1 Prehistory

Arising when Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity were still in the process of firmly establishing themselves institutionally, Islam traces its origins to Arabia of the seventh century. Revolving around a prophet named Muḥammad with a scripture named the Qurʾān, Islam became the ideology which served to unite the Arab empire which asserted itself first in the area of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, and then across North Africa and Persia. In doing so, it displaced to a large extent the older religions, including that of ancient Persia, Zoroastrianism.

The foundations of Islam

Common wisdom would suggest that in order to understand the foundation of Islam we must have some knowledge of the historical, social, political and economic context from which the religion emerged. As a generalization, of course, this has a degree of validity. However, it is quite possible to question the value of this approach to Islam's historical contextualization because it is highly dependent upon a notion of the religion of Islam existing as a conceptually defined entity from the very beginning of its proclamation. A more stimulating model of the foundation of Islam pictures the religion as emerging gradually, coming to a fixed sense of identity (and all that entails in terms of sources of authority) over a period of some two centuries. Certainly the gradual intertwining of developing Islamic ideology and the immediate environment presents a complex and confused picture, and thus a sketch of the political and religious situation in the Near East in the sixth through the eighth centuries can definitely help to put some of the matter in focus. The provision of such information should not be taken, however, in the sense of looking for "influences upon Muḥammad" from this pre-Islamic

period (as so many studies of Islam seem to suggest), but, rather, as an attempt to sketch the context in which Islam did eventually emerge and to see the combination of factors in the society that made the religion successful and made it into the religion that it is today. While the point may seem surprising at first, the relevance of the geographical region of central Arabia to that emergent definition of what we have come to know as the religion of Islam is highly questionable; Islam (in its clearly defined and developed form) had its formative developing period outside the Arabian context and, while the initial impetus for the religion is clearly tied to the Ḥijāz in Arabia, the character the religion adopted was moulded by more widespread Near Eastern precedents than would appear historically possible within the narrow isolation of Arabia.

The Near East before Islam

There are three foci of interest in the centuries preceding the wave of Arab conquests of the Near East region in the seventh century. The Christian Byzantines had some influence over the Red Sea, extending at times to an alliance with the Monophysite Christians of Abyssinia; the Zoroastrian Persians, with their capital in Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia, had influence which reached at times the eastern side of Arabia and along the south coast to the Yemen; and the south Arabian kingdoms whose fluctuating fortunes, last manifested in the Himyar dynasty of the sixth century, had lost virtually all semblance of vitality by the time of the rise of the Arabs. The Arabian peninsula, although having had settled centres for several millennia, did not contain a power to be reckoned with in the world at the time. The only partial qualification to this resided in the various tribal areas which had become pawns in the hands of external kingdoms, perhaps thereby creating the human forces which would eventually expand out of the peninsula and subjugate the earlier rulers.

In the year 527 Justinian I came to the throne of the Byzantine empire at Constantinople. He was determined to restore unity with the remnants of the decaying Roman empire, the western parts of which had been lost to the Germanic tribes, especially the Vandals and the Goths. He was successful in directing the re-conquest of Italy, North Africa and part of Spain but, by his death in 565, much of this accomplishment was being nullified as the result of continual local uprisings. The Persians took advantage of the subsequent unstable situation and undertook military initiatives on their western border with Byzantium. Heavy taxes, however, provoked instability on the

