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A "Religious Transformation in Late Antiquity" - From Tribal Genealogy to Divine  
Covenant:

**Qur'ānic Refigurations of Pagan-Arab Ideals Based on Biblical Models <sup>1</sup>**

**1. The historical background; approaches to the Qur'an**

*Inna akramakum 'inda Illahi atqakum* – "Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you"<sup>2</sup> Using this Qur'ānic verse<sup>3</sup> as their slogan, the Kharijites, an early Islamic opposition movement<sup>4</sup>, entered the arena of the 7<sup>th</sup> century debate about legitimate rule over the new Islamic political entity. This motto reflected the principle, repeatedly articulated in the Qur'ān, that a man's social standing should not be based on genealogy, on a noble pedigree, as the pagan Arabs upheld, but rather on individual piety, *taqwa*, equivalent to the Christian notion so central in Late Antiquity, of *eusebeia*. The idea was revolutionary, for the contrary position, estimating a man as "noble", *karīm*, according to his familial pedigree stood at the heart of the current local canon of values of *muruwwa*<sup>5</sup> which was strongly imprinted by Beduin perceptions. Familial lineage is dwelt on numerous times in the

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<sup>1</sup> Translated into English by W. Scott Chahanovich.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent English translations of surahs are from A.J. Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted*. London, 1955.

<sup>3</sup> Partial citation from Q 49:13, a Medinan verse.

<sup>4</sup> Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im II. und III. Jahrhundert Hidschra II*, Berlin 1992, pp. 404-41.

<sup>5</sup> See James Montgomery, "Dichotomy in Jahili Poetry. In: *Journal of Arabic Literature* 17 (1986) 1-20.

central literary medium of the time: the ancient Arabic *qasīda*, whose final section often contains a panegyric – *mufakhara* – in praise of the tribe to whom the poet is associated.

It should not be surprising that after the death of the Prophet in 632 – an event that conclusively defined the end of the proclamation – the old pagan position was revived and even politically implemented. With Mu‘awiya Ibn Abi Sufyan in 661 a prominent member of the Meccan Umayya clan became ruler of the Muslim community, a person whose will to power was strong enough to assert himself as the founder of the first dynasty of Islam. Under the Umayyad rule from 661 to 750, Arab rule over the Near East crystallized into an emergent pluri-national empire. Yet tribal hegemony did not fade away. In the new state comprised of many different peoples, social mobility for non-Arab citizens was not warranted by conversion alone but was additionally dependent on clientage with an Arab tribe. Simultaneously, much effort was expended on arabizing state representation<sup>6</sup>, administration as well as coinage, a process that also included the official publication of the Qur‘ān<sup>7</sup> as well as the systematic construction and fixation of Arab tribal genealogies.<sup>8</sup> Tribal lineage was a powerful instrument that during the age of conquests not only determined prestige, but also secured material privileges. But not only tribal Arab genealogy mattered, There was equally intense interest to embed Arab genealogies in a biblical *Weltgeschichte* (world history)<sup>9</sup> by constructing a biblical lineage for the Arab tribes – a lineage that conveniently placed the Arabs,

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gerald Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam. The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661-750*, London 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Omar Hamdan *Studien zur Kanonisierung des Korantexts. Al-Hasan al-Basris Beiträge zur Geschichte des Korans*. Wiesbaden 2006.

<sup>8</sup> For the importance of genealogy before and during the early Islamic period, as well as information about the most important genealogists Muhammad b. Sa‘ib al-Kalbi (d. 763) and Abu I-Mundhir Hisham b. Muhammad al-Kalbi (d. 819?), see the introduction to Caskel (1966), 19-81; cf. also Franz Rosenthal, „Nasab,“ in: *EP*, vol. VII, Leiden 1991, 967-968.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Toral-Niehoff (unpublished lecture) and Werner Caskel, *Gamharat an-nasab. Das genealogische Werk des Hisam Ibn al-Kalbi*, Leiden 1966, pp. 39-41.

the recipients of the Arabic Qurʾān, as a community both steeped in, and springing forth from, biblical tradition, thus putting them into a close relation to the Jews and Christians.

The Umayyads within a few decades succeeded to annihilate their rivals, the Kharidjites. Yet with the factual triumph of genealogical lineage over the principle of individual piety not only a partisan view, but a central accomplishment of the Qurʾānic message was forsaken: the once achieved supersession of genealogical loyalties by religious ones. This concept's political failure, its non-implementation, should not make us forget that the Qurʾānic paradigm shift had equaled an ideological breakthrough, which can be described with the term recently coined by Guy Stroumsa<sup>10</sup> as a "religious mutation of Late Antiquity".

Here, a preliminary remark is in place. In this study, the Qurʾān is read diachronically<sup>11</sup>, i.e. not according to the traditional sequence of suras as they are organized in the canonic text. Instead, the text is presumed to reflect a process of subsequent communications whose historical sequence can be roughly reconstructed, a historical-critical project<sup>12</sup> that is currently being worked out in the *Corpus Coranicum* (CC) project<sup>13</sup> under the auspices of the Berlin-Brandenburg

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<sup>10</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, *Das Ende des Opferkults. Die religiösen Mutationen der Spätantike*. Berlin 2011 (Original Fr. edition: *La fin du sacrifice. Les mutations religieuses de l'Antiquité tardive*. Paris 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang* (=KTS), Berlin 2010, pp. 19-67.

<sup>12</sup> The reconstruction of the earliest surahs has already been published. See Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren* (=HK 1), Berlin 2011.

<sup>13</sup> See also Michael Marx, "Ein Koranforschungsprojekt in der Tradition der Wissenschaft des Judentums. zur Programmatik des Akademievorhabens Corpus Coranicum", in *Im vollen Licht der Geschichte – Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und die Anfänge der Koranforschung*, ed. Dirk Hartwig, Walter Homolka, Michael Marx, Angelika Neuwirth, Würzburg 2008, pp. 41-54.

Academy of Sciences. This re-formulated and re-arranged chronology<sup>14</sup>, which subdivided the text into early, middle, and late Meccan and Medinan suras, does not line up the suras according to how they are arranged in the 'Qur'ānic codex' (*mushaf*), but rather reflects the sequence underlying the oral dissemination process of the Qur'ān, which we understand as an open debate, subject to trial and error, between a messenger and his listeners. This new approach for reconstructing the early history of the emerging community, in contrast to common readings of the Qur'ān as a *fait accompli*, presupposes that the agents participating in the genesis of the Qur'ān were individuals educated in Late Antique lore, not yet committed to an Islamic *Erwartungshorizont* (frame of expectations). Consequently, this approach – which is decisively different from both the revisionist view that dispenses with the agency of the historical Muhammad and the traditional scholarly approach that depicts Muhammad as the Qur'ān's author – speaks of 'the messenger' and 'the listeners' as communicative partners in a mutually inclusive debate which underlies the emergence and development of the Qur'ān.

Furthermore, the Qur'an is read intertextually. As a post-Biblical text whose narratives closely reflect Biblical precursors the Qur'an invites a re-connection to related earlier monotheistic traditions, both Jewish and Christian. These reflect particular concepts of genealogy and other models of collective loyalty that are negotiated in the Qur'an. Their example in particular strongly resounds in the Qur'anic reflections about the ideal household, about dealing with family members and handling of sexual issues<sup>15</sup>. However, since it is the peculiar – tribally oriented – self-image of the pagan opponents of the message that is one of the main targets of early Qur'anic polemic, ancient Arabic poetry provides another important intertext. Tribal pride, *fakhr*, is a core issue of pagan Arabic self-awareness, which has been

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<sup>14</sup> For a recent reconstruction, see Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren* (=HK 1), Berlin 2011, pp. 15-72.

