

THE ORIGINS OF MUSLIMS PRAYER:
SIXTH AND SEVENTH CENTURY RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES ON THE SALĀT
RITUAL

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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a candidate for the degree of master of religious studies, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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ABSTRACT

While salat is a central aspect of Islamic practice, the way the first Muslims developed the prayer ritual has not been widely researched. This study employs the theory of syncretism to show that religious rituals practiced in Jewish traditions, Zoroastrian traditions, Christian traditions and traditions indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula influenced how the Muslim daily prayer was developed.

Four aspects of salat are considered: washing before prayer, prostration, direction faced during prayer and number of times prayer is performed throughout the day. A set of criteria for potential syncretic influence is applied to historical evidence of religious practice in specific communities in the Northeast Africa, Southwest Asia region in the sixth and seventh centuries. The criteria are similarity in practice, contact between early Muslims and other religious individuals or groups, and the extent of that contact. When these criteria are met, possible syncretic influence is indicated.

Conclusions reached indicate that ritual washing was influenced by Jewish and Zoroastrian practice. Prostration was likely an influence from indigenous Arabian traditions and not from Jewish and Christian traditions, as previous studies have concluded. Direction faced during prayer was an influence stemming from the Jewish tradition. Number of times prayer is performed throughout the day was primarily a Zoroastrian influence, while other traditions also likely had some influence.

Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the most visible elements of Muslim worship is the daily prayer. For many Muslims, both present and past, *salāt*, daily prayer, is one of five obligatory elements proscribed for Muslims by the Qur'an. It is a complex assembly of ritual movements and recitations, all of which are rooted in a tradition whose purpose is to allow the penitent Muslim to display his or her submission to God. The actions in *salāt* are an outward display of faith, and while the minutia of action varies depending on a number of factors, such as the sect of Islam or the time of year or day, there are a core set of ritual actions common to most Muslim practices of *salāt*. By washing parts of the body with clean water or earth, one is made ritually pure, able to approach the sacred act. Facing Mecca, one performs a series of bows and prostrations accompanied by a precise recitation of Arabic words honoring God and His prophet, Muhammad. Traditionally, this act is performed five times a day. It holds a central place in Muslim worship.

Many of the above mentioned actions were practiced during the time of the Muhammad, making each *salāt* at once a unique personal experience and a direct link to the rich history and tradition of Islam. Given its importance in Muslim worship, it follows that the origins of *salāt* should be widely researched in the modern, secular study of Islam. This, however, is not the case. Relatively little has been published on the subject.

This study seeks to contribute to the knowledge of this important aspect of Muslim worship and illuminate the circumstances and environment in which *salāt* arose. More specifically, it employs the phenomenon of syncretism in conjunction with a thorough historical review of religious traditions in Northeast Africa and Southwest Asia in the sixth and seventh centuries to show that *salāt* can be understood, in part, as a

synthesis of rituals practiced by various cultures in the region. Ritual washing, prostrating, facing a specific direction while praying and the number of times prayer is performed – elements essential to performing salāt as proscribed in the Qur’an – were used in the myriad cultures throughout the region *before* the time of Muhammad. Thus, while the origin of salāt itself must be attributed to Muhammad and his followers, as it was they who first employed it in relation to Islamic beliefs, it is also important to recognize that Muhammad and his followers were as much influenced by life experiences as they were by the inspirational source they called God.

Muslim tradition clearly describes the original and only source for salāt – God. In the Qur’an, it is written that “It is (God) Who has sent His Messenger (Muhammad) with Guidance and the Religion of Truth, that he may proclaim it over all religion.”¹ And as Muhammad was sent by God, the Qur’an says that Muslims should “take what he assigns you”² for “you have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day.”³ Thus, it was through Muhammad (and other Abrahamic prophets) that God brought Islam to humanity, and in Muhammad, believers had an example of correct “conduct.”

Christianity and Judaism are mentioned specifically in the Qur’an, indicating possible influence on Islam from these traditions. According to some Muslim interpretations, however, Hamilton A.R. Gibb succinctly writes:

¹ Sura 61:9. The Qur’an translation used throughout this study is Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s. *The Holy Qur’an: English Translation With an English Translation and Commentary*, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, trans. (Delhi: Kitab Publishing House, 1973).

² Sura 59:7.

³ Sura 33:21.

Muslim doctrine, for its part, has never denied a relationship of Islam with Judaism and Christianity and their community of origin...but explicitly rejects any 'influence' from either side on the Qur'an, declaring it to be the verbally inspired Word of God...Parallels and deviations from the earlier Scriptures therefore need no explanation.⁴

The argument presented in this study is secular, and it necessarily takes human action and thought as the origin of all things religious. From this viewpoint, the Islamic argument for salāt originating with God alone is important as it reveals something about the way early Muslims understood Muhammad and his actions, but it does not provide a satisfactory secular answer to the question of extra-Islamic influences on the formation of salāt. Therefore, this study seeks an alternative explanation for how salāt was developed by Muhammad and his followers. Conclusions are based on evidence of religious rituals as they were performed prior to and during the time of Muhammad.

Given the importance the Qur'an places on salāt, it seems crucial that this area of Islamic studies receive the same scrutiny and research as other aspects of the faith and practice. However, consulting published research and conclusions, it is found that few articles or books address the topic specifically. Perhaps the most prolific scholar on the topic is Arendt Jan Wensinck who contributed a great deal to the study generally of the origins of Islam. His arguments, however, are consistent in that they cite only Judaism and Christianity as sources for influence on early Islam. The language used in Wensinck's scholarship implies a level of intent on Muhammad's part, writing, for instance, that "Muhammad took over the word salāt...from his neighbours and the

⁴ Hamilton A.R. Gibb, "Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia," *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1999), 295.

Muslim *salāt* shows in its composition a great similarity to the Jewish and Christian services.”⁵ Wensinck finds Jewish and Christian influences on *salāt* and other elements of Islam, but his conclusions never reach further than Abrahamic influence.

In Marshall Hodgson’s three-volume *Venture of Islam*, one of the most exhaustive studies of the history of Islam, the origins of *salāt* are described as “a form of adoration...reminiscent of Syrian Christian practice.”⁶ Evidence for this is not provided, nor is further detail. Other works investigating early Islam are equally brief. Mary Boyce wrote in her definitive three-volume *History of Zoroastrianism* that the Zoroastrian prayer five times a day was the source for the later Muslim practice. This claim, however, is neither evidenced nor proven. Hodgson and Boyce were consummate scholars whose scholarship greatly influenced their respective areas of study. Yet, the topic of *salāt*’s origins was simply not discussed.

That influences on daily Muslim prayer have not received the level of research and publication one might expect on such an important topic attests to a key hindrance to secular Islamic scholarship – trustworthy primary sources on the topic are scarce. Thus, secular studies investigating the formation of *salāt* have not been made in any great number.

Studies that have investigated early Muslim prayer tend to focus largely on prostration. What is more, they consider Islam in relation to one other religious tradition, as opposed to several traditions, which allows for more nuanced conclusions. In Roberto Tottoli’s essay on early Muslim views on prostration, he concludes that Muhammad was primarily influenced by Christian traditions. He also finds that prostration was not

⁵ First Encyclopedia of Islam, 1913-1936 (NY: E.J. Brill, 1987), s.v. “*salāt*.”

⁶ Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 162.

practiced by people indigenous to the peninsula.⁷ On the latter point, he writes that “the fact that Arabs considered prostration a foreign practice is confirmed by the scarcity of evidence regarding its practice among them before the rise of Islam.”⁸

A point Tottoli emphasizes is that because research on the origins of prostration in *salāt* rested around the mid-twentieth century, and after that, no publication challenged the findings, conclusions reached to that point must necessarily be correct.⁹ The conclusions mentioned in Tottoli’s work, such as Wensinck’s, cite Judaism and Christianity as the inspirational sources for *salāt*’s prostration. As shown in this study, these findings are in many ways shortsighted.

Khaleel Mohammed’s essay, “The Foundation of Muslim Prayer,” suggests that early Muslim prayer was, but for minor differences, essentially the same as Jewish prayer in the area.¹⁰ This finding is similar to Tottoli’s and those Tottoli cites in as much as one religious tradition is analyzed and determined to be the only source of influence. For the most part then, barring occasional mention in peripheral literature, this is the extent of research on the origins of *salāt*. However, in all of the above-mentioned essays, the argument for determining extra-Islamic influence is based on, though not always explicitly stated, the concept of syncretism.

Though this study also sites syncretism as the method by which Muhammad and his followers were influenced by other groups, it looks not only at prostration but at several other elements required for the correct physical performance of *salāt* – ritual washing, facing a geographic location during prayer and number of times performed

⁷ Roberto Tottoli, “Muslim Attitudes Towards Prostration (*sujud*): I, Arabs and Prostration at the Beginning of Islam and in the Qur’an,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 88 (1998): 5-34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁰ Khaleel Mohammed, “The Foundation of Muslim Prayer,” *Medieval Encounters*, 5, no. 1 (1999): 17-28.

during the day. It then looks at similar rituals employed in the religious traditions and cultures in the region, namely, the practices of people indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula, various Jewish communities, Zoroastrian communities and the Persian royal court, and Christian communities, including Monophysite monks and the Byzantine church.

Studying the cultural makeup of the area in this way has two benefits. First, it takes into account the diversity of tradition, thus widening the range of people and places from which Muhammad might have been influenced. Second, it allows for more precise conclusions, for while some communities influenced salāt, others certainly did not. Because of this study's wide scope, it is possible to draw firmer conclusions than those reached in other essays.

Criticism has been levied against studies similar to the kind presented here. William A. Graham writes that “the presumption at one level beneath all of this impressive searching for precedents in earlier practice to explain these rites is the familiar scholarly belief that essence lies in origins.”¹¹ The purpose here is not to determine the essence of salat, nor is it to strip Muhammad and his first followers of the creative genius they necessarily employed when first joining Islamic belief with ritual action. Rather, in determining non-Islamic influences on salāt, a clear link is shown between Islam and the cultures and religious traditions that surrounded it.

Graham goes on to writes that “rites are not to be seen merely as products of a particular religiocultural substrate out of which old practices repeatedly appear in new

¹¹ William A. Graham, “Islam in the Mirror of Ritual,” *Islam's Understanding of Itself* (Malibu, California: Undena Publications, 1981), 55.

garb, but much more as the enactments of religious convictions and ideals, the embodiments as well as the results of conscious or unconscious sentiments.”¹² This study does not deny this. In fact, the author wholly agrees that the essence of salāt is best studied by learning from the practitioner and not the historian. Religion is unique to the individual, and to understand salāt’s meaning, we must necessarily speak to the individual.

However, in the study of Islamic history, there is a definite void in scholarship on the topic of where the rituals themselves arose. Prostration in Islam may mean many things to various individuals, but as an act, it can be seen as similar in performance regardless of meaning. Finding a similar performance in non-Islamic traditions does not detract from the importance or uniqueness of salāt for the individual. Rather, the history of Islam is incomplete without recognizing that non-Islamic influences played a part in making the daily prayer what it is.

There are many areas of religious and cultural history that must be investigated to determine probable influence on salāt. It is not sufficient to merely identify similarities in ritual action and conclude syncretic influence. A set of criteria are employed here as a means to determine where syncretism might have occurred in relation to the specific elements of salāt considered in this study. Conclusions presented are based on evidence that when analyzed satisfies the criteria for probable syncretic non-Islamic influence on salāt. The three criteria are similarity in ritual action, contact between early Muslims and a religious tradition that shares a common ritual action with salāt and that said contact was extensive enough to allow transference of ideas and traditions.

¹² Ibid., 59.

The first criterion is similarity between ritual actions in salāt and ritual actions in other religious traditions. The rituals specifically discussed in this study are washing, prostrating, facing a specific direction during prayer and the number of prayers performed in a day. To satisfy this criterion, the actions found in other religions must have been (or perceived to have been) performed in relation to the religious tradition of a culture or community. For example, a Jewish person bathing is not necessarily a religious ritual. However, a sixth-century Jewish person washing his or her hands and feet before praying and doing so because it is demanded of them in sacred literature is clearly religious ritual. Thus, religious action that is common to both Islamic and non-Islamic traditions indicates potential influence.

The second factor necessarily present for concluding syncretic influence is contact between Muhammad and a culture employing a ritual that meets the above criterion. A person religiously bowing in South America at the time probably did not have influence on Muhammad. There must be evidence of cultural contact. This includes the Prophet's firsthand experiences and observations and those of people with whom Muhammad had the opportunity to learn about such practices.

The third criterion is the extent of contact between Muhammad and non-Islamic traditions. As shown below, Northeast Africa and Southwest Asia held a plethora of culturally distinct communities. From historical investigation, it appears that Muhammad had close interactions with some groups and less interaction with others. Those with whom Muhammad had more contact are understood to be potentially more influential than cultures or people with whom Muhammad may have had only fleeting contact.

When the historical record shows shared ritual action with and frequent contact between a culture in the region and Muhammad and/or his followers, it is concluded that the formation of salāt was influenced by that culture and the specific ritual or rituals it employed. As already mentioned, the resulting influence can be explained through syncretism. For this study, syncretism is defined as the method by which a religious practice previously employed in one or more traditions became incorporated into another tradition.

Because of the complexity of this argument and the mass of information analyzed to reach the conclusions presented herein, this study is structured with groupings of topics. The organization is a step-by-step approach, each section providing a necessary block of information that when taken as a whole, shows the extent of non-Islamic influence on salāt and the sources from which Muhammad and his followers drew inspiration for the developed of the prayer ritual.

Presented first are two key concepts. A general description of salāt and its place in Islamic practice is presented. The phenomenon of syncretism is also explained. Following this is a close look at what the Qur'an and other sacred scriptures reveal about salāt. The primary source of information is the Qur'an as it is understood by Muslims as the word of God. *Hadith*, or records of what the Prophet and his first followers said and did, are investigated to show how Muhammad and his followers practiced the daily prayer. Presented is a detailed look at precisely how the ritual was initially performed. Also discussed is a biography of Muhammad that, though written long after the Prophet's

time, is still of use when determining Muhammad's movements and contact with various cultures and religious traditions.

Next is a discussion of how and where trade occurred in the region. Trade between communities is shown to be the primary method by which ideas were spread and shared between cultures. Because Muhammad worked as a trader before following his prophetic call, it is important to show that as a result, he had opportunity to interact with various communities and learn about their rituals and traditions. Showing how trade operated in the sixth and seventh century aids in establishing the above criteria of contact and the extent of it.

With this information in place, potentially influential cultures and traditions are investigated. First discussed is the culture and beliefs held by people indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula. While this tradition may have been the most influential, it is also the culture least discussed in the historical record. After Islam was established as a dominant, culturally-uniting belief system, ideas, and more importantly evidence, of pre-Islamic Arabia was purposefully ignored, and in many cases, destroyed. History in Arabia before Islam came to be called "the Time of Ignorance." So as to stem its influence on later followers, it was actively rejected and forgotten. Nevertheless, a critical reading of historical sources and a consideration of the scant archeological evidence provides some insight into how people in pre-Islamic Arabia worshipped. Where possible, the rituals employed in worship are examined to determine syncretic influence.

The Peninsula was not, however, a land inhabited exclusively by people who followed the indigenous religion. Judaism was also a prominent religion in the region. There were several Jewish communities with differing beliefs and rituals. The

communities are considered in conjunction with how much contact Muhammad likely had with them. Areas with large Jewish communities are discussed along with the rituals they employed. The regions discussed are Syria-Palestine, Yathrib (later Medina) and Himyar, a kingdom in what is today called Yemen. Other communities are discussed, but these three are shown to be the most likely sources of Jewish influence on *salāt*.

From this section, it appears that Muhammad had close and frequent contact with Jewish communities in Arabia. Also, these communities employed the rituals of washing and bowing, rituals later used in *salāt*. The conclusion here is that there was likely influence on daily prayer.

Discussed next is Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Persian Empire. Though Zoroastrianism appears to have greatly influenced *salāt*, it is also the least researched in modern scholarship as it relates to Islam. For this reason, a close look at the history and rituals of Zoroastrianism is presented. Zoroastrians prayed five times a day and ritually washed before prayer. These are rituals essential to Muslim prayer. What is more, Muhammad and his followers had occasion to learn about Zoroastrian ritual from a Zoroastrian priest who came to follow Islam and Muhammad. Thus, Zoroastrian ritual appears to have been an influence.

Finally, Christianity is discussed; its sects, communities and rituals. Christianity was a dominant religion in Northeast Africa and Southwest Asia, largely because of its affiliation with Byzantium. Of those Christians from whom Muhammad may have learned of ritual practice, Monophysite monks are shown to be the most likely source. In addition, Muhammad had opportunity to learn firsthand from a Christian monk. However, as is shown, rituals practiced by monks living on the Arabian Peninsula do not

seem to have overlapped with actions in salāt. This does not suggest an absence of Christian influence on other aspects of Islam. Yet, evidence does not indicate influence on salāt beyond the number of times prayer is performed throughout the day.

From this in depth review, it is possible to draw conclusions about the likely sources of inspiration and influence on Muhammad and his followers. In the section of conclusions, this study returns to the concept of syncretism, drawing together information presented so as to determine the sources of influence on salāt. In this way, some of the origins of daily Muslim prayer are revealed.

Chapter 2: Terms and Concepts

There are two fundamental concepts crucial to this study: *salāt* and syncretism. The former is the ritual investigated and interpreted in this study. The latter is the method by which the formation of *salāt* is explained. A description of these concepts is essential to the investigation that follows.

Salāt

There are several kinds of Muslim prayer, each with its own purpose and method. For instance, there is a Friday prayer, a funeral prayer and a prayer for 'Īd. *Duā* is a general form of prayer that entails meditation with an emphasis on “talking” with Allah.¹³ Ritual actions and recitation of some Qur’anic verses may precede *duā*, but *duā* itself is simply an internal “discussion” with Allah.¹⁴ Its nature is devotional and spontaneous.

Salāt, however, is an obligatory prayer. In fulfilling this duty, a Muslim consistently expresses their submission and devotion to God. *Salāt* is institutional, meaning it is correctly performed by employing a set liturgy in combination with precise movements. The word *salāt* is derived from an Aramaic word, originally meaning “bowing.”¹⁵ This term generally referred to institutional prayer in synagogues and

¹³ Depending on scholar or publication, the transliteration of Arabic words can vary, mainly because there are sounds in Arabic which have no corresponding letter combination in the Latin alphabet. For instance, the transliteration of *duā* might also be *duaa*; *salāt* also *salah*. The transliterations of spellings in this study are chosen for consistency and ease of reading, though they may not in all cases completely represent the actual pronunciation of the words used.

¹⁴ An example of *duā* is found in Sura 46:15, which reads: “When he reaches the age of full strength and attains forty years, he says, ‘O my Lord, grant me that I may be grateful for Your favor which you have bestowed upon me, and upon both my parents, and that I may work righteousness such as You may approve; and be gracious to me in respect of my offspring. Truly have I turned to You and truly I do bow (to You) in Islam.’”

¹⁵ S.D. Goitein, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden: E.J Brill, 1966), 74.

churches before it was used in Islam.¹⁶ Thus, even at its inception, the daily prayer in Islam was understood to be the performance of a sacred duty, evidenced by the general meaning of the word that was used to describe it.

Salāt is one of the Five Pillars of Islam (*Arkan al-Islam al-Khasma*). These are the core requirements of Islam and include the declaration of faith (*shahadah*),¹⁷ salāt, almsgiving (*zakāt*), fasting during Ramadan and pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). Each pillar indicates a religious obligation, duties that must be fulfilled by the penitent Muslim. Thus, the duty to perform salāt is a fundamental tenet of Islam, an institutional practice central to the active nature of the faith. As found in sacred Muslim texts, there is a strict formula for it.

Depending on the time of day salāt is performed, there is some variation in action and speech. However, variations revolve around central sets of ritual action and recitation called *rak'ah*. Considering only the action in a rak'ah, it is best described as a series of standing, bowing, prostrating and sitting. Each movement carries a precise form and motion, and all actions happen in a specific order.

Variations, designated by the time of day and circumstance, occur in the number of rak'ah performed and what is said to accompany them. While what is spoken during salāt is an essential part of daily prayer, this study considers only the physical actions in the rak'ah that make up salāt. So as to better understand how salāt came to be performed as it was by early Muslims, this study focuses on the use of these practices in non-Islamic cultures and religions. The phenomenon that explains the appropriation of these practices for salāt is syncretism.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *La illaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasoul Allah* (lit. "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.")

Syncretism

Historically, syncretism has been a contested term. It can be applied both objectively and subjectively. In the objective sense, syncretism is simply a mixing of religions, whereby some elements of one religion are incorporated into another. André Droogers calls this “interpenetration.”¹⁸ The subjective sense suggests a deviation from purity, meaning a religion incorporated an illegitimate theological view or practice, thus drawing it away from the purity it enjoyed in its original form.¹⁹

Thus, syncretism is potentially a dangerous concept as, if used in a biased way or arguing for the validity of one religious tradition over another, it could imply the authenticity of one tradition over a “syncretic” tradition. Fritz Graf writes that “two assumptions underlie the descriptive (subjective) usage (of syncretism): religions can be understood as autonomous entities, and purity is their early (‘original’) stage.”²⁰ This study rejects both subjective assumptions, and employs the objective concept of syncretism as a heuristic tool to analyze the similarities between Muhammad’s method of prayer and those of others in the region at the time.

To underscore this point: this study understands syncretism as the way in which a religious practice previously employed in one or more traditions becomes incorporated into another tradition. Some of the religious rituals used by non-Islamic communities throughout the Northeast Africa, Southwest Asia region at the time were also used in

¹⁸ André Droogers, “Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem,” *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁰ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., s.v. “syncretism.”

Islam's salāt, and given the similarities discussed throughout the study, when the criteria mentioned in the introduction are met, syncretism likely occurred.

There is, however, difficulty determining the influence one religion has on another. Carsten Colpe writes of syncretism in relation to physical worship:

When one rite adopts components from another rite, forms of worship are combined. But because the basic stock of possible ritual actions is relatively small, external influence in this area is often indistinguishable from the action of factors already present in the tradition.²¹

While this is true, salāt presents a unique case and opportunity for determining syncretism. During Muhammad's time, Islam was a new tradition. G. van der Leeuw's argues that all religions are syncretic.²² Agreeing with this argument, Islam as a distinct religious tradition was new only in as much as it was a new arrangement of actions, concepts and theologies, previously employed in other traditions. The combination of those things which make up Islam was in itself innovative, even though independently elements of Islam may have been in use in other traditions with meanings specific to the individuals and communities that employed them in their respective methods of religious practice and belief. This Leeuw calls *Verschiebung*.²³ The meaning attached to a ritual, symbol or liturgy is unique to whatever tradition employs it, although the ritual, symbol or liturgy itself may remain constant throughout more than one tradition.

Thus, Muhammad and his follower's inspiration, devotion, speaking, writing and all things that went into the formation of the diverse tradition called Islam marked the beginning of a new combination, syncretic but also unique. For this reason, the

²¹ Ibid.

²² This argument is described by Droogers in "Syncretism," citing G. van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie der Religion* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1956).

²³ Ibid.

challenges Colpe identifies in determining syncretic influence on worship practices are lessened by the youth of the distinct Islamic tradition during the time period considered. Before this time, there was no such tradition as Islam, and studying the elements employed at its inception provides an opportunity to conclude syncretic influence on salāt by virtue of the fact that the elements involved had never before been assembled in such a way with such meanings under the title of salāt as it relates to Islam.

Having discussed the concepts of salāt and syncretism, it is possible to look closely at those religious traditions that likely influenced early Muslims. The first necessary step is a discussion of how salāt is presented in Muslim sacred literature.

Chapter 3: Primary Sources: The Qur'an, Hadith and the Sīrah

Salāt in the Qur'an

The commandment to pray five times a day is not given in the Qur'an, nor are the finer details of salāt provided. There are, however, numerous references to prayer, and verses concerning salāt do list essential, albeit sometimes vague, elements of daily prayer.

Before salāt, a Muslim is obligated to perform *wudū*, ritualized washing for the sake of purity. Sura 4:43 tells a Muslim, “do not approach prayers...until after washing your whole body...and (if) you find no water, then take for yourselves clean sand or earth, and rub therewith your faces and hands.” This verse shows that when possible, one should use water to cleanse parts of the body, but in the event water is unavailable, ritual cleanliness can be achieved through washing with earth.

Sura 4:162 commands “regular prayer” for those who would be pious, the same phrase is found again in Sura 6:72. The qualification for what constitutes regular is found in other passages. Sura 11:116 reads: “Establish regular prayers at two ends of the day and at the approaches of the night: for those things that are good remove those that are evil.” The time of day for prayer is stated more explicitly in Sura 17:78: “Establish regular prayers – at the sun’s decline till the darkness of the night, and the morning prayer and reading.” These verses do not command prayer five times a day, but nevertheless name times at which one should pray. More than this, it explains that frequent prayer maintains mindfulness of Allah and the method by which good deeds overcome evil ones. From these selected passages (and there are more reiterating similar

themes), it is clear that *salāt* is linked with community, should be done regularly and at specific times of the day.

The Qur'an provides almost no information on Muhammad and little elaboration on the practice of prostration (*sujud*). Even Sura 32, titled "Prostration," has only one reference to *sujud*: "Only those believe in Our signs, who, when they are recited to them, fall down (prostrate) in adoration, and celebrate the praises of their Lord."²⁴ Other references to prostration in the Qur'an are similar in brevity. The link between prostration and prayer is seen most clearly in Sura 17:107:

Say: 'Whether you believe in it or not; it is true that those who were given knowledge beforehand, when it is recited to them, fall down on their faces in humble prostration, and they say, "Glory to our Lord! Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled!" They fall down on their faces in tears, and it increases their (earnest) humility.'

Perhaps the most direct command for prostration is found in Sura 22.77, which reads, "O you who believe! Bow you down, prostrate yourselves, and adore your Lord." Thus, those who would be penitent are told explicitly to prostrate in prayer. Yet, the precise method for prostration is not given.