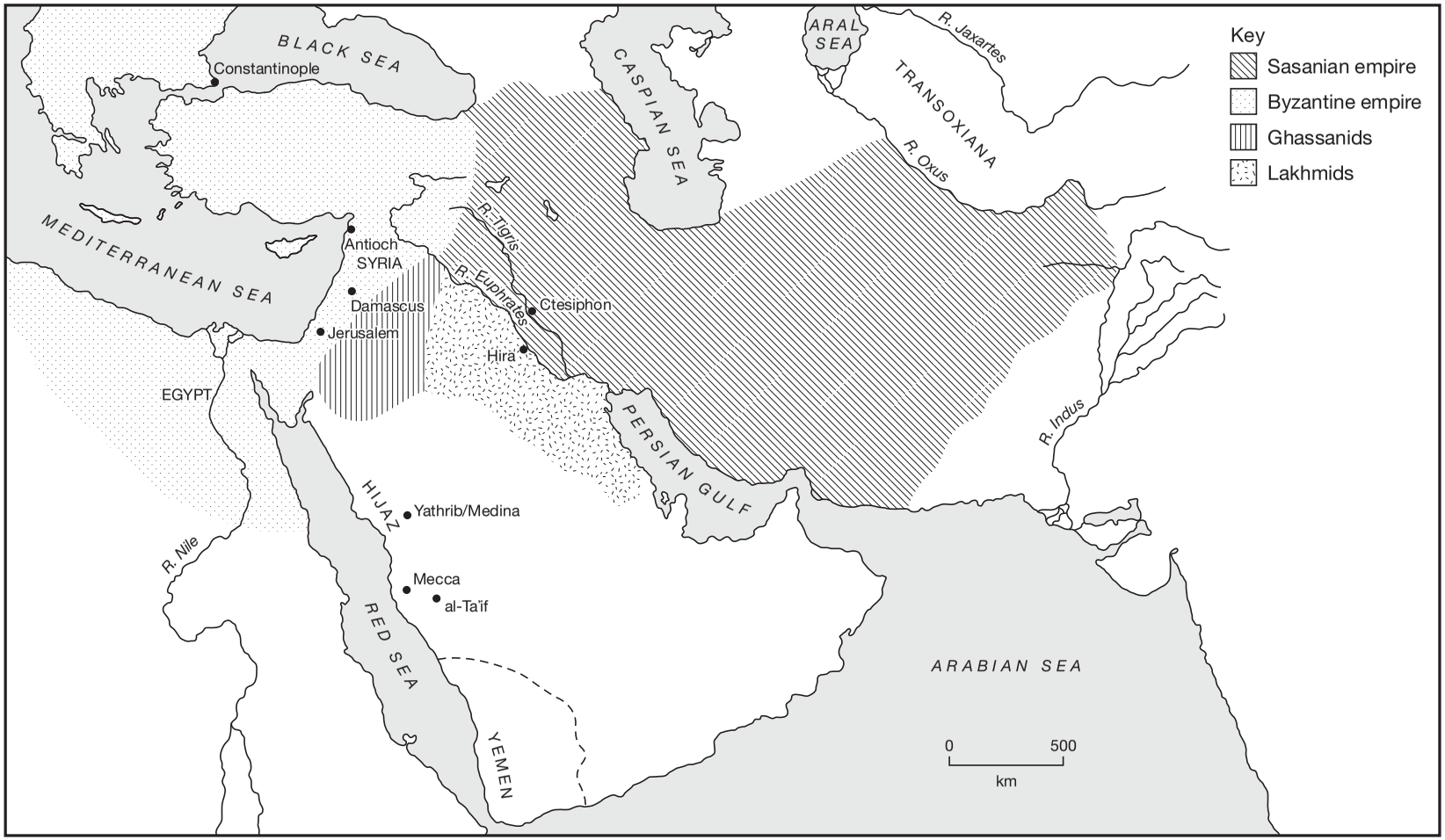

Figure 1.1 Map of the Near East, *c*.600 CE

edges of this newly expanded area. Heraclius, the Byzantine leader who died in 641, managed to gain supremacy in Constantinople in 610, only to witness the Persians take Antioch in 613 and Jerusalem in 614, and then march into Egypt in 619. An attempt to move on Constantinople itself in the year 626 left the Persians disorganized and overstretched. Before this final move by the Persians, Heraclius had begun a counterattack and had successfully invaded Persian territory as far as Ctesiphon in 628, recapturing Jerusalem in 629, forcing a retreat on the part of the Persian empire, and eventually causing the murder of Shah Khusro II. The overconfident Byzantines relaxed and fell victim to the Arab conquest, which started most significantly with the initial capture of Damascus in 635.[1]

The situation in the Arabian peninsula

From the point of view of Arabia, this political situation was further confused and made more unstable by two additional factors: the interaction of the Arabs with the two major world powers and the religious rivalry between Jews, the various sects of Christians and, to a lesser extent, Zoroastrians.

Through a system of states functioning as tributaries to the Byzantines and Persians, the nomads of Arabia were kept within the confines of the desert area, and thus did not pose any great danger to the frontier area. As well, these tributary states, Hira (whose people are also known as the Lakhmids) under the Persians in the north-east of Arabia, and Ghassan under the Byzantines in the north-west, provided troops to their respective overlords. By the sixth century, these areas were populated by settled Bedouin tribes, and Christianity especially was making its presence felt.[2] The Arabs of this area were, however, of little practical consequence to the world powers of the time, although towards the end of the sixth century, independence was seized by the Ghassanids, while the Lakhmids were forced into an even more subservient relationship with the Persians than had previously been the case. Overall, the tributary system, while it had been in operation for a number of centuries by the time of the Arab conquests, was becoming increasingly unstable at this time.

