



Varieties of Religious Invention: Founders and Their Functions in History

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Muḥammad's Mission and the Dīn of Ibrāhīm according to Ibn Ishāq

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter focuses on the debate over Muhammad's role as prophet in the first centuries after his death in 632. The earliest extant biography of Muhammad was written by Ibn Ishāq during the last stages of the Abbasid Revolution (c. 718–750). His *Sirat Rasul Allah* presents Muhammad as a man chosen to reestablish a lost tradition of ritual worship and submission to God centered on the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*), to which Ibn Ishāq refers as the *ḥanifiyah din* Ibrahim (covenant of Abraham). Ibn Ishāq understood this as not a new "religion," but the reestablishment of a much older system, one of several that can all be traced to God's covenant with Ibrahim as described in Jewish accounts that Ibn Ishāq used in creating his story.

Keywords: Muhammad, Ibrahim, din, Ibn Ishāq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, pilgrimage, covenant of Abraham, ritual worship

ALTHOUGH IT IS customary for non-Muslims to regard Muḥammad as the founder of Islam, it is important to note that Muslims do not typically speak of the prophet in these terms. Is this simply a matter of semantics? Or is it more complicated, with other, more fundamental factors involved? Before determining whether one can in any sense refer to Muḥammad as a "founder," it may be necessary to raise an even more basic question: What is "Islam"? Not, "what is Islam as a religious tradition," but what did the term symbolize to early followers of Muḥammad as well as those in the early centuries who lived through dynamic processes and events that caused the term to become reified, concretized, to denote a religious tradition. Such questions have theological as

well as linguistic and historical dimensions, and one might attempt to answer them from a variety of directions. This chapter focuses on what can be learned from a particular early Muslim source—the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*—that, as the earliest biography of Muḥammad and the basis for virtually all later biographies of the prophet, merits close reading. Early Muslim sources and the vast commentary tradition devoted to Ibn Ishāq's text that developed over the past millennium do not approach these questions in quite the same way that contemporary students of comparative religion might. But their portrayals of Muḥammad nonetheless bring to the fore critical questions about the self-understanding of people within the tradition as well as its relation to other religious traditions that remain a part of popular and scholarly discourse.

(p.132) The *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (*The Biography of the Messenger of God*) was written by Muḥammad b. Ishāq b. Yasār (d. 767), better known as Ibn Ishāq. This work was written a little more than a century following the prophet's death in 632 CE and is based on stories collected from many of those who had "living memories" of Muḥammad and his companions. The text was originally quite large, containing three primary sections: *al-Mubtada'* (The Beginning), which starts with the story of creation and ends with the birth of Muḥammad; *al-Mab'ath* (The Mission), which includes the birth of Muḥammad, his early life, his rise as prophet, the resistance to his call in Mecca, the migration (*hijrah*) to Medina, and ends with the beginning of the so-called Caravan Wars; and *al-Maghāzī* (The Expeditions or The Battle Days), which covers the raids and battles between Muḥammad's community and the Meccan polytheists and their allies, the victorious pilgrimage to Mecca, and ends with Muḥammad's death.

Ibn Ishāq's original text is no longer extant in its original form, but large parts of the last two sections of the text were redacted, commented on, and edited by 'Abd al-Mālīk b. Hishām (d. 828 or 833), known most commonly as Ibn Hishām, whose edition has been preserved and will serve as the primary source of the following analysis.¹ Ibn Hishām removed the earlier sections of the text, those relating to the stories of the pre-Muḥammad prophets found mostly in the Bible, because he appears to have objected to Ibn Ishāq's liberal use of the so-called *Isrā'īlīyat*, Jewish source material that included commentarial traditions on biblical narratives that he apparently received directly from Jewish interlocutors.² Many passages redacted by Ibn Hishām have been reconstructed by Alfred Guillaume from other medieval Arabic texts.³ In addition to Guillaume, Gordon Newby has reconstructed lost sections of *al-Mubtada'* that begins with Ibn Ishāq's account of creation and recounts **(p.133)** the stories of Muḥammad's prophetic predecessors.⁴ Although it can be difficult to interpret the nuances and symbols that Ibn Ishāq employs in his fascinating description of Muḥammad's purpose in God's larger sacred drama, Newby and Guillaume offer non-specialists an opportunity to examine early Muslim views of prophecy and of

Muḥammad's relationship to the larger "Abrahamic tradition" of the late antique/early medieval Near East.

The *Sīrat* as History or Epic

There has been a rather unfortunate tendency for many readers of Ibn Ishāq to treat the *Sīrah* as a history of the formation of Islam and the life of Muḥammad. Many scholars assume that his goal was to tell a "historically accurate" account of the way things *actually* unfolded during Muḥammad's life. I am not arguing here that the text cannot be used as a history or that Ibn Ishāq was attempting to write a fraudulent account of the community's first twenty-three years. But by treating it as a historical source we are using the text in a way that the author would have probably found troubling.⁵ *Sīrah* literature in general is better understood as "popular epics" than as historiographies, originally intended to be performed by storytellers to often illiterate audiences and concerned with presenting heroic figures as examples and instruments of God's will.⁶ It is thus better to imagine Ibn Ishāq as a performer than as a historian, one who creates an image of Muḥammad's life through a series of narrative cycles that, in many instances, do not fall into a coherent chronological order. In the case of Ibn Ishāq's epic of Muḥammad, there is no greater example and instrument of God's will than the prophet himself, whom the author uses to communicate a greater truth about God's intervention *into* history.

Ibn Ishāq's central concern is to depict Muḥammad as a man, chosen by God to reestablish a lost tradition of ritual worship and slavery to God centered on the pilgrimage (*hajj*), which Ibn Ishāq refers to as the *ḥanīfiyah dīn* Ibrāhīm and not as a "new religion" that came to be known as "Islam." For Ibn Ishāq, the term *islām* signifies (1) the rejection of aberrant practices introduced to the *dīn*—often incorrectly translated as "religion"; it can be (p.134) interpreted several ways, as discussed later in the chapter—established by Ibrāhīm (Abraham) and his son, Ismā'il (Ishmael) when they built the Ka'bah as the original temple to God; and (2) the escape from *'ibādat al-awthān* (the servile worship of images, figures, and objects).

The following analysis focuses on what it is that Ibn Ishāq understood Muḥammad to be creating or "founding" as a prophet in the line of biblical prophets. In other words, did Ibn Ishāq think that Muḥammad was bringing a new "religion"? What can be said about the tradition that Muḥammad was sent to (re)establish? In examining these questions we rely primarily on the last section of *al-Mubtada'* and the first part of *al-Mab'ath* that is preserved by Ibn Hishām as well as the section of the *Mubtada'* redacted by Ibn Hishām that depicts the story of Ibrāhīm. The choice of these parts of the *Sīrah* may sound curious as they do not describe in detail what Muḥammad did once prophecy begins and he starts to establish a community based on the revelations Ibn Ishāq sees as coming from God. But Ibn Ishāq uses these sections of the text to set up the crises that causes God to send Muḥammad as a prophet. It is thus not

possible to fully understand the latter parts of *al-Mubtada'* or *al-Mab'ath* without taking the earlier redacted stories of the prophets into account. Ibn Ishāq's Ibrāhīm lies in the background as the prelude to Muḥammad's mission and sets up the causes requiring Muḥammad's appearance.