<sup>15</sup> See for a template against which Qur'anic statements concerning these discourses should be viewed Peter Brown, *The Body & Society. Men, Women, & sexual Renunciation in early Christianity*. New York 1988. The Qur'anic debates about these matters are discussed in the introduction to Neuwirth, *Der Koran II*. (forthcoming).

given poetic expression in numerous verses. "In *fakhr* of the personal type the poet extols his own worth, whereas in tribal *fakhr* the tribe becomes the paradigm of *muruwwah* and the poet, without losing his individualism, merges with the tribe"<sup>16</sup>. One poem by Qurayt ibn Unayf from the tribe of 'Anbar - the opening piece of Abu Tammam's famous anthology 'al-Hamasa', "Heroism" – which celebrates the ideal of tribal solidarity may suffice as an example to highlight the ideological backdrop of the Qur'anic negotiation of traditional attitudes towards one's society:

Had I belonged to (the tribe of) Mazin, there had not plundered my herds  
The sons of the foundling Dhuhl son of Shayban.  
Then there would have straightaway arisen to help me  
A firm-handed kin, quick to defend the weak and needy.  
Men who, when evil bares before them its hindmost teeth,  
Fly out to meet it, in companies or alone.  
They ask not their brother, when he lays before them his troubles,  
To give them proof of the truth of what he says.  
But as for my people, though their number is not small,  
They are good for naught against evil, however light it be<sup>17</sup>.

## 2. A New Loyalty: The Messenger's Status without a Genealogy and without powerful kin (Early Mecca)

The Qur'anic debate about the ideal genealogical principle of *nasab*, family genealogy, which figured so highly in the ancient Arabian canon of values, and by extension about the adherence to a clan or tribe, seems to have begun quite early. It

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<sup>16</sup> James Montgomery, Dichotomy in Jahili Poetry. In: Journal of Arabic Literature 17 (1986) 1-20. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted after the translation by Robert G. Hoyland, Arabs and Arabia from the Bronze age to the coming of Islam. London, New York 2001. 113, from: Abu Tammam, Al-Hamasaa, Sharh at-Tabrizi, Damaskus without date, 3-5. See for this ethos in general Andras Hamori, The Art of Medieval Arabic Literature. Princeton 1974.

by far antedates considerations about desirable attitudes towards one's kin, expressed in recommendations how to deal with wives, children, parents a.o. One of the earliest Qur'ānic surahs, Q 108 *al-kawthar*, "Abundance" – a 'consolation surah' –, jumps directly into this debate<sup>18</sup>, though only by way of an oblique formulation. Most plausibly, the surah is intended to invert a calumny that had been thrown against the Messenger as a man "cut off" from his clan.

### Q 108 "Abundance"

- 1 Surely We have given thee abundance;
- 2 so pray unto thy Lord and sacrifice.
- 3 Surely he that hates thee, he is the one cut off.

With its triumphal exclamation that affirms a special privilege accorded to the addressee, the sura immediately assures that a crisis has been overcome: the initial third-person plural formulated statement concerning a manifest example of God's favor (v. 1: "abundance") is left vague, yet the morphologically intensive form *kawthar* narrows possible meanings to 'something extremely generous' and 'fulfilling'. In all likelihood, God's consolation should be understood as 'spiritual recompense' embodied in the newly disclosed power of proclamation. Empowering the Messenger with spiritual abundance compensates for the poor pedigree blamed on him in v. 3, i.e. of not belonging to a powerful and protective family clan (*nasab*) or having no sons. The experience of divinely guaranteed individual privilege takes the place of a genealogically inborn elitist consciousness<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> For a complete analysis, see Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren* (=HK 1), Berlin 2011, 106-112.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 125-132.

This argument is developed further in Sura 102 *al-takāthur*, “The Greed for Abundance”<sup>20</sup>, which was composed shortly after 108. In it, the dialogue is not only directed to a wider public, indicated by the second-person plural, but the Messenger also strikes back with a polemic address: it is the pagans – so his reproach – that find themselves in a state of need. They have been so obsessed, so “diverted”, with increasing their familial alliances, and, by extension, with improving their wealth and public standing, to lapse into ancestry worship, “[they] visit the tombs”<sup>21</sup>, instead of taking heed of their own eschatological future.

**Q 102 “The Greed for Abundance”<sup>22</sup>**

- 1 Gross greed for abundance diverts you,
- 2 such that you visit the tombs!
- 3 No indeed; but soon you shall know!
- 4 Again, no indeed; but soon you shall know!
- 5 No indeed; did you know with the knowledge of certainty,
- 6 you shall surely see Hell!
- 7 Again, you shall surely see it with the eye of certainty,
- 8 then you shall be questioned that day concerning true bliss!

Due to the practice of ancestry worship (v. 2), they have slid away from knowledge, which is exactly what they needed in order to recognize the problematic of their choice – favoring hedonistic worldly pleasure (v. 8) sanctioned by ancestral tradition

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<sup>20</sup> Arberry translates the title as “Rivalry”. It is modified into “Greed for abundance” to mark the referential relation to Q 108, where *kawthar* is translated as Abundance”.

<sup>21</sup> Reference is most probably to the family graveyards familiar in the late antique Near East. Particularly spacious grave complexes with facilities for collective meals to be consumed during a *ziyara*, have been found in the Nabatean Petra and in the Palestinian Bet Guvrin. See for the social importance of the ancestors’ tombs in Late Antiquity Peter Brown, *The Body*, 284-304. See for the majoritarian understanding of the verse as a reference to the death of the addressees Neuwirth, *Der Koran* I. 125-133.

<sup>22</sup> The following translation of Q 102 substitutes Arberry’s “rivalry” with “greed for abundance”.

– and to realize their fatal eschatological future. The truth claim raised by the messenger for the essential idea of the eschatological judgment is so emphatically expressed (v. 5-7) that it invokes Stroumsa's observation that, "contemplating religion [...] is an integral part of religion itself"<sup>23</sup>. The pagans' proximity to their forefathers remains a ubiquitous topic also in later texts, thus they scoff at the notion that their ancestors will be raised from the dead (Q 56:46-47): "What, when we are dead and become dust and bones, shall we indeed be raised up? / What and our fathers, the ancients?" Resurrection, an event making all men equal, would deprive their forefathers of the privileged status they continue to enjoy post mortem. The problem is still unsolved in Medina (Q 2:200), where the Meccan pilgrims are reminded to remember God "as you remember your fathers or yet more devoutly".

The seeds of this debate however, were already spread in early Mecca. The subject is first subliminally pursued, hidden in a linguistic pun: it seems to be more than just chance that these two chronologically close suras – 108 and 102 – both operate with a morphologically conspicuous derivation of the root **k-th-r**. A word-game, one that goes beyond the suras' borders, seems to flag the dialectic connection between the two texts. The Qur'ān reproaches the pagans' focus – i.e. their 'obsession' – on the strength of one's fathers and extended family, which is also understood as a genealogical guarantee for a carefree life of enjoyment. The orientation of the power of the family is continually re-invoked and proven as a dead-end throughout the Meccan period<sup>24</sup>.

### 3. Excursus: Pagan civic religion vs Communitarian religion?

In more recent religious studies, one no longer understands the transition from Antiquity to Late Antiquity primarily as a transition from a pagan to a monotheistic

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<sup>23</sup> See Guy G. Stroumsa, *Das Ende des Opferkults. Die religiösen Mutationen der Spätantike*, Berlin 2011, pp. 30-31.