In the south of Arabia, intertribal warfare was bringing an end to the Himyar kingdom, the last in a long line of impressive states in the Yemen area. One of the reasons for the gradual decline in this region was the diminishing importance of the incense trade in the fourth century, in the wake of the Christian takeover of the pagan world and the weakening of the Roman economy.[3] South Arabia, the

major source of incense for the world from antiquity (at least since the seventh century BCE), had based a great deal of its economy on the production and trade in this material which was used in Graeco-Roman religious festivals and in medicinal preparations. With the shift in the world situation, this economy suffered greatly. Some scholars have also suggested that, around the year 300, the whole area of Arabia suffered a drought, bringing about a collapse of the traditional agricultural basis of the local economy, although the evidence for this is not overwhelming.

Religion in the Arabian peninsula

The sedentary lifestyle of south Arabia had produced a society deeply involved in the various religious systems of the ancient Near East. Evidence, coming from inscriptions found in the area, reflects a developed stage of this religious growth and we have no information on how this religious system actually came into being. Clearly, the region was closely linked to the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian worlds. Until the fourth century, all of the evidence points to the existence of a polytheistic religion with a northern Semitic character. The worship of ʿAthtar, a male god who was the most prominent of the pantheon (he is always mentioned first in lists of gods), is often said to have been related to the Ishtar cult of the north, whose female god manifested herself in the Venus star. ʿAthtar was believed to be the bestower of blessings who could ensure good crops, many children and success in war. There were a number of other prominent deities whose identity varied with the locality and the historical era. Keeping these different deities clear and distinct is extremely difficult, given the complexities of dealing with the inscriptional source material, but a few observations can be made. The moon god was variously known as Almaqah, ʿAmm, Sīn and Wadd (the name of the latter is also known from Qurʾān 71/23), and the sun goddess was known as Shams.[4] These gods and several others were held to be tribal patrons. As well, deities of the clan and the family also existed and these were often described simply as "the god (*ʾlh*) of so-and-so." Each level of deity was seen to govern a different sphere, each in a power relationship to the next level: first on the personal level, then on the village level, then controlling tribal land, and then controlling the world. According to the evidence of archaeological remains from various temples, sacrifices were a prominent part of religious worship. Incense offerings on stone altars and blood offerings were likely to have played a role in acquiring benefits for the person

doing the sacrifice. All these activities took place within temples which were apparently attended by both men and women, with the purpose of the rituals being seen as the acquisition of the benefits which these various gods could bestow. Other features attested by inscriptions include pilgrimage activities, ritual meals and a code of personal purity.

Starting in the fourth or fifth century, South Arabian inscriptions speak of a monotheistic cult of "Raḥmanan, the Merciful," frequently qualified as "Lord of heaven and earth."[5] Very little evidence is found in the inscriptions for a continuation of the earlier polytheistic cult (although since inscriptions necessarily reflect an elite and official segment of society, whether the general populace so quickly gave up its polytheistic belief is open to question). Apparently the rise of the kingdom of Himyar in about the year 380 marks this change, coming about probably as a result of, or in order to accomplish, a unification of the various South Arabian tribes. The monotheistic impetus is often seen to be a result of Jewish influence in the society, although some scholars wish to see this as a natural, independent development (based on an evolutionary picture of religion in general). Some scholars also wish to connect this development to the Quranic notion of a *ḥanīf*, the quality of being a monotheist in the face of paganism; whether this is really a reference to a historical reality in terms of a movement among people or whether it refers to moral qualities of certain people is open to question. There is no independent evidence that incontrovertibly supports the existence of a native Arabian pre-Islamic monotheism.[6] The biblical echoes found in some of the monotheistic inscriptions, such as the phrase "the Merciful [*raḥmanan*], who is in heaven" and the use of the grammatical plural in reference to God (as in the Hebrew *elōhīm*) found in the inscriptional statement "the God(s) to whom belong the heaven and earth" suggest that Judaism is the most likely influence on the formation of this cult. Little is known of the religious character of this monotheistic trend, so additional information is not available to settle the matter definitively. It is likely that Judaism was supported by the Persians as a tool against Byzantine influence in the south of Arabia.