Setting the Table: The Story of Ibrāhīm as the Context for the Mission of Muḥammad

In presenting his tale of the rise of "idolatry" among Muḥammad's ancestors, Ibn Ishāq states that it began as the "ritual worship of stones" (*'ibadat al-ḥijārah*)⁷ following the original monotheist worship of God at the Ka'bah in Mecca. He says, however, that when Mecca became overpopulated, and as individuals and clans drifted away, they took stones (*ḥijārah*) from the *ḥaram* (the sacred space around the Ka'bah that included a significant part of the entire village of Mecca) for the "glorification of the *ḥaram*." Wherever they settled they would erect the stone and circumambulate it as if it were the Ka'bah. Over time, this led them to ritually worship (*'abada*)

(p.135) what they esteemed among the stones and which excited their wonder until eventually corrupting and forgetting what they followed, and they exchanged the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm and Ismā'il for another. So they ritually worshipped (*'abada*) idols (*awthān*) and they turned toward following the errors of the peoples before them.⁸

Strangely, however, Ibn Ishāq states that while Muḥammad's ancestors turned to the ritual worship of stones and, eventually, of *awthān*, they

continued to submit themselves according to the covenant (*'ahd*) of Ibrāhīm, such as glorifying the House (*al-bayt*), the circumambulation of it, the major pilgrimage (*ḥajj*), the minor pilgrimage (*'umrah*), the standing at 'Arafah and Muzdalifah, sacrificing the animals, and the *ihlāl* during the major and minor pilgrimage, while adding to it [things that were] not a part of it.⁹

As Ibn Ishāq presents it here, the introduction of the ritual worship of stones and *awthān*, however, was quickly followed by changes in the *ḥajj* ritual. For Ibn Ishāq this is a central crisis that necessitates the mission of Muḥammad because changes in the *ḥajj* ritual, perhaps more than the rise of *awthān* worship, signified the abandonment of the original *dīn* of his ancestors, rooted in the covenant (*'ahd*) of Ibrāhīm, although the significance of this is lost on the reader without examining Ibn Ishāq's story of Ibrāhīm.

Ibrāhīm has a special status in Muslim sacred history. In the Qur'ān, only Muḥammad, and Mūsā (Moses) are mentioned more often. Insofar as he predated all sectarian divisions and was a "pure monotheist" (*hanīf*) who "submitted to God" (*muslim*) and was not an "idolater," Ibrāhīm was central to Muḥammad's arguments with the Jewish community of Medina. Newby argues that Ibrāhīm is presented by Ibn Ishāq as the restorer of the worship established

by Adam and that Muḥammad, as the reviver of the *dīn* restored by Ibrāhīm, should be understood as the “new Adam and Abraham.”¹⁰

(p.136) Ibn Ishāq opens his story of Ibrāhīm by stating that “God desired to send (*yuba'ath*) Ibrāhīm . . . as a proof (*ḥujjah*) to his people and a messenger (*rasūl*) to His servants (*‘ibād*).”¹¹ He is “sent” and thus for Ibn Ishāq, Ibrāhīm functions as God’s instrument. He does not set out to found a new religion of his own accord. The term used to describe his mission, *ḥujjah*, implies something more forceful than merely to function as “proof” or “evidence” but to function as an active agent refuting the ritual worship of *awthān*. Furthermore, Ibn Ishāq does not say that Ibrāhīm was sent as a messenger to Ibrāhīm’s community (*qawm*) but to God’s servants (*‘ibādahi*). This term, *‘ibādah*, is perhaps the most important word in understanding Ibn Ishāq’s view of Muḥammad’s mission. The related verb *‘abada* means “to serve, worship, or adore.” It indicates that worship is an action and not simply a state of mind. The noun *‘abd* is used throughout the Qur’ān to indicate the status of slavery, especially to God. Its use in names is especially important for Ibn Ishāq. In his description of the rise of the “ritual worship of idols” (*‘ibadat al-awthān*), the conjunction of the names of gods embodied by *awthān* with *‘abd*, such as ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, marks not just a change in worship but an actual shift in the object of abject submission.¹²

The connection between worship and abject submission is important in appreciating the idea central in Ibn Ishāq’s understanding of the *dīn* that Muḥammad represented: that ritual worship performed properly is an act of abject submission, an expression of the complete status of obedience that the worshipper-slave undertakes. According to Ibn Ishāq, then, Ibrāhīm’s roles as (1) *ḥujjah* against the worship/submission to *awthān* and (2) messenger to God’s worshipper-slaves are not the same but, rather, two distinct activities.

Ibn Ishāq divides his story of Ibrāhīm along the lines of his dual role as *ḥujjah* and *rasūl*. The first part of the story deals with Ibrāhīm’s miraculous birth and rapid maturation, his innate monotheism, and his actions among his people to demonstrate the futility of ritually worshipping-submitting themselves to images made of stone and wood. God also performs miracles through Ibrāhīm as proof that ritually worshipping-submitting to the One God (Allāh) is better than *‘ibadat al-awthān*.¹³ A brief interlude tells how Ibrāhīm leaves his homeland and begins to **(p.137)** wander the land with his brother Lūṭ (Lot) and his wife Sārah (Sarah) in an effort to find a place to safely ritually worship-serve God. The final stage of the story begins with the appearance of Hājar (Hagar), a slave girl belonging to Sārah whom she gives to Ibrāhīm because Sārah is barren. Ibrāhīm sleeps with Hājar and she gives birth to a male child, Ismā‘īl. Once Ismā‘īl is born, God orders Ibrāhīm to “Build the House and call (*adhān*) the people (*al-nāss*) to pilgrimage (*al-ḥajj*).”¹⁴ Ibn Ishāq then provides four slightly different accounts of how Ibrāhīm and Ismā‘īl arrive in Mecca and build the House, the “first made for mankind on earth.”¹⁵ Once the House is completely rebuilt,

Ibrāhīm is shown by Jabra'il how to perform all of the rituals of the *ḥajj*. God then commands Ibrāhīm to call (*da'ā*) mankind (*al-nāss*) to perform the pilgrimage. In a scene reminiscent of the Exodus story where Moses demurs when God tells him to go to Pharaoh and free the children of Israel, Ibrāhīm complains "O Lord, my voice will not reach." But God reassures him saying, "Announce it and it will reach." So Ibrāhīm, in complete obedience,

raised his voice up over the place until it went to the tops of the mountains and along their length. The earth, its plains, its mountains, its dry land and sea, its men and *jinn* gathered that day so that they all heard it together. He put his fingers in his ears and turned his face to the south, saying "O mankind, the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) is ordained in the ancient [House], so respond to your Lord." And they responded from the seven limits and from the east and the west, from the ends of the earth, [saying] "At your service, O God, at your service" (*labbayka Allāhumma labayka*).