<sup>24</sup> cf. Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren (=HK 1)*, Berlin 2011, p. 49f.

cult. Guy Stroumsa<sup>25</sup> recently established a differentiated alternative model that describes this transition as a multi-staged “process of transformation”; a position of “care for the self” takes the place of the previous collective, public and identity-laden cult. A new type of religion emerged, based on verbally conveyed piety and on the recognition of scripture as the highest authority. Thus, new religious observances – in particular, the personal orientation to God through prayer and asceticism – occupied the position animal sacrifice previously held. Such new shifts called for a new definition of the ‘religious community’, which can be described as a shift from a ‘civic religion’ to a ‘communitarian religion’, “established through voluntary pious acts of individuals and based on a mutually shared belief”<sup>26</sup>. Although Stroumsa only occasionally refers to Islam and excludes inner-Qur’ānic transformation processes from, his study<sup>27</sup>, his observations nevertheless prove to be pioneering for a religio-historical analysis of the Qur’ānic communication process. In the Qur’ān we observe a shift of authority, which can be described by the categories Stroumsa proposes, with the sole modification that in the Qur’ānic transformation process the pagan attitude is less manifest in the supersession of cultic practices than it is in the establishment of new genealogical orientations. The authority of spiritual ancestry

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<sup>25</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, *Das Ende des Opferkults. Die religiösen Mutationen der Spätantike*, Berlin 2011.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Burkert’s flawed thesis about sacrifice in Islam is an obstacle in properly understanding the decisive transformation process in the Qur’ān. Burkert, in his otherwise groundbreaking work *Homo Necans. Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen*, Berlin 1972, p. 19, incorrectly understood the continued practice of animal sacrifice during the pilgrimage as proof of the never interrupted adherence to a theologically founded sacrificial cult; see Guy G. Stroumsa, *Das Ende des Opferkults. Die religiösen Mutationen der Spätantike*, Berlin 2011, p. 88. This balks at verse Q 22:36f, which explicitly deals with the theologically exclusive relevance of the sacrificer’s piety, thus sublimating the act of sacrifice; see Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang (=KTS)*, Berlin 2010, pp. 554-557.

and, at some later discursive level, the consciousness of belonging to God's people takes the place of genealogical authority.

The earliest suras, the so-called 'consolation suras' or 'thanksgiving suras'<sup>28</sup>, do not yet explicitly express a direct conflict. Yet, such a conflict would soon arise due to the propagation of a significantly new *theological concept* that would shake the foundation of the entire traditional tribal-oriented *Wertekanon*: the promise of the Judgment Day backed by the authority of Scripture.

#### **4. Disempowering the Clan System: Individual Responsibility versus Collective Accountability (Early Mecca)**

For the following discussion, it is useful to cite at length a classical interpretation of the religious historian Gustav von Grunebaum: "Fear of the [Last] Judgment, that will come into force at the end of this world, was, if not the most powerful, at least the most compelling explanation for the galvanizing drive behind the Prophet's message and his listeners' attention. The way in which the Arab, as he was told, would be judged was not the same way in which he, following his ancestors' footsteps, had acted, and certainly not the way in which he would have judged himself. With slight exaggeration one may say that only with Muhammad did sin as the personal appropriation of evil enter the life of him who had remained untouched by Christian, Jewish or Iranian ideas that had been making their way into the Pensinsula, unsifted, confused and confusing"<sup>29</sup>. Previously, Good and Evil, Justice and Injustice, were values based on their categorical utility for gauging the tribe's honor and status. This was a system that inversely guaranteed individuals protection and prestige. The elevated standing of the individual in the clan – as some early Qur'ānic texts drawing on Gospel imagery show – is lost on the Day of Judgment, thus revealing the system's final weakness. Q 80<sup>30</sup> says:

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<sup>28</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren* (=HK 1), Berlin 2011, pp. 44-50.

<sup>29</sup> Gustav von Grunebaum 1966, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> For further discussion on this surah, see Neuwirth 2011, pp. 378-394.

- 33 And when the blast shall sound,  
34 upon the day when a man shall flee from his brother,  
35 his mother, his father,  
36 his consort, his sons,  
37 every man that day shall have business to suffice him.

Though man's realization of the "care for the self", his individual awareness of accountability, is predicted according to v. 37 only for the Day of Judgment, this kind of self-reflection is already ordained upon the individual believer during his earthly life. Contrasting this accountability with the pagan system and its primary concern with satisfying the tribal collective, proved especially appropriate for deconstructing the ancient traditions. The idea of an eventually powerless tribal system vis a vis the immediacy of a personal eschatology, was formulated even more drastically in Q 70:

- 8 Upon the day when heaven shall be as molten copper  
9 and the mountains shall be as plucked wool-tufts,  
10 no loyal friend shall question loyal friend,  
11 as they are given sight of them.  
The sinner will wish that he  
might ransom himself from the chastisement of that day even by his  
sons  
12 his companion wife, his brother,  
13 his kin who sheltered him,  
14 and whosoever is in the earth, all together, so that then it might deliver him<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> See Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren* (=HK 1), Berlin 2011, pp. 437-444, for further discussion on the drastic change in formulation as compared with the Gospel text Mt. 18:21-35: "The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant". Specifically, the comparison is drawn with the depiction of the indebted servant who begs his master not to sell him and his family into slavery.

From within this new mindset, the traditional values in the clan system were thereby substituted with other ones. The new ethos of the “care for the self” whereby the individual, aware of the inseparable junctim of his body and his soul, prepares himself for eschatological judgment, introduced a new canon of values in which the stranger and the disadvantaged – not one’s kith or kinsmen who garner prestige through association – are taken up as the primary addressees of the new pious:

Q 90, *al-balad*<sup>32</sup> unfolding around the image of the ‘two ways’ develops a scenario of practically applied piety, in which alms-giving, a practice that will become a standard topos in the middle Meccan catalogues of virtues<sup>33</sup>, plays an important role. Whereas the ancient pagan Arab paradigm promoted exuberant generosity (*jūd*), in the new canon of values charity is required instead. Q 90 starts with an oath cluster conjuring the high rank of Mecca as an urban settlement and the act of procreation as the foundation of societal life (v.1-3) – it is noteworthy that the qur’anic message at no point rejects the begetting of children so vehemently - disputed in patristic literature from the third century to the fifth - but acknowledges marital life and the begetting of offspring as the basis for the existence and survival of the polis<sup>34</sup>. The oath cluster which connects procreation to sacredness thus forms a particularly emphatic prelude to the ensuing statement (‘Schwuraussage’) that man – with all his merit in constituting the polis - has been created as a defective being<sup>35</sup> (v.4). The somewhat non-specific “created in trouble” is explained in the ensuing verses: “man”, *al-insan*, is still committed to the pagan code of behavior, a state of affairs that transpires blatantly through his attitude towards worldly possessions which he – far from devoting them to charity – wastes in acts of boastful overspending:

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<sup>32</sup> For further analysis of the surah, see Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren* (=HK 1), Berlin 2011, 236-252.

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. Q 70:22-29 and Neuwirth, *Der Koran I*. 431-451.

<sup>34</sup> See for the patristic discourse Peter Brown, *The Body*, 5-32.

<sup>35</sup> It is noteworthy that the Qur’an takes no interest in distinguishing between a human condition before and after the fall of Adam – a discourse that was of momentous significance to the late antique Church fathers, see Peter Brown, *The Body*, 160-209.

- 1 No, I swear by this town<sup>36</sup>,  
2 And thou art a lodger in this town,  
3 By the begetter and that he begot,  
4 Indeed, we created man in trouble.  
5 What, does he think none has power over him,  
6 saying, 'I have destroyed wealth abundant'?<sup>37</sup>  
7 What, does he think none has seen him?  
8 Have We not appointed to him two eyes  
9 and a tongue and two lips  
10 and guided him on the two highways?  
11 Yet he has not assaulted the steep;  
12 and what shall teach thee what is the steep?  
13 The freeing of a slave,  
14 or giving food upon a day of hunger  
15 to an orphan near of kin  
16 or a needy man in misery;  
17 then that he become of those who believe [...].  
18 Those are the Companions of the Right Hand.