To summarize, the elements of *salāt* given in the Qur'an are to ritually cleanse the body before prayer, to pray at specific times of the day, to do so in the company of other Muslims and to prostrate while doing so. The broad strokes of *salāt* are thus provided. The detail of how the ritual prayer should be performed is found elsewhere in Islamic sacred literature.

²⁴ Sura 32.15

Concerning this absence of some detail in the Qur'an, the mandated prayer five times a day is not found. It will be shown, however, that it was Muhammad's practice. Moreover, Muhammad performed *salāt* in a precise way. It is important to understand how Muhammad prayed, for the record of his example served as the model for the correct performance of *salāt*. The most reliable sources for this information are the records of Muhammad and his followers' actions – *hadith*.

Salāt in Hadith

Of those sources that provide detail about how Muslim prayer was practiced during the time of Muhammad, the most specific and reliable are the *hadith*. Hadith is an Arabic word best translated as “report.”²⁵ They are important because they refer to Muhammad and his companions specifically. The Qur'an is held by most Muslims to be the word of God, an eternal truth and morality revealed specifically in Arabic. It details ethics, morality and how one should live his or her life, and it defines the relationship between human beings and their creator. It thus says little about Muhammad and his life, for he is considered by most Muslims to be the messenger and not the origin of the revelation. Hadith, however, focus specifically on Muhammad (and in some cases, his immediate followers and successors), what he said concerning certain topics and what his actions were in various circumstances. They are thus invaluable to understanding how Muhammad performed *salāt*.

²⁵ Hodgson, vol. 1, 63-66.

During and particularly after the life of Muhammad, “Muslims were interested in what the Prophet said and did.”²⁶ For those who believe he was favored and instructed by God, his was the ultimate example of how to live a pious life. Therefore, records of his words and actions became important Qur’anic supplements.

Muhammad’s companions strove to learn by heart all his teachings and to closely observe his actions.²⁷ These observations were shared with other Muslims and passed on from one follower of Islam to another. It is even said that “Muhammad himself attached a good deal of importance to the knowledge of his own Hadīth. He asked his friends and followers to make them as widely known as possible, taking care that they should not attribute to him anything falsely.”²⁸

False attribution, however, undoubtedly occurred. Later Muslim scholars who devoted themselves to collecting and organizing hadith recognized that some purported sayings and teachings of the prophet may have been relayed falsely or altered to suit the ends of various individuals. As a check on this potential problem, and because they were not compiled in a systematic form until at least a century after Muhammad’s death, each hadith is accompanied with an *isnad*. *Isnad* is the tracing of authorities who recalled the hadith from primary, secondary or tertiary encounters with Muhammad. Reports are

²⁶ There are three hadith collections used for this study. The first is that of Abu Muhammad al-Husain ibn Mas’ud ibn Muhammad al-Farra’ al-Baghawi, or simply, Baghawi. Baghawi was a legal scholar who reviewed thousands of poorly organized hadith and hadith collections and condensed them into a single work. As a means of confirming the translation and publication of the Baghawi collection used in this study, in addition to providing translations that most clearly illustrate a point, Muslim’s collection is also used. Also, Bukhari’s hadith are consulted. Without exception, the texts are in agreement on content. See, *Mishkat Al-Masabih*, trans. James Robson (Kashmiri Bazar, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1960), *Sahih Muslim*, trans. ‘Abdul Hamīd Siddīqī, 4 vols. (Kashmiri Bazar, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1976) and Muhammad Muhsin Khān, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahīh Al-Bukhārī: Arabic-English*, 9 vols. (Gujranwala Cantt, Pakistan: Sethi Straw Board Mills [Conversion] Ltd., 1971).

²⁷ Muhammad Zubayr Siddīqī, *Hadīth Literature: Its Origin, Development, Special Features and Criticism* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1964), 4-5.

²⁸ Siddīqī, 7.

assigned a category of reliability: *sahih* (sound), *hasan* (good) and *da'if* (weak).²⁹

Sources for these reports also vary in reliability.

Hadith reports cover many aspects of Muslim life. Initially, they focused on any part of Muslim practice.³⁰ In the seventh century, before the development of Muslim law, *isnad* were not particularly important.³¹ By the ninth century, however, what Hodgson calls “*isnad* criticism” was employed by Muslim scholars concerned with how Muhammad had lived.³² While this practice certainly restricted the acceptance of false reports, one must bear in mind that some eighth and ninth century Muslim scholars “had little hesitancy at simply inventing *isnads* – and in fact the hadith reports themselves as well – in a good cause; for they assumed...whatever was true and of value for Muhammad’s community must have been said by Muhammad.”³³ This does not mean that hadith should be rejected for possible inaccuracies. Rather, by trusting the scholarship of more reliable hadith compilers, hadith can reveal what was said and done by Muhammad and his first followers.

The most reliable sources are the ninth century Imams Bukhari and Muslim. Muslim was a student of Bukhari, but both scholars individually assembled, organized and classified hadith collections according to reliability. When both Muslim and Bukhari agree on the soundness of a hadith, the information is *sahih*, meaning it is likely to have been the actual or nearly actual words and doings of Muhammad.

There are many hadith reporting the method of Muhammad’s prayer. In some reports, the prophet’s every move is given in precise detail. These details were and still

²⁹ Baghawi, viii.

³⁰ Hodgson, vol. 1, 326.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 328.

³² *Ibid.*, 329.

³³ *Ibid.*, 328.

are important as “the ritual obligations of the individual were therefore minutely described on the basis of hadith.”³⁴ Thus, Muhammad’s method of *salāt* became the model for how daily prayer should be performed. A review of some hadith provides a clearer picture of how Muhammad prayed.

In passages where Bukhari and Muslim are in agreement, the records of Muhammad’s actions are more likely to be historically accurate. In Bukhari’s collection, both Bukhari and Muslim transmit Muhammad saying, “I have been commanded to prostrate myself on seven bones: the forehead, the hands, the knees, and the extremities of the feet.”³⁵ The detail of this hadith is important as it expands on the general command in Qur’an to prostrate oneself before God during prayer. Other hadith contain more detail.

As recorded in Muslim’s hadith collection concerning bowing (*rukua*), sources report that, “when he (Muhammad) bowed he neither kept his head up nor bent it down, but kept it between these extremes.”³⁶ *Rukua* and *sujud* are the two major motions (aside from standing and sitting) performed during *salāt*. Muhammad’s practice of *rukua* is seen again in Bukhari’s chapter, “The Nature of Prayer,” where information on the prophet’s prostration is given as well. The hadith reads:

When he bowed, he rested his hands on his knees, then bent his back; when he raised his head he stood erect with his spine straight; when he prostrated himself he placed his arms so that they were not spread out, and the fingers were not drawn in, and the points of his toes were facing the *qibla*.³⁷

³⁴ Hodgson, 337.

³⁵ Baghawi, 182.

³⁶ Muslim, 258.

³⁷ Baghawi, 160. The *qibla* is the direction faced during prayer, the mosque and Ka’ba in Mecca.

This shows that the ritual specificity of *salāt* was far more complex than a simple bowing of the head to the ground as found generally in the Qur'an. Rather, each movement required a specific form. Further hadith report Muhammad saying that when one prostrates, “place the palms of your hands on the ground and raise your elbows,” and of the prophet, observers said “he spread out his arms so that the whiteness of his armpits was visible.”³⁸ This level of detail suggests Muhammad's *salāt* actions were defined, at least to him. They were not haphazard. Rather, they were so regimented that they occurred exactly the same way during each *salāt*, evidenced by the numerous hadith that agree on form.

Recalling the Qur'anic command to perform *wudū* before prayer, hadith give precise instructions on how Muhammad washed. A hadith in Muslim's collection describes how Muhammad performed *wudū*:

He washed his hands thrice. He then rinsed his mouth and cleaned his nose with water (three times). He then washed his face three times; then washed his right arm up to the elbow three times, then washed his left arm like that, then wiped his head; then washed his right foot up to the ankle three times, then washed his left foot like that.³⁹

This is an elaboration on the command to wash as given in the Qur'an. Much like the motions within *salāt*, *wudū* was systematized and ritualized by the Prophet.

Finally, as noted above, the Qur'an gives four times for prayer, although tradition, through Muhammad, indicates prayer should occur five times a day. The hadith recording Muhammad's words on this read:

³⁸ Muslim, vol. 1, 257.

³⁹ Ibid., 149.

Five times of prayer have been prescribed by God. If anyone performs the ablution for them well, observes them at their proper time, and perfectly performs the bowing and showing of submissiveness during them, he has a covenant with God.⁴⁰

This hadith on its own does not explain where the extra time for prayer comes from. However, a hadith found in Muslim's collection states that the Angel Gabriel taught Muhammad how to pray, "reckoning with his fingers five times of prayer."⁴¹ As with actions in salāt and the specifics of wudū, this aspect of salāt is an elaboration on the Qur'anic command.

From the above, it is possible to reconstruct the way in which Muhammad performed salāt. He first performed wudū, ritually cleansing his limbs, face, mouth and nose. He then performed a rak'ah, composed of, in the precise order and number, standing, sujud, rukūa, sujud, sitting, sujud, sitting and standing. This he did five times a day. There may have been variations in order and number given the time of day or occasion, but according to hadith, the core of salāt for Muhammad was made up of these elements.

Comparing the information provided in the Qur'an and hadith, it seems Muhammad's detailed method of salāt was of his own design. The Qur'an speaks generally. Muhammad acted specifically. By this, it can be understood that Muhammad and his followers assembled, practiced and taught the rituals necessary for correct submission in prayer to God. While the system of these rituals was Islam-specific, the individual elements can be found in use in other traditions. Muhammad's contribution to the method of Muslim prayer was synthesis of multiple rituals and traditions. The above

⁴⁰ Baghawi, 115.

⁴¹ Muslim, 298.

mentioned rituals – washing before prayer, bowing, prostrating, facing a specific geographic location and praying five times a day – were practiced in various communities in Northeast Africa and Southwest Asia before Muhammad dictated the Qur'an. These rituals held various meanings for the societies and cultures that employed them, but their influence on Muhammad's elaboration on Qur'anic command is unmistakable.

Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Hisham and the Life of the Allah's Messenger

Though not directly related to salāt, there is another text with extensive information about Muhammad's life. The *Sīrah Rasūl Allah*, literally, *The Life of the Messenger of Allah*, is a biography of Muhammad's life. In it are details about Muhammad's movements and the people he had contact with. This is important for determining the criterion of contact and the extent of it. Referenced alongside other historical information, the *Sīrah* is an important source for early Muslim history and consequently, the origins of salāt.

While this work is attractive in its detailed discussion of Muhammad's early life, call to prophetic practice and actions as the leader of early Muslims, it is equally dangerous for information appears to be as much legend as fact-based. More than this, the original text by Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn Yasar is no longer in existence. Rather, about 50 years after Ibn Ishaq's death, an Egyptian scholar, Abu Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham took Ibn Ishaq's *Sīrah* and performed a heavy-handed redaction. Ibn Hisham

removed large portions of Ibn Ishaq's manuscript.⁴² This, however, is not the only reason to question information in the *Sīrah*.

Whereas hadith were transmitted, gathered and recorded based on the information they relayed about Muhammad, regardless of their relevance, Ibn Ishaq and later, Ibn Hisham, had an agenda in writing from accumulated sources. In the eighth century, in a time of Muslim strife and argument over leadership and theology, Ibn Ishaq wrote the *Sīrah* "as an active voice in the polemical debate."⁴³ His writing underscored Muhammad's place as religious authority, emphasized the Qur'an as the primary scripture of the Abrahamic faiths and showed Muhammad to be a legitimate prophet in accordance with earlier Abrahamic writings.⁴⁴ Though these notions existed before Ibn Ishaq, his writing certainly sought to cement them as cornerstones of Islam.

When Ibn Hisham performed his redaction in the late eighth and early ninth century, the agenda of scholarship was even more slanted towards defining the borders of Islamic theology and identity. Gordon Newby writes that "Ibn Ishaq represented the end of an era of open scholarly inquiry into Jewish and Christian knowledge, and Ibn Hisham's epitome marks a closing of the doors of such open investigation."⁴⁵ The redaction, or epitome, as Newby calls it, further defined Islamic scholarship by placing the focus entirely on Muhammad, thus attempting to further a standardization of Islamic identity.

⁴² Gordon Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

Ibn Ishaq was as much a scholar as he was a Muslim, reportedly having had an obsession with collecting hadith since early in his career.⁴⁶ Yet, when isnad are used in the *Sīrah*, they are prefaced with *za'ama* or *za'amū*, meaning the source *alleged* that something was said or done.⁴⁷ This shows Ibn Ishaq's wariness over the truthfulness of the traditions he used to construct his story of Muhammad. Given this and the redaction of his work by a clearly biased editor, Ibn Hisham, information in the *Sīrah* must be viewed with a critical eye, if not rejected all together as a reliable historical source.

However, the *Sīrah* is useful in constructing a timeline of Muhammad's life. Though the record of Muhammad's exact actions and words may be suspect, certain events that pose no threat or contradiction to the author and editor's agenda can be referenced for a general knowledge of Muhammad's life. Thus, in this study, the *Sīrah* is used sparingly and only to establish a general fact about Muhammad's life or the lives of those around him.

⁴⁶A. Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), xii-xiv. A note on Guillaume's title: While the title of Guillaume's work does not reflect that Ibn Ishaq's manuscript only exists in redacted form, he is aware of this and discusses Ibn Hisham's editorial additions and subtractions in his introduction.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xviii.

Chapter 4: Fifth and Sixth Century Trade in Arabia

Two of the criteria for determining syncretic influence are the nature of contact and the frequency of it. Thus, it is crucial to understand how people and ideas moved through the peninsula. Trade was the common factor linking the communities and cultures in the Northeast Africa, Southwest Asia region. It was trade routes that gave people from different religious traditions not only opportunity to travel but a reason to travel.⁴⁸ Commerce drove movement, which in turn placed merchants and other travelers in contact with many different people with diverse beliefs and practices. By this, ideas could spread, including knowledge of ritual practices.

Agriculture on the peninsula is restricted largely to the southern regions. The rain-bringing southwest and northeast monsoon times divide the year in the southern regions into four seasons.⁴⁹ When weather permitted, ships could safely approach the coast, bringing trade goods. Yemen, one of the few places where agriculture could flourish, was strategically important for empires and kingdoms seeking to establish and maintain power through control of trade routes. The inhabitants of the region existed in a state of political flux, sometimes enjoying autonomy, at other times, subjected to the authority of foreign power. In either case, the southern coastal regions were major entry points for goods to be transported, for the purpose of trade, to Mediterranean lands.

North of these fertile areas are vast deserts unfit for sedentary existence. Scattered fertile lands along the western side of the peninsula, called the Hijaz, break up some of the arid emptiness. It is a strip of land north of Yemen, running parallel to the Red Sea

⁴⁸ Transhumance could have been another reason for semi-sedentary groups to move throughout the peninsula; groups seeking natural resources and grazing lands that fluctuated with the seasons. However, contact with people and cultures outside of the peninsula would have come about largely through trading and movement throughout the Northeast Africa, Southwest Asia region.

⁴⁹ Bamyeh, 5.

coast where “arid steppe lands, interspersed with great reaches of rock or of sand, visited in winter and especially spring, with sporadic rains that awoke transient vegetation,”⁵⁰ and allowed some sedentary communities to exist.

The Hijaz provided a more hospitable environment than the deserts and supported a population that could engage in caravanning goods from the Yemeni ports. Arabian tribes did not inhabit the desert regions, but they did control them by guarding oases, part of the landscape that made long journeys possible.⁵¹ In the desert, water was the highest commodity.

In this dangerous environment, movement was essential for two reasons. First, movement allowed groups to locate sparse grazing land and water (in the event a small herd of pastoral animals could be maintained), providing opportunities for hunting and for the raiding of caravans or other tribal holdings.⁵² Second, wealth came through caravanning, which necessitated movement. Indeed, those who could traverse the vast expanses of desert played a crucial role in the trade system.

Nomadic tribes in the peninsula were able to traverse great distances, carrying large loads of trade goods, by use of the domesticated camel. Through this animal, sedentary communities could be linked, nomadism practiced and indeed, trade in the region conducted at all. The deserts were impassable but for the use of the camel, and owning and using the camel were the means by which commerce and thriving economies

⁵⁰ Groom, 147.

⁵¹ Some oases supported quasi-sedentary populations, where resources allowed for the tending of herd animals, some attention to craftsmanship and also a base from which to engage in the wealth gathering means of nomadism. As with all aspects of history, lines of distinction are never drawn in dualities. Lifestyles in the Arabian Peninsula were no exception, and my use of the sedentary/nomad dualism is simply an expedient way of describing the social terrain.

⁵² Bamyeh, 17.

could exist.⁵³ For those who rejected⁵⁴ (or did not have the means) to engage in agriculture, nomadism offered an alternative, one which allowed trade as a means of generating wealth.

The overland trade routes were advantageous because they allowed merchants to bypass the extra-Arabian tariffs, particularly those of the Byzantine Empire. Arab merchants strove to avoid taxation along the Byzantine borders. They engaged in smuggling, resisting Byzantine efforts to force caravans through customs stations in Mesopotamia. Few, if any, of the caravans halted in this region. There is no mention of customs stations in Syria and Palestine, and it is for this reason that the trade running north through the Hijaz beginning in Yemen stopped along the Mediterranean coast.⁵⁵

Another major trade route ran northeast to the Persian vassal state of Hira. This route was somewhat less profitable because Persians had direct overland passage to the eastern lands that produced valuable goods.

This information shows how important trade was in the region. The Byzantine and Persian Empires required trade goods to satisfy the needs and desires of their respective economies. Trade brought wealth into the peninsula because Arabian tribes and communities were the means by which trade goods could be transferred to the empires. Thus, Arabian merchants traveled throughout the region, putting them in contact with cultures and communities outside of the harsh Arabian terrain. By this, traders had

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ As nomads were excluded from sedentary existence, it was necessary to justify the alternative method of living. Bamyeh writes that constructing an ideology that “provided a moral force that highlighted the virtues of the inescapable *badawah* (nomadism),” had the ramification of generating a scorn for the perceived lesser existence of sedentary life. See Bamyeh, 43.

⁵⁵ F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 64.

opportunity to learn of different religious traditions and practices, which could have in turn been shared with communities and individuals living on the peninsula.

The Growth of Mecca

Along trade routes grew small settlements in which minor trade could be practiced, camels watered and travelers rested. Areas that gained significant populations and became major centers of rest and trade within the peninsula came to host market festivals throughout the year. The city of Mecca, which became the most important Arabian city once Muhammad began his teachings, had long been a “holy” city. Within it rested the sacred precinct, *haram*, where no blood over tribal wars could be spilt. Also there was (and remains) the central shrine, the *Ka'ba*, discussed in further detail in the next section.

The city's wealth came from pilgrims traveling to the holy city. Beyond this source of income, there were few of the natural resources needed to support a community; no running streams or fountains and little plant life. Its agricultural sustenance came from the scattered fertile regions throughout the Hijaz.⁵⁶ Drinking water was consistently a problem, and acquiring that essential element consumed much of the efforts of the governing tribe, the Quraysh. Before 400 C.E., Mecca was a minor population center. By the sixth century it was an important religious and commercial center boasting an ever growing population.

There are two main reasons why Mecca was able to become a thriving city. First, it was one of many caravan stopping points along the northern routes to Palestine and Syria. The annual cycle of market festivals brought many caravans to the city. Trade was

⁵⁶ Ibid., 27.

plentiful and consequently, economic gain was as well.⁵⁷ Mecca gained wealth and a significant standing in peninsula trade by profiting from annual festivals, garnering goods and sending trade caravans north in the summer to Syria and south in winter to Yemen.⁵⁸

Meccan exports consisted of locally produced leather goods.⁵⁹ Mecca became the trading center for goods sold within the peninsula, which were predominantly raisins, wine and slaves.⁶⁰ Erroneous scholarly traditions have held that Meccans produced and exported silver, gold and perfume. None of these could have been produced in the desert city, and therefore, did not play a part in the city's rise to economic prominence.⁶¹ Rather, Meccan prosperity and growth depended on local goods and the city's role as a center for trade.

The second reason why Mecca grew in prosperity and strength was because of its religious importance. Pilgrims from various places on the peninsula made their way to *haram* and the Ka'ba to pay homage to their respective deities. Between 440 and 500 C.E., the Meccan ruler Hisham levied a tax on all Quraysh so as to feed these pilgrims. He was thus held in high esteem by tribes throughout the peninsula and so, the Quraysh gained prestige as well as economic power from visits to the city.

That Mecca became such an important locus of trade and religion is important because Muhammad was of the Quraysh and was raised in Mecca. He was born into the center of commerce and became a merchant. By this, he had opportunity to travel to neighboring lands and hear accounts (or see them firsthand) of other religious traditions

⁵⁷ Mohammad A. Bamyeh, *The Social Origins of Islam: Mind, Economy, Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

⁵⁸ Peters, *Mecca*, 26.

⁵⁹ Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 150-1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Crone, 87.

practiced throughout the region. Muhammad was a contemplative man, and he was raised in a city ideally suited to satisfying a craving for ideas.

Muhammad's travel outside the peninsula

As with most aspects of Muhammad's life, determining his ventures beyond the peninsula is a difficult task. It is clear from certain texts that he had knowledge of the powerful empires in the region. *Sura al-Rum*, referring to the Byzantines, opens with a declaration that Byzantium had lost territorial holdings along their eastern frontier, referring to the Sassanian advance in the first decade of the seventh century.⁶² However, Muhammad would not have needed to be in the Mesopotamian lands to learn of the Byzantine defeat. The event caused a major upheaval in the regional power structure and land holdings north of the peninsula, and news of this devastating conflict would have spread far.

Qur'anic reference to Muhammad's journey outside the peninsula is found in relation to the so-called "Night Journey" or "Night of Power." This refers to Muhammad's divine transportation in a single night, "from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque," suggesting the Temple mount in Jerusalem.⁶³ From there, he was taken up to Heaven, ascending through six heavens with the angel Gabriel, before reaching the seventh heaven and encountering Allah alone.⁶⁴ Given the large Jewish population in

⁶² Sura 30:2-4; "The Roman Empire has been defeated in a land close by; but they, (even) after (this) defeat of theirs, will soon be victorious within a few years." This conflict is discussed in further detail below.

⁶³ Sura 17:1.

⁶⁴ Of the Night Journey, Hodgson writes that this was a dream vision that was "later greatly elaborated among Muslims, as the *mi'raj*, and given a central place in Muhammad's legend." The first reference to Muhammad's journey to heaven, apart from the sura, is found in Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham's *Sirah*. Tradition since then has held Muhammad's journey to Jerusalem and then heaven to have happened on the night of the twenty-sixth day of Ramadan. See, J.R. Porter, "Muhammad's Journey to Heaven," *Numen*, 21, no. 1 (1974), 64, and Hodgson, 171.

Yathrib as well as Muhammad's own knowledge of Abrahamic traditions, he would not have had to visit Jerusalem by terrestrial means to have knowledge of the Temple and its importance in Abrahamic religious history. However, as a trader, it is likely he would have visited Jerusalem, and references to the Temple ruins suggest possible first-hand knowledge.

In both Muslim and Bukhari's hadith, Muhammad is reported as saying "Traveling is a tortuous experience. It deprives a person of his sleep, his food and drink. When one of you has accomplished his purpose, he should hasten his return to his family."⁶⁵ These are the words of a man who has done significant traveling. It could refer simply to his movement from Mecca to Yathrib, the Hijra, but it might also refer to the 60 to 75-day caravan route from Mecca to Syrian lands.⁶⁶ Muhammad was a merchant before his prophetic calling, and as such, would have traveled along the trade route running north through the Hijaz.

The *Sīrah* records that Muhammad traveled outside the peninsula while in the employ of his wife Khadija. She "proposed that he should take her goods to Syria and trade with them."⁶⁷ The narrative continues with information detailing signs showing Muhammad's divine favor, though he was none the wiser. While the divine signs suit the authors' aforementioned agenda, their reference does not detract from the record that he likely traveled to Syria. It fits with the historical information available about Muhammad. He was known to be a merchant, which makes at least one trip north along the trade route probable, if not certain.

⁶⁵ Muslim, 1063.

⁶⁶ Crone, 21.

⁶⁷ Guillaume, 82.

The information provided thus far indicates several important aspects of Arabian trade and Muhammad's role in it. First, the trade routes running through the peninsula connected southern Yemeni ports with Mediterranean and Mesopotamian territories. Some of these routes ran through the Hijaz and were important thoroughfares for the growing Arabian economy. This leads to another important point.

Peninsular trade supported an Arabian culture and economy that enjoyed moderate autonomy. By the time of Muhammad, trade routes were as important for trading between cities and communities on the peninsula as they were for serving the commercial demands of the Byzantine or Persian populations. A trader during this time had occasion to trade in Yathrib and particularly Mecca, cities that hosted trading fairs. These fairs were intimately linked with indigenous beliefs, as shown in the next section.

The third important point is that Muhammad belonged to the Quraysh tribe and worked as a trader before following his prophetic call. This shows that he was most likely involved with trading festivals in Mecca. This put him in contact with people from throughout the peninsula, each with experiences and observations about religious traditions and practices in the region. As a trader, it is likely Muhammad employed the Hizaji trade routes, and could have visited Yemen, Mediterranean regions and possibly Hira. This is to say nothing of other Quraysh and Bedouin traders who may have had knowledge of various religious traditions, and consequently, opportunity to share their experiences with early Muslims.

To determine more solid evidence of contact, it is necessary to look at each religious tradition in the region and determine what early Muslims may have gleaned

from different ritual action and how such information was shared. Discussed first are the traditions indigenous to the Arabian population.