Unlike Moses in the Book of Exodus (4:1–17), who demurs when God tells him to go to Pharaoh and free the children of Israel, Ibrāhīm exhibits complete faith. When God reassures him, he immediately goes forth and calls the *ḥajj*, to which the people and the *jinn* respond at once and proclaim their obedience with the *ihlāl*, the shout of the pilgrim "labbayka Allāhumma labayka" (at your service, O God, at your service). It is the expression of servitude that the faithful '*abd*' declares as a proclamation of **(p.138)** servile obedience. The pilgrimage, therefore, becomes worship-submission par excellence, the fullest sign of submission to the One God, which is required for God's '*ibād*'. For Ibn Ishāq, this is Ibrāhīm's covenant with God: announce the *ḥajj* and they will come.¹⁶

The Pilgrimage as the Dīn of Ibrāhīm

Ibn Ishāq refers frequently to the "*dīn* of Ibrāhīm" in his work. Although *dīn* is usually translated as "religion," this term is highly problematic as a description of human experience and activity, especially when applied to pre-modern traditions. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a leading twentieth-century theorist in the field of comparative religion who has written extensively on Islam, argues that the modern English term "religion" comes from the Latin *religio* and originally referred to ritual acts and not to systems of "faith" (also a problematic term) as it comes to be used after the Enlightenment.¹⁷ Over time the term came to describe a multiplicity of ritual communities in the Greco-Roman world and began to be used as a way to describe "my ritual practice" against the ritual practices of others. It also was used as a way of describing the "bonds" that ritual practice creates between God and the practitioner. The term "faith" was more commonly used to describe a community held together by a set of assumptions about the divine that carried with it exclusive qualities. It is only after the fifteenth century that the term "religion" emerges as a way of describing the relationship between God and man in the way that "faith" had previously been used. During this time, *religio* begins to connote personal piety

and, by the seventeenth century, it comes to refer to systems of ideas or “belief” and not to acts, practices, or bonds. This is largely due to the anti-ritual disposition of Protestant traditions that sought to focus more exclusively on “belief” in God or Christ as the litmus test for salvation. “Religion” thus becomes a system of beliefs that can be falsified or proven.¹⁸ Following the Enlightenment “religion” also begins to be used **(p.139)** to describe historical entities that develop over time, which, according to Smith, leads to the search for common “essences” that link all “religions” together under the broader category of “religion” as a common aspect of being human.

Because of a series of historical events that occur in the pre-Islamic Near East, Smith argues that Islam emerges into the world as a fully self-aware religion that causes the term *dīn* to signify a religious community and its plural *adyān* to indicate multiple religious communities in which only one represents “the best of its kind,” a process that would not occur in Europe or the rest of the world for almost another millennium.¹⁹ In the Near East, therefore, by the seventh century, *dīn* comes to refer to (1) a religious community in the modern sense, in which members drew distinctions between traditions based on understandings of the relative “truth” of their tradition and those of others; (2) an “abstract pattern of beliefs and practices characterizing a particular tradition or group” that typified the outsider view; (3) a “systematic religion,” or a coherent unified structure of belief and practice that held a community together that represented the insider view; and (4) a path or way of conducting oneself.²⁰

Smith's account is problematic in certain respects in that he sees the early community as unified in sensing that what they did and thought was different from and superior to those around them and, above all, in the way he describes Islam as a “self-aware” agent. This emphasis in effect essentializes the early tradition, whereas “Islam” is, in reality, simply the product of Muslim activity. Nevertheless, if we take Smith's four definitions of *dīn* in early Islam as a guide, we appear to see aspects of each in Ibn Ishāq's usage. He uses *dīn* seventy-eight times in the sections of the *al-Mubtada'* and *al-Mab'ath* under examination. In most instances it is used to refer to the *dīn* of a particular group (such as Christians, Jews, and Mazdians) or of certain individuals.²¹ Thus, it would seem that Ibn Ishāq uses *dīn* in a comparative sense, drawing distinctions between groups and individuals. But in instances where he draws a distinction between different *dīns*, he focuses almost exclusively on differences in ritual practice-servitude (*ibādah*) and not on “belief” or understandings of the nature of God. In fact, Ibn Ishāq hardly ever uses the terms generally **(p.140)** interpreted as “belief” (*āmana*) or “believer” (*mu'min*) in passages that are not direct quotations from the Qur'ān. This is remarkable given that references to *āmana* in its various forms occur in the Qur'ān more than a thousand times. Additionally, given the importance of monotheism in the Qur'ān, it is striking that the explicit coupling of *dīn* and the discussion of God's unity (*tawḥīd*), occurs in only one story, that of 'Abd Allāh b. Thāmir and the Christianization of Najrān—where

“submission” (*aslama*) refers to acknowledging the oneness of God and referred to becoming a Christian, not a Muslim.²²

In virtually every other instance where the term can be linked to an idea or an action, *dīn* is used by Ibn Ishāq in reference to *‘ibādah*.²³ It is likewise evident that when Ibn Ishāq uses the phrases *dīn Ibrāhīm* and *ḥanīfīyah dīn Ibrāhīm* he specifically refers to *‘ibādah*—in this instance, the *ḥajj*. Ibn Ishāq uses the phrase “*dīn Ibrāhīm*” seven times in the sections of the text under examination. All but one of the references occurs in the context of the corruption of the *ḥajj* ritual by a group known as the *Ḥums* that begins around the time of Muḥammad's birth.²⁴ The only other reference occurs in the story of Salmān the Persian, who was raised as a Mazdian and upon leaving his home on an errand for his father encounters a group of Christians praying in a church. Like ‘Abd Allāh b. Thāmir, Salmān is taken by the beauty of their ritual prayers and he sets off on a quest to learn more about them. Salmān travels to Syria and seeks out the “most excellent of [the] *dīn* who is most knowledgeable.”²⁵ Throughout the account of his travels, *dīn* refers to a way or path that the pious men follow and that path, at least for Salmān, seems to center on ritual, specifically prayer. It is prayer that attracts him to the Christians in the first place and when he describes to his father his attraction to the Christians and tells him that the Christian *dīn* is better than the *dīn* of his father, Salmān is comparing the fire ritual of the Mazdians to the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) of the Christians. In these passages, Ibn Ishāq clearly uses *dīn* in reference to ritual practice. There are no discussions of “belief” or conceptions of God. Given that most uses of the term *dīn* by Ibn Ishāq refer to **(p.141)** servile ritual worship, with the majority referring to the pilgrimage ritual, it is clear that when Ibn Ishāq refers to the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm he intends the reader to understand it not as “the religion” of Ibrāhīm, but the *ḥajj* as servile ritual worship established by Ibrāhīm through God's direction.