The ostentatious wastefulness depicted in v. 6, echoes almost literally a poetic verse. Wastefulness is the expected behavior of the poet-hero in the beduin context where it does not, however, entail misbehavior, but rather reflects an ideal of the ancient Arab ethos. The poet-hero defends himself in numerous verses of poetry against his detractors standing proud of his excessive love of life before them: "Whenever I drink, I bring ruin to my wealth!" (*fa-idhā sharibtu fa-innānī mustahlikun*

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<sup>36</sup> Arberry translates: "No! I swear by this land!", which is however not the exact meaning.

<sup>37</sup> Arberry translates this line as, "I have consumed wealth abundant". The translation chosen here is the more literal. For further analyses of this line, see Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren* (=HK 1), Berlin 2011, pp. 241-242.

*māñ*)<sup>38</sup>. In denouncing such pagan extravagance, this Qur'ānic verse hits however only the tip of the iceberg of a much broader discourse. In reality the verse polemicalises against the old Arabic canon of virtues not for its being predicated on frivolity, but for its expressing a heroic defiance of death. This ultimate orientation underlying the pagans' obsessive emphasis on male honor owed to the tribe is, in light of imminent Judgment which subdues everyman to the omnipotence of God, anathema to the Qur'ānic ethos which is built on the principle of *taqwa*, *eusebeia*, fear of God<sup>39</sup>.

The 'way' metaphor in vs. 10-11 – the not-yet-assaulted "steep" – poses a puzzle. The system of ways evoked here, of course, reminds of the topographically real system of ways within the city where the addressee is dwelling. Yet the double option, the choice between two ways, points not to a geography, but to the symbolic duplicity of ways as images of two contrasting moral choices current in Biblical tradition, see in particular Mt 7, 13-14. The enigma of the two ways is only solved in v. 13-16 after a suspense introduced through the stylistic medium of a rhetorical question (v. 12): going the way of the slope, "the steep", is first and foremost comprised in social contributions. The idea of the emancipation of a slave, along with the feeding of the poor and clothing unknown beggars, is not new, it clearly reflects a frequently quoted text from the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah 58:6-7<sup>40</sup>:

58:6 – Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

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<sup>38</sup> See 'Antara's Mu'allaqa, v. 40, adduced by Andras Hamori, *The Art of Medieval Arabic Literature*, Princeton 1974, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang* (=KTS), Berlin 2010, pp. 672-722.

<sup>40</sup> All biblical citations are taken from the King James translation.

58:7 – Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

The three acts of charity first demanded in the Biblical text – emancipating slaves, feeding and caring for the poor and the strangers – are recapitulated in the Gospel of Matthew 25:34ff. Here, Christ praises those to his right for having done the same three acts of charity and condemns those to his left to Hellfire for having not performed these acts of charity<sup>41</sup>. The Qur’ānic reference of “people of the right” and “people of the left” could be an echo of Matthew’s Gospel. A biblical *Wertekanon*, already laid out eschatologically in the Gospels, takes the place of the pagans’ own code of conduct. The authority of the wisdom from the - unnamed - Scripture disempowers pagan ideals, handed down by their ancestors over the ages.

##### **5. Exchanging Genealogical Relationships for a Spiritual One (Middle Mecca)**

The orientation towards scripture which becomes predominant in the Mid-Meccan period when the emerging religious community developed a conscious sense of belonging to the biblical people of God, afforded the community the opportunity to view the question of genealogy in a broader context. With the adoption of the qibla, the direction of prayer towards Jerusalem, the community had distanced themselves from the local Meccan cult, a turn in orientation which is equally reflected in the Qur’ānic message where Biblical figures and narratives took the place of the earlier cherished Arabian scenarios. Biblical figures thus rise to the rank of exemplars. Given the cultural framework of *nasab*-bound relations in clan-based society, forsaking one’s own pagan clan-family was deemed scandalous. Yet, the growing religious movement in many cases asked just that from its members: to leave those relatives who were not willing to convert. In these cases the step of abandoning one’s own kith and kin was elevated to the level of a meritorious act, an attitude

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<sup>41</sup> Mt 25:41ff.

vindicated with the help of biblical analogies. It was Abraham, above all, whose example could be evoked in this debate, who according to the Qur'ānic reading of the story of his departure from his homeland Haran had distanced himself from his pagan clan. The Qur'ānic Abraham narrative in Surah 37 is comprised of two complementary parts: a punishment and salvation legend, on the one hand, and a story of trial and tribulation, on the other. The first part thematically illustrates the Qur'ānic topic of the hardship a prophet must endure among his own intractable people, from whom, under dramatic circumstances, he is later saved. Importantly, this account however revolves around Abraham's proactive conduct: the destruction of the idols worshipped by his people and his father. This episode takes the prime place in the Qur'ānic depiction of Abraham, yet it is not biblically based but has its origin in the Jewish hagiographic tradition, the Haggadah<sup>42</sup>. While the biblical story of Abraham in Genesis 12 sets in with his departure from his land and family in fulfillment of God's command, the Qur'ān's Abraham – as in the Midrash – is presented as having led a previous life in his homeland. Here, as the Qur'ān now demands of the messenger's audience, Abraham exchanges blood ties (genealogy) for a spiritual bond. The chief reason for his departure (v. 99) – "I am going to my Lord" – is justified by the rejection of his homeland's willful heathenism, a narrative that already had been deduced from biblical statements not included in the canonical Genesis account<sup>43</sup> by early Jewish exegetes<sup>44</sup>. Such reports are found explicit in the Book of Jubilees<sup>45</sup>, an apocryph from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E., which was widely received in Late Antiquity. In Q 37:83-99, the story is as follows:

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<sup>42</sup> For more on this, see Heinrich Speyer, *Biblische Erzählungen im Qoran*. Gräfenhainichen 1931, pp. 134-140.

<sup>43</sup> James Kugel, *How to read the Bible. A Guide to Scripture, then and now*, New York 2007, pp. 90-96

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90-96

<sup>45</sup> *The Book of Jubilees*, cf. Klaus Berger, *Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit. II.3: Das Buch der Jubiläen*, Gütersloh 1981, 12:2-4; cf. also Heinrich Speyer, *Biblische Erzählungen im Qoran*. Gräfenhainichen 1931, pp. 164-166; 170f.



pinned as the reason for his break (v. 99)<sup>46</sup>, yet it is only in the Qurʾān that the figure of the father is singled out as the one from whom the son turns away. Abraham subsequently establishes a new genealogy grounded in a spiritual *Leitfigur* – God Himself – thereby superseding genetic bonds<sup>47</sup>.

It is noteworthy that in the Mid-Meccan period a hitherto unknown term is introduced: *dhurriyya*, in more modern version normally translated as progeny<sup>48</sup>. The word is derived from *dharral dhurra*, “grain seed”. It is phonetically near – though not etymologically related – to the Hebrew *zeraʿ*, “seed”. The Hebrew *zeraʿ* is found in the biblical patriarch narratives as a circumscription of “progeny”, The “seed of Abraham” in particular is the central concept in that divine promise, which in the biblical text is the essential outcome of Abraham’s sacrifice story. Gen 22:17 states: “That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore”<sup>49</sup>. The word *dhurriyya*<sup>50</sup> - which is morphologically quite conspicuous – most frequently appears together with Abraham. The term, however, is first introduced in the story of Noah in Q 37:77, which immediately precedes the story of Abraham. The ‘biblicizing’ concept of “progeny” facilitates a byway around the standard discourse on “sons”, *banūn*, and “forefathers”, *abāʿ*, both of which explicitly constitute the backbone of the pagan power paradigm. The pagan discourse of *nasab* is thus superseded by the

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. James Kugel: *How to read the Bible. A Guide to Scripture, then and now*, New York 2007, pp. 90-96; the tradition is found explicitly in the Book of Jubilees, 12:2-4.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang* (=KTS), Berlin 2010, pp. 633-637.

<sup>48</sup> Arberry however does translate *dhurriyya* as “seed”; the King James Version of the Bible also translates the Hebrew *zeraʿ* as “seed”.