Certainly, Judaism was present within this period of the monotheistic cult and perhaps even pre-dated it slightly. There is clear and explicit evidence of a Jewish presence in South Arabia, attested towards the end of the fourth century. References are found to the "community of Israel" as well as "Lord of Jewry." The presence of Jews in the Yemen continued until the mid-twentieth century when most were removed to the newly formed State of Israel.

Christianity, meanwhile, was not in evidence in south Arabia before the sixth century, at which time it appears to have been present in a community centred in the town of Najrān. It is thought to have spread there from Abyssinia. Accounts are found of persecution of the Christians early in the sixth century by the Jewish ruler Yūsuf Asʿar, probably as a result of fears of Byzantine influence over the Christian community. Sixth-century retaliations by Abyssinian troops seem to mark the demise of Judaism as a power, with inscriptions thereafter speaking of belief in "God and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit" on the part of the rulers. There is no doubt that the Christianity which spread from Abyssinia was supported by the Byzantines against Persian influence in the area, even though it was, from the Byzantine perspective, of the heretical Monophysite persuasion. By the end of the sixth century, the Persians started to encourage Nestorian Christianity, another strain of that faith which was abhorrent to both the Byzantines and the Abyssinians, and aided the Yemenites in their removal of the Abyssinian overlords. The country was so fractured and destroyed by being subject to the manipulation of the various foreign powers that little remained by the time of the rise of the Arabs to be of any particular significance to either major empire.

The significance of central Arabia

The area of central Arabia remains a vast unknown territory during this historical period, of little significance to anyone in the ancient world except as a natural barrier of desert. Despite the extensive work done by scholars studying early Muslim literary texts concerned with the subject (archaeological digs have not been permitted in crucial religious areas), the evidence for the role of the region as a focal point for a rich and economically explosive trade between South Arabia and the Fertile Crescent, as was once suggested, is virtually non-existent.[7] Any solid evidence of the religious character of the region reveals a polytheistic system having basic features in common with Semitic religion in general; this includes worship of gods associated with the astral cults and beliefs in spirits inhabiting rocks, trees and the like.[8] The role of Mecca as a sanctuary is fairly evident, although the character of this sacred area becomes rather muddled as a result of the manipulations of the data by later historians who have overlaid what would appear to be native Arabian sanctuary traditions with Jewish ones.[9]

Overall, given this situation, a number of things become clear in historical retrospect. Politically, the area of the Near East was

unsettled at the time of the Arab conquests and was certainly in a condition which would allow for the emergence of a new configuration in political power. The interactions which did occur between the Arabs and the world at large saw the tribes being manipulated by the foreign policy of the empires, with no particular significance being given to the people themselves; this was true both in the north and in the south. The connection between the ancient empires and their religions was close, meaning that a new religious dispensation, separate from the notions connected with the old regimes, may well have found itself in a favourable position.

Prehistory in Muslim identity

There is, however, far more significance to the pre-Islamic period than the preceding interpretation of the historical data would seem to suggest. In terms of Muslim identity, the pre-Islamic period serves most emphatically as a historical, ideological and ethical counterpoint to the Islamic ethos. It is, therefore, an era in which Muslim writers have tended to be very interested and they have provided an abundant amount of material purporting to portray the period. Therefore, from the standpoint of attempting to comprehend the foundation of the Islamic religion, the Muslim understanding of the period takes on a crucial and considerable role. The appreciation of this Muslim view, however, must be distinguished from reconstructing the history of the era itself; what is at issue here is the role of understanding the past and the kinds of pressures and interpretations to which such understanding becomes subject. This process, embodied within Muslim writings about the past, is one which is common to humanity: the re-creation of the past embodied in the idea of "tradition," selectively formed and reshaped into a new and relevant context.[10]

The notion of *jāhiliyya*

The pre-Islamic period is an era contrasted to the time and ethos of Islam, a contrast which is embodied in the term *jāhiliyya*. This term is found in the Qurʾān four times in reference to the idea itself and ten times in reference to people, and is also used in verbal derivations related to the word with the same sense. The word would appear to be used in the text of scripture as the opposite of "Islam," in that those who are connected to the *jāhiliyya* are those who are "ignorant of God" – at least this is the way most Muslim commentators on the Qurʾān have taken the word. For example, Qurʾān 48/26 states:

> When those who disbelieved set in their hearts fierceness, the fierceness of ignorance [*jāhiliyya*], God sent down His Shechina upon His messenger and the believers, and obliged them to the word of godfearing to which they have a better right and of which they are worthy.