The same is true for *ḥanīfīyah dīn Ibrāhīm*. Generally, the term *hanīf* has been translated as a kind of nondescript monotheism, or in Ibrāhīm's case, as “pure monotheism.”²⁶ But interpretations of the term are often tied to understandings of the term *dīn* as “religion” instead of ritual practice or way of ritual practice. It is therefore always assumed that when the term *ḥanīf* is used it refers to a theological understanding of the nature of God and not to ways of worshipping or serving God. Central to understanding *ḥanīf* is one of the definitions of the term *dīn* passed over by Smith. In classical Arabic, the word *dīn* comes from a root (*d y n*) that connotes obedience, submission, or enslavement. For instance, in a poem Ibn Ishāq attributes to the latter-day *ḥanīf* Zayd b. ‘Amr b. Nufayl, who breaks with the Quraysh when they institute innovations to the *ḥajj*, Zayd laments, “Am I to worship (*adīn*) one Lord or a thousand? . . . I will not worship (*adīn*) another God besides you.”²⁷ This poem takes place in the context of Zayd's search for a proper way to worship-serve God, which he characterizes as

the *ḥanīfiyah dīn Ibrāhīm*. The poem clearly refers to *adīn* as an act of worship, specifically the pilgrimage established by Ibrāhīm.

With this in mind it is evident from the stories of Salmān the Persian and Zayd b. 'Amr that when Ibn Ishāq uses the phrase *ḥanīfiyah dīn Ibrāhīm* he does not mean "pure monotheism." In classical Arabic the word *ḥanīf* meant to "incline toward the right state or tendency." It is therefore likely that *ḥanīfiyah dīn Ibrāhīm* means, in Ibn Ishāq's usage, "Ibrāhīm's inclination toward servile worship," an admittedly unwieldy phrase, but one that encapsulates the story of Ibrāhīm and the centrality of the *ḥajj* as the ultimate expression of the servile worship of God.

The Rise of 'Ibādat al-Awthān among the Descendants of Ismā'īl
After Ibrāhīm establishes the *ḥajj* as the ultimate act of worship-servitude to God, his descendants, through his son Ismā'īl (Muḥammad's ancestors), **(p.142)** begin to reintroduce 'ibādat al-awthān several generations later. The timeline for this process is extremely confused in Ibn Ishāq's story. Ibn Ishāq begins by describing tribal disputes that all revolve around control of the Ka'bah almost immediately after Ibrāhīm's death. These disputes eventually lead to the capping of the Zamzam well. Ibn Ishāq refers to this event as occurring in the *jāhiliyah*, generally translated as "time of ignorance."²⁸ Muslim commentators usually took this term, when it appears in the Qur'ān, to indicate the opposite of 'ilm (religious knowledge) and the absence of *islām* in both its symbolic meaning of "submission" and its more reified form signifying the period in which Islam as a religious tradition became established.

Initially, Ibn Ishāq refers to the *jāhiliyah* in the context of disputes over control of the Ka'bah that result in the further corruption of the *dīn* of Ibrahim. The *jāhiliyah* is understood as a period of foolish actions or wrong conduct that begins, not with the beginning of the 'ibādah of stones or even of *awthān*, but when disputes within the tribe of Ismā'īl led to the capping of the Zamzam well and the decline of the Ka'bah as the central site of pilgrimage. In Ibn Ishāq's depiction of the sacred history of Mecca, the closing of the Zamzam well seems to have prompted or coincided with the migrations of the descendants of Ismā'īl that led to stone worship. Although the members of the tribe of Ismā'īl took stones in order to glorify the *ḥaram*, they continued to perform the *ḥajj* according to the covenant of Ibrāhīm; even though they "added to it [things that were] not a part of it" they are not described as "adding deviations" (*ghayyar*) or "innovations" (*bid'ah*).²⁹

Some thirteen generations after the capping of the Zamzam Well, the situation changes when 'Amr b. Luḥayy becomes the first to "deviate" (*ghayyar*) from the *dīn* of Ismā'īl. It is clear from the text that 'Amr b. Luḥayy did not begin the practice of 'ibādat al-ḥijārah. His crime, for which he is "dragging his intestines in hell," was building temples (*ṭawāghīt*, sing. *ṭāghūt*) and installing idols

(*aṣnām*) in them that he gave the names of gods.³⁰ No longer were the stones or images extensions of the *ḥaram* that the people glorified; now they began to signify the presence of **(p.143)** gods in addition to the One God, making the *‘ibād* “unclean people of association” (*najas ahl shirk*).³¹ In addition, ‘Amr b. Luḥayy extended the *ḥajj* ritual to include circumambulation of these temples while remaining in a state of ritual purity, normally reserved only for the *ḥaram*, as well as other parts of the *ḥajj* ritual established by Ibrāhīm for the Ka‘bah alone. Aspects of the *ḥajj* ritual were even extended to the worship-service of household gods, a practice that spread across Arabia.³²

The Tradition of Quṣayy b. Kilāb and its Replacement of the *Dīn* of Ibrāhīm
Approximately two generations after ‘Amr b. Luḥayy, the remaining clans in Mecca began to fight over control of the Ka‘bah and the *ḥajj* leading to further deviations from the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm and Ismā‘īl. Eventually, Quṣayy b. Kilāb, the most important figure in the pre-Muslim Quraysh tribe, seized control of Mecca and of the pilgrimage rites, establishing himself and his family as the source of authority for the rituals attached to the Ka‘bah.³³ From this point until the revival of the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm, the performance of the stages of the *ḥajj* was dictated by the whims of certain clans not according to the traditions established by Ibrāhīm. Quṣayy’s standing was so great that he irrevocably replaced Ibrāhīm as the source of authority for the pilgrimage and the rituals attached to the Ka‘bah. Although conflicts continued within the Quraysh after Quṣayy’s death, his control over the Ka‘bah and the pilgrimage, according to Ibn Ishāq, was passed to Hāshim, his grandson and the eponym of Muḥammad’s clan, the *Banū Hāshim*. His son, Shaybah, also known as ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, inherited these rights as well.³⁴

The Rediscovery of the Zamzam Well and the Rise of the Cult of Ibrāhīm
The nature of Ibn Ishāq’s story changes with the beginning of his account of Muḥammad’s grandfather, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, and the rediscovery of the **(p.144)** Zamzam well. It marks the point at which God, having set out the corruption of the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm and his final replacement as a source for authority for the *ḥajj* by Quṣayy, begins to intervene directly in human affairs to create the conditions necessary for Muḥammad’s mission.