<sup>49</sup> The “seed of Abraham” is also the subject of extensive Talmudic discussions. See for example the Palestinian Talmud, Nedarim 3:8, translated by Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud Yerushalmi*, vol. 23, Chicago 1985, pp. 66-67.

<sup>50</sup> The *-iyya*-ending is attached only to three Qurʾānic lexemes; in its earliest use it refers to a collective.



110 Even so We recompense the good-doers;

111 he was among Our believing servants.

The second narrative focuses on Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, commonly known as the "Binding of Isaac", in Hebrew *'aqedah*, see Gen 22:1-19 where Abraham again demonstrates his preference for the spiritual bond over that of the familial. Unlike Gen 22:1, in the Qur'ān Abraham receives God's order in a vision. The son's readiness (v. 102) to give himself over to be sacrificed – probably a somewhat later added clarification - reflects an interpretation of the text established in Late Antique Jewish tradition<sup>53</sup>. This reading exculpates Abraham from the blame to have prepared to sacrifice his son arbitrarily as proof of his personal fidelity to God. Thus, a venerated prophetic figure is cleared of willing involvement in an otherwise gruesome act<sup>54</sup>. The Qur'ān's emphasis on the son's patience, i.e. his un-dramatic acceptance of suffering, may be also understood as a repudiation of a mythical elevation of affliction as a salvific act, like the Passion as understood in Christianity<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> James Kugel, *How to read the Bible. A Guide to Scripture, then and now*, New York 2007, pp. 126-128, and idem, *The Bible as it Was*, 165-178.

<sup>54</sup> See Pseudo-Philo in *ibid.*, p. 127, for further discussion on the early Jewish reinterpretation of the biblical *'aqedah* – literally, "the binding" (of Isaac by Abraham) – as an act of mutually agreed sacrifice between father and son.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Augustinus in *ibid.*, p. 128. For more on this adaptation's theological impact and implications, see Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands. The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, Albany 1990, pp. 116-151; Reuven Firestone, "Merit, Mimesis and Martyrdom: Aspects of Shi'ite Meta-Historical Exegesis on Abraham's Sacrifice in Light of Jewish, Christian, and Sunni Muslim Tradition," in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66.1. (1998), pp. 93-116, Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son. The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*, New Haven 1993, und Angelika Neuwirth, „Biblische Passionen als Herausforderung: Verhandlung, emotionale Entschärfung und Rekonstruktion des Abrahamsopfers im Koran" (in print).

According to the biblical text, Abraham's consummate willingness to surrender fully to the will of God is rewarded with the guarantee that his "seed" – progeny – will receive privileged standing among the peoples of the world, a standing that is from now on justified by the "Merit of the Fathers", *zekhut avot*, Gen 22:18: "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed My voice"<sup>56</sup>. In contrast, the Qur'ānic text does not speak of the descendants' exceptional status. The name of Abraham's son involved in the episode<sup>57</sup> is not mentioned even once. Instead, Abraham is rewarded with an honorary blessing, whereby he is established as an exemplary figure. For the new religious community his name is to be accompanied henceforth with the eulogy "peace be upon him", *'alaihi l-salām*. Thus, the Qur'ān substitutes the biblical idea of Abraham's establishment of a privileged genealogy with his elevation to a spiritual role model.

## 6. The New Challenge: the Genealogical 'Privilege' of the Jews (Medina)

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Erik Aurelius: "Durch den Glauben gehorsam – durch Werke gerecht," in: Reinhard G. Kratz & Tilman Nagel (hrsg.), *Abraham, unser Vater. Die gemeinsamen Wurzeln von Judentum, Christentum und Islam*, Göttingen 2003, pp. 98-111; Salomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, New York 1909, p. 179ff.; Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands. The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, Albany 1990, pp. 135-152; and Reuven Firestone, "Merit, Mimesis and Martyrdom: Aspects of Shi'ite Meta-Historical Exegesis on Abraham's Sacrifice in Light of Jewish, Christian, and Sunni Muslim Tradition," in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66.1. (1998), pp. 93-116.

<sup>57</sup> A later added section, not associated with the narrative, v. 112f., appends the announcement of Isaac's birth to the story. This addition emphasizes that Isaac will have as offspring one righteous son (Jacob) and a "manifest self-wronger" (Esau), or groups of righteous and wrong-doers. The later supplement emphasizes the newly adopted interpretation in Medina, which in contrast to the Jewish tradition, does not have Abraham's descendants categorically blessed.

The story of Abraham's sacrifice is told only once in the Qur'ān. Though not evoked in Mecca any more, the narrative acquires a new reading after the emigration<sup>58</sup> – *hijra* –, figuring prominently in Medinan debates over the founding of the Ka`ba and the establishment of the pilgrimage rituals. The emigration of the community to Medina in 622 demarcates an important shift. Here, many of the older Meccan communications acquire a new – religio-political – dimension<sup>59</sup>. The new hermeneutic is due to the fact that in Medina, the messenger and his audience no longer stand in a pagan-syncretic environment, in which they can freely draw from a heterogeneous body of religious knowledge. Rather now they find themselves in a heterogeneous society whose prevailing group, a Jewish community, claims the biblical heritage that up to this point counted as universal intellectual property, as their own legacy, and thus the legitimate subject of their particular exegesis. In this context, the sacrifice narrative acquired new religio-political significance for the Qur'ānic community. Specifically, the story comes to be understood as a centrally important event for the emerging religion of Islam.

Some background knowledge may be in place: According to the Qur'ān, Abraham's sacrifice does not take place in the Holy Land, but in the area around Mecca<sup>60</sup>. It seems that local tradition had already earlier associated Abraham with the Arabian Peninsula and included him as part of the Meccan religious tradition<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> See Joseph Witztum, "The foundations of the house (Q 2:127)," in: *BSOAS* 72 (2009), pp. 25-40; Nicolai Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung. Studien zur frühen Koraninterpretation*, Würzburg 2006; Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang* (=KTS), Berlin 2010, pp. 637-652, and Angelika Neuwirth, „Biblische Passionen als Herausforderung: Verhandlung, emotionale Entschärfung und Rekonstruktion des Abrahamsopfers im Koran" (in: Christoph Wulf, xxxx).

<sup>59</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang* (=KTS), Berlin 2010, pp. 510-560.

<sup>60</sup> Reuven Firestone, "Abraham," in: Jane D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. I, Leiden 2001, pp. 5-11.

<sup>61</sup> Tilman Nagel, „Der erste Muslim. Abraham in Mekka," in: Reinhard G. Kratz & Tilman Nagel (hrsg.), *Abraham, unser Vater. Die gemeinsamen Wurzeln von Judentum,*

Therefore, it is little amazing that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son – which is celebrated in Jewish tradition as unique proof of Abraham's fidelity which served as the textual justification for the Jews' 'chosenness', and which moreover foreshadowed the Passion of Christ - was also claimed by the Qur'ānic community and included in their own narrative. In Medina, the textual event is connected with a central religious act celebrated locally, the rite of sacrifice during the pilgrimage. A number of the extant cultic rites associated with the pilgrimage – the *hajj* –, culminating in a collective offering, that had survived into the time of the Prophet's ministry were integrated into the emerging new religion and through Qur'ānic texts were stipulated as binding injunctions. The cultic rites, however, acquired a new meaning, since Abraham is now claimed as the founder of the pilgrimage ritual.

And when We settled for Abraham the place of the House: Thou shall not associate with Me anything. And do thou purify My House for those that shall go about it and those that stand, for those that bow and prostrate themselves; and proclaim among men the Pilgrimage, and they shall come unto thee on foot and upon every lean beast, they shall come from every deep ravine that they may witness things profitable to them and mention God's Name on days well-known over such beasts of the flocks as He has provided them: So eat thereof, and feed the wretched poor. (Q 22:26ff.)