Chapter 5: Arabian Indigenous Traditions

The religious traditions indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula certainly influenced Muhammad and his followers. Muhammad was a member of the Quraysh tribe, who were custodians of the sacred Ka’ba shrine. Even in the Qur’an, there is evidence of Muhammad referring to indigenous deities. However, the pre-Islamic period is in large part lost to history. As Islam spread, indigenous shrines were destroyed, along with other evidence of the religious traditions deemed heretical by Muhammad and other Muslims. Thus, though the indigenous religious practices may be the most revealing in the search for the origins of salāt, they are also those most difficult to determine.

The difficulty in investigating what pre-Islamic Arabian tribes believed lies in the absence of historical records. Early Muslim historians, though contributing greatly in other areas, left a significant void in the historical record, considering the *jahiliyya*, “time of ignorance,” as a period not worth recording. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn.

Reviewing available material, it is possible to reconstruct how pre-Islamic worship was practiced and further deduce the possibility for syncretic influence on salāt. Because Muhammad was of the Quraysh, a tribe that practiced the indigenous traditions, contact with the tradition is a given. The goal is to determine which practices became employed in salāt. As shown below, there is evidence suggesting prostration and facing the Ka’ba were common indigenous practices. A review of available historical material makes clear the potential for syncretic influence in the indigenous ritual actions.

Deities, Sacred Stones and ‘Places of Prostration’

Various terms have been used to describe the religious beliefs of the indigenous people of the Arabian Peninsula. Many scholars have favored polytheism, as indeed, the indigenous tradition did host a pantheon of deities. However, deities were not followed equally, with some tribes favoring their patron over those of others. From this, a more accurate term is henotheism.⁶⁸ Yet, even beyond this there was a general understanding of one deity presiding over all others. While individual tribes had their patron deity, the highest of all was Allah. This is not clearly monotheistic, but rather, a tradition where a high deity is recognized while lesser deities are treated with reverence. These descriptors are simply methods of classifying the style of belief on the peninsula.

There is little to be said with confidence concerning the indigenous beliefs in the peninsula. There may have been several hundred deities known to the pre-Islamic nomadic and sedentary groups. Allah was a creator god, lord of the sky and giver of rain.⁶⁹ Allah was associated with Mecca though not bound to it, and there was not necessarily a specific Allah cult.⁷⁰ There were, however, three goddesses of Mecca who did receive cultic worship. The Daughters of Allah, as they were called, were Manat, Allat and al-‘Uzza.⁷¹ Manat was a goddess of destiny and fortune who was worshipped by a tribe based south of Mecca.⁷² Allat, also called Alilat, had a sanctuary in Taif and

⁶⁸ Henotheism refers to individual worship of a particular god while recognizing the existence and authority of other gods, though the other gods are not necessarily worshipped. According to scholar Max Muller, “‘to the mind of the supplicant’ each god is ‘at the time a real divinity, supreme and absolute,’ and not limited by the powers of any other gods.” See Encyclopedia of Religion, s.v. “henotheism.”

⁶⁹ Henninger, 118.

⁷⁰ Scholars are in disagreement as to what role Allah played in pre-Islamic Arabia. Some argue he is not unlike the generalized Semitic “El.” Others place him as a once prominent deity that lost prominence as local deities gained favor. See, Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, Theophil Menzel, trans. (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 15-6; Michael Lecker, Henninger, 117.

was the goddess of motherhood and fertility.⁷³ Al-‘Uzza appears to have drawn the most worship. Her authority was similar to Allat, except in the north where her association with Venus remained a central element of her worship.⁷⁴

The Daughters of Allah had a favored place among the Quraysh.⁷⁵ Al-Uzza was particularly beloved in Mecca.⁷⁶ Beliefs in these deities, and their prevalence in Mecca, were revealed by Muhammad’s temptation to allow the three daughters into Islamic theology, found in the so-called satanic verses of the Qur’an.⁷⁷ According to the ninth century historian Ibn Sa’d, Muhammad’s original recitation placed these goddesses as intermediaries between human beings and God.⁷⁸ While this apparent theological error was corrected, the historical Islamic tradition that records the incident suggests just how prevalent these deities, and likely others, were in Meccan life.

While the Daughters of Allah were some of the more widely known and worshipped deities in the indigenous pantheon, there were other deities honored with shrines and by tribes throughout the peninsula. In a ninth century text about pre-Islamic Yathrib, thirteen tribes are listed in relation to the specific deities they worshipped.⁷⁹ The “idols” served as the link between the tangible everyday world and the divine realm. From this it appears that the Yathrib population following the indigenous tradition worshipped a range of deities, further evidence of the diversity and worship of the indigenous pantheon.

⁷³ Andrae, 16.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Peters, *Muhammad*, 111.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Sura 53.

⁷⁸ Andrae, 19.

⁷⁹ Michael Lecker, “Idol Worship in Pre-Islamic Medina (Yathrib),” *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, F.E. Peters, ed. (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1999), 130.

In Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabarī's *The History of Prophets and Kings*, there are several references to shrines and cults. In northern Yemen, there was a castle, Ri'ām, which served as a temple for the worship of a deity, Ta'lab.⁸⁰ This is evidence of a specific location where a deity could be worshipped. Throughout the peninsula, other locations existed specifically for divine worship.

Deities were identified with a specific shrine in a specific place, signified by a tree, grove or stone.⁸¹ Manat was linked to a stone south of Mecca. Allat was linked to a stone on which wheat was ground.⁸² The Ka'ba in Mecca was and is a stone structure with a sacred black stone as part of it, and Allah was understood to be the "Lord of the Ka'ba."⁸³

Offerings or sacrifices were made at the stones and sanctuaries associated with a deity. Sacrifices included animals as well as inanimate objects considered to hold value.⁸⁴ It was necessary to have a *sadin*, a priest or temple guard, protect the sacred area. *Sadin* also cast lots to consult a deity on an important matter.⁸⁵ This role was filled by the chief of the tribe who claimed devotion to the deity and its respective sanctuary. However, any member of the tribe could also carry out these functions.⁸⁶ Because the Quraysh were custodians of the Ka'ba, and Muhammad was of the Quraysh, he could have acted as the Ka'ba's *sadin*. At the least, he would have been aware of what was involved in maintaining and guarding the shrine, as it was his as well as every Quraysh member's

⁸⁰ Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabarī, *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, vol. 5 of *The History of al-Tabarī*, C.E. Bosworth, trans. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 171.

⁸¹ Hodgson, vol. 1, 155.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁴ al-Tabarī, vol. 5, 171.

⁸⁵ Andrae, 29.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

obligation to do so. Most rituals associated with the Ka'ba then would have been familiar to Muhammad.

The Ka'ba, a sacred space and sanctuary, was a place of pilgrimage for indigenous worshippers. It was also a place for sacrifice to a deity or deities.⁸⁷ Many idols were placed in the sacred space around the Ka'ba, making the shrine a sacred location for several tribes and communities.⁸⁸ For example, idols for the deities Manat and Hubal were placed near the sacred black stone.⁸⁹ This, F.E. Peters argues, allowed for peaceful trading in the sacred months, for as tribes came to worship at the Ka'ba, they could also trade. With groups otherwise disposed towards asserting dominance through battle, a shared cult center allowed tribes to enjoy a sense of security and an opportunity to trade.⁹⁰ Such was the case in Mecca, which, as already mentioned, accounted for the city's growth in economic and political power.

Thus, sanctuaries held an important place in the pre-Islamic indigenous traditions. They provided the means by which a worshipper might approach a deity. Of concern to this study, however, is what worshippers did when approaching a sanctuary.

Shrine sites found in the Negev Desert correspond to some of the imagery of pre-Islamic Arabian beliefs referred to in early Muslim sources. Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren interpret this archeological evidence as places of worship of pre-Islamic deities. The few remaining shrines, formerly thought to be storehouses, are in the form of small buildings, some as sunken pits. Nevo and Koren find that worshippers at these shrines,

⁸⁷ Uri Rubin, "The Ka'ba: Aspects of its Ritual Functions and Position in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times," *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, F.E. Peters, ed. (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1999), 320-3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Peters, *Muhammad*, 106.

formerly in great number, were nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes that traveled and camped near the shrines for a short time. Within the shrines are the remnants of pottery “intentionally and systematically broken into small pieces and then scattered,” found most frequently near areas where offerings may have been presented. These shards, in addition to marble and gemstone, eggshells, seashells, iron and copper suggest sacrificial offerings to deity or deities at the particular shrine.⁹¹

That Nevo and Koren found many of these shrines intentionally filled in or purposefully destroyed fits with what is known about early Muslim animosity towards pre-Islamic beliefs. Also, the absence of these shrines in the lower Hijaz seems fitting when set in the historical context. The systematic destruction of pre-Islamic places of worship would have been a way of breaking with the past, acting against vestiges from the “time of ignorance” as a way of supporting Islam. One hadith holds an example of how this was accomplished. In an area in Yathrib, formerly held by “polytheists,” Muhammad “ordered that the trees should be cut, and the graves should be dug out, and the ruins should be leveled.”⁹²

This active destruction of pre-Islamic worship sites explains the scarcity of archeological and written evidence in the peninsula. That remnants of buildings are found in the Negev suggests they were far enough away from Mecca, Medina and the early Muslim population to be overlooked.

Graffiti left by Bedouin groups (the Thamud and Safait specifically) in the northern Hijaz, refers to a kind of building (perhaps like those found by Nevo and Koren)

⁹¹ For a review of Nevo and Koren’s work, see, Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 173-185.

⁹² Muslim, 266-7.

called “places of prostration” (*mdhqn*).⁹³ F.E. Peters links this graffiti with the Qur’anic term for shrine, *masjid*, used most notably in reference to the Ka’ba, *al-masjid al-haram*.⁹⁴ This link suggests that on approaching a shrine or sanctuary, worshippers may have prostrated. More evidence is available when considering the Ka’ba specifically.

In a study of the origins of the morning and evening Muslim prayers, Uri Rubin finds in a ninth century report from ‘Abd al-Razzāq that the Bedouins in pre-Islamic Arabia prostrated during prayer.⁹⁵ A morning prayer was performed by Bedouin traders at the Ka’ba as a prayer of thanks for success in commerce. In this, prostration was performed.⁹⁶ As noted above, the link between religious worship and commerce was a defining attribute for Mecca. Tribes from throughout the peninsula traveled to the central city to worship and trade. Bedouin traders approached the Ka’ba with prayers of thanks. Rubin writes that “the *sujūd* is a characteristic gesture of obedience and gratitude, and...it seems that it was far more common among the Bedouins than is usually admitted in Muslim sources.”⁹⁷ On this, however, there is some scholarly disagreement.

Joseph Henninger writes that for Bedouins worshipping in the pre-Islamic cult, prayer was not of primary importance.⁹⁸ Of prostration specifically, Tottoli writes that people of the peninsula “considered it a foreign practice which could be appreciated as a poetic device for giving praise or performed to a certain extent before kings when abroad, but which was essentially alien to their pre-Islamic...customs.”⁹⁹ This argument is

⁹³ Peters, *Muhammad*, 115.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Uri Rubin, “Morning and Evening Prayers in Early Islam,” *The Development of Islamic Ritual*, Gerald Hawting, ed. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2006).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Joseph Henninger, “Pre-Islamic Bedouin Religion,” *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, F.E. Peters, ed. (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1999), 118.

⁹⁹ Tottoli, 8-9.

disproved by Rubin's evidence, if the ninth-century report is to be trusted. The Bedouin graffiti interpreted by Peters to refer to shrines as "places of prostration" lends support to Rubin's document. It is thus possible that Bedouin prayer at shrines included *sujud*.¹⁰⁰

Jinn and Kahin

Belief in entities known as *jinn* was also prevalent, so much so that their pre-Islamic influence carried over into the Qur'an and Muhammad's teachings. A *jinn* was an autonomous spirit whose actions resulted in human knowledge of divine plans. The *jinn* obtained knowledge of what transpired between deities or what the deities intended for human beings, and shared that with its human counterpart, a *kahin* or seer.¹⁰¹ People consulted *kahins* (and by consequence, their *jinn*) on undertakings or if something had been lost.¹⁰² Their response to someone seeking aid was given in prose. *Jinn* were also seen as the source of poetic inspiration.¹⁰³ The spirit would physically force itself on a human being and force that person to speak poetry.¹⁰⁴

In the Qur'an, *jinn* are included among entities created by Allah. In the Meccan suras, writes F.E. Peters, *jinn* are linked with humanity, evidenced by multiple Qur'anic verses with the phrase "jinn and mankind." Though they may, under Islam, be seen as

¹⁰⁰ The *Sīrah* contains stories that show Muhammad lived with a Bedouin foster mother during the first years of his life. It is thus tempting to suppose that this experience may have left him with personal knowledge of Bedouin prayer. There is, however, no way of confirming such a story, and in any event, Muhammad need not have been raised Bedouin to know how they prayed. See Guillaume, 69-72.

¹⁰¹ Andrae, 29.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰³ Michael A. Sells, "Towards a Multidimensional Understanding of Islam: The Poetic Key," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 64, no. 1 (1996), 148

¹⁰⁴ Andrae, 29.

negative, they are never linked with human adversaries, such as Satan.¹⁰⁵ From verses in the Qur'an, it is clear jinn were worshipped to some degree by Meccans prior to Islam. Sura 6:100 reads: "Yet they make Jinns equals with Allah, though Allah did create the Jinns; and they falsely, having no knowledge, attribute to Him sons and daughters."

There is evidence in the Qur'an that shows an emphasis on the divine nature of the revelation given to Muhammad. His revelations were spoken in a format similar to those used by kahin when consulting jinn.¹⁰⁶ Yet, one of the "signs" purported by the Qur'an to show its divine origin is the perfection of its poetry. Sura 17:88 reads: "If the whole of mankind and Jinns were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support." Thus, while Muhammad may have sounded like a kahin to his early followers, the revelations he spoke emphasized the uniqueness of the message.

Evidence supporting a link between the phenomenon of jinn, the social group of kahin and prayer has not been found. The jinn-kahin relationship appears to have been focused on sharing divine actions with humanity without the worship of jinn. For this reason, the position of jinn in the pre-Islamic tradition does not appear to have influenced the specific salāt rituals concerned here.

Hanifiya

In addition to the indigenous traditions discussed above, there was a monotheistic tradition practiced, what Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham call *Hanifiya*, "the religion of

¹⁰⁵ Peters, *Muhammad*, 162-3; also see, A.T. Welch, "Allah and Other Supernatural Beings: The Emergence of the Qur'anic Doctrine of Tawhid," *Studies in Qur'an and Tafsir: Journal of American Academy of Religion*, 47 (1979): 745.

¹⁰⁶ Andrae, 30.

Abraham.”¹⁰⁷ Documents record people who were not necessarily Jewish or Christian but were distinctly Abrahamic in their beliefs. Unlike other religions discussed in this study, this monotheistic tradition was not based in a specific community. Rather, the *hanif* seem to have lived throughout the peninsula. For example, the name Abraham is found in unusual frequency in sixth century Negev texts and mosaics.¹⁰⁸ However, there are also records of monotheists living in or near Mecca. These were known as *hunafā* (sing. Hanif).

Zayd ibn ‘Amr is one of four *hunafā* listed in the *Sīrah*. Of the four, he is recorded as the only one who did not convert to Christianity. However, even before leaving Mecca to search for knowledge of Hanifiya, it is written that “he abandoned the religion of his people and abstained from idols, animals that had died, blood and things offered to idols...saying that he worshipped the God of Abraham.”¹⁰⁹ The *Sīrah* also records him performing *sujud* before the Ka’ba. According to Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham, Zayd ibn ‘Amr was killed when traveling south through Mesopotamia and never learned of Islam.

Waraqā ibn Naufal ibn Asad ibn ‘Abdu’l-‘Uzzā, a *hanif* discussed in detail in this study’s section on Christianity, is reported to have prayed at the Ka’ba, though there is no record of him prostrating like Zayd. Waraqā is reported to have referred to his monotheistic god in relation to Zayd (“my Lord is the Lord of Zayd”), making it possible that Zayd and Waraqā shared similar prayer methods.¹¹⁰ Information about the *hunafā*, however, must be viewed critically as Uri Rubin writes that “the apologetic nature of

¹⁰⁷ Guillaume, 99.

¹⁰⁸ Neveo and Koren, 188-9.

¹⁰⁹ Guillaume, 99.

¹¹⁰ Rubin, *Hanīfiyya and Ka’ba*, 284.

these traditions is obvious, their chief aim being to present the prophet as descended from noble monotheistic ancestors who allegedly never practiced idolatry.”¹¹¹

The Qur’an refers to prophets who are not mentioned in other Abrahamic literature. This also suggests a tradition of non-Jewish or non-Christian monotheism in Arabia prior to Islam. Figures such as Idris, Dhul Kifi, Dhul Nun, Abu Amir Abd Amr ibn Sayfi and Abu Qays ibn a-Aslat are named as monotheistic prophets of the Abrahamic tradition. Yet, their historical context is not given, and their presence in other monotheistic religions is unaccounted for.¹¹² This suggests they were specifically Arab figures, known in the pre-Islamic culture and context, practicing and speaking about a monotheistic belief system. Information on their practices is unfortunately lacking.

Indigenous Influences on Salāt

The criteria of contact indicating syncretic influence is established by virtue of Muhammad and some of his early followers having lived in or around Mecca and Medina. In both locations, pre-Islamic cults flourished, particularly, however, in Mecca, which held the Ka’ba. Muhammad was from the Quraysh tribe and was therefore privy to the rituals associated with worship at the Meccan shrine. The more difficult criterion to establish is similarity in ritual.

As has been mentioned, sources on this subject are scarce. While a general concept of how the indigenous tradition operated can be established, determining how worship was practiced is far more difficult. From the above investigation, it seems that

¹¹¹ Uri Rubin, “Hanīfiyya and Ka’ba: An Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of Dīn Ibrāhīm,” *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, F.E. Peters, ed. (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1999), 267.

¹¹² Qur’an 21:85.

prostration could have been practiced at the Ka'ba and other shrines, though there is no single example that makes this clear. References in historical literature supports prostration at the Ka'ba, but this information must be weighed against suggestions that prostration was viewed as a foreign practice. Information on the *hunafā* should be interpreted carefully in light of later Muslim writers' propensity for supporting Muhammad's role as prophet by describing pre-Islamic Arabian monotheists.

Perhaps the firmest evidence of pre-Islamic indigenous prostration is the graffiti Peters interprets as referring to shrines as "places for prostration." That prostration is mentioned at all in the graffiti sets precedence for the practice, but it does not finally prove that *sujud* was practiced in relation to the indigenous belief system. Other evidence of worship practices indicates an emphasis on sacrifice to deities. While ritual sacrifice is a practice found in Islam, it is not a ritual found in *salāt* and therefore lies beyond this study's focus. The Ka'ba was clearly an important shrine, crucial to indigenous worship. This may indicate some influence on the direction faced during prayer, but it does not appear to be a primary influence. Deities were approached at shrines throughout the peninsula. Turning towards the Ka'ba when outside of Mecca would not have been the practice, for not all deities were represented at the Ka'ba.

Evidence has not been found supporting the indigenous practice of ritual washing, bowing, facing a specific direction or prayer times. This does not necessarily mean that they were not performed, but a firmer conclusion cannot be reached in the absence of documents and archeological finds. There is significant evidence, however, for these ritual practices employed in other traditions in and around the peninsula.

Chapter 6: Jewish Traditions and Communities

Throughout ancient Israel's history, worshippers of Yahweh traveled (either willingly or against their will) throughout the Northeast Africa and Southwest Asia region and established communities. These movements occurred at various times over hundreds of years. Thus, the region's Yahweh worshippers were widespread, and their religious beliefs and practices were diverse. Jewish theology and ritual did not develop only within the tenuous boundaries of ancient Israel, but throughout the region. Thus, understanding the religious practices of Jews in and around the Arabian Peninsula in the sixth and seventh century requires a close look at the historical context of each community. By this, it is possible to understand how different Jewish communities worshiped, and what, if any, influence they may have had on Muhammad.

Four geographic areas of Jewish habitation are particularly relevant to this study. These are Syria-Palestine, Yemen, Yathrib and Abyssinia. Two stumbling blocks to responsible scholarship arise, however, in investigating Jewish practice and belief in these areas. First, in each area, communities were internally diverse, composed of competing tribes or clans, each with its own history and ambitions. These smaller groupings were made up of those claiming descent from Israelite ancestors and converts to the Jewish tradition. Beyond this, there were arguments over correct theology and worship.

Deciphering and understanding this complex picture of Jewish life in the region is made difficult by a scarcity of written records concerning the individual and his or her method of worship. Gordon Newby concisely states this problem in the preface to his definitive work, *A History of the Jews of Arabia*: "We do not have the personal records,

autobiographies, and letters that would really let us glimpse the lives of individual Arabian Jews. For the most part, we can only look at these long-dead Jews at a communal level.”¹¹³ Even then, information about Jewish communities in the above mentioned areas must be gleaned, for the most part, through the lens of non-Jewish, later writers who say little about Jews and Jewish traditions outside of Yathrib.¹¹⁴ This makes difficult an investigation into how members of the communities viewed themselves, their beliefs and their religious action. Finally, when direct sources are available, they “are written in one of several Near Eastern languages and scripts, which are read only by a small circle of scholars...Relatively little has been translated.”¹¹⁵ The challenge then is formidable.

Nevertheless, the historical record does provide some information about the practices of Jewish communities in and around the Arabian Peninsula. These practices can be found through a critical reading of sources available as well as deductive reasoning. This method of scholarship leads to the conclusion that Muhammad had contact with and was aware of the Jewish traditions in the above mentioned areas. Furthermore, similarities between rituals in salāt and Jewish prayer actions employed during the time period considered here indicate syncretic influence on Muslim prayer. So as to determine these rituals, the communities in the most relevant geographic areas – Syria-Palestine, Yemen, Yathrib and Abyssinia – are taken in turn.

The Jews of Syria-Palestine

¹¹³ Gordon Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse Under Islam* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), xi.

¹¹⁴ Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1979), 8.

¹¹⁵ Stillman, xvii.

In the spring of 70 C.E., the Roman army in Judea marched on Jerusalem.¹¹⁶

During this time, the supply of sacrificial lambs was cut off from the Temple and for the first time, daily sacrifices could no longer be made. Not long after, the Temple wall was breached and Roman soldiers forced resisting fighters into the inner court. In the fray, a torch was tossed into the priests' chambers, setting the Temple afire. The sight of the House of the Lord burning drove the fighting Judeans into frenzy, throwing themselves against Roman swords, running into the burning structure and even committing suicide.¹¹⁷ Such was the end of the Second Temple and before long, the end of any semblance of the former kingdom of Israel.

The defeat caused a dramatic change in the distribution of Jews in Palestinian lands. With the Temple destroyed and Roman control absolute, "tens of thousands of Judeans" fled their homeland to establish Jewish communities in "Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, and North Africa."¹¹⁸ Aside from those communities discussed below in Yemen and Yathrib, a large community settled to the east in the Mesopotamian lands near the Persian border. Thus, the Second Temple's destruction spurred movement to communities outside of Palestine.

Though these events occurred centuries before the focus of this study, they are relevant in two respects to what follows. First, nowhere was the destruction of the Temple felt more severely, nor did it have such a devastating impact on the social, religious and cultural life, than on Jews in Palestine. Communities thriving elsewhere, such as those in Yemen, Abyssinia and Mesopotamia, had "long before 70 C.E. come to terms with their geographical distance from the Temple, which, for all practical purposes,

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 164.

¹¹⁸ Sicker, 172.

no longer impacted on their daily lives.”¹¹⁹ Those in Palestine who had continued to believe that a Davidic king might restore the kingdom of Israel pursued revolt, even with the Temple destroyed.

After a failed guerilla-style revolt against Roman forces, led by Simon Bar Kokhba in 135, “Jews were forbidden to visit the Temple mount or the environs of Jerusalem.”¹²⁰ More than this, Jews were forbidden to enter the country around the city so that it could not even be seen from a distance.¹²¹ The city was renamed *Aelia Capitolina*, and by 310 C.E., the original city name, Jerusalem, had been essentially forgotten by the Roman government assigned to rule the area.¹²²

Perhaps spurred by the prohibition against Jews visiting the Temple mount, during and after the fourth century, synagogue building in Palestine increased. At least 100 synagogues were constructed with particular attention to art and epigraphs.¹²³ The territories where the boom in synagogue building took place were Galilee, the Golan Heights and a small area in the south, Eleutheropolis.¹²⁴ Synagogues in the south, particularly in Judea, were sparse in number and distant from one another, indicating that the Jewish population there was smaller than in the north.¹²⁵ While the first century had been a time of devastation, the fourth century was a time of renewal. Regardless, Jerusalem and the surrounding area remained closed to the Jewish populations.

¹¹⁹ Lee I Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 160-1.

¹²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of first and second century Judean revolt, see Sicker, *Between Rome and Jerusalem*, 179-186; and Newby, *History*, 30.

¹²¹ Günter Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land*, Ruth Tuschling, trans. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 40.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Newby, *History*, 163.

¹²⁴ Stemberger, 158.

¹²⁵ Newby, *History*, 164.

At this time, studying the Torah and interpreting its meaning was the central focus of the religious elite, the rabbis. For rabbis at this time, prayer in a house designated solely for Torah and Talmudic study was the primary focus, this as opposed to serving as a religious leader.¹²⁶ Thus, despite the increasing numbers of synagogues in Palestine and the immediate surrounding areas, Jewish communities were frequently without rabbinic leadership. This was particularly so because rabbis congregated in areas with larger Jewish populations, such as Tiberias, Caesarea and Sepphoris – not equally distributing to the scattered synagogues throughout Palestine.¹²⁷

Over time, these attitudes towards communal worship warmed, and soon a synagogue was referred to by most rabbis as *the* place to pray. And yet, local prayer frequently deviated from the standards set in the aforementioned centers of rabbinic study. Günter Stemberger notes that for centuries after rabbis took a measure of authority in Palestinian synagogues, there was frequently a lack of uniformity and a disagreement between rabbis and communities on how worship should be performed. He cites instances of benedictions given in the wrong number and Bible readings decided upon at the synagogue level, as opposed to a religion-wide uniformity.¹²⁸

This seeming lack of consistency obscures a clear picture of how synagogue services were performed in Palestine around the time of Muhammad. However, looking to the physical structures of the synagogues reveals a great deal. First, the facades of the synagogues throughout Palestine faced Jerusalem. Thus, from whichever direction, when Jews came to pray, they faced Jerusalem.