He opens this cycle of his story by describing how ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, while sleeping near the Ka‘bah, was visited by an unseen entity (*āt^{an}*) over the course of several nights. On the fourth night, he is told, “Dig Zamzam,” but he has no idea what this means. Ibn Ishāq uses this story to illustrate how far the Quraysh had drifted from the covenant of Ibrāhīm and to demonstrate how little the people, and even someone with as much religious authority as ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, remembered about the sacred history of Mecca and the purposes and activities of the *ḥanīfiyah dīn* Ibrāhīm. When ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib says he has no idea what “Zamzam” means, the entity gives him clues in the form of a poem so that he can

understand and find its location. Once he deciphers the clues, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib and his son al-Ḥārith, begin to dig until they hit the top of the well.³⁵

The rediscovery of the well rouses the Quraysh from their historical stupor. Once they connect Zamzam to the story of Ibrāhīm and Ismā'īl, members of the tribe begin to assert this relationship as a claim to superiority. When they hear of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's discovery, they say, "This is the well of our father Ismā'īl, and we have a right to it, so give us a share in it." In Ibn Ishāq's narrative this remark is the first reference to the patriarch since the time of Quṣayy. A crucial byproduct of the rediscovery of the Zamzam well in this telling is the revival of the importance of the Ka'bah as a pilgrimage center in Arabia and the centrality of the "cult" of Ibrāhīm to the claims of the Quraysh as its guardians. I use the term "cult" to emphasize Ibn Ishāq's contention that while claiming to be "the children of Ibrāhīm" and thus the heirs to his authority, the Quraysh do not seek to revive the ancient *dīn* of Ibrāhīm but instead use him to promote their importance and the importance of the Ka'bah as the chief pilgrimage site in Arabia.

The Battle of the Elephant and the New Covenant

Through his telling of two events that both occur around the time of Muḥammad's birth, Ibn Ishāq indicates that the rediscovery of the well caused an increase of pilgrims to Mecca that led directly to its reemergence (p.145) as the major center of pilgrimage. The discovery of the well and the conflict over its control also sets in motion a series of events that steers history toward Muḥammad's mission.

The first event, known as the "Year of the Elephant," takes place when Abrahah, an Abyssinian-Christian general, takes control of Yemen and builds a massive church in Sana'ā', intending to make it the central pilgrimage site for the Arabs. Hearing of the plan, a Meccan from the Kinānī tribe travels to Sana'ā' and defiles the church to make it unfit for pilgrimage.³⁶ Abrahah becomes so enraged that he marches toward Mecca, led by a war elephant, intending to destroy the Ka'bah. When Abrahah attacks the outskirts of Mecca and takes two hundred camels belonging to 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Meccans cannot agree about the best way to respond to the threat posed by the Abyssinians. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib states that he is more concerned about the return of his camels than defending the Ka'bah because there is no way they can muster a force sufficient to oppose the Abyssinian army:

This is God's sacred house and the house of his friend Ibrāhīm. . . . So if He protects it from [Abrahah] it is [truly] His house and His holy place and if He allows him in [the *ḥaram*], by God, there is nothing we can do to prevent him from it.³⁷

While one might read this statement as fatalism on 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's part, it functions to demonstrate his Ibrāhīm-like trust in God and, when God inevitably defends the Ka'bah from destruction, this event is depicted as evidence of the sacredness of the Ka'bah in the eyes of the Arabs and at the same time as buttressing the claims of the Quraysh as having a special link to Ibrāhīm that they alone possess.

Abrahah returns the camels to 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib—whose insouciance in the face of the looming destruction of the Ka'bah shocks the Abyssinian—but proceeds with the attack. The next day the Quraysh decide to leave Mecca to God's protection and flee into the mountains. Before abandoning the village, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib goes to the Ka'bah along with a few of his male kin and prays to God (Allāh) to protect His House, saying,

(p.146) O God, indeed the slave ('*abd*) defends his saddle, so defend your people. Do not be overcome by their strength tomorrow and [do not allow] their guile to be greater than your guile.³⁸

The prayer sets out the relationship between God and His people as being analogous to the slave and his saddle. Just as a slave has nothing but his saddle and would fight to the death to protect it, so too does 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib implore God to hold nothing back to protect his people. After the prayer, they then go up into the mountains that surround Mecca and take up defensive positions. Abrahah begins his attack on Mecca the following day, but the elephant he had brought with him refuses to attack and flees toward Yemen. The Abyssinian forces follow suit as God intervenes to bring about their destruction; even Abrahah dies a gruesome death in the retreat.

Ibn Ishāq says that when God sent Muḥammad, "he used to recount to the Quraysh how God preserved and put His blessing on them when the power of the Abyssinians was turned away so that their authority [over the Ka'bah] would permanently endure." In light of his repeated emphasis on the covenant of Ibrāhīm, Ibn Ishāq thus indicates that the prayer of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib before leaving Mecca should be interpreted as creating another covenant between God and the Quraysh, "so that nothing changed about their condition which they possessed by the will of God for the good, if [only] they would accept it."³⁹

This notion was not original to Muḥammad or the Qur'ān but appears to have been current among the Arabs as a whole. Ibn Ishāq makes this clear when he states that, following the defeat of Abrahah, the Quraysh were "glorified" (*a'ẓama*) by the Arabs, echoing language normally reserved for the veneration 'ibād have for God and his House. He quotes poetry written in tribute to the special nature of the Quraysh, who are described as "the people of God" on whose behalf God fought. The last of these poems links the battle directly to the *ḥanīfiyah dīn* Ibrāhīm and the elephant's inability to attack Mecca,

concluding, "Every *dīn* on the Day of Resurrection, God, except for the *dīn* of the *ḥanīfiyah*, will destroy."⁴⁰ Here **(p.147)** one finds the clearest expression of the new covenant created by 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's prayer before the attack. The Quraysh thus stake their claim as the inheritors of the *ḥanīfiyah dīn* Ibrāhīm, a status made manifest through God's defeat of the Abyssinians.

The Hums

The restoration of Mecca as a major pilgrimage site after the rediscovery of the Zamzam well and especially the miraculous defeat of the Abyssinians elevated to new heights the Quraysh's belief in their own special status. The Quraysh "created" a group known as the *Hums*, a cult association tying members of several western Arabian tribes to the Meccan shrine. Ibn Ishāq states that the founders of the *Hums* had said,

We are the sons of Ibrāhīm, the people of the *ḥaram*, the guardians of the House, and inhabitants of Mecca. There is no one among the Arabs [who] have rights like ours and nothing resembling our rank. The Arabs do not acknowledge [others] as they acknowledge us. So we must not glorify a thing from the outside (*hill*) like we glorify the *ḥaram*.⁴¹

As an outgrowth of their arrogance, Ibn Ishāq states that the Quraysh divided the Arabs into two groups, the *Hums* (sing. *aḥims*) and the *Hillah*. Ibn Ishāq says that "they were called '*hums*' because they were 'zealous' (*hums^{an}*) in the intensity of their ritual practice (*dīn*)."⁴²