His act of sacrifice pre-figures that of the believers during the pilgrimage. Through his willingness to sacrifice his own son, he passes a "test", one that elevates him to the status of role model, *imām*. The appellation hints at the biblical promise that he will become "the father of many nations", but reinterprets the genealogical promise as a spiritual one. According to the biblical tradition in Gen. 22:18 and the Jewish tradition of the "Merit of the Fathers", Abraham's decedents are expected to use this righteous heritage to their advantage. In the Qur'ān, however, after he is elevated

to the status of role model, Abraham's question about the status of his descendents is dismissed, Q 2:124:

And when his Lord tested Abraham with certain words, and he fulfilled them, He said: "Behold, I make you a leader for the people." Said he: "And of my seed?" He said: "My covenant shall not reach the evildoers."

Again, his readiness to offer up to God his most beloved child remains his greatest merit and, hence, also serves as the justification for upholding him as a role model of fidelity to God. This distinction is accorded to Abraham already in an early Meccan sura, Q 53:37, but it is only later, in the Medinan context that it triggered the crucial revision of the until then accepted Jewish interpretation, whose genealogical entitlements are now rejected.

In addition, Abraham sets another precedent that again affirms his status of role model and which simultaneously depicts the *Urszene* – the original enactment – of the Islamic sacrificial ceremony: the offering of a substitute animal sacrifice. Yet animal sacrifice in the Qur'ān does not really bear a theological significance since the ritual of sacrifice itself, which stands at the pinnacle of the pilgrimage in Medina, is interpreted anew. Although the ritual is sanctioned by a direct Qur'ānic directive, it is simultaneously de-mythified and re-interpreted as an act of piety, *taqwa*, "fear of God", Q 22:36f.:

And the beasts of sacrifice – We have appointed them for you as among God's waymarks; therein is good for you. So mention God's Name over them, standing in ranks then, when their flanks collapse, eat of them and feed the beggar and the suppliant. So We have subjected them to you; haply you will be thankful. The flesh of them shall not reach God, neither their blood, but fear of God<sup>62</sup> from you shall reach Him [...].

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<sup>62</sup> Arberry translates "*taqwa*" in v. 37 as "godliness".

In contrast to Walter Burkert's understanding<sup>63</sup>, the passage does not speak of 'sacrifice' in exact correspondence with the meaning of the word used in the Biblical tradition. Although the slaughter of animals, as prescribed in old Arabian ritual, is continued, it does not accrue any power for the remission of sins. Only by one's individual fear of God – the spiritual attitude in which the slaughter is to be performed – "shall [the offering] reach Him". The offering, conventionally understood as an act performed for the remission of sin, henceforth becomes an act of obedience. All mythical dimensions are expurgated. In the end, only the piety of the individual, *taqwa*, *eusebeia*, counts. There is thus no reason for not accrediting the Qur'ān as well with having facilitated the "end of sacrifice", that Stroumsa has claimed for the other late antique religious cultures.

## 7. Implications of the particular set of characters involved in Abraham's Sacrifice

The rite of sacrifice in the Qur'ān, despite its de-mythification, is however not entirely dis-empowered. By way of a typological association, it reacquires new meaning: it is elevated to the rank of an Abrahamic institution. Participants in the cult perform an *imitatio Abrahami* - an inestimable religious upgrading of the pagan pilgrimage rites. This in turn facilitated a new self-image of the worshippers who now themselves stood in the ritual tradition of Abraham.

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<sup>63</sup> Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans. Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen*, Berlin 1972, p. 19. He erroneously understands the continuation of ritual animal slaughter during the pilgrimage as proof of the 'sacrifice discourse'; see Guy G. Stroumsa, *Das Ende des Opferkults. Die religiösen Mutationen der Spätantike*, Berlin 2011, p. 88. Yet the relevant verse Q 22:36f. explicitly speaks of the exclusive validity of piety, the spiritual state in which the slaughter itself is successfully performed. Cf. Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren* (=HK 1), Berlin 2011, pp. 554-557.

Despite the fact that the sacrificial offering was re-conceived in Medina, one must keep in mind that offering up a sacrifice in the pagan context is an extraordinarily expressive act that contributes heavily to the affirmation of identity. The unique set of characters associated with the Abrahamic sacrifice, composed of a father as sacrificer and a son who is both a co-sacrificer and the sacrifice itself, could not go unnoticed by a society that was sensitive to genealogical lineage. In fact, Abraham initially abrogated genealogical bonds with a spiritual one: he places God in place of his own father by choosing to leave the latter. But he also gives the father-son bond a new meaning by actively including his son in the sacrificial act. Though Abraham in the Qur'an does not establish - as the Biblical context would suggest - an Abrahamic line, he does legitimate and consolidate the bond between father and son anew. Margaret Combs Schilling supports the thesis that the newly constructed connection of genealogy and sacrificial offering significantly contributed to establishing a patrilinear kind of thinking, i.e. the conceptualization of social legitimacy primarily through the father<sup>64</sup>. This observation, although derived from the traditional sacrificial practice of a particular region, might have been relevant already for the revelation's direct recipients. Combs Schilling attributes a double impact to the dialectic created by the Qur'anic embedding of a father-son-sacrifice into a father-renunciation-story: through Abraham's rejection of the idolatrous father, on one hand, and his readiness to sacrifice his own son, on the other hand, the dialectical story simultaneously delimits and empowers the patrilinear bond's significance. In Combs Schilling's words:

Transcendence comes in because, as told in the Qur'an, the prophet Abraham had to deny his own father in order to remain faithful to the one God [...]. Yet the Qur'an also reinforces patrilineality by portraying the ultimate sacrifice that God demands of humans as the sacrifice of the most precious tie on earth – the father's link to his

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. M. Elaine Combs Schilling, *Sacred Performance. Islam, Sexuality and Sacrifice*, New York 1989, p. 57f.

male child – the fundamental patrilineal connection. The myth of sacrifice ennobles that bond over all others. So at the same time that the Qurʾān underlines the limits of patrilineal affiliation [...], it reinforces patrilineality, for it was the father in connection with the son that made for connection to the divine and won for father and son – and by extension all of humanity – long life on earth and eternal life thereafter<sup>65</sup>.

For the later recipients of the Qurʾān's take on the Abrahamic sacrifice, who read the Qurʾān when genealogy and the old ideal of virility had gained value again, Comb Schilling's conclusion is certainly a relevant consideration: the yearly sacrifice which is expected to be conducted annually by every Muslim *paterfamilias* crystallizes together the elements of both the social ideal of male hegemony and patrilinear identity.

## 8. The Power of Typology

As for the Qurʾān, one can go a step further and claim that the idea of the "synergetic interaction" between father and son - established in the Meccan text Q 37 and connected with the role attributed to Abraham as the founder of a sanctuary in Medina – strongly reactivated a typological interpretation of the Abraham story that had been flashed out before: The sacrifice narrative in Q 37 is told in a non-emphatic, sober voice. Emotion is excluded from the tale so as to avoid any association with the Christian Passion story. The nameless individual to be sacrificed is "prudent" (v. 101) and "steadfast" (v. 102), so that no dramatic mood should arise. Most of all, through the consent of the one to be sacrificed, the sacrificer is emancipated from his tragic constraint to elevate loyalty to another being over the care for his own son. Thus, an analogy to the Christian Passion is excluded. Equally discarded is the Jewish belief in "the Merit of the Fathers", the

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

biblical promise that Abraham's descendents will be blessed above all other peoples which is explicitly disavowed in Medina in Q 2:124: "My covenant shall not reach the evildoers."