The religious accomplishment of Islam, encompassed in the word "godfearing" (*taqwā*) contained in this passage, can only be judged by comparing it to what came before. Even more significantly, the impulse to demonstrate this accomplishment of Islam appears to rest ultimately upon the desire to prove the divine status of the religious dispensation itself. What Islam has accomplished in transforming society from one of *jāhiliyya* to a "godfearing" one is, in fact, proof of the divine nature of the religion.

A consequence of this apparent impulse to illustrate the separation between *jāhiliyya* and Islam is that a large amount of material emerged which was designed to prove and provide the appropriate pre-Islamic contrast. The starting point of all this material was, of course, the Islamic position – that is, only what was needed in order to provide this counterpoint to Islamic values is presented in the texts. In no sense do the Islamic sources attempt to provide a dispassionate presentation of pre-Islamic society, politics and religion (although many recent scholars of Islam have certainly attempted to take the material and re-create that era, despite the selectivity and biases of the material itself).

Discontinuity of Islam with the past

How this approach to portraying the past works can most easily be illustrated through an example dealing with a point of law. In legal issues the impulse to demonstrate the benefits of Islam are quite pronounced, for this often reflects very tangible elements within everyday Muslim life. Qurʾān 2/168 reads: "O people, eat anything lawful and good that exists on earth, and do not follow the steps of Satan; he is a manifest enemy of you." Common to a number of sources which deal with interpretation of the Qurʾān and which provide anecdotes about the "context" of the revelation of a verse[11] is the following: "This verse was revealed about [the Arab tribes of] Thaqīf, Khuzāʿa and ʿĀmir ibn Ṣaʿṣaʿa who prohibited to themselves cultivated produce and grazing livestock. They also forbade the *baḥīra*, *sāʾiba*, *waṣīla* and *ḥāmī* camels."[12]

The picture that is painted is one of various people before the revelation of the Qurʾān doing things, in this case prohibiting to themselves various foods, which were to be permitted under the Islamic dispensation. Of course, it is not possible to prove that this was not actually so, that this event did not "really happen," but that is not the point. What is of interest here is how the anecdote works within the Islamic context, for the function of such stories would seem to be the prime reason Muslim writers transmitted such accounts. The purpose of the anecdote is to provide a measure of the accomplishment of Islam and to differentiate Islam clearly from what existed previously.

In fact, it is quite possible to demonstrate in individual cases that later Muslims did not know the "facts" of the pre-Islamic period but, rather, that the anecdotes emerged for the purpose of anchoring Islam to history more firmly; other writers have provided many lucid examples of this phenomenon[13] and further instances are easy to locate. Concerning Qurʾān 2/158, "Ṣafā and Marwa are among the waymarks of God. Whoever goes on the pilgrimage to the house or performs the visitation [ʿ*umra*], there is no fault on him if he circumambulates them," anecdotes are repeated which speak of the pre-Islamic practices concerning the hills of Ṣafā and Marwa, but they are unclear as to whether the pre-Islamic Arabs did or did not run between them. One anecdote reads as follows:

> On Ṣafā was the image of a man called Isāf, while on Marwa was the image of a woman called Nāʾila. The people of the book [i.e., the Jews and Christians] claimed that these two had committed adultery in the Kaʿba [in Mecca], so God converted them into stone and placed them on Ṣafā and Marwa in order to act as a warning to others. . . . The people of the *jāhiliyya* stroked the idols when they circumambulated them [during their pilgrimage rituals]. When Islam came and the idols were broken, Muslims detested the circumambulation between the hills because of [their association with] the idols. So God revealed this verse.[14]

Another explanation of the verse is found in this report:

> ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr said to ʿĀʾisha: "I see no fault in someone who does not run between Ṣafā and Marwa, nor would it concern me if I did not run between them." ʿĀʾisha answered: "You are wrong, O son of my sister! Muḥammad ran between them and

> so did the Muslims. Rather it was [the pagans] who sacrificed to Manāt, the idol on the mountain of Mushallal, who did not run between them. Then God sent down this verse. If it were as you say, the verse would read, 'there is no blame on whoever does not run between them'."[15]

Illustrated in these anecdotes is the ambivalence of the information. Either the pre-Islamic Arabs did or did not run between the two hills. Both reports certainly provide a justification for the Muslims running between them (which, after all, is the central question for later Muslim jurists) and, at the same time, both reports provide a contrast with the pre-Islamic period. This contrast, note, can be positive or negative – either things are different from the past or they are the same. A similar phenomenon can be seen in many legal discussions, for example, regarding foods being prohibited to Muslims "by virtue of not being eaten by pre-Islamic Arabs,"[16] where the evaluation as compared to the past is positive once again.