In their zeal to draw distinctions between themselves and the *Hillah*, the *Hums* gave up any part of the pilgrimage ritual that took place outside the precincts of the *ḥaram* even though they acknowledged that they were aspects of the *ḥajj* and the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm commanded by God. The *Hums* still thought that the *Hillah* should perform these aspects of the *ḥajj* but that they, as people of the *ḥaram*, should not and, as Ibn Ishāq sees it, thereby placed their status above the will of God. Ibn Ishāq goes on to say that the *Hums* created new rituals and customs regarding such matters as ritual purity and conduct during pilgrimage for which there was no divine command.⁴³

(p.148) He follows the story of the *Hums* with tales in which Christian monks, Jewish rabbis, and even pagan soothsayers foretell of Muḥammad's coming. The narrative pace quickens with these tales, anticipating the moment of the first revelation. Even the carcass of a sacrificed calf calls out to the Quraysh, saying that "a man will call, saying, 'There is no god but God!'" Most of the references to the *ḥanīfiyah dīn* Ibrāhīm occur in this section. In each case they emphasize the purpose of Muḥammad's mission, that is, to return to the original covenant of Ibrāhīm and reinstitute the *ḥajj* according to the "right inclining ritual practice" of Ibrāhīm. The story of Salmān the Persian is found here. Salmān leaves the *dīn* of his father and goes on a quest to find the true *dīn*. He is finally told by his last teacher that he is living in the time of a prophet from the land of

the Arabs who is reviving the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm.⁴⁴ When Salmān sets out to find this prophet, he is captured and taken as a slave to Medina. In Medina he meets Muḥammad and becomes a close companion after the prophet helps him buy his freedom. One day Salmān tells a story of seeking out a healer who lived in the wild in Syria on the instructions of his last teacher. In his story, Salmān confronts the man and says, "Tell me about the *ḥanīfiyah dīn* Ibrāhīm." The man responds, "Indeed, you ask about something the people today no longer ask about. Already, you overshadow the time of a prophet [who] is reviving this way among the people of the *ḥaram*. So, go to him, he [will] take you to it." When Muḥammad hears the story, he replies, "If you have been truthful with me, O Salmān, you truly encountered 'Īsā (Jesus) son of Maryam (Mary)."⁴⁵

Ibn Ishāq closes his account of the pre-mission portion of his text with the story of four men of Quraysh who separate themselves from the *Ḥums*. They decide to meet in secret and, in a scene reminiscent of Ibrāhīm's testimony to his people regarding their idol worship, say of the *Ḥums*:

By God, they know [that] our people dismiss everything [right], for already they have followed the wrong way in the *dīn* of their father Ibrāhīm; of the stone they circumambulate, it does not hear, it does not see, it does not harm, nor does it benefit. O people, seek for yourselves a *dīn*, because, by God, you follow nothing.⁴⁶

(p.149)

Here Ibn Ishāq implies that just as Ibrāhīm's people knew they worshipped powerless images, the Quraysh know what they do is wrong and contrary to the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm. Yet, because they arrogantly think that "there is no one among the Arabs [who] have rights like ours and nothing resembling our rank," the Quraysh reject the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm and now "have no *dīn* at all."⁴⁷ In other words, they have completely abandoned all pretenses of worship-service, not just to God, but even to the idols themselves. Instead, for the Quraysh, it is their glorification that matters most.

For Ibn Ishāq, therefore, the *Ḥums* represents the complete break with the ritual practice of Ibrāhīm and the embodiment of *jāhil*. The *jāhiliyah* is frequently referred to as the "time of ignorance." Yet Ibn Ishāq does not portray the Quraysh as ignorant of what they are doing but as fully aware, and thus culpable, for their wrong conduct. They may not know how the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm is to be performed in all of its specific aspects since it had been lost slowly over the generations and almost completely forgotten before the rediscovery of the Zamzam well, but they are completely aware that they are violating the fundamentals of the *ḥajj* ritual. In a sense, they have abandoned the worship-service of God and begun worshipping themselves.

To demonstrate the need for Muḥammad's mission, Ibn Ishāq then introduces four men who decide to break with their kin and seek the *ḥanīfiyah dīn* Ibrāhīm that has now been completely lost, forgotten, or arrogantly ignored. Three of the four, Waraqah b. Nayfal, Ubayd Allāh b. Jaḥsh, and 'Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith become Christians (*tanaṣṣar*). Waraqah, the cousin of Muḥammad's first wife Khadījah, is described as studying the books of the Christians until "he was one of the most knowledgeable among the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*). Ubayd Allāh, according to Ibn Ishāq,

Was constantly occupied with his search [for the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm] among the confusion [of different paths of worship-service] until he *aslama* (abandoned his old ways and surrendered). He then migrated with the *muslimīn* (submitters) to Abyssinia with his wife, Umm Ḥabībah bint Abū Sufyān; she was a *muslimah*. So, after he arrived there he became a Christian (*tanaṣṣar*) and withdrew his *islām* (submission) until he died.⁴⁸

(p.150) 'Uthmān traveled as far as Byzantium where he became a Christian when he entered the emperor's service.

The focus of this section of Ibn Ishāq's story, however, is on Zayd b. 'Amr. Zayd serves a function analogous to that of John the Baptist in the New Testament in that he goes before Muḥammad proclaiming the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm to his people. According to Ibn Ishāq,

He resisted and did not enter Judaism or Christianity and withdrew from the *dīn* of his people. He withdrew from the idols, from eating carrion, blood, and sacrifices that were slaughtered to the idols. He forbade the killing of infant girls. He said, "I worship-serve (*a'bad*) the Lord of Ibrāhīm." He showed open hostility toward his people for the defects of what they followed.⁴⁹

Ibn Ishāq says that Zayd had decided to leave Mecca to search for the *ḥanīfiyah dīn* Ibrāhīm but his wife held him back. He preached to the people and proclaimed the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm whenever he entered the *ḥaram*. But he began to be harassed by the Quraysh and was forced to flee up to Mount Ḥirā', where Muḥammad would receive his first revelation. He cried to God in his despair that he was not a *Ḥillah*, but a Meccan whose house was in the center of the *ḥaram*, yet he could no longer enter the *ḥaram*.⁵⁰

Zayd finally decides to leave Mecca and seek the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm in other parts of the Near East. After many travels he meets a monk in Syria who tells him, "Indeed, you seek a *dīn* to which no one can take you today." The monk continues, "Already you are in the shadow of a time [when] a prophet is being sent to your land which you just left. He is being sent with the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm *al-ḥanīfiyah*, so follow him, for indeed he is being sent now, this is the time."⁵¹ Zayd sets out immediately for Mecca but is killed before he returns. Muḥammad later

says that on the Day of Judgment Zayd “will be resurrected alone of the community.”⁵²

For Ibn Ishāq, the extremes of the *Hums* were so great that they represented the final break with the *dīn* of Ibrāhīm and necessitated the **(p.151)** mission of Muḥammad. He makes this clear when he says that the practices of the *Hums* lasted until God sent Muḥammad:

So He revealed to him, when He rendered His *dīn* free from defects and made plain for him the customs of the *ḥajj*. . . . Thus God removed the restriction of the *Hums* and the innovations of the Quraysh from the people when God sent the messenger with submission (*islām*).⁵³

Conclusion

For Ibn Ishāq the problem that necessitated the mission of Muḥammad was the complete corruption of the *ḥanīfiyah dīn* Ibrāhīm that is represented as the complete and abject submission to God as embodied in the proper performance of the *ḥajj* after the manner of Ibrāhīm. Throughout the sections of the text examined in this chapter, Ibn Ishāq focuses on actions that demonstrate abject submission to God and rarely mentions ideas or “beliefs” about the nature of God, His unity (*tawḥīd*), or a multiplicity of associates for God (*shirk*). While *ʿibādat al-awthān* implies *shirk* in some sense, the fact that Ibn Ishāq emphasizes changes in actions over changes in ideas indicates that what mattered most to Ibn Ishāq was the external expression of belief through one's actions as signifiers of one's submission or obedience to God.⁵⁴

The focus on external actions—especially on the correct performance of the *ḥajj*—as signifying true submission to God also says a great deal about Ibn Ishāq's understanding of Muḥammad's purpose and what it was that he “founded,” if anything. On one level, it is clear that Ibn Ishāq understood Muḥammad to be reviving the lost *ḥanīfiyah dīn* of Ibrāhīm by returning to the practices of the *ḥajj* as they were given to Ibrāhīm by Jabraʿīl.

But what about “Islam?” Ibn Ishāq refers to Muḥammad's followers as *muslimūn* (sing., *muslim*) and what they participate in as *islām*. What, exactly, does he mean? Wilfred Cantwell Smith maintains that Islam came **(p.152)** into the world as a “self-aware” religion, meaning that Muslims understood Islam to be a religion distinct from, and somehow better than, other religions. Yet the term *dīn*, commonly taken to mean “religion,” usually means “to obediently follow a path or method of ritual practice,” of which there are many. Ibn Ishāq does not present a single *dīn* as preferable to all others, as is evident in the stories of Salmān the Persian, ʿAbd Allāh b. Thāmir, and even in references to Warāqah b. Nawfal, who after breaking with the *Hums* and becoming a Christian, later becomes an advisor to Muḥammad and even declares him a prophet but, surprisingly, never becomes a follower.⁵⁵ Clearly, then, Ibn Ishāq does not

interpret *islām* to refer to an exclusive set of rituals and theological conceptions that represents the only correct “religion.”

For Ibn Ishāq, Islam seems to represent at least two things: (1) a status of submission to God that is expressed through physical acts of ritual, *and* (2) a period of time or state of being that he juxtaposes frequently with the *jāhiliyah* and the period of the *Ḥums*. Ibn Ishāq describes ‘Abd Allāh b. Thāmir’s “conversion” with the verb *aslama* when he becomes a Christian. Clearly, he does not mean here that ‘Abd Allāh became a “Muslim” but that he “rejects or abandons his practice of *‘ibādah al-awthān* and submits to a new *‘ibādah*,” in his case, ritual prayer offered to the One God.⁵⁶ Ibn Ishāq uses the term *aslama* to indicate the abandonment of *‘ibādat al-awthān* and submission to God as expressed by the correct performance of *‘ibādah*, almost always referring to the *ḥajj*. In other words, *aslama* is only used in reference to people who had been “idol worshippers” before becoming “practicing” worshipper-slaves to the One God, whether it is a man who had been a soothsayer and then becomes a follower of Muḥammad or, as in the case of ‘Abd Allāh b. Thāmir, one who becomes a Christian.⁵⁷

When Ibn Ishāq uses *islām* as a noun, it is never to describe something Muḥammad creates but something to which he “calls” people (*da‘āna ilā al-islām*), just as he is said to have “called” people to God (*da‘āna ilā Allah*), (p. 153) or he is described as being sent with *islām*.⁵⁸ In most instances *islām* is described as something that “arrives” or “occurs,” as an event in time, not as a “religion” as described by Smith.⁵⁹ In references to Christianity (throughout the text it is *Naṣrānīyah*, literally, “Nazarenes”), the noun is sometimes made into a verb meaning “he became Christian” (*tanaṣṣar*); there is no equivalent in classical Arabic for “he became Muslim” (*tasallam*) until the fifth Islamic century, long after the time of Ibn Ishāq.

From Ibn Ishāq’s point of view, it would thus be incorrect to describe Muḥammad as the “founder” of Islam. He is best understood as the “messenger of *islām*” bringing the message of submission to the One God, as the reviver of the *ḥanīfiyah dīn* Ibrāhīm, and, therefore, as the prophet sent to reestablish the community of worshipper-slaves among the descendants of Ismā‘īl whose primary expression of object submission is the correct performance of the *ḥajj* as established by Ibrāhīm.

The foregoing examination of only one portion of the entire *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* makes clear that determining precisely what Ibn Ishāq understands “Islam” to be is extraordinarily complicated. And his is just one of many voices in the early period. To be sure, as the author of the earliest surviving biography of the prophet, his is a voice that cannot be ignored if one’s aim is to understand what Muḥammad accomplished, what his followers think he was trying to accomplish, and how Islam through the centuries relates to and yet differentiates itself from

other religious traditions, especially those—Judaism and Christianity—that regard Abraham as a pivotal figure. More broadly, thinking with an author like Ibn Ishāq about the propriety of applying the title “founder” to Muḥammad provides an opportunity to reconsider the question of what, precisely, constitutes a “religion” and what is at stake in the answer to that question, both for those inside the tradition and for those looking on from the outside.

For Further Reading

Bibliography references:

Benton, Michael. “Visualizing Narrative: Bridging the ‘Aesthetic Gap.’” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 33. 2 (Summer 1999): 33–49. Demonstrating that for many Muslims, the *Truth* of Muḥammad is greater than the mundane details of his (p. 154) life, what one might think of as small “t” truth. Benton describes a process whereby authors transform the basic “facts” into “biomythographies,” as Ibn Ishāq does in providing a deeper understanding of Muḥammad as an instrument of God’s will.

Donner, Fred. *Narratives of Islamic Origins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). Provides a controversial retelling of the history of the early community and their understanding of the relationship of Islam to Judaism and Christianity.

Guillaume, Alfred. *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955. The only translation to date of this important text. The author reconstructs the redacted sections of Ibn Ishāq’s text excluding the sections dealing with the stories of pre-Muḥammad prophets.

Hughes Aaron W. *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Offers a critical assessment of the function of Abraham in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Motzki, Harald, ed. *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of Sources*. Leiden: Brill, 2000. An excellent resource on debates about the historicity of early prophetic biographies.

Newby, Gordon. *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989. Translation and reconstruction of the first section of the lost stories of the pre-Muḥammad prophets.