Yet once established, this father-son-synergy generated new, important tropes (*Sinnfiguren*) for the emerging Ka`ba cult. In Q 2:127, the task is given to Abraham and Ishmael – who had already appeared together in the late Meccan sura 14 – to build the Ka`ba, God's House, for the cult's adherents (v. 125). The intended sacrifice, which is not mentioned in Q 37, is here *post facto* identified: it is not Isaac. Rather, it seems that the already familiar figure of Ishmael, the Arabs' tribal forefather has taken his place. This, at least, is the understanding suggested by verse v. 127 which presents the two patriarchs in their activity of building the "House", an activity that includes the offering of a sacrifice offered, to which the imperative *taqabbal minna*, "accept from us", seems to allude, see below. Abraham's ensuing "prayer of the blessing of the House", which is recited by both Abraham and Ishmael during the construction of its foundation walls, in some formulations reminds of Salomon's dedication prayer upon completion of the Temple in 1 Kings 8:14-61<sup>66</sup>. The section culminates in a plea for the ritual completion of the Meccan worship, which before was still incomplete, consisting exclusively of the pilgrimage rituals and the gestures of humility accompanying the ritual prayer – proskynesis,, and bowing and standing (Q 2:125). Important is the new demand that the worship rites should be completed through a verbal service. This specific plea is a *vaticinatio ex eventu* in the Qur`ān, a prayer that has already come to fruition with the messenger's ministry, Q 2:127-129:

When Abraham raised up the foundations of the House, and he and Ishmael spoke: 'Our Lord, receive this (our prayer) from us; Thou art the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing; / and, our Lord, make us submissive (*muslimūna*) to Thee,

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<sup>66</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, "The spiritual meaning of Jerusalem in Islam," in: Nitza Rosovsky (ed.), *City of the Great King. Jerusalem from David to the Present*, Harvard 1996, pp. 93-116; 483-495.

and of our seed a nation submissive to Thee (*umma muslima*); and show us our holy rites, and turn towards us; surely Thou turnest, and art All-Compassionate; / and, our Lord, do Thou send among them a Messenger, one of them, who shall recite to them Thy signs (*ayāt*), and teach them the Book and the Wisdom, and purify them; Thou art the All-Mighty, the All-Wise.

Neither the act of constructing the “House” by Abraham and Ishmael, nor their prayer, is biblically founded. Yet they are certainly not a Qur’ānic *ad-hoc* construction, as has long been presumed. Rather – as Joseph Witztum convincingly has demonstrated<sup>67</sup> – it is a Qur’ānic restaging of the late antique multifarious vita of Abraham. In order to demonstrate this, Witztum contextualizes both the construction activities of the two patriarchs (v. 127) and the prayers conducted by them with their underlying rabbinic and Christian traditions. Whereas in the Qur’ān the construction of a sanctuary, a temple, *bayt*, is at stake, it is explicitly an altar which is the central subject of debate in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Thus, already Josephus (1<sup>st</sup> century) depicts Isaac as taking part in the construction of the altar upon which he is to be sacrificed<sup>68</sup>. In Christianity, the son’s participation in the preparation of his sacrifice figures critically at the heart of the Christian tradition, as various Syriac and Greek homilies from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. adduced by Witztum demonstrate. These Christian sources interpret the event christologically: father and son, the “wise architects of faith”, erect an altar together, on which the salvific sacrifice of the son is to take place. As Witztum has demonstrated, this widespread typological version of the sacrifice narrative, has left behind discernible traces in the Qur’ān. In light of their wide circulation, one may presume that these narratives could have functioned as a catalyst for the Qur’ānic depiction of the Kaba’s/the House’s construction. The designation of the Ka’ba with al-bayt, “the House” though obviously no innovation of the Qur’an, but introduced as already familiar in one of

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<sup>67</sup> Joseph Witztum, “The foundations of the house (Q 2:127),” in: *BSOAS* 72 (2009), pp. 25-40.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the earliest suras, Q 106:3, and frequently used in Medina, in this particular verse evokes Biblical or more precisely post-Biblical associations: It is worth noticing that word bayt is Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew bayt which designates the Temple. The Jerusalem Temple again, is prefigured by the altar built by Abraham and Isaac. To find the image of the building of the "House", bayt, by the two patriarchs who also feature praying for acceptance – of their prayer or their sacrifice? - suggests that here a post-Biblical scenario may have been reproduced. The verse would then have to be understood as alluding to the Abrahamic sacrifice which extended into the building of the sanctuary. However that may be, one quickly notices that the story in the Qur'ān is told without recognizable allegorical features. Its purpose seems to be the foregrounding of the one son of Abraham, that is not the Biblical elect Isaac, by having him participate in the foundation of the sanctuary. That this is primarily a polemical exclusivist stratagem is indicated by the fact, that this genealogy is nowhere in the Qur'an theologically exploited<sup>69</sup>.

Typological, though not allegorical, references are thus clearly discernible. If one expatiates on the structural similarities in each of the three – Jewish, Christian, Qur'ānic - respective takes on the father-son-synergies in the sanctuary construction narratives of Late Antiquity, a clear parallel is discernible: Ishmael takes part in constructing the Ka'ba in Mecca, as Isaac participates in building the sacrificial altar on Mount Moriah, and as 'God the Son' shares in the erection of the sacrificial altar at Golgotha according to the typological homilies. Still, this comparison is not really adequate: in the Qur'ān, the father-son-synergy lacks the mythical dimension that in the two other traditions is created theologically through the weighty notion of redemptive sacrifice. As is often the case in the Qur'ān, one can speak here of de-allegorization<sup>70</sup>, i.e. that the Qur'ān trims a christologically relevant narrative down to its sheer diegetic plot. Nevertheless, by upholding references to the older text's

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<sup>69</sup> See Werner Caskel, *Gamharat an-nasab. Das genealogische Werk des Hisam Ibn al-Kalbi*, Leiden 1966, p. 39.

<sup>70</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang (=KTS)*, Berlin 2010, pp. 561-512.

authority, the basic biblical plot structure continues to contribute a surplus dimension of meaning to the Qur'ānic story.

### 9. A "Counter Genealogy": the Prophetic Line of Succession (Medina)

Ancestor worship and the patriarchal tradition, *nasab*, in the Qur'ān are, as we saw, negatively connoted from the start. In verse Q 49:13, evoked as an introduction to this article, the existence of tribes and peoples is downgraded to a mere instrument for divine instruction: "O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you. God is All-Knowing, All-Aware." Pragmatic utility, not prestige, - the text tries to suggest - lies at the foundation of tribal organization. By marginalizing both history and *tribal* history, a new bond was needed that provided historical depth to the community's new awareness of 'electedness', of belonging to the 'elect people', though not genealogically but spiritually. Reuven Firestone suggests that the Qur'anic debate about election should have arisen only in the argument between early Muslims and those Jews and Christians who believed in their communities' exclusive relationship with God<sup>71</sup>. This may well be true for the polemic discussion of chosenness, such as documented in Q 2:113 and Q 5:15. It is however obvious that a counter-concept to the Jewish and Christian exclusive notion of chosenness emerged much earlier. The pagans' old tribal model, foregrounding the forefathers which was predominant throughout the community's environment, was in the course of being substituted with a new orientation already in Mecca: for the messenger and his listeners, who consciously considered themselves as part of the biblical tradition of God's People, genealogical ancestral-based family bonds were replaced by the relationship with God's earlier prophets, whom they regarded as their 'spiritual forefathers'<sup>72</sup>. They

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<sup>71</sup> Reuven Firestone, Is there a notion of „divine election“ in the Qur'an? In: Gabriel S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'an. The Qur'an in its historical context 2*. New York, London 2011.393-410. 408

<sup>72</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren* (=HK 1), Berlin 2011, pp. 365-367.

thus constructed a “genealogy of elects”, a “prophetic line of succession” as a spiritual counter-model to a tribal genealogy allowing them to partake in divine election. In Medina the election of these prophets is programmatically laid out, Q 3:33f.:

God chose Adam and Noah and the House of Abraham and the House of Amram above all beings / the seed (*dhurriyya*) of one another; God hears, and knows.