¹²⁶ Stemberger, 277.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 269.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 278.

Secondly, archeological excavation of this era's synagogues show prayer rooms to be "divided into three aisles by two rows of three columns. Benches lined three of the walls."¹²⁹ The prayer rooms were set up for sitting, listening and praying. They were not, however, conducive to prostrating. That prostration probably did not occur at these synagogues fits other information on Jewish tradition, discussed below. A Jewish community with somewhat different traditions lived in Yemen.

Yemeni Jews

A community of Jews had lived in the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula for centuries. A precise date for when Jews arrived in southern Arabia is largely speculative. Dating is made even more difficult because Yemenite Jews held a negative view towards any writing not directly related to theology. In fact, the oldest existing Yemeni Jewish writing is dated to 1717.¹³⁰ Thus, ascertaining when the Jewish tradition was brought south is a difficult task.

One tradition puts Jews in Yemen in 544 B.C.E., before the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E.¹³¹ However, considering accounts in the Hebrew Bible, however, as well as some archeological evidence, it can be speculated that "the reign of Solomon would seem to provide a propitious setting for the establishment of Hebrew colonies...in Arabia."¹³² In either case, Yemeni Jews in the fourth century of the Common Era would have been designated by religion and religious

¹²⁹ Ibid., 132. For a description of the different synagogues excavated throughout the region, see Stemberger, 123-158.

¹³⁰ Reuben Ahroni, *Yemenite Jewry: Origins, Culture, and Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 22.

¹³¹ S.D. Goitein, "The Jews of Yemen," A.J. Arberry, ed., *Religion in the Middle East: Three Religions in Concord and Conflict*, vol. 1, *Judaism and Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 226.

¹³² Ibid., 33.

practice and not by ethnic claims. Indeed, genetic studies have shown most Yemeni Jews to be descendants of Bedouin converts in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E.¹³³

During the Second Temple period, Jewish caravans traveled to and from southern Arabia, evidenced in part by the tradition of transporting the dead to the Holy Land for burial.^{134, 135} By the fourth century C.E., there was a large Jewish community in the southern areas of the peninsula. Evidence for this comes from the ecclesiastical historian Philostorgius' writings. He recorded that in an attempt to bring the south Arabian lands into the Byzantine Empire through conversion, Constantine sent Christian missionaries in 356 C.E. to the peninsula. The result, as recorded by Philostorgius, was that "the considerable number of Jews whom he had found in Southern Arabia proved to be a stumbling block to his missionary endeavor."¹³⁶

While Jewish proselytizing was outlawed by the Romans in the Syria-Palestinian provinces, it continued in Yemen. Yemeni Jews were "so active...in proselytizing in the region, that many Arab tribal chieftains adopted Judaism and brought their entire tribes into the Jewish fold."¹³⁷ Those of Judean heritage were adopted into non-Judean tribes and most likely outnumbered by proselytes.¹³⁸

¹³³ Batsheva Bonne-Tamir, "Oriental Jewish Communities and Their Genetic Relationship with Sout-West Asian Populations," *Indian Anthropologist* (1985), 168.

¹³⁴ Ken Blady, *Jewish Communities in Exotic Places* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 2000), 8. This is a particularly striking fact as Jews in the Roman Empire, west of Palestine, were cremated or buried in exclusively Jewish tombs. That Yemeni Jews took pains to transport their dead to Israel, and although this was certainly the privilege of the wealthy, it speaks to their strict adherence to Judean tradition and not simply Jewish beliefs. See, David Noy, "Where were the Jews of the Diaspora Buried?" *Jews in a Graeco-Roman World*, Martin Goodman, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 75-89.

¹³⁵ Before the destruction of the Temple, the preferred burial place was the Mount of Olives. Afterwards, when access to Jerusalem and the surrounding country was restricted, *Beth Shearim*, a location approximately 11 miles southeast of what is today Haifa, became the preferred place for burial. See Stemberger, 133.

¹³⁶ Ahroni, 40.

¹³⁷ Blady, 8.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

An important kingdom in the history of Yemen was Himyar. The Jews of Himyar were descendents of Judean immigrants and Arabian converts.¹³⁹ Beginning in the fourth century, a series of leaders in the kingdom adopted Judaism. In 350, a Himyar king, Wakia, converted to Judaism, though Abyssinian missions later convinced him to convert to Christianity. In 390, King Abu-Kariba Asad-Toban also converted and pursued the conversion of his subjects. The most notable Jewish convert king was the final Himyarite leader, Dhu Nuwas. He came to power as Zar'a, though after conversion, he changed his name to Yusef Ash'ar, commonly known as Dhu Nuwas.¹⁴⁰ His acceptance of Judaism was, however, somewhat more politically motivated than his predecessors.

These Yemeni conversions must be viewed with some skepticism. A Yemeni Jewish scholar, Rabbi Yosef Kafih, was particularly critical of the converted masses. Though an adoption of monotheistic beliefs did take root, Kafih wrote that converts did not study the Torah, keep the Sabbath, did not take a *lulav* or fix a *mezuzah*.¹⁴¹ However, inscriptions from the time period record that Yemeni noblemen used the Talmudic name for God, *Rahmān*, and rededicated the shrines of previously non-Jewish, local gods to the monotheistic Hebrew god.¹⁴² This would indicate that though converts may not have adopted Judaism chapter and verse, they nevertheless accepted some of its major tenets, most importantly, the worship of a single god with a Hebrew name and history. There were others who either embraced Judaism more fully or continued to follow the faith of their ancestors.

¹³⁹ See Ahroni, 42-3; Blady, 8-9; and Hirschberg, 121.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 9. Dhu Nuwas means "Lord of the Curls," and Blady suggests Ash'ar was called such because he wore long peots.

¹⁴¹ Ahroni, 47.

¹⁴² Goitein, 227.

Across the Red Sea, Abyssinia had for some time made attempts to take control of Himyar, all to no avail.¹⁴³ Upon Emperor Justinian's rise to power in 527 C.E., Byzantine control of Himyar became increasingly important. Justinian embarked on a mission to reestablish the dominance and vast territories of the former Roman Empire. This meant increased aggression towards the Persians.¹⁴⁴ One method of stripping power from the Persians was by diverting trade and importing eastern goods directly into the empire via Abyssinia, an ally. One of the most favorable ports was found along the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula; a favorable trade route running through Himyar. If Himyar could be conquered, Justinian speculated, a direct line of trade with the Far East could be established, thus achieving an economic, if not territorial, victory over the Persians.¹⁴⁵

From various Abyssinian incursions, pockets of Christian missionaries came to live in Himyar. Dhu Nuwas sought to create and maintain absolute independence of Himyar from Abyssinia, and so, in 518, he instituted a persecution of Christians within the kingdom. Following this, he executed 150 Christian leaders in Najran to the north.¹⁴⁶ These killings were part of a struggle for influence and control in Yemen. Peters writes that "there was in fact a civil war for power in the land of Himyar, in which one faction, that represented by Dhu Nuwas, happened to be Jews, and the other, in numbers if not in inspiration, Christian."¹⁴⁷ War against the Christians was by proxy against the sponsors of Christianity in Himyar, the Abyssinians. It was not only a civil war then, but also, a fight for autonomy.

¹⁴³ Peters, *Muhammad*, 52.

¹⁴⁴ Kamal Salibi, *A History of Arabia* (Beirut: Caravan Books, 1980), 65.

¹⁴⁵ H.Z. Hirschberg, "The Oriental Jewish Communities," A.J. Arberry, ed., *Religion in the Middle East: Three Religions in Concord and Conflict*, vol. 1, *Judaism and Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 121; and Ahroni, 44-5.

¹⁴⁶ Peters, *Muhammad*, 53-4.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

The result of these persecutions was a fierce attack on Himyar by the Abyssinians in 525, aided by the Byzantines. A fleet was provided by Justinian¹⁴⁸ – outraged at the execution of his fellow Christians and still in need of a secure Arabian port – and a force of 60,000 Abyssinian soldiers crossed the Red Sea, overrunning Himyar and killing Dhu Nuwas.¹⁴⁹ The kingdom was crushed, the port was secured and the last Yemeni Jewish monarch passed into history. Though Jewish political power had been broken, and Christianity increasingly became a prevalent religious tradition in Yemen, a Jewish presence remained.

While Byzantium and Persia warred for dominance in the north, Jewish political power in the south waxed and waned. Trade routes were disrupted for a time following Abyssinian victory over Dhu Nuwas. However, Yemeni Jews had for centuries spread their beliefs in two ways; through proselytizing within the kingdom and through trading caravans. After the defeat of Dhu Nuwas, proselytizing in Yemen ground to a slow halt, but the spread of Yemeni Jewish traditions continued as trade routes stabilized.

Yemini Jews, prior to the Abyssinian invasion, had some contact with other Arabian Jews through trade routes that ran into Mediterranean territories via the Hijaz. However, direct contact and sharing theological innovations (such as ritual) was sporadic.¹⁵⁰ When there was contact with other Jewish communities, it was predominantly with those in Yathrib.¹⁵¹ While other Jewish traditions changed through contact with Diaspora communities, Jewish practices in Yemen changed largely through

¹⁴⁸ Salibi, 66.

¹⁴⁹ Blady, 9.

¹⁵⁰ Blady, 6.

¹⁵¹ Newby, 41.

internal dialogue. Thus, Judaism in Yemen was a long-standing tradition in moderate isolation.

This is not to say, however, that Yemeni Judaism was without theological guidance. In fact, there was priestly activity in Yemen into the sixth century C.E., where priests lived among the communities, sometimes in groups composed exclusively of Jewish priests with direct (either firsthand or familial) ties to Jewish theological schools in Palestine.¹⁵² The priests were called as such because they made claim to descent from the tribe of Levites.¹⁵³ Sources on how this identity influenced religious guidance are scarce. But since they had ties to communities in Palestine and were likely influenced by theological thought in Yathrib, it is probable that Jewish practice in Yemen bore some resemblance to Jewish practices elsewhere. So as to best understand this influence and the practices of another major Jewish community in the region, presented next is a discussion of how prayer was performed by Jews in Yathrib.

The Jews of Yathrib

Twelve years after his first revelation, Muhammad was forced to flee Mecca to escape the aforementioned Quraysh, the majority of which had grown increasingly hostile to his prophetic condemnation of indigenous beliefs and call for a morality in line with his divine instruction. Traveling with a small group of Meccan Muslims, Muhammad moved to Medina in 622 C.E.; this journey is called the *hijra*. Though he most likely had

¹⁵² Ibid., 47.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 40.

contact with Jewish communities through trade prior to this move, after the *hijra*, Muhammad lived for a time amongst a predominantly Jewish population.¹⁵⁴

A Jewish population may have spread into the northern areas of the Arabian Peninsula as early as the sixth century B.C.E. through the expansion of the Babylonian empire under the leadership of its last king, Nabonidus.¹⁵⁵ Around 559 B.C.E., Nabonidus invaded the northern Hijaz, conquering local populations as far south as Yathrib.¹⁵⁶ Gordon Newby argues that there is not enough archeological evidence to support a claim that credits the Jews who came with Nabonidus with the lasting origins of Jewish traditions and language in Arabia. Rather, he writes that “it is more likely that the period after the destruction of the Second Temple (was) the time for the formation of the communities as we come to see them later.”¹⁵⁷

In either case, Jews in Arabia maintained an association with Israel. Indeed, as Newby writes, “Jews dwelling in Arabia...were ‘devout men’ who would return to Jerusalem to participate in Temple celebrations.”¹⁵⁸ With such a longstanding Jewish tradition, particularly one which maintained contact with Jerusalem up to, presumably, the destruction of the Second Temple, the rites and theology of the religion would have been known among the non-Jewish population. When Muhammad arrived in Yathrib in 622 C.E., he was most likely not discovering alien traditions. Rather, he was gaining a

¹⁵⁴ Prior to the *hijra*, Medina was known as Yathrib. After Muhammad’s arrival, it came to be called *al-Medina*, “the city.” For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I refer to this location as Yathrib, regardless of date.

¹⁵⁵ It should be noted that the cities conquered during Nabonidus’ campaign into Arabia, Yathrib particularly, came to be areas for Jewish settlements. Another important point is that unlike the Assyrian deportations of Jews in the eighth and seventh centuries, the Babylonians held a “policy of permitting...the different ethnic groups resettled in Babylonia to maintain their separate identity, thereby keeping alive their historical, legal and cultic traditions.” See, Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 149; and Newby, 20.

¹⁵⁶ Newby, *History*, 20.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

closer inspection of previously recognizable beliefs and practices. The longstanding communities in Yathrib and Yemen suggest that, as has already been stated, Judaism was not a foreign tradition, but rather, as much a part of the peninsula's religious makeup as the indigenous beliefs.

Closer inspection yields a more nuanced understanding of the Jewish community at Yathrib. The city was made up of, for the most part, five tribes. Three of those – the Banû Qurayza, the Banû an-Nadîr and the Banû Qayumqâ' – were Jewish.¹⁵⁹ As in Yemen, designators such as Arab and Jew signified only a religious orientation and not necessarily a unique cultural history, or racial or ethnic unity. As in Yemen, many Jews in Yathrib were Arab. This so given the centuries the Jewish tradition had been present in the peninsula. The tribes at Yathrib then grew through similar worldviews and common interest.

Newby writes that in “Medina (Yathrib) and probably other ‘cities’ of the northern part of Arabia were amalgamations of small villages, strongholds, keeps, and other kinds of dwellings. Some individuals and groups banded together for *mutual interest and protection*.”¹⁶⁰ In some instances, Newby writes, settling with part of a larger social unit entailed conversion to Judaism. Thus, the five major tribes that dominated Yathrib's social and political landscape were divided along religious lines, best understood as either Jewish or not Jewish.

There were many rabbis at Yathrib. The term *rabbâniyyûn* is found in the Qur'an with reference to Jews in Yathrib. This word means “rabbinate,” referring to the

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 51-2.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 52. Emphasis added.

communities as Jews following the rabbinic school of Judaism.¹⁶¹ What is more, the use of the word in the Qur'an, though it may be obvious, means that the rabbinic communities were led by rabbis. A second word, *'ahbâr*, also found in the Qur'an with reference to Jews in Yathrib, suggests, when viewed in light of Talmudic language, a population along the lines of the Pharisees, strict observers of laws of cleanliness and ritual. Jews in the Hijaz generally, Yathrib specifically, "expressed their interests in correct practice... (and)...the concerns of Arabian Jewry were sufficient to attract the attentions of the Babylonian rabbis."¹⁶² When Muhammad came to Yathrib, he encountered rabbis and a population concerned with a faithful observance of Biblical and Talmudic commandments for worship and lifestyle. This meant, in part, attention to ritual cleanliness, an important fact when determining possible influence on *salât*.

As contact and the extent of it are criteria for possible syncretic influence, it is important to show how familiar Muhammad was with the Jewish tribes in Yathrib. When Muhammad reached Yathrib in 622 C.E., the city was in a state of civil conflict. The tribes were at war, and the political power of the Jewish tribes had been diminished.¹⁶³ Early Muslims had for years slowly exited Mecca as animosity towards the new religion grew. Muhammad was one of the last Muslims to leave Mecca, sneaking away in the night with Abu Bakr. This was done to avoid assassination.¹⁶⁴ Yet, his move to Yathrib was in part inspired by a request that he arbitrate the violent conflicts between tribes in the city.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 57-8.

¹⁶² Ibid., 54.

¹⁶³ Peters, *Mecca*, 61-3.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 57.

Upon his arrival, records indicate that Muhammad pursued a diplomatic insertion of himself and his teachings into the governance of the city. This is seen most clearly in what has been called the *Constitution of Medina*, perhaps more accurately referred to as *Muhammad's Ordinance for Medina*.¹⁶⁵ The purpose of the document was a means of mediating conflict and setting forth some standards on conduct and relationships.

In this document, there is a clear familiarity with the different tribes at Yathrib as well as an acceptance that the Jewish tribes held a religion separate to that of early Muslims. The ordinance reads:

The Jews of the Banû Awf (Aus) are a community with the Believers. The Jews have their religion, and the Muslims have theirs. This applies for their clients and themselves... The same applies to the Jews of the Banû 'l-Najjār as to the Jews of the Banû Awf, and so too for the Jews of Banû 'l-Hārith, Banû Sā'ida, Banû Jusham, Banû Banu 'l-Aws, and Banû Tha'laba.¹⁶⁶

There are two striking points in this passage. First, Jews are counted as a community *with* Muslims. Second, there is a clear understanding of the diversity of Jewish tribes in the city. The document does not simply mention the three major Jewish tribes but names the subgroups within and without. The familiarity shows that Muhammad was in close contact with the Jewish population, and this proximity would have given him ample opportunity to witness Jewish worship. Given his initial diplomatic role, Muhammad would have been in contact with leaders in the tribes, who were likely to have been the rabbis mentioned earlier.

¹⁶⁵ Stillman, 115.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

Other Jewish Communities

There are three other areas where Jewish communities flourished in Diaspora, though their practices' impact on salāt was most likely minimal. There was a Jewish community in Khaybar, north of Yathrib. It first became a predominantly Jewish community after Nabonidus shifted populations into the peninsula.¹⁶⁷ Khaybar then had a similar history to Yathrib, which was settled in the same way. Sources on Khaybar before Islam are scarce, but given its proximity to Yathrib and that it was situated near “communication and trade routes of western Arabia,” it seems likely that Jewish practices in Khaybar were similar to those in Yathrib.¹⁶⁸

Khaybar was inhabited by several Jewish tribes. They had strong ties to Yathrib's Jewish community as evidenced by their warfare against Muhammad at the Battle of the Ditch.¹⁶⁹ The battle was fought on one side by Muhammad and his army; on the other, Jewish tribes and the Quraysh. The leader of Khaybar's coalition of tribes, Abû Râfi' Sallâm b. Abû al-Huqayq, participated in the battle, reinforcing the Jewish tribes in Yathrib.¹⁷⁰ The Muslim military warded off the Meccan attack and defeated the Jewish tribes in Yathrib. Months later, in 629, after the peaceful surrender of Mecca to Muhammad, attention was turned to Khaybar.¹⁷¹ Muhammad laid siege to the heavily fortified city until the tribes surrendered and brokered an agreement whereby they paid half their annual harvest in return for being allowed to remain at Khaybar.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (NY: Routledge, 2001), 62.

¹⁶⁸ Newby, 40.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Hodgson, 189.

¹⁷² Newby, 94.

While there was clearly contact between Muhammad and Jews at Khaybar, it does not appear that that contact would have yielded any substantive difference from ritual practices observed in Yathrib. The communities of Khaybar and Yathrib were similar, having settled in the region around the same time and sharing the same trade routes that allowed contact with other Diaspora communities. Also, sources available, predominantly hadith and the *Sîrah*, show that the instance of greatest contact was when Muhammad attacked the city.¹⁷³ Religious influence probably would not have occurred at this point given that Khaybar's inhabitants were viewed as enemies. Regardless, there would not have been much difference between what might have been observed there and what was observed in Yathrib.

Another Jewish community resided in the Persian Empire. A large population of Israelites was exiled into the Babylonian Empire in 586 B.C.E.¹⁷⁴ When Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians in 539 B.C.E. and established the Persian Empire, those exiled were permitted to return to Israel. Some did. Others did not. What is more, some remained in Mesopotamia while others moved east, farther into Persian lands.

These Jews had close scholarly ties with the Babylonian academic communities, and before the fourth century, "Persian Jewery was intricately intertwined with the spiritual life of Mesopotamian Jewry and its great rabbinical academies."¹⁷⁵ Yet, Persian Jews adopted the culture in which they were living. They wore Persian dress, took Persian names, understood themselves to be subjects of the Persian emperor and may

¹⁷³ For source material relating to the attack on Khaybar, see, Guillaume, 510-519, and Muslim, 992-4.

¹⁷⁴ Goiten, "The Jews of Yemen," 226.

¹⁷⁵ Blady, 56.

have even worked for the imperial administration.¹⁷⁶ Thus, they were ethnically Persian but due to their religious tradition, were nevertheless understood to be distinct communities within the empire. Periods of persecution existed, though there were also times of tolerance.¹⁷⁷ As in Yemen, Judaism in Persia was understood as an attribute separate from ethnicity.¹⁷⁸

This population should not be confused with the Jewish population living farther west, the decedents of Israelites exiled to Babylon and those responsible for the Babylonian Talmud. Because this population lived well within the Persian Empire and was for the most part integrated into the society, it is improbable that Muhammad had any contact with them. For this reason, they can be safely discounted as a religious group having direct influence on Muhammad's institution of *salāt*.

The other Jewish community of note was one living in what is today Ethiopia, their land known as Beta Israel. These Jews had no knowledge of Talmudic law, little if any adherence to later prophets of Israel and in some cases, no knowledge of Hebrew. How these Jews came to inhabit lands in East Africa is unclear. Some attribute the group to descendents of Moses, others to Solomon's offspring through the Queen of Sheba. Though their beliefs, traditions and origins are important to the overall study of Jewish history, they probably would not have had any influence on Muhammad's method of prayer. This conclusion is based on the fact that Muhammad did not (according to any

¹⁷⁶ Touraj Daryaee, "Ethnic and Territorial Boundaries in Late Antiquity and Early Medieval Persia (Third to Tenth Century)," *Borders, Barriers, and Ethnogenesis: Frontiers in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Florin Curta, ed. (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2005), 127.

¹⁷⁷ Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, "Zoroastrian Religion," *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 3(2), *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, Ehsan Yarshater, ed., (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 879-83; and Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 120.

¹⁷⁸ In later periods, persecution of Jews in Persian lands reached devastating levels, forcing many communities to flee, but in the time period being discussed, isolation and harassment based on religion was generally subdued.

records available) travel to the African continent. While some early Muslims were forced to find refuge from persecution in Abyssinia (discussed in detail in another section of this study), there is no record that they came in contact with Jews. The focus is instead on Christians in Abyssinia. Therefore, Beta Israel would not have had influence on early Muslims and salāt.

The Religion of Jews in Arabia

Having detailed the history and makeup of the diverse Jewish communities in the region around the time of Muhammad, it is possible to look more closely at their style of worship. As already mentioned, sources are scarce with regard to individual practice. However, since Jewish communities in Syria-Palestine, Yemen and Yathrib enjoyed religious leadership relying, albeit in different ways, on longstanding tradition, understanding how prayer ritual changed over time is a good approximation of how Jews in these areas most likely prayed; specifically, how they acted during prayer.

Bowing and washing

Prayer, particularly at the Temple mount, was an essential element in Jewish worship. This was true for the communities in Syria-Palestine and elsewhere. For those living in Diaspora, “even an occasional pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a special occasion in the life of a Jew” and “only the well-to-do could indulge in such luxury, probably only once in a lifetime.”¹⁷⁹ Thus, while prayer at the Temple ruins was a particularly

¹⁷⁹ Abraham E. Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971), 77. This fact makes Blady’s claim that Yemeni Jews were transported back to Israel for burial somewhat suspect. Indeed, the movement of a corpse through the unrelenting heat of the Arabian Peninsula may have made the caravan members somewhat disturbed by the foul result of a decaying corpse. Given

auspicious action, traveling to Jerusalem was a difficult and sometimes economically impossible feat. The synagogue's function as the center of Jewish worship was in this way cemented. Synagogues were an important part of Diaspora communities before the first century, but the destruction of the Temple ensured that synagogues were the *only* place of worship. Worship could take place wherever a community lived, for as the Torah records, "In every place where I (God) cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you."¹⁸⁰

Worship in the synagogue mimicked the worship traditions that had been carried out in Temple service. Morning, afternoon and night services were maintained with prayers offered by the community.¹⁸¹ When the Temple existed, those coming to worship cleansed themselves, wading through large pools before entering the outer court. After the Temple's destruction, however, the method of ritual cleansing changed. In synagogue prayer (or for any Jewish prayer, according to the ritual law), cleansing the entire body was reduced to washing hands with water. Hands must be washed up to the wrists, be it after sleep or work.¹⁸² In some Orthodox communities, a more thorough ritual washing was and is practiced, though for everyday prayer, the washing of hands was sufficient. The importance of cleanliness stemmed from the Torah – literally, the law. Experts on the law, priests and rabbis, would certainly have encouraged their communities to follow the

Noy's discussion of Jewish burial within the Roman Empire, Blady's claim that Yemeni Jews were transported to Israel is either evidence of a strict adherence to Biblical and Talmudic law or faulty scholarship. I agree with the former, though given the scarcity of records in Yemen for reasons already mentioned, Blady's claim may be augmented slightly to refer specifically to the extremely wealthy. Yemeni Jews, prior to Dhu Nuwah's demise, had accumulated a great deal of wealth, and so, such a claim would not be unfounded.

¹⁸⁰ Ex. 20:21b.

¹⁸¹ Millgram, 84

¹⁸² Ganzfried, 58.

commandment. The clearest of biblical commandments to wash before prayer is found in Exodus 30:19, which reads:

When they (Aaron and his sons, meaning priests) approach the altar to serve, to turn into smoke an offering by fire to the LORD, they shall wash their hands and feet, that they may not die. It shall be a law for all time for them—for him and his offspring—throughout the ages.