The role of the Abrahamic myth

In general, it can be said that this pre-Islamic material was recorded not with "historical" reasons in mind, if by that we mean modern principles of historical research. Rather, the accounts were transmitted and written down in order to provide the necessary information for understanding the Qurʾān within a context of Arabia, and for evaluating Islam as a whole. An extremely popular work was written by Hishām ibn al-Kalbī, who died in 819, which was entitled *The Book of Idols*. The text gathers together poetical references to various "pre-Islamic" deities, especially those cited in the Qurʾān. Once again, however, it must be noted that the origins of this poetry are by no means obviously from the historical period before Muḥammad; it is non-Islamic religiously (but not necessarily pre-Islamic historically), and that suggests the possibility at least that, in the period after Muḥammad, vestiges of earlier religious sentiments still remained.

Of special interest is the very beginning of Ibn al-Kalbī's book, which provides a clear theological understanding of Islamic prehistory; the example illustrates well the approach of works such as these. History is presented (indeed, as one should expect) through Islamic eyes and told according to Islamic principles, and includes in its retelling an implicit condemnation of the corruption and immorality of the pagan era which preceded Islam.[17]

> When Ishmael, son of Abraham, may God bless them both, settled in Mecca, many children were born to him such that the number of people became so numerous that they were crowded there. They displaced the original inhabitants, the Amalekites. Later on, Mecca become so overcrowded that rivalries and strife arose among them, causing them to fight one another and as a result they spread out throughout the land seeking a livelihood. . . . No one left Mecca without carrying a stone from the sanctuary as a sign of veneration of it and of love for Mecca. Wherever they settled they would erect the stone and circumambulate it as they had done at the Kaʿba, thereby seeking blessing and affirming their attachment to the Kaʿba. They continued their veneration of the Kaʿba and Mecca despite this practice and still journeyed there on the pilgrimage and the visitation [*ʿumra*] according to the tradition inherited from Abraham and Ishmael, may God bless them both. In time, this led them to worship whatever they liked. They forgot their ancient beliefs and changed the religion of Abraham and Ishmael for another. They worshipped idols and returned to the practices of the nations before them. After discovering the images which the people of Noah (on him be peace!) worshipped, they adopted the worship of those which were remembered. Among the practices were some which came down from the time of Abraham and Ishmael, including the veneration and circumambulation of the temple (in Mecca), the pilgrimage, the visitation, the standing on ʿArafāt, the rituals of Muzdalifa, offering sacrifices, and uttering the ritual formulae during the pilgrimage and the visitation.[18]

The problem that such a passage is trying to solve for its readers is the following. Muslims know that the rituals connected to the Meccan pilgrimage were continuations of pre-Islamic rites; such rites had pagan connotations. How could God legitimize such activities? The answer is found in Abraham and Ishmael who, having lived in Mecca and performed the pilgrimage rites there (implicitly the same ones which Muslims perform until the present time), left the heritage of the activities, but the meaning (although not the actions themselves) of them was forgotten among the pagan inhabitants of the area.[19] While this Abrahamic background is not appealed to in every case of a positive connection between the *jāhiliyya* and Islam, it certainly is sufficiently frequent to be seen as a generalized tool for the Muslim understanding of the past. Abraham remains the "first Muslim," putting into practice the activities which would have to be revived

by Muḥammad; the people in the intervening centuries are the ones who distorted the true religion which God had made available to His creation through Abraham.

The significance of prehistory

Thus we can see that the "prehistory" of Islam is a significant conceptual notion both for historians concerned with understanding the emergence of Islam and for the Muslim community itself in the understanding of its relationship to its religio-cultural heritage. For the latter, the evaluation of the accomplishment of Islam in separating its faith from the past is understood in two ways: as a radical split from the past or as a continuation of the valuable (i.e. divinely sanctioned) elements. For the former, the reliance on material preserved within the framework of the evaluation of the Muslim faith means that the assessment of the rise of Islam is fraught with difficulties. In the absence of assuredly contemporaneous sources, literary or epigraphic, our knowledge of "prehistory" will remain filtered through the theologically inspired picture of the past provided by the later Muslim sources.