Does this chain hold out against a genealogical verification? It is true that Adam and Noah, as the prime fathers of humanity, are genetically related and by extension, Abraham’s House – Abraham’s descendents – falls into the same family line. But in contrast, the House of Amram, that according to the Qur’ān represents the Holy Family and the Christian line of tradition<sup>73</sup>, includes a list of figures well attested to in inter-testamental literature, but only loosely related to the Abrahamites, in Q 33:33f. - they are even seen as a rivaling lineage. *Dhurriyya*, therefore, seems to mean more than just a genetic relationship. What binds the four names – Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Amram – is evidently their rank as God’s covenantal partners (or in Amram’s case: as the father of such a partner). It is noteworthy that the list of names is not new, the figures mentioned here feature – with a slight modification – in earlier Christian covenant lists as well<sup>74</sup>. ‘Lineage’, distinguished here by the term

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<sup>73</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, “The House of Abraham and the House of Amram. Genealogy, Patriarchal Authority, and Exegetical Professionalism,” in: Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qur’an in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’anic Milieu*, Leiden 2009, reprint 2011.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. the prophetic line of succession of Butrus Bayt Ra’si (Pseudo-Eutychios) cited by Samir Khalil Samir, “The Theological Christian Influence on the Qur’an. A Reflection,” in: Gabriel S. Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur’an in its Historical Context*, London 2008, pp. 141-162, which conveniently replaces the House of Amram with Moses; cf. also Angelika Neuwirth, “The House of Abraham and the House of Amram. Genealogy, Patriarchal Authority, and Exegetical Professionalism,” in: Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.),

*dhurriyya*, thus appears to have been sublimated to a kind of electedness. Even though the figures mentioned are depicted as being genealogically related in Q 3:33f. – *dhurriyyata ba‘dihim min ba‘d*, “the seed of one another” –, the criterion of common descent will conclusively be faded out<sup>75</sup> and give way to chosenness: After a number of prophets and prophets’ families have been described as “elected”, eventually, in Q 33:7, the messenger himself is included in the prophetic succession: “When we took compact from the Prophets and from thee, and from Noah, and Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, Mary’s son; We took from them a solemn compact, that He might question the truthful concerning their truthfulness; and He has prepared for the unbelievers a painful chastisement”. What counts is the divine covenant: succession of prophetic lineage, a family of elected ones, replaces and supersedes the worldly bond of the tribe<sup>76</sup>. The Qur’ān thus offsets tribal history with a *counter history*: not however by claiming a new election to replace the preceding elections of the Jews and Christians, but with a prophetic line of succession, which can be claimed by the pious believer as his spiritual ancestry universally. Firestone is right to stress the renunciation of a claim to an unconditioned electedness on the side of the new community<sup>77</sup>.

At the end of this development, Abraham takes up the leading role and becomes the spiritual ancestor over a community legitimized through prophets. He presides over a “House”, a faith community no longer exclusively traced to the Jews as conveyed in the verse of ‘prophetic election’, Q 3:33f. Instead, the new role adopted by Abraham critically engages this verse and even re-formulates it as a counter-argument against the Jews’ electedness. In the late-Medinan period, Abraham is depicted as the first pure servant of God, *hanif*, who comes to venerate One God still without the guidance of the Mosaic Law. He is effectively a ‘just man

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*The Qur’an in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’anic Milieu*, Leiden 2009, reprint 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. the Medinan amendment to the middle Meccan Surah Q 19:58.

<sup>76</sup> See Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang* (=KTS), Berlin 2010, pp. 230-234.

<sup>77</sup> Firestone, „Is there a notion of ‘divine election’ in the Qur’an?” 408.

from among the heathen peoples', *ummi*. After the Prophet's death, Abraham, as ancestral lord of a community, becomes the one biblical figure whose tradition, the ideal of "the House of Abraham", *Al Ibrahim*, should be continued, and who is thus included in Muslims' quotidian prayers, at the end of which the following is uttered:

God bless Muhammad and the House of Muhammad  
As you blessed Abraham and the House of Abraham!

How the "House of Abraham" is constructed is neither explained in any great detail, nor is a word mentioned in reference to his role of being the Arabs' tribal ancestor, let alone any privilege to be deduced from it. In contrast, Abraham is depicted as the messenger's role model; the House of Abraham thus constitutes the nucleus of a religious community, which now, at the end of their development, is renewed through the implementation of Abraham's plea unto God for the establishment of a verbal service (Q 2:127-129). That community is spiritual, not genealogical, and thereby universally justified. What was once the privilege of Abraham's genealogical descendents (Gen 22:17) – to benefit from and share in his merits as their ancestor – is now requested in the form of prayer for all pious persons. By this transformation, a the long path has been traversed: starting from the 'real', historical, Mecca previously dominated by genealogical lineage, and passing a phase replete with biblical narratives associated with the spiritual Jerusalem evoked in the listener's imagination, until finally reaching the "New Jerusalem", which in fact is a biblically encoded Mecca. Finally, with the positioning of Abraham as the ultimate role model and the founder of the Meccan sanctuary, this biblical figure, erstwhile loaded with genealogical associations, finally turns into the triumphant victor over genealogy.

## 10. Conclusion

The title of this article "A Religious Transformation in Late Antiquity" announces an attempt to integrate Qur'ānic exegesis into the framework of Guy Stroumsa's concept of "religious mutations in Late Antiquity". The Qur'ān was communicated in a time when society in the Arabian Peninsula was ready to undergo a cultic transformation, i.e. to transition from a pilgrimage- and sacrifice-oriented cult to a new oral service based on individual piety. The group around the messenger had already taken a significant step on the path towards this transformation: their "care for the self" is clearly reflected in their eschatologically founded sense of individual responsibility for one's own deeds. They are distinguished as a new community through their liturgical dedication, their inclination toward asceticism and monastic virtues, and, most of all, their adoption of the authority of scripture; in other words, they practice a "communitarian religion". Their opponents are not wholly untouched by this new orientation of Late Antiquity either, their pagan deities have lost their status as part of a pantheon and are reinterpreted as angels<sup>78</sup>. What little is left of the opponents' 'pagan' attitudes is ancestral pride and their anthropocentric inclination toward a simultaneously heroic and hedonist lifestyle as configured in tribal ethics, a lifestyle which is clearly documented in profane poetry.

As the debate with his detractors over the decisive role of loyalty intensified, the messenger increasingly referred to Biblical historical precedence in order to spur on the transition out of clan-based relationships and into the bonds of a religious community. Abraham presented himself as the ideal role model for such a process. Having attained an individual relationship with God, he had managed to free himself from the shackles of genealogical loyalty. The same Abraham became a central figure as the new religious community disputed with Jewish and Christian learned men in Medina, where he was portrayed as reenacting his role as the founder of the central sanctuary – in a father-son-synergy already pre-figured in the two earlier traditions. His role as founding father of a sanctuary connected to a sacrificial cult was intertwined with a decisive amendment to the tradition: the community's

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<sup>78</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren* (=HK 1), Berlin 2011, pp. 642-685.

sacrificial offering, which attests the worshippers' *imitatio Abrahami*, entailed no mythical implications since it was already understood as a sublimated offering. Moreover, any association of the sacrificial offering to genealogical privilege is blocked, not only for the Jews, whose claim to such an advantage is denied<sup>79</sup>, but as well for the Arabs, who could have derived from their relation to Abraham a similar claim analogous to the "Merits of the Fathers". The cultic rites originally confirming tribal identity are turned into a succession of Abraham by the individual pious. Genealogy as a major concern of society is disempowered and elevated to the level of spiritually determined prophetic genealogy, in which Abraham plays the central role. In conclusion, the religion founded by Abraham – in accordance with Late antique perceptions – is universal and grounded exclusively in personal piety.

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<sup>79</sup> See Q 2:124; 3:65-68 and the polemic against Jews and Christians summarized by Firestone, „Is there a notion of ‚divine election‘ in the Qur’an?“, 408.

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