Washing is thus clearly an important part of Jewish worship and would have been emphasized by the religious leaders of the Jewish communities in and around the Arabian Peninsula. It should also be noted that in the Babylonian Talmud, in the absence of water, earth is proscribed as an agent of ritual cleaning.¹⁸³ It seems likely that this was a source of influence on the same practice in Islam.¹⁸⁴

Prostration

Instances of prostration are fairly common in the *Tanakh*.¹⁸⁵ However, as traditions changed in different Jewish communities, particularly after the destruction of the Temple, specific mention of prostration, with regard to worship, became rarer. As mentioned above, sources for the daily lives of Jews in Arabia are scarce. This is particularly so concerning prostration. This is not to say instances of Arabian Jewish prostration did not exist, but throughout this author's research, no example was found. Because other scholars have frequently made the claim that Jewish prostration influenced

¹⁸³ Babylonian Talmud, *Berakot*, II, cited in A.J. Wensinck, "The Origin of the Muslim Laws of Ritual Purity," *The Development of Islamic Ritual*, Gerald Hawting, ed. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2006), 77.

¹⁸⁴ Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorâns* (Leipzig, 1909), 199, cited in Wensinck, "The Origin of the Muslim Laws," 77.

¹⁸⁵ The *Tanakh* is the Hebrew word for the Hebrew Bible. The *Tanakh* has three sections each containing several books: the Torah (law), the Nevi'im (prophets) and the Kethuvim (writings about other prophets).

Muhammad's *salāt*, it is important to detail where examples of prostration are recorded and show how these examples do not suggest an influence. Tracing the mention of prostration in Jewish scriptures from *Tanakh* to Talmud shows the changing nature of the practice, but it does not necessarily indicate that Jewish prostration influenced prostration in *salāt*.

Prostration is found in many places in the *Tanakh* and with many different meanings. It is not necessary to recount all instances of prostration. Rather, with the understanding that prostration is a common occurrence in the *Tanakh*, it is more important to consider meanings behind the act in different circumstances.

One of the most common purposes for prostration as found in the *Tanakh* is a demonstration of respect. This is found with reference to both Yahweh and figures of authority, such as kings or prophets. In I Chronicles 29, David orders an assemblage of “all the officers of Israel” to pray before the construction of the first Temple. In prayer, David offers the collected materials for the Temple to Yahweh. After David orders the assemblage to “bless” God, “all the assembly blessed the Lord...and bowed their heads and prostrated themselves before the Lord and the king.”

Another meaning is found in Deuteronomy 9. The text recounts Moses' return from Mount Sinai finding the Israelites with the golden calf. Verse 18 reads, “I (Moses) threw myself down before the LORD...because of the great wrong (the Israelites) had committed.”¹⁸⁶ The text does not show Moses prostrating in prayer or devotion. Rather, his prostration is a form of sacrifice or petition aimed at appeasing Yahweh's anger against the Israelites.

¹⁸⁶ Deut. 9:18.

Aside from biblical instances, there were times during ancient Jewish worship where prostration was expected. A daily morning and afternoon prayer, *Tahanun*, meaning “supplication,” called for prostration.¹⁸⁷ The prayer begins by reciting David’s petition to God as recorded in II Samuel 24.14, and as prostration during petitions is found in Deuteronomy 9.18 and Joshua 7.6, the *Tahanun* was originally prayed while prostrate. It is for this reason that the prayer is also known as *nefilat appayim*, “falling on the face.”¹⁸⁸

The *Tahanun*, the liturgy and rite, began during the Talmudic period in Babylon and did not have a fixed format until the sixteenth century. Even during its formation, however, there was objection to prostration during the prayer. Several third-century rabbis refused to prostrate during this prayer because they “considered complete prostration forbidden outside the Temple in Jerusalem.”¹⁸⁹ By the sixth century, the prostrate position had been modified to “sitting (or half-sitting), with the head inclined on the arm.”¹⁹⁰ This rejection of prostrating during the *Tahanun* appears to have occurred across the Jewish world. The Ashkenazi and Sephardi *Tahanun* were virtually identical save the addition of a silent confession of sins at the beginning of the Sephardi prayer.¹⁹¹ Thus, while at first the *Tahanun* appears to indicate Jewish prostration, by the time of Muhammad, no such action was performed.

Another prayer in which prostration was performed is the *Aleinu Le-Shabbe’ah*, “It is our duty to praise.”¹⁹² Tradition credits the creation of the prayer to the a third-

¹⁸⁷ Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 15 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1971), 702.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 703.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 2, 556.

century Mesopotamian Jewish theologian Rabbi Rav, although it may date even earlier to the Second Temple period (sometime before 70 C.E.) as there is reference to prostration in the Temple. Performing prostration during *Aleinu* continues in Ashkenazi communities, “while in other services the congregants bow when reciting the words ‘we bend the knee...’”¹⁹³ The Sephardic communities, however, such as those in Arabia, do not prostrate themselves during this prayer. Firmer evidence on if and how this prayer was performed by the Jewish communities discussed here has not been found. However, as the *Aleinu* is most likely a combination of rites performed during the Second Temple period and Talmudic writings on actions in the Temple, further information can be found in the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud* as they refer to prostration.

Tamid 7.1 of the *Mishnah* describes the ritual of the High Priest and his attendants entering the Sanctuary to perform prostration. Tamid 7.3 describes a burnt offering ritual that concludes with a “plain blast” from a trumpet while those in attendance prostrated.¹⁹⁴ The *Talmud* contains similar writing. Sheqalim 6.1 of the Babylonian Talmud describes prostration in the sanctuary. It identifies the members of households prostrating “for so did they have a tradition from their forebears.”¹⁹⁵ In the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, there is no reference to prostration outside of temple ritual.

It seems that the *Tahanun* and *Aleinu* are instances where prostration was once appropriate but fell out of practice after the destruction of the Temple. Had prostration played a larger role in extra-Temple worship, it most likely would have been recorded in the Talmud. That only a few prayers and passages refer to the practice, and that evidence

¹⁹³ Ibid., 557.

¹⁹⁴ *Mishnayoth-Kodashim* “Tamid,” Philip Blackman, ed. (NY: The Judaica Press, 1964), 493, 6.

¹⁹⁵ *The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation*, “Sheqalim,” trans. Jacob Neusner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 115.

shows the practice was no longer used by the time of Muhammad, suggests it was not a widespread or frequent ritual action. The conclusion then is that prostration was most likely not prevalent amongst the Jewish populations in Arabia. Consequently, Muhammad would not have gleaned notions of prostration from his encounters with Jews.

Direction of Prayer

In the Yemeni Jewish communities, society centered on the synagogue and much of the population, from the scholarly elite to the simple craftsman, had knowledge of Jewish myths and scripture.¹⁹⁶ Religious education also included memorization of biblical books or sections of books necessary for synagogue worship. And though the community had knowledge of the Talmud, only the *Mishnah* was taught in elementary education. In the immediate post-Talmudic period, this style of education was common to many Jewish communities. However, it continued in Yemen when other communities augmented their systems of study.¹⁹⁷

A religious science of *shehītā*, the ritual killing of an animal and a study of the carcass, was predominant in the area. It was not simply a practice of rabbis but rather, of all who progressed beyond elementary education.¹⁹⁸ The continuance of ritual sacrifice, the aforementioned transportation of the dead to Israel for burial and knowledge of the *Mishnah* all point towards a cultural association with Israel, even though the Yemeni Jews were more or less isolated from other major Jewish communities. For this reason, it is possible to conclude that when praying, Yemeni Jews faced Jerusalem. Though the

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 228.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 232.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 231-2.

Romans destroyed the Second Temple in 70 C.E., prayer towards Jerusalem continued based on a specific passage in the Hebrew Bible.

After constructing the First Temple, King Solomon called for the congregation of Israel to stand before the newly constructed House. The Bible records that he spoke to the assemblage a blessing and an instruction. In I Kings 8, there are seven separate commands to face the Temple when praying. Perhaps the most striking of these pertains to when Israelites are defeated by an enemy and their “captors carry them off to an enemy land.” The passage reads:

When they sin against You...and they turn back to You with all their heart and soul, in the land of the enemies who have carried them off, and they pray to You in the direction of their land which You gave to their fathers, of the city which You have chosen, and of the House which I have built to your name – oh, give heed.¹⁹⁹

Though Yemeni Jews were not led into South Arabia at the hands of an enemy, their religious tradition nevertheless dictated that they continue to pray towards Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple, though Israel was no more, Jerusalem was under Byzantine control and the Temple was destroyed.

Evidence that Jews in Yathrib faced Jerusalem when praying is found in the Qur’an. In 2:144, it reads:

We see the turning of your face (for guidance) to the heavens: now shall We turn you to a Qibla (the Ka’ba) that shall please you. Turn then your face in the direction of the sacred Mosque: wherever you are, turn your faces in that direction.

¹⁹⁹ I Kings 8:46-49a. Other examples can be found in, I Kings 8:30, 35b, 42 and 44.

When Muhammad and his followers first entered Yathrib, they prayed in the direction of Jerusalem. This is clear because the Qur'an tells Muhammad and his followers to turn away from where others were praying. If the Qur'an gives an explicit command to turn from Jerusalem, it seems clear that Jews of that area were praying towards Jerusalem. Further verses support this reasoning. Sura 2:145 continues: "Even if you were to bring to the people of the Book all the Signs (together), they would not follow your Qibla; nor are you going to follow their Qibla." The "people of the Book" refers to Jews and Christians. From what has been shown, however, Yathrib's population was at least three-fifths Jewish. Therefore, the verses reveal that the Jewish population in Yathrib faced Jerusalem during prayer.²⁰⁰ It has also been shown that Jews in Syria-Palestine faced Jerusalem while praying, as evidenced by the orientation of the synagogues there.

Jewish influence on salāt

Recalling the criteria for syncretic influence, it seems clear that there were cases where Jewish ritual practices influenced Muhammad and his followers' use of salāt. Concerning contact, early Muslims had ample opportunity to interact with Jewish communities. Though Jews of Yathrib were Muhammad's first lasting "daily face-to-face contact with a large, organized Jewish community," he would have come in contact with Jews from Yemen, along trade routes from Syria-Palestine and from other communities in the Hijaz. Contact in Yathrib in addition to his lifelong general contact with Jews means Muhammad may have been familiar with Jewish prayer. This familiarity is clear as aspects of Jewish prayer are clearly seen in salāt. Contact between early Muslims and

²⁰⁰ Suras in the Qur'an are roughly arranged according to length. However, approximately the first half of the Qur'an contains suras revealed while Muhammad was in Yathrib. Thus, 2:144-4 was most likely revealed in Yathrib. See, Arberry's preface to his interpretation of the Qur'an.

Jewish communities appear to have been frequent and lasting. Thus, possible influence can be determined by isolating the similarities between Jewish practices and *salāt*.

Looking to evidence in the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*, it seems that prostration fell out of practice the centuries after the Temple's destruction. Evidence of Yemeni Jews prostrating is lacking, making it difficult to conclude whether it was employed in prayer. However, given the religion-wide movement away from prostration, it is likely that as in Medina and Syria-Palestine, prostration also fell out of practice.

Bowing during the *Aleinu* suggests influence on *salāt*. While Diaspora Jews on the European continent continued to prostrate during the *Aleinu*, those living in the Northeast Africa, Southwest Asia region replaced the prostration with a bow. As shown in hadith relating Muhammad's practice of *rukua*, bowing consisted of placing hands on knees with the back bent. It seems then that after extensive contact with Jewish communities, Muhammad may have bowed in prayer in the same way Jews may have. This is not a definitive conclusion, but a similarity worth noting nonetheless.

Concerning the washing before prayer, similarities are clear. In the Jewish tradition, as commanded by the Torah, washing of the hands and feet is necessary. In hadith, it has been shown that Muhammad washed these parts of his body before prayer. A clear influence on washing, however, is the proscription for using earth as a detergent in absence of water. This is found in the Babylonian Talmud as well as in the Qur'an and hadith. The similarity here is unmistakable, and while it is possible that washing with earth was a pre-Islamic indigenous practice, there is no evidence for it having been so. Beyond this, the many similarities between Jewish and Muslim prayer indicate influence,

making it likely that washing with earth was a Jewish practice incorporated into salāt by early Muslims.

Facing a specific geographic location while praying was also an important part of prayer practice. At first, early Muslims prayed toward Jerusalem, as the Jewish communities in Syria-Palestine, Yemen and Yathrib did. A shift occurred when Muhammad was in Yathrib, as shown in the Qur'an. The reason for this shift is not relevant to the present argument. Rather, Muhammad's salāt incorporates facing a geographic location, clearly an influence from the Jewish communities discussed above.

Washing and direction of prayer are similarities between Jewish prayer at the time and salāt. Bowing may also have been originally a Jewish practice. If only one of these commonalities were found, influence would seem as likely as coincidence, or at least, peripheral inspiration. However, because three prayerful actions are found in common, the probability that Muhammad drew directly from Jewish prayerful action is much greater.

Jewish actions, however, do not account for other important aspects of salāt. To find other influences on Muhammad and his method of prayer, it is necessary to look to other traditions of other cultures in North Africa and Southwest Asia.

Chapter 7: Zoroastrian Traditions and the Persian Empire

Beginning in the sixth century B.C.E., the Persian Empire lasted for roughly a millennium. It is referred to as Persian because of the regions controlled by a nearly unbroken succession of culturally and religiously similar dynasties. It is, however, more precise to discuss the control of the Iranian lands with reference to dynasties.²⁰¹ Most relevant to this study's focus are the first and last dynasties, the Achaemenian and Sassanian, respectively, as they made significant changes in the way the imperial religion, Zoroastrianism, was understood and practiced.

Religious traditions must always be discussed in context. In this case, it is important to review aspects of the Sassanian period as they influenced Zoroastrian practice at the time. To understand the way Zoroastrianism was practiced during the Sassanian period, it is also necessary to briefly discuss the religion as it was practiced by the Achaemenians. The historical review below provides the basis from which Zoroastrian practice and its potential influence on salāt can be investigated.

As shown below, Muhammad and his followers had opportunity for lasting contact with Zoroastrians. What is more, there are similarities between the way Zoroastrian prayer was performed during the time of Muhammad and ritual action in salāt. The criteria for syncretic influence are thus satisfied. So as to illuminate the context of Zoroastrian prayer rituals, it is important to begin with a brief review of the Persian dynasties' growth, political goals and relationships with other nations. This provides a point from which influences on Muhammad's salāt can be analyzed.

²⁰¹ The history of the Persian Empire is vast and complex; over a millennium of emperors, religious reforms, wars and intellectual discussion. The present argument necessitates a brief recounting of both its beginning and end, so as to provide a measure of the vast complexity surrounding Zoroastrian beliefs and Persian political action predating the time of Muhammad. A discussion of the middle centuries, indeed, the bulk of Persian history, is not directly relevant to this study's focus.

The Achaemenian Dynasty

Beginning around 600 B.C.E., a small vassal state in eastern Iran began a slow yet steady rise to power. The state's ruling authority, the Achaemenians, conquered weaker states within Persia and eventually captured the Median kingdom. This dynasty was, from the time of their humble beginnings, heavily influenced by Zoroastrianism, a religion that originated in Bactria, an area northwest of the Indus River Valley.²⁰² By the time of the Achaemenians, the religion spread by the Prophet Zoroaster had been followed and developed for 400 to 800 years.²⁰³ Thus, from the beginning of the Persian Empire, Zoroastrian beliefs were a part of, if not inseparable from, the political rule.

Under the leadership of the first Achaemenian king, Cyrus the Great, the Persian Empire stretched from the Indian borderlands in the east to the western borders of the Babylonian empire. Cyrus died in 530 B.C.E. Of emperors who followed, there is at least one worth noting for his contributions to the way Zoroastrianism as an imperial religion was viewed and practiced: Artaxerxes II, who came to power in 404 B.C.E. The king married his daughter, Atossa. She became leprous, but rather than turn from her, he offered prayers to Spenta Ārmaiti "making his obeisance and clutching the earth before this goddess as he did before no other."²⁰⁴ As discussed in further detail below, Ārmaiti is one of the Bounteous Immortals with guardianship over earth, literally the land, and a manifestation of the abstract notions of obedience and submission.²⁰⁵ Artaxerxes made a submissive gesture corresponding with the nature of Ārmaiti, a prayerful approach to

²⁰² Boyce, *History*, vol. 2, 217.

²⁰³ Boyce, *History*, vol. 1, 190.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

²⁰⁵ Boyce, vol. 1, 203.

Ārmaiti's domain. He also did so because she is the patron deity of women. It thus seems that the king prostrated with the intent of prayer, positioning his body in a way consistent with Ārmaiti's nature, submission. Artaxerxes "clutched the earth" as an aspect of his prayers for his daughter-wife. Prostration and prayer were in this way linked. It is important to note, even if this account does not represent an actual occurrence, it is important as evidence of a how Zoroastrians understood their tradition. Regardless of whether Artaxerxes did prostrate, he was remembered in the tradition as one who had, indicating a place for prostration in Zoroastrian worship.

In the Zoroastrian pantheon, Bounteous Immortals have *hamkārs*, what Mary Boyce calls "fellow-workers."²⁰⁶ Pairs of Immortals support one another to best maintain goodness and protection in their respective domains. Ārmaiti's hamkār is Anāhita²⁰⁷ to whom Artaxerxes supported cult worship. He publicly declared his devotion to Anāhita and "imposed her worship, with cult-statues, throughout the Zoroastrian community."²⁰⁸ Artaxerxes also built temples to house these statues, using a great deal of wealth (gold and silver) in constructing them.

This cult worship was denounced by Zoroastrian priests as a deviation from the singular worship of Ahura Mazda and the light through which he manifests himself. In response, more orthodox Zoroastrians established a fire cult, complete with temples rivaling those of Anāhita. In the temples, a sacred fire was maintained and offerings in worship of Ahura Mazda were made.²⁰⁹ These seem to have had a greater longevity than

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 267.

²⁰⁷ Earlier in the religion's history, Ārmaiti's hamkār was Vouruna, lord of water. Over time, however, and through contact with Indian traditions, Vouruna lost stature and was overshadowed by the Indo-Iranian Sarasvatī, the manifestation of a mythical river giving water to existence, later identified as Anāhita. See Boyce, vol. 1, 52, 71-4.

²⁰⁸ Boyce, vol. 2, 217.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 221-5.

that of the Anāhita temple as they were established throughout the vast empire, in more locations than the Anāhita temples. Even after the fall of the Achaemenians, they were “so firmly integrated by then into Zoroastrian devotional life that even in non-Iranian regions they were maintained by their expatriate and isolated congregations for many centuries.”²¹⁰

The importance of Anāhita’s worship, with regard to this study, is that Artaxerxes was remembered in the daily prayers of Persians under a later dynasty, the Sassanians, for his devotion to Anāhita and by consequence, Ārmaiti.²¹¹ The fire cult, however, endured as well. Thus, the initial conflict between Anāhita and fire cult worship was forgotten during the Sassanian reign, and what remained was devotion to both sacred water and earth and to sacred fire representing the light of Ahura Mazda. Both of these elements – devotion to light and a religious appreciation for the Bounteous Immortal of obedience and submission – were Zoroastrian beliefs that influenced Muslim prayer ritual.

Alexander the Great’s conquests in the fourth century B.C.E. temporarily disrupted the Persian dynasties. This military interruption broke a chain of Zoroastrian rulers, instituting Macedonian control until the reigns of dynasties pertinent to the current investigation – the Parthians and Sassanians. Whereas the former empire had been the largest to rule the Southwest Asian lands, these post-Macedonian rulers boasted less impressive territories.

The Sassanians

²¹⁰ Ibid., 221

²¹¹ Ibid.

The Sassanians were concerned with correct Zoroastrian practice and theology. However, the Sassanians also held firm political aims that manifested themselves in endless war with their western enemy, Byzantium. The growth of the Persian Empire under the Sassanians came to include the coast of Mazūn (what is today, Oman) and the entire Arabian Persian Gulf coast. By this, they secured trade and protected their holdings in the Indus Valley.²¹² They also held influence in Yemen through the kingdom of Himyar. The Himyarites had delegates in the Persian court.

Abyssinia, a predominantly Christian land, had long coveted Himyar's rich trade ports and to some extent, agriculture. Himyar achieved dominance in the region in the fourth century and viewed Abyssinia as an enemy. Since Abyssinia was allied with Byzantium, the Abyssinians were enemies as well. The saying about an enemy's enemy being one's friend applies, for as animosity grew between Abyssinia and Himyar, ties between Himyar and Sassanian Persia grew stronger.²¹³

The Sassanian kings erected pillars at the boundaries of their empire, declaring the extent of their power. King Sābuhr stated the following:

I am the ruler of Ērān-šahr (Land of Iran) and hold these šahrs: Persia, Parthia, Xuzistān, Mēšān, Assyria, Adiabene, Arabia, Āzerbaīn, Armenia, Geogris, Segan, Albania, Balaskan, up to the Caucasus Mountains and the Gates of Albania, and all of the mountain chain of Pareshwar, Media, Gurgan, Merv, Herāt and all of Abaršahr, Kermān, Sīstan, Tūrān, Makrān, Paradene, India, Kušānšahr up to Peshawar and up to Kašgar, Sogdiana and to the mountains of Taškent, and on the other side of the sea, Oman.²¹⁴

²¹² Salibi, 53.

²¹³ Ibid., 54.

²¹⁴ Daryaei, 131.

This was indeed a vast empire, though Sābuhr may have been somewhat overly boastful in claiming to control all of Arabia and India. This shows the wide-reaching influence the Sassanians enjoyed. By virtue of this, early Muslims had ample opportunity to interact with those following the Zoroastrian tradition.

Though Zoroastrianism had long been the imperial religion, and moreover, the professed and practiced religion of many within Persian lands, it was not until the Sassanian dynasty that the concept of religious history and devotion was linked with political empire building and maintenance.²¹⁵ To be Persian was to be both a Zoroastrian and an imperial subject. During the Sassanian reign, the two identities were viewed as inseparable. This was an intentional aim of Sassanian politics. So as to legitimate their rule, “the Sassanian kings themselves carefully fostered this image of a greater attachment to Zoroastrianism in their dynasty.”²¹⁶ Interestingly, this identity shift occurred roughly contemporarily with the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Thus, Sassanian Persia was a massive empire in which most subjects identified as Zoroastrian followers. When an early Muslim or Arabian trader came in contact with a Sassanian subject, they were also in contact with the religious history of the faith and empire embraced by most subjects.

The precise Zoroastrian theology and practice was a matter of contention throughout the early Sassanian reign. Zoroastrian priests and other religious elites argued over interpretation of the faith and ritual. In the mid-sixth century, under the Persian king

²¹⁵ Wiesehofer, 165.

²¹⁶ Albert de Jong, “Sub Specie Maiestatis: Reflections on Sasanian Court Rituals,” *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, Michael Stausberg, ed. (Boston: Brill, 2004), 345.

Khusrau I, there was a struggle for orthodoxy within the Persian elite.²¹⁷ There was also a royal drive to eliminate foreign religious influence, particularly Christianity.

Over the reigns of several emperors, Zoroastrian sects vied for recognition as orthodox. The aim of the Sassanians remained establishing Zoroastrianism, in some agreed theological understanding, as the imperial religion. When the final Sassanian emperor came to power, through force and some accommodation, he ended arguments over which sect was correct and true on matters of theology and practice.

Khusrau I, upon claiming the throne, declared he possessed “in short the whole original wisdom of the Mazdayasnian religion.”²¹⁸ Khusrau and his priests presumed to possess all knowledge of Zoroastrianism and were forgiving of those Zoroastrians limited in their knowledge and consequently practicing in error. At the same time, however, Khusrau outlawed further “discussion, divergence of opinion and controversy in the affairs of state,”²¹⁹ and finalized how Zoroastrianism was to be followed and practiced. The rituals of this interpretation were therefore the practices that might have influenced *salāt*.

In response to an increasing Christian, and to some extent, Manichaean population in Sassanian lands, Khusrau also banned all religions but the imperial Zoroastrianism. Of other religions, Khusrau stated:

Whereas we have recognized that, insofar as all dubious doctrines, foreign to the Mazdayasnian religion, reach this place from all over the world, further examination and investigation prove that to absorb and publish

²¹⁷ Duchesne-Guillemin, 893.

²¹⁸ Duchesne-Guillemin, 894. Mazdaism is synonymous to Zoroastrianism. The monotheistic deity championed by the Prophet Zoroaster as pure goodness, light and life is Ahura Mazda. Thus, the religion can be referred to either by its founding prophet or its principle deity's name.

²¹⁹ Zaehner, 189.

abroad knowledge foreign to the Mazdayasnian religion does not contribute to the welfare and prosperity of our subjects.²²⁰

In short, other religions were recognized but rejected. This statement can be analyzed from both a religious and political perspective. Religiously, Khusrau (and most other Sassanians) believed Zoroastrianism to be the true religion, and the burden of defeating Angra Mainyu falls on all. The presence of other religious traditions distracted a population whose faithful observance of Zoroastrian ritual was essential to spreading good and combating evil.

The fifth century emperor Yezdegerd I created a state policy that tolerated Christianity within the empire and allowed Christians to openly practice their religion,²²¹ but the tolerance did not last. Under Khusrau, Christians in Persia were deemed traitors. More than that, a non-Zoroastrian was considered unclean because they were unaware of the purity rites required to keep pollution from the sacred elements of existence, particularly those in Persian controlled lands.²²² Christians then, save Yezdegerd's brief policy of tolerance, were under perpetual threat. This paralleled an unending Persian-Byzantine conflict, excepting sporadic episodes of military truce.²²³

Though the empire held sections of the Arabian coast, its influence did not reach into the harsh terrain of the inner peninsula. In an effort to protect their southwestern border, for both military and trade purposes, the empire created a client state, Hira, ruled

²²⁰ Duchesne-Guillemin, 894.

²²¹ Sicker, *Pre-Islamic*, 193.

²²² Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism: Triumph Over Evil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 8, 11.

