radical deniers, once again in the sense that they rejected the monotheist conception of God. This interpretation suggests itself with particular force in a passage in sura 2 in which we encounter intellectually arrogant people who pretend to believe in God and the last day, but who will not believe “as the fools believe”. The Messenger responds that they themselves are fools, perhaps alluding to Psalms 14:1 (“The fool says in his heart: there is no

84 Abū Hātim al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-zīna*, section on *aṣḥāb al-ahwā’ wa’l-madhāhib*, in ‘A. S. al-Sāmarrā’ī, *al-Ghuluww wa’l-firaq al-ghāliya fī ’l-ḥaḍāra al-islāmiyya*, Baghdad 1972, 247, citing an anonymous scholar *ad* 25:43.

God”), and adds that “When they meet those who believe, they say, ‘We believe’. But when they are alone with their demons (*shayāṭīn*), they say, ‘We are with you, we were only joking’” (2:8, 13f).⁸⁵ We hear of similarly double-minded people identified as People of the Book (5:61, cf. 59), as a group (*tā’ifa*) of the People of the Book (3:72), and as a group (*farīq*) of Jews with gentiles (*ummiyyūn*) among them (2:75f, 78).⁸⁶ Once again we seem to be encountering a radical minority, this time consisting of Jews and Arabs alike. In last three passages nothing is said about the last day, but 9:29 famously tells us that those People of the Book who do not believe in God and the last day should be fought until they pay *jizya*.

The passage on the intellectually arrogant people apart, the Medinese suras are problematic in that belief in God and the last day is often used as a frozen expression for little more than doing as the Messenger says. “Obey God and the Messenger and the holders of authority and refer matters to God and the Messenger if you believe in God and the last day” (4:59), as a well-known passage commands. Divorced women should not hide what God has created in their wombs “if they believe in God and the last day” (2:228); those guilty of unlawful sexual relations should be flogged without compassion “if you believe in God and the last day” (24:2); and if you asked for exemption from fighting, you would be deemed not to believe in God and the last day (9:44f; cf. also 2:232, 264; 4:38, 162). Belief in “God and His messengers” often comes across as similarly frozen.⁸⁷ However we are to account for the fact that belief in God and the last day (rather than, say, belief in the prophets and scripture) became a shibboleth for obedience, we have here a case where it is impossible to discern the reality behind the polemics. How literally are we to understand 9:29 on the People of the Book who are to be fought for not believing in God and the last day? Did they deny God or the last day in any sense other than that of refusing to join or properly support the Messenger’s party? Without the voice of the opponents themselves one simply cannot tell.

In sum, all we can say about the Medinese suras is that radical deniers seem to be reflected in them too, now apparently represented among both Jews and Arabs. But it is only in the Meccan suras that the resurrection and afterlife are debated in sufficient detail to allow us a glimpse of the diverse positions of the *mushrikūn* on the issue.

85 For their *shayāṭīn*, compare “The *shayāṭīn* are the friends of those who do not believe” (7:27, in the context of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from paradise). Such *shayāṭīn* are apparently assumed to lie behind all wrongful acts, cf. 6:68, 121; 22:3 f.

86 Unlike S. Günther (in J. Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Leiden 2001–06, s.v. “*ummi*”), I cannot see that *ummi* means anything other than “gentile” in the Qur’ān: Arabic *umma* corresponds to Latin *gens*/Greek *ethnos*, and “gentile” fits all the contexts in which *ummi* occurs. Naturally, the term would be largely synonymous with an Arab in Arabia, but what it meant was simply non-Jew. The meaning “illiterate” is doctrinally inspired, assisted by 2:78, where the *ummiyyūn* do not know *al-kitāb*: the continuation that they are just conjecturing (*wa-in hum illā yazunnūn*) shows that the sense in which they do not know it is that of ignoring it, not in that of being uneducated or unable to read it.

87 Cf. 4:150, 152, where those who “do not believe in (*yukaffiru bi-*) God and His messengers” are at fault for believing in some of them and not in others; 4:171, where People of Book are told to believe in God and His messengers and not to say “three”. Compare also 3:179; 57:19, 21.