Rippen, Andrew. “The Function of ‘*Asbāb al-nuzūl*’ in Qur’ānic Exegesis.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51.1 (1988): 1–20. Explores the concept of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, “occasions of revelation,” which is based on the idea that God intervenes in history in times of grave crisis. The *asbāb al-nuzūl* literature is extensive in medieval Muslim discourse because knowing the

“cause” of an instance of revelation is central to understanding the meaning of the Qur’ān and *sunnah* (prophetic example). Rippen provides an overview of this concept and its applications in the various branches of Muslim thought.

Tottoli, Roberto. “The Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā’iliyyāt* in Muslim Literature.” *Arabica* 46 (1999): 193–210. Discusses Ibn Ishāq’s extensive use of Jewish lore in his “making” of the image of Muḥammad as a prophet in the line of those listed in the Bible.

Notes:

(1.) ‘Abd al-Mālik b. Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-nabawīyah*, 4 vols., ed. Muṣṭafā al-Shaqqā, Ibrāhīm al-Ibyārī, and ‘Abd al-Ḥafīẓ al-Shalabī (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1936) Unless otherwise indicated, the translations provided in this chapter are mine.

(2.) See Gordon Newby’s introduction to his *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

(3.) Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955). When quoting from passages in Ibn Ishāq’s “original” text I provide the page numbers for Guillaume’s translation as well as the Arabic source for the text. For instance, if a passage occurs in the translation on p. 68 and in Ibn Hishām’s text on vol. 1, p. 164, I cite it as “G 68/IH 1:164.” Passages included by Guillaume but not found in Ibn Hishām, such as al-Azraqī’s *Akhbar al-Makkah* (= “Az”) or al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh al-rusul wa’l-mulūk* (= “Ṭ”) are cited in similar fashion.

(4.) In sections dealing with the reconstructed *al-Mubtada’* I provide citations for the Arabic source as well as the English translation provided by Newby (= “N”).

(5.) On the historical value of Ibn Ishāq and his *Sīrah*, see Josef Horowitz, *The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and Their Authors*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 2002), 74–75.

(6.) Sabine Dorpmueller, “Introduction: History and Fiction in Arabic Popular Epic,” in *Fictionalizing the Past: Historical Characters in Arabic Popular Epic*, ed. Sabine Dorpmueller (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oossterse Studies, 2012), 1–2.

(7.) The terms “idolatry” and “idol” are used in this chapter to indicate the worship of various images by the pre-Muslim Arabs, but they are highly problematic as there appears to be no term denoting “idolatry” in classical Arabic. The term approximating “idolatry,” *wathanīyah*, does not arise until the

eighteenth century, most likely under the influence of European discussions of idol worship.

(8.) G 35-36/IH 1:79-80.

(9.) G 36/IH 1:80. Ibn Ishāq often refers to the Ka'bah as "The House." The *ihlāl* consists of the pilgrim shouting "labbayka Allāhumma labayka" (At your service, O God, at your service).

(10.) Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, 65, quoting Qur'ān 3:56-68.

(11.) N 67/T 1:254.

(12.) G 36/IH 1:80-81.

(13.) N 68-70/T 255-61.

(14.) N 73/T 270-71, 277.

(15.) N 74-76. In these accounts, they are led to Mecca by the *Sakīnah*, described by Ibn Ishāq as a wind and generally understood as "the presence of God," by the angel Jabra'il (Gabriel), or by both.

(16.) While the Qur'ān refer to a number of covenants between God and God's prophets, neither the Qur'ān nor Ibn Ishāq makes any mention of the covenant described in the Hebrew Bible involving circumcision and a promise to the elderly Ibrāhīm and Sārah that they will have many descendants (cf. Gen. 17:1-27).

(17.) Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 23-24.

(18.) Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 28-43.

(19.) Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 76.

(20.) Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 93-95.

(21.) E.g., G 6, 17, 20, 95/IH 1:19, 36, 43, 229.

(22.) G 16/IH 1:35.

(23.) E.g., the *dīn* of the Mazdians is linked to maintaining the "sacred fire" (G 95/IH 229).

(24.) See G 87, 99 (twice), 100, 103/IH 1:238, 240 (twice), 264 (twice). See below on the importance of the *Ḥums* in Ibn Ishāq's understanding of the causes of Muḥammad's mission.

(25.) G 95/IH 1:229.

(26.) Cf. Newby, *Making of the Last Prophet*, 65.

(27.) G 100–101/IH 1:241–42.

(28.) G 47/IH 1:119–20.

(29.) See G 35 and 87/IH 1:79 and 211 to contrast the degrees of corruption these terms suggest.

(30.) G 35/IH 1:79.

(31.) G 9/IH 1:25.

(32.) G 38–39/Az 1:73–74.

(33.) G 52–56/IH 1:130–37.

(34.) G 59–61/IH 1: 144–50.

(35.) G 62/IH 1: 151.

(36.) G 20–22/IH 1: 44–47, most likely meaning that he defecated in the sanctuary.

(37.) G 20–22/IH 1: 50.

(38.) G 26/IH 1: 52.

(39.) G 27–28/IH 1: 56.

(40.) G 29–30/IH 1: 62.

(41.) G 87/IH 1: 211–12.

(42.) Az 1:116.

(43.) G 87/IH 1:214.

(44.) G 87/IH 1: 232.

(45.) G 96–98/IH 1: 232–36.

(46.) G 99/IH 1: 238.

(47.) G 87/IH 1: 211–12.

(48.) G 87/IH 1: 211–12. The term meaning “to become Christian” refers to al-Nāṣirah, or Nazareth, the purported hometown of ‘Īsā (Jesus). Ibn Ishāq refers to Christians as *al-Naṣrānīyah*, or Nazarenes.

(49.) G 87/IH 1: 239–40.

(50.) G 100–103/IH 1: 240–47.

(51.) G 103/IH 1: 247.

(52.) G 100/IH 1: 240.

(53.) G 88/IH 1:215–16.

(54.) The fact that Muslims focused primarily on actions over theological conceptions as a means of defining inclusion in the community argues against certain aspects of Fred Donner's thesis that the early community defined itself as a "community of believers" (*Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010]).

(55.) G 99, 107, 144/IH 1:238, 254, 340.

(56.) G 16–17/IH 1: 35–36.

(57.) G 92/IH 1:223. The key to the idea of "*aslama*" is to be found in the single exception to the rule, which occurs in the story of an attack on the Jewish tribe of the Banū Qurayẓah (G 461/*ibid.*, IH 3:244–45). Some of the tribe "abandon" their forts and their tribe and "surrender" to Muḥammad's forces and become his followers (G 94/IH 1:227).

(58.) G 88, 93/IH 1: 216, 225.

(59.) G 21–22, 39, 47, 52, 56, 57, 78, 83, 94/IH 1:45–46, 90, 119, 131, 137, 140, 189, 202, 226/Az 1:127.