²²³ It is interesting to note that among the Sasanians, Yezdegerd was the most hated of all Sasanian emperors. He was given the epithet *bazakkar*, meaning, "the sinner" and was said to have a propensity towards, and enjoyment of, evil-doing. See, Jong, 362; also Sicker, 194; and Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 119.

by a powerful Bedouin tribe, the Lakhmids.²²⁴ This was a centuries-long relationship, ending only when the Persian Empire fell to advancing Muslim armies.²²⁵ Along with protecting trade routes that ran from Arabia to the Persian border, the Lakhmids also occasionally served with Persian armies, assisting in attacks on Byzantium and their Byzantine counterpart, the Ghassanids. Their military contributions were not large, but they nevertheless put significant numbers of Lakhmid Arabs in contact with Persian soldiers who were almost certainly Zoroastrian.²²⁶

In this way, knowledge of Zoroastrian practice – especially daily prayer times and ritual washing – became common knowledge amongst the Lakhmids and consequently, those who came in contact with the Lakhmids, namely, traders. It should be noted that the Lakhmids showed no interest in Zoroastrianism but did have an association with the Christological interpretations of Nestorianism and Monophysitism, discussed in detail in the next section.

Zoroastrianism During the Time of Muhammad

The above discussion of Persian dynasties has been given so as to express the longstanding presence of Zoroastrianism in the region. Indeed, it was for over a millennium one of the world's most influential religions. This point is often obscured in modern scholarship due to Zoroastrianism's rapid decline following the expansion of the Muslim Empire. Zoroastrianism's status as an imperial religion, however, made it a pervasive influence in the region, its outward practice and general theologies likely

²²⁴ Ibid., 202.

²²⁵ Geoffrey Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War, 502-532* (Chippenham, Wiltshire: Francis Cairns Publications Ltd., 1998), 27.

²²⁶ For instance, in 531, approximately 5,000 Lakhmids joined a 15,000 manned Persian army in attacking Roman territory. See, Greatrex, 195.

common knowledge to people in the region. To understand which Zoroastrian elements were commonly understood, it is important to place them within the theological context of the faith.

Zoroastrianism began with the teachings of the Prophet Zoroaster sometime between 1400 and 1000 B.C.E.²²⁷ Zoroaster taught a theology that centered on two equal, uncreated deities, Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu.²²⁸ The former, the Lord Wisdom, was the creator of life and the origin of goodness on Earth. Goodness was not simply an abstract morality. Rather, it was a deity, *Aša*, created by Ahura Mazda, which could play an active role on the individual when worshipped.

The latter, the Hostile Spirit, was Ahura Mazda's opposite, the origin of counter creation; death and nothingness.²²⁹ Angra Mainyu created the deity of deceit and evil, *Drug*. It was thus the individual's choice whether to embrace *Aša* or *Drug*, their respective creators and their influence upon existence in a cosmic battle between light and darkness, "life and not-life."²³⁰

Before any other creation, Ahura Mazda brought into being seven *yazatas*,²³¹ Bounteous Immortals, lesser deities whose task it was "to further the 'world of *aša*,' so that it does not decay or wither, spoil or become impure."²³² Each of these seven was appointed to a physical part of creation which was intimately tied to an abstract idea of

²²⁷ Boyce, *History*, vol.1, 190.

²²⁸ The term "uncreated" would have been rejected by the Zurvānites. However, modern scholars, Mary Boyce among them, interpret Zoroaster's initial theology to be purely dualist. Arguments for this interpretation can be found throughout the first volume of Boyce's *History of Zoroastrianism*.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 192-5.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 194, 199-201.

²³¹ In Zoroaster's theology, more than seven *yazatas* were created by Ahura Mazda. However, the first seven were charged with the most important tasks and thus, remained most closely associated with their creator. See, Boyce, *History*, vol. 1, 194, 202.

²³² There is some uncertainty as to whether the *yazatas* were deities independent of Ahura Mazda or qualities of Ahura Mazda worshipped individually. Of the latter, this is a theological understanding similar to that of Hinduism, a religion with which Zoroastrianism shares many similarities, such as vocabulary and understanding of divinity. For a review of the scholarly debate, see, Boyce, *History*, vol. 1, 202-3.

creation. For instance, the sky, “which enclosed the world like a fortress and dominated the earth,”²³³ was linked with the concept of Dominion and was ruled by the *yazata* Khšathra. The other aspects of Ahura Mazda’s cosmos are Water, Health, Earth, Devotion and Life.²³⁴ Aša was the seventh *yazata*, commanding fire and representing cosmic order which pervaded all existence.²³⁵

This theology necessitated ritual action, as the human being played an active role in the eternal battle between Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. Looking at specific ritual acts employed to fulfill this duty, similarities with *salāt* become evident.

Daily Prayer

The ritual obligations of Zoroastrianism fall predominantly on the priestly elite. Priests purify sacred fire and perform the most important of all rituals, the *Yasna* ceremony.²³⁶ Due to the emphasis on priestly ritual activity, those religious actions performed by the lay Zoroastrian would certainly gain more significant meaning.²³⁷ This can be seen most clearly in the Zoroastrian obligation to pray five times a day. It was one of the few rituals laity was allowed to practice and as such, would have held increased importance.

²³³ Ibid., 204

²³⁴ Boyce writes that the order *yazatas* were created in differed depending on the ancient writer’s context. For instance, an emphasis on morality would produce a different order depending on how the ancient writer interpreted the *yazatas* and their meaning. See Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, 13.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ For an in depth discussion of this ritual, its origins and performance, see Almut Hintze, “On the Ritual Significance of the *Yasna* Haptanhāiti,” *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, Michael Stausberg, ed. (Boston: Brill, 2004), 291-316.

²³⁷ I reach this conclusion from Albert de Jong’s insightful deduction that the Zoroastrian emphasis on priestly rites “almost naturally lead(s) to the development of special and meaningful lay rituals.” See Jong, 352.

As has already been stated, Aša was the *yazata* of goodness and order invoked and made present through fire, or more precisely, light. At five times throughout the day (dawn, noon, sunset, between sunset and midnight, and between midnight and dawn) Zoroastrians are obliged to turn toward light (be it the sun or at night, the purified hearth fire) and pray. The prayer ritual takes the following form. The Zoroastrian cleanses him or herself by washing face, hands and feet. He or she unties the ‘koštī or sacred cord,²³⁸ and holds it out, eyes on righteousness and order – light from sun or fire. A prayer is said to Ahura Mazda, and the cord is retied while praying.²³⁹ The exact recitations of early Zoroastrians are uncertain. They were most likely verses from the *Gathas*, Zoroastrian sacred scriptures.²⁴⁰

As prayers are always given towards light, it is clear that Aša holds a central place in all Zoroastrian prayer. Aša, being Ahura Mazda’s first creation, represents creation in its entirety, which is an ordered set of realities protected by yazatas. Order here is paramount. Jean Kellens effectively summarizes the relationship between Aša, order and prayer in the following way:

By organizing the world according to the principle of order, Ahura Mazda set in motion the great natural cycles which allow life to develop on the surface of the earth. But this work is never finished. On the one hand, the primordial achievement must be magnified, for if not, the god might allow the work to be undone; on the other, the god must be aided in maintaining

²³⁸ The ‘koštī is a sacred cord worn around the waist, first donned during a boy’s initiation rites. It was woven on a wooden frame from seventy-two threads, by a priest who recited Avestan hymns while weaving. See, Mary Boyce, *A Persian Zoroastrian Stronghold* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 236-7.

²³⁹ Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 33.

²⁴⁰ Boyce, *History*, vol. 1, 259-60.

the permanent cohesion of the universe. This is the double task that falls to human piety, which is above all expressed in the ritual activity.²⁴¹

Whether this was a theological interpretation grasped by common Zoroastrian practitioners is not entirely relevant. What is crucial is that prayer five times daily was understood to be an essential duty of every Zoroastrian. As such, one who witnessed such ritual action, having perhaps even less knowledge of its religious significance than the Zoroastrian performer and probably not understanding the ancient Gathic prayers, would have nevertheless grasped its importance. If nothing else could be told about the Zoroastrians, from one trader or traveler to another, certainly the seriousness and necessity of daily prayer could have been perceived and relayed.

Washing

The importance of cleanliness would have been equally noticeable as an aspect of Zoroastrian prayer. There are two things believed to make a prayer unheard and divine beings unwilling to approach: immorality and impurity.²⁴² These are intimately linked for immorality can yield impurity.

The seven material creations of Ahura Mazda, protected by the Bounteous Immortals, must be kept pure at all times. The earth (land) is an aspect of creation upheld by the yazata *Ārmaiti*,²⁴³ and consequently a product of Ahura Mazda's pure act of creation. If it is made impure by a carcass or impure people, it must be cleansed through

²⁴¹ Jean Kellens, *Essays on Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism*, Prods Oktor Skjærvø, trans. and ed. (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2000), 101.

²⁴² Boyce, *A Persian Zoroastrian Stronghold*, 37.

²⁴³ The notion of *Ārmaiti* presiding over earth should not be confused with the Abrahamic idea of a deity ruling "Heaven and Earth." Rather, earth in this case refers specifically to soil and its relative position to other aspects of creation, meaning low and beneath all things.

ritual or in some cases, left barren and untouched for a year.²⁴⁴ It is the duty of Zoroastrians to support Ahura Mazda through moral action and also through helping to maintain the purity of Mazda's creations. Yet, though the earth can be made impure by impure people, it can also be used to ritually cleanse a person.

The same is true of water, protected by Haurvatāt, later called Anāhita. Water is more vulnerable to pollution and is held in higher esteem as a pure material creation.²⁴⁵ It is not a primary but secondary or even tertiary purifying element, and it can only be used after other ritual actions have been performed. If not, water is polluted, achieving the opposite of the intent – one is made impure by making a material creation impure.

Ideally, all purification begins with a wash by unconsecrated bull's urine. Then, earth is applied in the same manner. Finally, water is used to wash away the ritually pure urine and earth, leaving the person, water and earth pure.²⁴⁶ The same process is required for all other items that must be cleansed, such as clothing. The application of bull's urine before earth and water is, in every day life, impractical. Therefore, if a Zoroastrian remained predominantly pure – meaning they have not had contact with anything wholly polluting, such as a carcass,²⁴⁷ or done anything that is a grievous sin, such as sodomy²⁴⁸ – skipping the wash with bull's urine and even earth came to be accepted. Jamsheed Choksy writes that “this adaptation of religious law to the necessities of life probably occurred at an early date and persists to the present day.”²⁴⁹

²⁴⁴ Choksy, 11.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 12.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 92.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 13.

For daily prayer, washing the face, hands and feet is essential, and depending on circumstance, ritual cleansing is performed with those pure material creations at hand. Looking to Zoroastrians most likely encountered by traders and other inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, just as prayer would have been viewed as religiously important, washing would have been as well. Assuming Sassanian soldiers, traders and citizens did not have large reserves of unconsecrated bull's urine, traders and travelers discussing the importance Zoroastrians placed on daily prayer would have also discussed the washing that always took place prior to it. They would have spoken of faces, hands and feet being washed with earth, water or both prior to the important prayers.

Prostration

Though Zoroastrians stand while praying, the above cited story of Artaxerxes praying to Ārmaiti suggests precedence for prostration in the Zoroastrian tradition. Artaxerxes reigned during the Achaemenian dynasty, but his importance as a devotee of Anāhita was not forgotten when the Parthians and Sassanians linked their right to rule with that of the Achaemenians. Ārmaiti, as has already been mentioned, is associated with the idea of submission, obedience and devotion. Thus, closeness to soil can be understood as a method of expressing these concepts. Ārmaiti came to be worshipped as both a bearer of human beings (as humans live on the earth) as well as the patron deity of women, as women bear children and consequently, all humanity.²⁵⁰ Given the importance of Artaxerxes' devotion in later times and the importance of earth in purity rites, it is possible that his act of prostration was remembered alongside his contribution to worship of Anāhita. Could this story have influenced emperors and subjects to the point where

²⁵⁰ Boyce, *History*, vol. 1, 207.

prostration became an assumed action in an empire where religion and political power were viewed as inexorably intertwined? The expression of submission and devotion through prostration is found in the Sassanian court.

Royal court etiquette in the early Sassanian era was highly ritualized and was, in fact, later copied in Byzantine courts. There was a custom of prostrating when in the presence of the emperor, and when permitted close enough, to kiss the hem of his garment.²⁵¹ Such an occasion, however, would have been infrequent. In both public and private audiences before the emperor, a large curtain obscured the ruler from view. Times when the curtain was drawn back occurred when a large public audience, made up of both courtiers and common people, had been gathered.²⁵²

In such an instance, the spectacle would have been impressive. The curtain drawn back, the emperor was revealed on a high throne, holding a scepter, a gold, jeweled crown suspended above his head by a golden chain. His beard was gilded in gold, his head covered with a diadem leaving braided hair to flow out, adorned with colored ribbons. The holy fires of lamps in the giant royal hall reflecting off a figure so dressed as to appear a brilliant golden flame himself. All assembled fell in unison, prostrating.²⁵³ Such a spectacle, if viewed by a Lakhmid, would have certainly been recounted upon his return to Hira.

This was not a purely secular act, nor was it necessarily religious. These ideas were viewed as one and the same. Those who were neither Persian nor Zoroastrian, yet visited or knew of Sassanian court ritual, interpreted this style of worship before the

²⁵¹ V.G. Lukonin, "Political, Social and Administrative Institutions: Taxes and Trade," *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 3(2), *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*. Ehsan Yarshater, ed., NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

²⁵² Jong, 356-7.

²⁵³ These details I take from Jong's general description of the king at court. See, Jong, 356, 363.

emperor to mean that the ruler saw himself as a god.²⁵⁴ Indeed, the role of emperor was perceived as having a measure of divinity. Sassanian emperors took the title “King of kings,” so as to set themselves above all previous dynasties, and justify rule over the empire and all vassal states.²⁵⁵ And while there was a tendency in Zoroastrian tradition to associate certain people with gods, there is no instance when a person became a god.²⁵⁶

The emperor’s identity did not liken him to Ahura Mazda, but it did signify a divine status of a different nature. The emperor acted as protector of Zoroastrians by expanding and maintaining the empire, and in return, the yazatas and their numerous *hamkārs* and underlings, legitimated his rule, thus making him divinely linked, inspired and favored.²⁵⁷

When subjects prostrated before the emperor at court, they were prostrating, in part, to an aspect of their divine pantheon; that is, piety, goodness and justice, (abstract ideas not unlike one of the ways the yazatas could be understood) were manifest in the emperor.²⁵⁸ He was an ideal, looked to as the ultimate ruler but not intended to be seen as the ultimate ruler himself, Ahura Mazda, or under the dualist Zoroastrian theology, Zrvan Akarana, infinite space and time. Prostration in this sense carried a quasi-religious meaning, but to an outsider, such as a Lakhmid, it may have seemed fully religious. Whether prostration before the emperor was also associated with prayer in the eyes of the foreigner is uncertain, but it would have easily been understood as praise and most likely in religious terms.

²⁵⁴ Jong, 361.

²⁵⁵ The title “King of kings” is not unique to the Sassanian emperors. Other examples where it was used include the Bible and by Abyssinian kings. This does not finally matter, however, with regard to the Sassanian use of the title. Those who employed the concept naturally considered their title to be warranted and correct, all similar titles used in other empires inappropriately applied.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 360.

²⁵⁷ Wiesehofer, 165-6.

²⁵⁸ Jong, 363.

As noted above, non-Zoroastrians were considered unclean because they were untrained in the rites of purity. This created barriers between people of different religions, including separate bathhouses and preparation of food. This placed non-Zoroastrians on the periphery of Zoroastrian society, but it does not mean that a non-Zoroastrian would have been barred from the royal court. The longstanding relationship with the Lakhmids would have probably at some point brought representatives into the royal court. In this way, non-Zoroastrians could have been witness to the grand spectacle of subjects prostrating before the emperor. In turn, they may have passed the details to others not privy to such an experience, such as people moving (either as traders, travelers or nomads) throughout the Arabian Peninsula.

I have not discovered evidence as to the extent, if any, the practice of prostration carried over to lesser Persian authorities and their subordinates. Nor have I found further evidence of Zoroastrians clutching the earth in prayer to *Ārmaiti*. While Persian prostration probably did not influence *salāt*, these examples make ruling out such a possibility impossible.

Zoroastrian influence on salāt

To establish probable syncretic influence, contact and similarity must be defined. In the case of Zoroastrianism influencing *salāt*, the criteria are satisfied. From the historical context provided, it has been established that traders as well as other inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula were in contact with Sassanian subjects and rulers. This is unsurprising given the size and strength of the empire. It had relations with Himyar and a vested interest in the trade routes that ran through the peninsula.

There is also evidence in hadith that at least one of Muhammad's followers was Persian. A hadith from Muslim's collection reads: "If the *dīn* (religion) were at the Pleiades, even then a person from Persia would have taken hold of it, or one amongst the Persian descent would have surely found it."²⁵⁹ It is related later that one amongst those listening to Muhammad when this was said was a Persian named Salmān. He was one of Muhammad's companions, also called Salmān Fārisī, Hadrat Salmān and Abu Abdullah. His Persian name had been Rozeba and was changed to Salmān by Muhammad.²⁶⁰ He is mentioned in other hadith as an origin of isnad.

The *Sīrah* records that Salmān was the son of a rich landlord with strong political influence. In hopes of his son also becoming an influential figure, Salmān's father was able to get his son an appointment as a priest at the local fire temple.²⁶¹ Three years later, in 586 C.E., he journeyed from his town on business for his father.²⁶² On his way, he encountered a Christian church holding a service. He converted and left home, joining a caravan traveling west into Syrian lands.²⁶³ He spent 30 years in Syria-Palestine before learning of Muhammad and his prophetic call.

In a note about the Battle of Ahzāb (Ditch), there is a hint to Salmān's relationship with Muhammad. When the Jewish and Qurayshi tribes were organizing for the third battle against the Muslims in Medina, Muhammad "resolved at the suggestion of Hadrat Salmān, the Persian, to entrench Medina, a stratagem as yet unknown to the Arabs."²⁶⁴ Salmān possessed some knowledge of warfare that was alien to those living on

²⁵⁹ Muslim, 1352.

²⁶⁰ Sayed A. A. Razwy, *Salman El-Farsi (Salman the Persian): A Short Story of His Life* (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., 1989), 18.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 20.

²⁶² Ibid., 23-5.

²⁶³ Guillaume, 95.

²⁶⁴ Muslim, 984.

the peninsula. That Muhammad took his military advice, advice that historically came to define the battle itself, it seems Salmān was trusted and respected enough to be listened to. This could have stretched over into knowledge of non-Islamic religious traditions. As he had once been a priest in a Zoroastrian fire temple, he was aware of the rites associated with worship of Ahura Mazda. Also, he had spent almost half his life as a Christian in Syria-Palestine. Clearly, Salmān had extensive knowledge of religious traditions outside the peninsula and had opportunity to share this knowledge with Muhammad or other Muslims.

Salmān was but one of many followers of Muhammad, and it is probable that other Persians came to follow Muhammad in Arabia. Given this, the daily prayers performed by Zoroastrians would have been common knowledge to people living on the periphery of the empire.

Looking to salāt, it has been established that while the Qur'an mandates four times for prayer, Muhammad's prayer included a fifth time. He prayed five times a day, attributing this Qur'anic addition to non-Qur'anic revelation.²⁶⁵ However, the influence from Zoroastrianism is unmistakable. While the basis of Islam was the revelation provided through Muhammad, the practice of prayer as commanded by the Qur'an was augmented by Muhammad. That he was influenced by Zoroastrian ritual seems likely.

Ritual acts that were outwardly similar, if not identical, to those in salāt include the Zoroastrian obligation to pray five times a day. This was a commandment upon all Zoroastrians. It has also been shown that Zoroastrians used both earth and water to ritually cleanse themselves before their obligatory prayers. The Qur'an states that in the

²⁶⁵ In Ibn Ishaq's biography, the revelation occurs while Muhammad is in heaven during the Night Journey. See, Guillaume, 186.

absence of water, earth can be used to ritually cleanse oneself.²⁶⁶ Zoroastrianism demands a ritual cleansing with both elements. Zoroastrians washed as they did because of the theological belief that the material creations of Ahura Mazda needed to be treated in such a way as to avoid contamination. However, the meaning behind the act need not have been known for the ritual to influence Muhammad or his followers. What was seen by non-Zoroastrian observers was a ritual wash with earth and water. That these are both mentioned with regard to *salāt* in the Islamic sacred literature suggests influence from Zoroastrianism. It seems likely that this element of Zoroastrianism was also an influence on Muhammad's *salāt*.

On the point of prostration, I have not found sufficient evidence to conclude that Muhammad and his followers were influenced by Zoroastrians in their use of *sujud*. While there appears to be precedence, and there may well have been influence, given the evidence found thus far, a confident conclusion of a Zoroastrian influence on Muhammad's *sujud* cannot be made.

²⁶⁶ Considering the information presented in this study's section on Judaism, it is possible that the two similar purity rites in Judaism and Zoroastrianism both contributed to an influence on *salāt*. This is discussed further in the conclusion.

Chapter 8: Christian Traditions and Communities

There is no question that Christianity has a prominent place in Islamic tradition and scripture. References in the Qur'an and hadith show that Muhammad was familiar with Christianity in the region. However, there was not one interpretation of Christian theology, but several. Thus, a discussion of possible Christian influences on salāt must include a nuanced investigation of the styles of Christianity followed during Muhammad's time. Recalling that contact and frequency of it are criteria for determining probable influence on salāt, it is important to define the areas and communities where different forms of Christianity thrived. Considering Muhammad and his early followers' movements throughout the region alongside areas influenced by a Christian theological interpretation supports conclusions as to where influence on salāt may have stemmed.

Prior to and during the time period and regions considered in this study, there were three main competing interpretations of Christian theology: Orthodoxy, Monophysitism and Nestorianism. Arguments centered on Jesus and the form of his divinity. Christians (of varying interpretations) were found in almost all areas of Northeast Africa and Southwest Asia. The Monophysite and Nestorian communities were found in Syria, Egypt, Abyssinia, Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula. The Orthodox interpretation, supported by the Byzantine Empire, was dominant within the imperial borders. However, on the periphery, such as in Syria-Palestine and northern Egypt, Orthodoxy was in constant competition with Monophysitism.

Outside of urban centers and populated areas lived ascetic Christians, those who quit the *oikoumene*, the inhabited world, to seek an isolated life devoted to God. These people were in great number, leading one observer at the time to comment that "there are

so many of them that an earthly emperor could not assemble so large an army.”²⁶⁷

Though removed from society, these ascetics influenced Christian theology, and as shown below, were the most likely source for syncretic influence on salāt.

So as to set the Christian interpretations within the historical context of the communities that followed them, this section begins with an overview of Christianity in the region prior to and during the time of Muhammad. The religious tensions that influenced how Christianity was followed and practiced throughout the region are discussed. From this, it becomes clear that Monophysitism was the dominant tradition in areas where Muhammad and his followers were likely to have traveled. What is more, monks as religious leaders of this Christian interpretation were the individuals who would have been able to explain and perform rituals to interested travelers. A presentation of ritual actions associated with this interpretation and the people who performed them reveals precisely who could have influenced salāt.

The divisions of Christianity

In 324 C.E., the Roman emperor Constantine conquered rivals in the east, which consequently gave him dominion over lands great in wealth and population.²⁶⁸

Constantine brought an end to the series of civil wars and military coups that had kept political and military power in the East unstable.²⁶⁹ His success in defeating his rivals, however, did not overcome a growing eastern-western divide. It defined it more clearly.

²⁶⁷ Norman Russell, trans., *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (Kalamazoo, Mich. Cistercian Publications, 1980), 50.

²⁶⁸ Peter Sarris, “The Eastern Roman Empire from Constantine to Heraclius (306-641),” *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, Cyril Mango, ed. (NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19.

²⁶⁹ Walter Emil Kaegi Jr., *Byzantine Military Unrest 471-843: An Interpretation* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert Publisher, 1981): 14.

Consequently, the eastern lands came to be an empire unto itself, though Byzantine rulers and subjects considered it only a continuation of the earlier Roman Empire, perfected through Christianity.²⁷⁰

Constantine's allowance of Christianity and later, movement of the imperial capital from Rome drastically changed the nature of religion and society in the region.²⁷¹ The empire came to be synonymous with Christianity. This came at a time when the Sassanians were attempting to define an imperial Zoroastrianism. Christianization of Byzantium, then, shifted imperial focus to unity of the Christian church and defense of the religion and empire against its religious and military rival to the east.

Another result of Constantine's control over the East was a stronger military and a growth of a wealthy civilian class in eastern provinces, most notably, Syria.²⁷² Security and wealth in this area spurred a movement of Christians to Jerusalem. This movement was encouraged by the supposed discovery of the relic of the cross upon which Jesus had been crucified. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher was built in the mid-fifth century to house the relic.²⁷³ Other smaller churches were also built throughout Palestine.²⁷⁴ As a result, Christian pilgrimage to Palestine generally and Jerusalem specifically, increased.

²⁷⁰ Nadia Maria El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 21.

²⁷¹ Jean Daniélou and Henri Marrou, *The Christian Centuries: The First Six Hundred Years*, Vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 334.

²⁷² It is interesting to note that both Licinius and Constantine had stopped the persecution of Christians and brought a measure of religious tolerance to the empire. However, Constantine's political victory over Licinius had the result of Constantine being remembered as the only ruler who stopped the persecutions. The old adage, "he who wins the war, writes the history," is certainly applicable. See, McCullough, 40; and Kaegi, 19.

²⁷³ Stemberger, 55-64.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 64-67

Many pilgrims relocated and remained there, accounting for the large Christian population in Jerusalem.²⁷⁵ Pilgrimage also accounted for the large population of monks in Palestine. The movement of monks to Palestine, however, created an environment where differing interpretations of Christianity came into conflict.²⁷⁶ This then became a hotbed of theological thought, a place where the divisions within the Christian communities grew more defined.

The eastern regions of the empire were frequently a place of conflict between Byzantium and Sassanian Persia. For both nomads and sedentary people living in the affected regions, power, authority and security were ever changing and as a result, destabilizing. Archeological evidence shows economic, population and cultural decline.²⁷⁷ Trade continued but to a far lesser extent than in earlier centuries. War between the two powerful empires took its toll on the communities in this area. Yet, various forms of Christianity had already spread and continued to spread throughout Northeast Africa and Southwest Asia. A review of the kinds of Christian interpretations at the time facilitates a discussion of ritual actions employed by various Christian communities in the region.

Divisions and beliefs

The Christian Church suffered a series of divides that crystallized after ecumenical councils whose purpose was to define the tenets of Christian belief: who was Jesus, what was his nature and what was his relationship to God and the Holy Spirit? Particularly after the second century, Christianity became increasingly focused on

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 86-88.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 115-6.

²⁷⁷ Kaegi, 51.

doctrine.²⁷⁸ A review of the councils and arguments that led to permanent divisions in the Christian community lays beyond the scope this study. What should be noted, however, is that after the Council of Chalcedon in 451, two interpretations of Christianity, Nestorianism and Monophysitism, became clearly separate from Orthodoxy, the interpretation of Byzantium proper.²⁷⁹ The creed formed at Chalcedon for the purpose of reconciling theological differences within the ever growing Christian population proclaimed that Jesus was at once both God and man.²⁸⁰ This decision rejected the Monophysite belief that Jesus had one indivisible nature – divine. It suppressed, to some degree, Nestorianism, but did not draw the Monophysites back into the Orthodox fold.²⁸¹

A history of the Monophysite movement and its steady divergence in culture and church must include James Bar‘adai, a Monophysite monk from eastern Syria. He contributed significantly to the spread and eventual dominance of Monophysitism.²⁸² Though James was initially the metropolitan of Edessa, his authority expanded to encompass areas from Constantinople and Jerusalem.²⁸³ Byzantine emperor at the time, Justinian, perceived danger in a Monophysite church led principally by Syrians under the direction of James.²⁸⁴ A religiously and culturally separate group regionally concentrated in Egypt and Syria – centers of commerce fed by trade routes – had the potential to weaken the eastern frontier, possibly even foster a future split from the empire. Justinian

²⁷⁸ Norbert Brox, *A Concise History of the Early Church* (NY: Continuum, 1995), 120.

²⁷⁹ Daniélou and Marrou, 353-4.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 350.

²⁸¹ Brox, 172-4.

²⁸² Monophysitism refers to the person of Jesus Christ as having one nature. “Monophysites held that after the incarnation the two natures became one, so that all the thoughts and acts of the savior were those of a single unitary being, God in Christ.” This was in contrast to the Orthodox Church that held Jesus Christ to have had two natures, human and divine, “the properties of each nature retaining their identity.” See, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Monophysitism.”

²⁸³ Frend, 285-6.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 287.

attempted to have James arrested, but James disguised himself as a beggar and escaped, embarking on a thirty-four-year missionary endeavor that spread Monophysitism in “Syria, Armenia, Cappadocia, Cilicia, Isauria, Pamphylia and Asia...Rhodes, Cyprus, Chios and Mitylene.”²⁸⁵ In short, James built the Monophysite church.²⁸⁶

The continued Monophysite rejection of imperial orthodoxy is important in as much as first, the Monophysite areas of influence stretched from the Black Sea, through Syria, across Egypt, Abyssinia and throughout the Arabian Peninsula. The areas where Monophysite Christianity was dominant were in total larger than those areas under Orthodox influence.²⁸⁷ Second, the importance of Monophysite theology as debated and discussed by monks took place to a significant degree in Syria-Palestine. It was in this region that figures such as Emphraim Syrus and Simeon Stylite (and his followers) made their ascetic mark on the tradition. Ideas and traditions spread throughout the region by the work of Monophysite evangelizing monks who influenced the ritual practices of people with whom Muhammad and his followers likely had contact.

This link between Monophysite theology and monks provides a method of understanding how Christians in areas around the peninsula, even though in many cases, documents describing the individual prayer practices of various communities are absent. Put another way, if it is known how evangelizing monks prayed, and it is known where they traveled and who they influenced, it is possible to deduce the ritual actions of groups throughout the region. Presented next is a discussion of where these theologies held sway. By this, the widespread influence of Monophysite monks suggests where the most likely Christian influence on Muhammad would have originated.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 285

²⁸⁷ Frend, xiii.

Syria-Palestine

One major Monophysite area was the Syria-Palestine region. On the eastern border of the Byzantine Empire, the Monophysite communities were dominant, though there were Byzantine efforts to stifle its influence and encourage Orthodoxy. Also in this area, battles ensued between Byzantium and Sassanian Persia well into the seventh century. One of the most dramatic confrontations was a Sassanian advance, under the direction of emperor Khusro II, on Byzantine holdings east and west of the Euphrates. Revolts broke out in Syria-Palestine, with sections of the Jewish population openly revolting against Byzantium and Christian opponents, some also fighting against the Persian armies.²⁸⁸

The Persian attacks weakened the Byzantine eastern front. The rebellions in the region led to many deaths, thus weakening the population and making them less likely to resist Khurso. Jerusalem was laid siege in 614. When the siege ended twenty days later, attacks on Christians barricaded inside were ruthless. Sophronius, later the Patriarch of Jerusalem, recorded his observations on seeing the Sassanian attack on the city. He wrote: “Equipped with bloody sword, (Persian armies) cut down the people – the city of sacred and holy old men, children, and women... Accomplishing everything with cruelty, he despoiled the holy city and with blazing fire burnt the holy places of Christ.”²⁸⁹ Between 36,500 and 90,000 people were killed, evidenced by written records from the time as well as a recently excavated mass Christian grave near the city.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 187.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 191.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

In 622, Heraclius began an assault on the Persians matching their earlier, methodical advance. He personally led his armies, out maneuvering Khurso, driving Byzantine armies deep into the Sassanian Persia.²⁹¹ They reclaimed lost lands and invaded to a point of overrunning the royal Persian palace at Dastagird, forcing Khurso to flee.²⁹²

Considering territorial holdings at the conclusion of this conflict, little had changed. Sections of Syria remained under Persian control, which caused Christian persecution in years leading up to the Muslim invasions.²⁹³ In terms of population and power, however, the conflicts in Syria-Palestine left the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires exhausted after nearly thirty years of ceaseless war. Byzantine administration over the areas was severely weakened.²⁹⁴ Also, the Christian community in the area never recovered from the results of the Sassanian invasion. For instance, the Christian population in Jerusalem was drastically smaller. Churches burned and destroyed during the Sassanian attack were not rebuilt, or at least, not to the same aesthetic level as they had been. Also, the monasteries in southern Palestine never regained their former level of theological productivity and attraction.²⁹⁵

This review is important because it reveals the weakened state of the region during Muhammad's time and why, despite the Christian empire adjacent to the peninsula, Monophysites were able to establish their theology, liturgy and customs

²⁹¹ Ibid., 205.

²⁹² Berkey, 50; McCullough, 45.

²⁹³ G.J. Reinink, "Babai the Great's *Life of George* and the Propagation of Doctrine in the Late Sasanian Empire," *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium and the Christian Orient*, J.W. Drijvers and J.W. Watt, eds. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 137 (Leiden/Boston/Koln: Brill 1999), 171. Reprinted in *Syriac Christianity Under Late Sasanian and Early Islamic Rule* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2005).

²⁹⁴ Robert Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule: A Historical and Archaeological Study* (Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1995), 54-5.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 47-8.

throughout much of Northeast Africa, Syria and parts of the peninsula. Byzantine Orthodoxy suffered as the empire struggled in battle, and Nestorianism was an interpretation without a safe location to flourish in any great number in Syria-Palestine. More than any other interpretation, it faced persecution, forcing followers to consistently search for safe places to settle, generally further east. Thus, the Monophysite interpretation was dominant and was the most likely to have had influence on *salāt*. Discussed in greater detail below are how monks and ascetics lived within this wider tradition and what influence they had.

Syria-Palestinian societal categories at the time can be divided into three primary groups; Greeks (self identifying, regardless of ethnic background), Hellenized Syrian/Arab and Aramaic/Arabic-speaking Syrian/Arab.²⁹⁶ Early in the sixth century, the Christian majority in the region adhered to the Monophysite interpretation. This was true of church leaders as well as the general peasantry of the region. As mentioned above, Nestorian communities were farther east and had little representation in the region. The Greeks and Hellenized followed the Chalcedonian, what they termed Orthodox, interpretation, upheld by Byzantine emperors.²⁹⁷

There was Hellenic influence on Syrian Monophysite monasticism. Monks learned to read, write and speak in Greek for a more effective dialogue with various communities. And while laity viewed monasticism as a central aspect of Syrian Monophysitism, the Hellenistic worldview did not fully satisfy the laity's needs.²⁹⁸ Living outside of a Hellenized culture (or at least, worldview), the theological debates on

²⁹⁶ Trimingham, 212-3.

²⁹⁷ Chalcedonian was the term for those who followed the decree after Chalcedon. They believed that decree made the Church in Constantinople universal, with all dissidents incorrect.

²⁹⁸ Harvey, 4; Trimingham, 212.

the nature of Jesus and the hierarchy of the Church was not as essential to the average peasant-class Christian in the area. Rather, they “embarked on lines of their own expressed in the language of Jesus himself”²⁹⁹ – Aramaic. This was the second reason for Monophysite’s appeal to the majority of Christians in Syria-Palestine. Aramaic was the most widely spoken and written language in the Mesopotamian lands.³⁰⁰ Orthodoxy was viewed with suspicion because of its association with Byzantium, which sometimes produced emperors (such as Justinian, Justin II and Tiberius II) whose notion of reconciliation between the Orthodox and Monophysite interpretations was persecution. This drove a cultural and political divide to a point where a Coptic-Jacobite church was established independent of the Orthodox Church.³⁰¹

There were theological divides within the Syrian Christian community. The Nestorian school of Christological thought differed from the prevailing interpretations of the Syrian church.³⁰² By the middle of the fifth century, the school was firmly committed to the Nestorian tradition, and in 457, faced with a growing Monophysite community in Syria-Palestine, the Nestorian school moved to Nisibis in Persian territory.³⁰³ Once inside Sassanian territory, the Nestorians were under constant threat of persecution at the hands of rulers committed to maintaining a singular state religion; all others were considered traitors to the empire.

²⁹⁹ Trimmingham, 216.

³⁰⁰ Greek was equally widespread but was more of an official language. As a language in everyday life, it was used predominately in coastal towns, such as Antioch. See, Trimmingham, 224.

³⁰¹ Frend, 320, and Trimmingham, 216.

³⁰² Nestorianism holds that “Jesus Christ was the result of a union between the divine Son of God and the man Jesus...(not unlike Hebrew prophets), except that in the case of Christ, God indwelt as in a Son, and the union between God and the Son was inseparable and perfect.” See, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Nestorianism.”

³⁰³ Daniélou and Marrou, 369-70.

Nestorians did make some inroads in Sassanian Persia, successfully proselytizing to people in the ruling class. Missionary work expanded to the northeast, but it was in constant competition with fervent Monophysite proselytism. The Nestorian or Persian Church became increasingly isolated from centers of Orthodox and Monophysite Christianity, and in a sea of Zoroastrianism, its theology came to focus on resistance to the imperial religion.³⁰⁴ This is discussed in greater detail below in reference to the Lakhmids and the Armenian population.

From this, it can be understood that the dominant Christian influence in the Syria-Palestine region was Monophysitism, upheld by a Syriac Church. Though Greek was spoken, the predominant language in the area was Aramaic. From the early Byzantine focus on Jerusalem, the holy city had been a place of pilgrimage, attracting a large population of monks. While the imperial wars hurt the population and the infrastructure, a population remained. Thus, if Muhammad or his followers came in contact with Christians in Syria-Palestine, it is likely that those encountered were Aramaic-speaking Monophysites. That said, what might the Prophet and his followers observed or been shown with regard to Christian ritual action? What would have been understood as crucial to faithful practice?

In the Syriac church, the sacrament of baptism was provided only if the penitent agreed to continence from then on – an unrealistic requirement that led to universal baptism.³⁰⁵ Monks, having dedicated themselves to a life of prayer, became exemplars of piety in Monophysitism. Many of the religious authorities in the communities were monks, and they consequently were the hand by which converts were baptized. J. Spencer

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 372.

³⁰⁵ Trimmingham, 218.

Trimingham writes that “the authority of the monks derived from the power they exercised through their peculiar mode of life and the fact that their spiritual élitism did not separate them from the people.”³⁰⁶

The monks led the people, but the people themselves did not hold as nuanced an understanding of Monophysite theological reasoning.³⁰⁷ Thus, for the most part, monks were custodians of proper Christian prayer, piety and practice. General contact with Syrian Christians would not have left striking impressions on travelers and traders. However, wandering monks and clergy evangelized throughout the region, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and India.³⁰⁸ Wandering and homelessness were aspects some monks sought to embrace, abandoning one’s homeland in the image of Abraham and freeing oneself from the trappings of earthly attachments.³⁰⁹ It was the monks as both detached yet engaged evangelizers who came in contact with people moving through the Arabian Peninsula into the Syria-Palestine lands.

With regard to prayer, there was a monastic emphasis on ceaseless prayer, and praying was “an expression of and trust in God in the face of a trial which could not otherwise be borne.”³¹⁰ The notion of submission is similar to that in Muslim prayer. However, there is at least one striking difference between Christian monastic prayer and Muslim prayer. Salāt is oriented towards prostration. Monophysite prayer was performed in a cruciform position. This is made clear by turning to one of the oldest Syriac texts, the *Odes of Solomon*.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 219.

³⁰⁷ It should be noted that some monks in Palestine considered Monophysites completely in error. See Frend, 348.

³⁰⁸ Frend, 296.

³⁰⁹ Hans Von Campenhausen, *Tradition and Life in the Church: Essays and Lectures in Church History*, A.V. Littledale, trans. (St. Jame’s Place, London: Collins, 1968), 232.

³¹⁰ Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 169.

A date for the *Odes* as well as an agreement of their original language is not definitively known. It is clear, however, that the verses are uniquely Syrian, illustrating a hallmark of Syrian belief and practice.³¹¹ The verses exhibit a physical element to worship; for instance: “My heart bursts forth the praise of the Lord, and my lips bring forth praises to Him.”³¹² This is what scholar Susan Harvey calls an “act of self-giving,” bringing the worshiper into God’s presence. The physical element to these odes is a cruciform position, whereby “the believer...is mystically lifted into the presence of God as was Christ himself.”³¹³

Syrian monks followed the tradition of praying in short verse. One monk in Syria, Aphrahat (the Persian Sage), emphasized the singular and inner nature of prayer. He was a monk and writer in the fourth century, though little else is known about him. What survive are his writings on different aspects of living inline with examples set by Biblical figures. On the nature of prayer, he wrote:

The moment you start praying, raise your heart upwards, and lower your eyes downwards; enter inside your inner person and pray in secret to your Father who is in heaven...There are amongst us people who multiply prayers and make long supplications, doubling themselves up and spreading out their hands, while the true task of prayer is far from them.³¹⁴

The phrase “doubling themselves up and spreading out their hands” suggests the prostrated form. Thus, potentially, not only did Syrian monks embrace the cruciform position, they also consciously rejected prostration, at least in this case.

³¹¹ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 8.

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³¹⁴ Sebastian Brock, trans. *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1987), 17.

The above examples show that monastic prayer was individual, consistent and brief. While examples may exist showing an ascetic monk's actions during prayer, research suggests that monastic prayer, particularly ascetic, emphasized thought and word. Instances of bodily position are restricted to the cruciform position and kneeling.³¹⁵ There were times for communal gathering and worship, specifically the beginning and end of the day, when a morning and evening hymn was sung.³¹⁶ This, however, was far from the rigid prayer times found in Zoroastrianism and later, Islam.

As evangelizers, Syrian monks spread into the desert, preaching to nomadic tribes, making it possible for them to perform the Eucharist and take part in prayer, though churches were not present. There are records of three monks evangelizing in the "Province of Arabia" specifically.³¹⁷ The sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist were the predominant actions shown to travelers and traders. These two sacraments were understood as acting in accordance with the belief that Jesus' death was advantageous to them.³¹⁸ Because this was emphasized, other elements of Syrian belief and worship necessarily would have been less so, at least in comparison.

A monk's lifestyle, willful homelessness, was inspired by the theology he espoused. Thus, when he evangelized, the idea of salvation and the monk's way of living were joined. That this impression was primary is shown by a lack of comment on Christianity's personal impact (such as religious practice) in Christian Arab poetry with regard to monks.³¹⁹ However, the wandering monk gave sacraments to those he met, thus emphasizing the rites of baptism and Eucharist as of the greatest importance. Had

³¹⁵ See Theodoret of Cyrrhus, 25, 51-2, 60, 98.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 60, 90

³¹⁷ Trimmingham, 141.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 216.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 223.

Muhammad or his followers observed monks at prayer, they would have seen the cruciform position and kneeling, neither of which is employed in salāt. Because Syrian laity took instruction from the monks, it is likely that most contact with any Syrian-Palestinian Christians would have yielded similar observations. The absence of these positions in Islam shows that, with regard to Syria, there was no influence on bodily position in Muslim prayer.

Concerning the direction faced during Christian prayer, there was, until the Middle Ages, a tradition of painting or hanging a cross on the eastern wall of a house of prayer.³²⁰ This practice was particularly present in areas of Syrian Christianity. Facing east, however, was not for the sake of a geographic location, such as Jerusalem. Rather, in both public and private prayer, east was faced because it was believed there lay the “abode of the Blessed” and the direction from which Christ would return.³²¹ As has already been shown, many Jewish communities faced Jerusalem, following the Biblical command. This influenced Muhammad’s salāt, though the direction was later changed to the Ka’ba in Mecca. The important point here is not only that Syrian Christians faced a direction different from Jews and later Muslims, but that the intent was different. In honor and expectation of Christ’s return, the prayerful faced a geographic *direction* rather than location. Thus, again there does not appear to be influence on salāt.

By the fourth century, it was common practice for most Christians to pray three times a day, at the third, sixth and ninth hour.³²² These hours were associated with elements in Christian theology; in the third hour, the descent of the Holy Spirit; in the

³²⁰ Joseph A. Jungmann, *Christian Prayer Through the Centuries*, John Coyne SJ, trans. (London: Paulist Press, 2007), 116-7, fn 37.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³²² *Ibid.*, 4.

sixth hour, Peter's prayer; and his entry into the Temple in the ninth hour.³²³ The tradition of thrice daily prayer had its origins in earlier traditions. In the third century, a scholar, Tertullian, wrote about prayer, and suggested that prayer should be held in the third, sixth and ninth hours.³²⁴ Even before this, however, there was a tradition for prayer three times a day, based on Daniel 6:10: "(Daniel) continued to go to his house...and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him."

Three prayer times a day, however, was the minimum number suggested. Israelite King David, whom Jewish, Christian and Muslim tradition holds as having written the Psalms, prayed seven times a day, as recorded in Psalm 119:164. His was the model of piety. Fourth century theologians emphasized that prayer at least three times a day should then be the minimum. Also emphasized was the need for a prayer at midnight as well as prayers at morning and night.³²⁵ Thus, tradition for the Christian laity was prayer between three and six times a day. It is important to note, however, that Monophysite monks strove for ceaseless prayer.

Looking to the Qur'an, recall that four times for prayer are prescribed: sunrise, afternoon, sunset and after sunset. The fourth century Monophysite tradition of prayer throughout the morning (third, sixth and ninth hours), night and midnight seems to coincide with the tradition in the Qur'an. In hadith, the fifth time for prayer is set at noon. While this comes after the proscribed third, sixth and ninth hours, it nevertheless falls near the ideal Christian times for prayer. Given the contact Muhammad and his followers likely had with Syrian monks, the similarity in prayer times suggests an influence on salāt. However, as the times do not match exactly, it is possible the Christian tradition

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid., 2.

³²⁵ Ibid., 4.

was a reinforcement of Zoroastrianism's primary influence on prayer five times daily. In the absence of further evidence, a firmer conclusion on this point cannot be made.

However, the similarities are intriguing and do suggest possible influence.

Thus, while Monophysite prayer position and direction were clearly not an influence on *salāt*, it is possible that Syria-Palestinian Christian practice had influence on when prayer should be practiced and how often. The issue of ritual washing is considered in detail in this section's conclusion.

Egypt

Monophysite Christianity also spread into Northeast Africa. There had been some strain between the Byzantine Bishop of Alexandria and the laity in Egypt prior to the Council of Chalcedon.³²⁶ Part of the strain came from Egypt's large population of monks and nuns, with the aforementioned propensity for monks to move against the imperial interpretation because of their worldview and understanding of how salvation is obtained – abstinence, solitude and homelessness, as opposed to a centralized church hierarchy.³²⁷ By the sixth century, Egypt was largely Monophysite, and there was a severing of the Church of Egypt from the official Byzantine Church.³²⁸

One of the most influential forces in this area was the ascetic population. There were several styles of ascetic life in Egypt. One was initiated by Antony the Great (also called St. Antony) in the fourth century. Antony essentially left society and followed an ascetic life in the Egyptian desert wilderness. His goal was a lifestyle uninterrupted by

³²⁶ C. Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 C.E.* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1991), 171-4.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

³²⁸ Griggs, 215; Trimmingham, 164.

the concerns that plague the *oikoumene*. For Antony, and others like him, “there is no solicitude, no anxiety for food and clothing. There is only the expectation of the coming of Christ in the singing of hymns.”³²⁹ Isolated, Antony could devote every moment to prayer, reaching for closeness to God. So powerful was his example that many other monks and nuns mimicked him, particularly after his death in 356. Spurred by a Greek and later Latin account of Antony’s life widely read throughout the Christian world, many ventured to the desert to find salvation. Those who took to Antony’s strict and isolated example came to be called the Desert Fathers.

With a similar intent, Pachomius, also in the fourth century, established ascetic practice near villages in northern Egypt. For those who followed Pachomius, “ascetic withdrawal...occurred within the village, eventually behind a gated wall.”³³⁰ Long after Antony and Pachomius, many continued to travel to the desert. The ascetic lifestyle there had massive appeal. Some made the journey to speak with and learn from the ascetic community. In some cases, tourism was the impulse, though such visitors were gently sent away.³³¹ In the sixth century, the desert was also a place of refuge as Monophysite monks and nuns fled Emperor Justinian’s bloody campaign to force reconciliation between the Monophysite and Chalcedonian Churches.³³²

In any case, visitors arrived largely from Palestine, though there was movement of monks from the Latin Church in the West.³³³ Because so many traveled to see these monks, and because their words and lives were recorded in writing, it is possible that

³²⁹ Russell, 50.

³³⁰ James Goehring, “Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt,” *Forms of Devotion: Conversion, Worship, Spirituality and Asceticism*, Everett Ferguson, ed. (NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 243-4.

³³¹ Russell, 4.

³³² Harvey, 76-80.

³³³ Russell, 20.

Muhammad or his followers need not have met these monks in person to learn of their traditions. However, when closely examined, it seems unlikely that the Desert Fathers' rituals had much impact on *salāt*. One of the best sources for insight on this topic is the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*.

The *Historia Monachorum* is a late fourth, early fifth-century text composed by an unnamed monk from a Jerusalem monastery on the Mount of Olives.³³⁴ It is a record of the monk's observations on a journey to visit Egyptian monks. Originally composed in Greek, it was soon after translated (loosely) by the Jerusalem monastery's founder, Rufinus. In translating, Rufinus added some of his own observations from an earlier journey to Nitria, a monastic area south of Alexandria, near a Nile tributary. One of his additions, discussed below, is of particular importance.

In the Greek text, the desert monks are said to have prostrated before visitors. One monk, Father Apollo, who lived in the territory of Hermopolis in the Thebaid "frequently spoke about the reception of visitors, saying, 'You must prostrate yourselves before brothers who come to visit you, for it is not them but God you venerate.'³³⁵ Important to note is the word "brothers." Those who came to study and speak, likely monks themselves, were received with welcome. So-called tourists were fed and sent away.³³⁶ Though this is the most explicit reference to prostrating to visitors in the text, there are other mentions of such practice. Thus, those with firsthand knowledge of the Desert Fathers' prostration towards visitors would have necessarily been monks. That there were records of their sayings and doings suggests that one need not have experienced such things firsthand to have knowledge of them.

³³⁴ Ibid., 7.

³³⁵ Ibid., 78.

³³⁶ Ibid., 4.

Turning to one of Rufinus' additions, prostration is also evident during prayer. He recalls a story told to him by monks at a monastery in Scetis near Nitria. The head of the monastery, Macarius of Alexandria, reported a story to Rufinus about an episode where he was tempted by demons in the night. While this story's focus is the monks' piety and devotion, it contains a relevant detail. Demons swarmed in the church, and "after the psalm when the brothers prostrated themselves in prayer they (demons) ran to each of them, and as each threw himself forward to pray they assumed the appearance of woman, while others made themselves into things to eat or drink."³³⁷ Though the focus is the discipline required to be undistracted by worldly temptation, the detail about prostration is clear evidence that, at least in this case, the Egyptian monks prostrated in prayer.

Also interesting is the absence of comment Rufinus makes on the practice. If it was a foreign or unusual practice, there might have been some indication that it was unique to the monks at Scetis. The absence of comment then suggests that Christian prostration in prayer was frequent enough that such practice did not merit explanation or remark. It should be noted that, though written in Jerusalem, this addition to the *Historia Monachorum* was written in Latin, a language not in daily usage in the Greek and Aramaic-speaking Syria-Palestinian Monophysite population. Nevertheless, the absence of comment on the prostration indicates that such a practice was familiar to the people there.

With regard to prostration before visitors, there is evidence in hadith that shows such a practice did not carry over into Muslim worship. Father Apollo was clear in stating that the prostration was not to the visitor, but to God, present in all creation. Muhammad, however, is equally clear in hadith, forbidding prostration before a person. More than

³³⁷ Ibid., 153.

this, steps were taken to prevent even an inadvertent prostration before a living thing. A sutra, meaning “covering” or “screen” refers to an object early Muslims used when praying outside of a mosque.³³⁸ Hadith record that Muhammad and his followers used a saddle or staff. A sutra closes the space between the worshipping Muslim and any person or animal that might walk in front of them, thus preventing even an accidental prostration towards a worldly entity. From this it is clear that early Muslims would never prostrate to a visitor.

The example found in Rufinus’ writing, however, shows that prostration was used by Egyptian monks and such a practice was not unheard of, even in Jerusalem. Thus, potentially Muhammad or one of his followers could have learned of such an action. Whether they could have observed such an action is problematic. Fellow Christians were welcomed into the isolated monasteries, but a non-Christian traveler may not have been so openly received. It is unlikely then that early Muslims would have seen the Desert Fathers performing prostrations in prayer. However, there was an individual on the peninsula, living near Mecca, who may have seen such a practice and had the opportunity to relate it, if not show it, to Muhammad. Waraqa ibn Naufal ibn Asad ibn ‘Abdu’l-‘Uzzā, a Christian and cousin to Khadija, Muhammad’s wife, is discussed in detail below.

Nubia and Abyssinia

From the above review of Syrian and Egyptian Monophysitism, it is possible to understand how Christianity was practiced in other areas of the Northeast Africa, Southwest Asia region. Documentation of ritual practices elsewhere in the region are

³³⁸ Muslim, 258, fn 708.

scarce, but it was the Syrian and Egyptian forms of Monophysitism that guided other communities. In the absence of a written historical record on this specific subject, the above discussion can be used as a guide to determine how worship in other areas probably occurred. What becomes important then are other factors that may have driven or hindered influence from other Christian areas on Muhammad and his followers' ritual actions – namely Nubia, Abyssinia and the city of Najrān in Yemen.

Spreading south from Egypt, missionaries, most likely monks, were able to convert three Nubian kingdoms.³³⁹ Emperor Justinian supported evangelical missions into Nubia but insisted that they be strictly Chalcedonian. His efforts were thwarted, however, by Syrian Monophysites intent on spreading their interpretation of Christianity.³⁴⁰ After the mid-560s, Nubia shifted towards Syrian Monophysitism until by 700, it was entirely Monophysite.³⁴¹

Abyssinia came to be Monophysite in much the same way, though more slowly.³⁴² Monks from Syria-Palestine and Egypt evangelized, and the translation of some scriptures into the primary language of the region, Ge'ez, allowed Monophysitism to be viewed as a Christianity of the people.³⁴³ This was a process that continued through the seventh century. Byzantine readiness to ally with Monophysites stemmed from the primary focus on maintaining the empire. This required some collaboration with Abyssinia as well as the Nubian Monophysite church.

In the *Sīrah*, there is evidence of early Muslims traveling to Abyssinia.

Muhammad's recitations and call for a conversion of Mecca to Islam caused persecution

³³⁹ Frend, 297.

³⁴⁰ Daniélou and Marrou, 374-5.

³⁴¹ Frend, 300-2.

³⁴² Daniélou and Marrou, 374.

³⁴³ Frend, 308.

against him and his followers. Speaking to his followers, the *Sîrah* reports Muhammad saying, “If you were to go to Abyssinia (it would be better for you), for the king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country.”³⁴⁴ The number of those who made the journey was eighty-two, not counting children.³⁴⁵ Among the refugees was Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad’s companions who later became the first caliph. The *Sîrah* describes a positive relationship between the refugees and their Abyssinian protectors. It is even written that the king converted to Islam. When the refugees returned to the peninsula and journeyed to Yathrib, the city to which Muhammad fled to escape Meccan persecution, they certainly brought with them accounts of how religion was practiced in Abyssinia.

In the absence of documents describing how prayer was practiced in Abyssinia at that time, it is possible to discern how the religion was likely practiced based on how Monophysitism spread in the area. In 480, a group of Syrian monks traveled to Abyssinia and introduced an “anti-Chalcedonian doctrinal outlook and Syrian liturgy, customs, monastic rules and discipline.”³⁴⁶ Because this was the same group who translated the Gospels into the vernacular, their teachings were well received, leading the Abyssinian Church to resemble the Syrian Church in liturgy and practice. The Muslim refugees from Mecca would have then seen Christian worship practiced in a way similar to the Syrian traditions described above. Kneeling and the cruciform position were likely seen, and they might also have noted prayer times.

Two additional important notes are that first, because Syrian Monophysitism was the dominant Christian influence in Abyssinia, Egyptian Monophysitism was secondary, meaning the traditions of the Desert Fathers may not have been accepted practice, though

³⁴⁴ Guillaume, 146.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 148

³⁴⁶ Trimmingham, 289.

the Desert Fathers were nevertheless seen as examples of religious devotion throughout the Christian world. Second, because Abu Bakr was among the refugees, whatever observations he made in Abyssinia were likely relayed to Muhammad, placing the potential for Christian influence directly within the Prophet's circle of followers and leaders.

Yemen

Under Emperor Justin, Chalcedonian Byzantium necessarily ignored doctrinal differences with Abyssinian Christianity so as to exploit the lands and gain a footing in other areas, mainly wealthy Himyar. It was this interest in maintaining open trade routes from the south of the peninsula to the eastern Byzantine provinces that encouraged a close Abyssinian-Byzantine relationship that lasted for centuries. Through Abyssinia, Byzantium could influence Yemen – their politics and religion – and undermine Persian influence.³⁴⁷

It is interesting to note that there was some Christianization of Yemen during the fleeting favorable relationships between Abyssinia, Byzantium and Yemen.³⁴⁸ Christian dominance in the area was brief. It came to an end with the rise of the Himyarite kingdom under the Jewish king, Wakia. A Christian presence in Yemen ended violently around 518 under the later Jewish king of Himyar, Dhu Nuwas. With the exception of a Christian stronghold in Najrān in northern Yemen, Christian communities that had once flourished were decimated and the few survivors forced to scatter.³⁴⁹ In 528, the Abyssinian king

³⁴⁷ Berkey, 65.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ For a review of Christian communities before persecutions under Dhu Nuwas, see, Trimmingham, 287-299.

Caleb invaded and took control of Yemen. As an Abyssinian vassal state, Yemen was later overthrown by Arab tribes and the Sassanians when the Abyssinian general who had taken control of the region as a king tried to conquer Mecca.³⁵⁰ In 547, this general and Abyssinian viceroy, Abrāhā, attacked Mecca, an instance that gained record in the Qur'an.³⁵¹ This attack, which failed, led to a popular animosity towards Abyssinia and consequently, Byzantium. However, it seems that this animosity did not extend to Muhammad and his followers, as evidenced by the refuge the early followers found in Abyssinia. The understanding of an enemy's enemy being a friend potentially applies. The result for Christians in the southern part of the peninsula was that the most concentrated population of Christians was the population in Najrān. Himyar was thereafter controlled by Persia until its conversion to Islam in 628.³⁵²

There was some Christian presence in Yemen prior to this, but it can be seen as, for the most part, divided and in conflict. Justinian denied Christians in Himyar a bishop. Around 560, they elected a bishop from among their own clergy. Nestorians were present in Yemen, but they had little influence, even after the Sassanian takeover of the region. This is proven by virtue of there being “no evidence that Nestorianism established itself among the people of the country.”³⁵³ The part of Southern Arabia with the most lasting and concentrated Christian population was Najrān.

³⁵⁰ Abyssinian presence in Yemen waxed and waned, strong to a degree before Dhu Nuwas, more so after him. See, Trimmingham, 296.

³⁵¹ The sura *Surat al-Fīl*, (lit. sura of the elephant), is so-called because it refers to the “men of the elephant,” Abyssinians who used elephants in their military. In popular tradition, the Meccans resisted this attack in the year Muhammad was born. Factually, however, Muhammad was born 20 to 30 years later. See, de Maigret, 251-2, Trimmingham, 305, and Daniélou and Marrou, 374-5.

³⁵² Alessandro de Maigret, *Arabia Felix: An Exploration of the Archaeological History of Yemen*, Rebecca Thompson, trans. (London: Stacey International, 1996), 250-2.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 303.

Najrān's Christian community was made up of people from different places. At the time of Dhu Nuwas' attack, the priests were originally from Hira and Syria with deacons from there and Abyssinia – all Monophysite. The martyrs, however, had Arabic names found predominantly in the south, and ten held the Christian Arab baptismal name, 'Abdallāh.³⁵⁴ This suggests that there was an indigenous Christian population, not merely travelers and missionaries who made the journey through the Hijaz with the aim of establishing a home in Yemen.

Najrān held a defined church structure and a bishop. Muhammad had direct contact with Christians from Najrān, evidenced by an agreement between Muslims in Yathrib and Christians in Najrān that none of the Christians there would be forced to apostate.³⁵⁵ There is little evidence of prayer practices in Najrān. It would have been influenced by several traditions: the Syrian Monophysite rituals; vestiges of the once dominant Jewish tradition; and a general monotheism unique to the region. Trimmingham writes that a general monotheism was certainly present because of the absence of “direct indications of a peculiar and particularist monotheism.”³⁵⁶ From the Syrian tradition, it can be supposed that there was a focus on prayer at least three times a day (reinforced by the Jewish tradition), kneeling during prayer and most likely prayer facing east, as this was a practice common throughout the Christian world at the time. Beyond this, however, lies speculation, and all that can be known with certainty is that Muhammad was aware of Najrān to the point of understanding the basic church structure and had communication

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 295.

³⁵⁵ Trimmingham, 306.

³⁵⁶ The focus of this general monotheism was a supreme God with the epithet *rahmanān*. See, Trimmingham, 293.

with Christians there at least once, evidenced by the Prophet's promise that Christians there would not be forced to apostate.

Northern and Central Peninsula

From the discussion of Syrian monks, it seems that Christian monasticism could have made its way to Mecca and Medina and established an indigenous following. This, however, was not the case. Of a possible Christian community in the peninsula, Osman writes that "a significant Christian community did not have time to form in Mecca and Medina" because Christians referenced are first generation converts.³⁵⁷ They did not have time to construct churches or pursue further evangelizing, should they have had the impulse to. There were, however, other places on the peninsula where Christian belief was professed.

This was unacceptable primarily because of Byzantium's interests in the region. The Byzantine Empire had no expansionist intentions in the Arabian Peninsula.³⁵⁸ Rather, it wanted to first, continue to hold and protect its provinces in Palestine, and more importantly, Syria, where many of their wealthy citizens resided.³⁵⁹ At the end of the fourth century, the Byzantine border with Arabia was an ill-defended no-man's-land. Though Persian influence waxed and waned in the northern peninsula, the land south of the Khabur and Euphrates was primarily populated by Byzantine citizens.

Bedouin raids were common, and as there was relative peace between the Byzantine and Persian Empires after 395 for roughly 150 years, Byzantium was content

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 64.

³⁵⁹ Concern for Syrian lands was not unfounded, evidenced largely by Shapur's campaign against Syria in 256. See Shahid, 468.

to stay out of the area, so long as the trade routes were left intact.³⁶⁰ That is not to say they ignored that part of their frontier altogether. They had been establishing treaties with local sheikhs since the fourth century, but few ended in definite control and none guaranteed the protection of the southeastern border or safety of Byzantine subjects living in those lands.³⁶¹ Security eventually came from a Bedouin tribe that converted to Christianity, Monophysite specifically.³⁶² This tribe, the Saracen banu-Ghassan, in conjunction with other tribes in a loose federation, controlled lands east of the Jordan River.³⁶³

Their relationship with Byzantium was that of a military treaty. The Ghassanids, as the federation was called, enforced security along the frontier, kept the population under their rule from raiding the Syria-Palestinian lands and provided military assistance to Byzantium when needed.³⁶⁴ In exchange, the empire paid an annual subsidy. The Ghassanids controlled the areas along the Byzantine eastern front from north of Damascus to the borders of the Hijaz.³⁶⁵ During a Sassanian attack on lands immediate to the Euphrates, about twenty years before the major advance discussed above, 5000 Ghassanid warriors went to battle with Byzantine military against the Persians.³⁶⁶ The Ghassanids were a strong force, capable of protecting against raids from the peninsula and of making independent attack on Persian forces. This is evidence of positive relationship with Byzantium and consequently, openness to Christianity.

³⁶⁰ J.A.S. Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power* (NY: Routledge, 1996), 86.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Evans, 86-7.

³⁶³ Frend, 323.

³⁶⁴ Peters, *Mecca*, 28.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 27.

³⁶⁶ Greatrex and Lieu, 92.

During the major Sassanian advance at the end of the sixth century, the Ghassanids fought with the Byzantine armies to resist. An account from this time suggests the religious orientation of the Ghassanids, led by a certain Mundhir.³⁶⁷ An Edessan historian writing from sources in the 13th century records a detail that shows the Ghassanids to be Christian. The incident took place at Callinicum. A Sassanian military force was under the leadership of Adarmahan. The Edessan chronicler writes:

The forces who were with Mundhir assembled there; and when they fell upon each other, many of the Persians were slaughtered. And at dawn on the following day, when they were ready to join battle, Adarmahan, knowing that he could not fight with Mundhir, cleverly sent (to him) saying, '(Since) tomorrow is Sunday, let us not go into battle, but on the next day, Monday, let us prepare for battle.' And the Romans agreed.³⁶⁸

This passage reveals three facts about the Ghassanids. First, they were considered Roman (Byzantine) by later historians. The forces concerned are entirely Ghassanid led by the Ghassanid ruler. Yet, the chronicler refers to them as Romans. This may be a historical inaccuracy perpetrated by the chronicler, but it could also indicate that the Ghassanids and Byzantines were linked to a point where they were popularly perceived as culturally and politically indistinguishable. Christian influence fell within the Byzantine-Ghassanid relationship, but when the political relationship crumbled, so too did the religious influence.

Second, the delay of battle, which Adarmahan strategically employed so as to escape in the night, was caused by an agreement not to fight on Sunday. This is the

³⁶⁷ This Mudhir should not be confused with Mundhir ibn Nu'mān, also called Dhu Qarnain, a roughly contemporary Lakhmid ruler. See Trimmingham, 192-7.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

Christian Sabbath. That the Ghassanids agreed suggests that they recognized Sunday as the Sabbath, thus reinforcing their Christian orientation. Indeed, why else would Sunday be considered a day worthy of refraining from battle?

Third, assuming that a readiness not to fight on Sunday is evidence of their Christian association, Adarmahan knew there was a Christian element to the Ghassanid federation. This is proven by his suggestion to rest on the Sabbath. He would not have proposed a delay of battle without giving a reason he thought might persuade. The reason he suggested appealed to the Ghassanids' religion, showing his knowledge of their beliefs. It can be further deduced that the Ghassanids were known to be Byzantine allies not only militarily but also, to some extent, religiously. Beginning in 541, the Ghassanids shifted from an Orthodox to a Monophysite outlook.

Yet, the Christian ties between the Ghassanids and Byzantium were stronger than the theological divide between them, and in any case, Byzantium could not afford to lose the Ghassanids as allies.³⁶⁹ However, the Ghassanids considered themselves an autonomous unit separate from Byzantium. They were quick to turn their swords on the empire if they felt they were treated or paid unfairly.³⁷⁰

The Sassanians also employed a tribe along their frontier, the Lakhmids.³⁷¹ Based in Hira along the Sassanian southwestern frontier, the Lakhmids gain authority in the Armenian lands contemporaneously with the Ghassanid growth in power.³⁷² Hira was

³⁶⁹ Frend, 285.

³⁷⁰ The most significant example of this is seen in the advance of Muslim armies out of the peninsula. Around the time the armies were moving north, a Byzantine official made the error of refusing payment to some Arab border guards. The tribes stepped aside and instructed the Muslim armies on the best routes into Palestine. See, Schick, 80.

³⁷¹ Kinda territory was approximately two days journey to Mecca and at the height of its power, the Kinda clan practiced the indigenous religion of the peninsula. Only later, as their power waned, did the Kinda begin to embrace Nestorian Christianity. See Trimingham, 266-8.

³⁷² Trimingham, 115.

largely Christian. A regional gathering of bishops in 424 was held at Hira.³⁷³ That Hira was chosen “shows that the settlement must have been strongly Christian.”³⁷⁴ It is unsurprising then that many Lakhmids were also Christian, though the clan as a whole cannot be said to have been Christian. Arguably the strongest leader of the Lakhmids, Mundhir ibn Nu’mān, was not a Christian, but his wife was. He did not restrict the beliefs of people in territories under his control. He allowed Nestorianism, which as has been shown was always in need of a safe haven, and also allowed Monophysite missionaries to move through his territories.³⁷⁵

Nestorianism existed on the periphery of religious and political activity in the areas concerned in this study. It did find a stronghold in Hira. There is some scholarly disagreement on what influence Hira’s Nestorians could have had on major Arabian populations. Tor Andrae argues that Meccans were in “vital contact” with Nestorian Arabs in Hira, and therefore brought Nestorian influence to the city.³⁷⁶ Ghada Osman, however, emphasizes the Hira-Yathrib relationship, arguing that Monophysite Christianity primarily influenced Meccans, and Nestorianism would have had, if any, an influence on the population in Yathrib.³⁷⁷ From research presented here, it seems that Monophysitism was the dominant interpretation throughout the region, and Arab Nestorians in Hira may have been less influential than previously thought. These conclusions are supported by how Christianity was understood by populations in the peninsula. Frequently, a profession of Christian belief was more a tool for facilitating social and economic interactions, rather than salvation through Christ.

³⁷³ For a review of what was discussed at this synod, see Trimmingham, 190.

³⁷⁴ Trimmingham, 191.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁷⁶ Andrae, 90.

³⁷⁷ Osman, 72.

The Ghassanids and Lakhmids showed some allegiance to Monophysitism and Nestorianism, but it is likely that this allegiance was in name alone. The tumultuous environment in which these nomadic groups lived and fought necessitated some means of bridging the societal and cultural differences between themselves and the empires from which they drew authority and wealth. Christianity provided this bridge. In northwest Arabia, along the border between Monophysite Syria and the difficult terrain of the peninsula, the Ghassanids and other nomadic and semi-sedentary groups understood an allegiance to Christianity “within the context of the political orbit of Byzantium.”³⁷⁸

Syrian Christianity specifically emphasized a church upheld by the religious elite, the monks and priests, who provided spiritual benefits for the masses without their direct participation.³⁷⁹ How much more difficult then was it for a devotion to Monophysitism to permeate a northern peninsula population steeped in indigenous religious practices and lacking consistent guidance from the monastic custodians of the church, particularly for the nomadic groups who did not resign themselves to settling within the spheres of monastic oversight? More than this, nomadic and semi-sedentary groups on the peninsula “rejected authoritarian political forms.”³⁸⁰ Religion and politics were not distinct societal elements, but mutually reinforcing phenomenon. Therefore, the response to a church structure attempting to dictate Christian practice would not have been well received, particularly because these tribal groups were “resistant to any fundamental change in the government of their life.”³⁸¹ This explains why Monophysitism became the dominant interpretation for the Ghassanids, even if the interpretation did not hold lasting sway.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 310.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 309.

³⁸⁰ Hodgson, vol. 1, 149.

³⁸¹ Trimmingham, 309.

For the Lakhmids, a support of Christianity was even more tenuous. Lakhmid rulers understood Christianity in relation to Byzantium, their enemy by consequence of their relationship with the Sassanian Persia. Attitude towards Christians living within their territory was generally neutral but certainly not overt in support, showing an absence of Christian devotion among the Lakhmid leaders.³⁸² While the population under Lakhmid rule did hold some Christians, given the structure of the Syrian Church and the Nestorian's consistently dwindling numbers, it seems unlikely (though not impossible) that Christian influence stemmed from these areas.

However, there is no doubt that Christianity influenced Islam, if for no other reason than because the Gospels were understood by Muhammad and his followers as divine revelation. Influences on the specific ritual actions considered in this study, however, are more difficult to determine. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn.

Christian Influences on Salāt

Recalling the criteria for syncretic influence, it is possible to extract from the broad and complex history of Christian traditions in Northeast Africa and Southwest Asian those elements that could have influenced salāt. The first to consider are the similarities between physical practices in Christian and Muslim prayer. The body position employed in the Syrian Monophysite tradition was cruciform and kneeling, neither of which are present in salāt. However, the Desert Fathers prostrated in prayer, and from Rufinus' writings, it is clear that this practice was not unheard of. Early Muslims did not employ the practice of prostrating towards people, evidenced by the strict Muslim prohibition against submitting to a human being. There is clearly no influence on this

³⁸² Ibid., 189.

point. However, because of the instance of prostration in prayer recorded in the *Historia Monachorum*, influence on *sujud* from the Desert Father's cannot be entirely ruled out.

While prayer for ascetics and monks was ideally unending, for laity, prayer three times a day was encouraged. Though the number of times differ, a similarity in practice between *salāt* and Christian prayer is seen in specific prayer times existing at all.

Christians, particularly in Syria, faced east when praying. However, in *salāt*, the direction faced depended on one's geographic orientation from first Jerusalem, later, Mecca. Thus, there does not appear to be influence on direction faced during prayer.

Finally, from the beginnings of the Christian tradition, ritual washing was considered unnecessary. The Gospel of Mark records Jesus saying, "Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?"³⁸³ Thus, while ritual washing was essential to the correct performance of prayer in Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Islam, Christianity rejected the need for it because circumstances exterior to the body were not seen as polluting prayer.

The second criterion for determining influence is contact. Christianity did not easily spread south into the peninsula. J. Spencer Trimingham succinctly explains why, writing:

Wādi 'l-Qurā, 'the Valley of the Settlements,' stretching from al-'Ulā³⁸⁴ towards the vicinity of the *harrā*³⁸⁵ of Yathrib, constitutes a demarcation line in that the tribes north of it had been related to the cultural spheres of (earlier tribal dynasties tied to Byzantium). Such relationships with early Arab civilizations are reflected in various ways, but, more important, the

³⁸³ Mark 7:18-9.

³⁸⁴ West of the Great Nafud Desert, approximately halfway between the desert and the Red Sea.

³⁸⁵ Basalt desert

settlements and nomads were orientated towards Syria. Politically, they found themselves related, even though but tenuously, with Byzantine authority, while religiously they fell within the radiation zone of Monophysitism.³⁸⁶

In short, this area was a cultural divide. North of the Valley of the Settlements were populations heavily influenced by Syrian and to some extent, Egyptian Monophysitism. South, however, including Yathrib, populations were of another culture and were religiously oriented towards indigenous beliefs as well as the Jewish tradition that had long been established. Also, as stated above, the language of the south was Arabic. Though a sister language to the Aramaic spoken in the northern peninsula and beyond, it was nonetheless a different language, constituting yet another cultural divide. For these reasons, it is reasonable to conclude there was relatively little cross-cultural (including religious) contact on Muhammad by the Lakhmids and northern peninsula Nestorians.

There is no question that tribes of the peninsula were open to Christianization. Monophysitism, driven by vigorous proselytizing, took root in nearly all areas to which it was brought. It encountered resistance in Yemen because of its association with Abyssinia and Byzantium, viewed as aggressive, intrusive and unwanted. Yet in Mecca and Yathrib, Christianity was not a significant force. Though Muhammad probably came in contact with Christians while working as a trader, he was never immersed in a cultural environment boasting a strong Christianity presence. Any Christian presence in Yathrib would have been peripheral to the dominant cultural and religious forces of Judaism and the indigenous belief systems.

³⁸⁶ Trimingham, 120.

From the above investigation, however, it is clear who the Monophysite Christian authorities were – monks. They spoke Aramaic, lived an ascetic lifestyle and lived along trade routes. On the peninsula, these monks lived in hermit's cells and provided a welcome to those making long journeys through the desert.³⁸⁷ From the intense evangelizing sponsored by the Syrian Church, these monks followed the Monophysite theology and ritual, meaning they employed the cruciform position in prayer and prayed several times a day.

The Muslim refugees who found sanctuary in Abyssinia certainly had opportunity to observe Christian prayer ritual, and as they later returned to the peninsula and followed Muhammad to Yathrib, the Prophet would have had opportunity to learn of the Abyssinian practices, which, as has been shown, followed the Syrian liturgy and customs. In the absence of more information from Najrān, it can be taken that Christian practice there was performed in the Syriac Monophysite tradition, because the population was predominantly influenced by Syrian and Abyssinian Monophysitism.

The third criterion is level of contact, and there are two people among Muhammad's acquaintances who could have provided in depth descriptions or performances. These figures are Abu Bakr and the cousin of Muhammad's wife.

Abu Bakr was among the refugees who traveled to Abyssinia. Returning to the peninsula, he was a close companion to Muhammad. Because of his opportunity to learn traditions of the Abyssinian Church and his relationship to Muhammad, it is likely that Christian influence may have come from information he shared with Muhammad. The same holds true for any other refugee who later joined the Muslim community in Yathrib.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 247.

Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, was a cousin of a Christian scholar, Waraqa ibn Naufal ibn Asad ibn 'Abdu'l-'Uzzā. The *Sīrah* reports that Waraqa was "a Christian who had studied the scriptures and was a scholar."³⁸⁸ Upon Muhammad's return from a trading mission to Syria, Khadija heard from her servant (who had accompanied Muhammad) that a monk in Syria had called Muhammad a prophet and on the return trip, two angels had flown above him to keep the sun from burning him.

Khadija's reaction was to consult with her cousin, Waraqa. He, according to the *Sīrah*, responded to the servant's story by saying, "If this is true, Khadija, verily Muhammad is the prophet of this people. I knew that a prophet of this people was to be expected. His time has come."³⁸⁹ Also, after Muhammad's first revelation, Khadija consulted Waraqa. His reply is similar, though more jubilant: "Holy! Holy! Verily by Him in whose hand is Waraqa's soul, if thou has spoken to me in truth, O Khadija, there hath come unto him the greatest Nāmūs (meaning Gabriel) who came to Moses aforetime, and lo, he is the prophet of this people."³⁹⁰

As mentioned earlier, the *Sīrah* must be read with a critical eye, due to its authors' intention of presenting Muhammad as legitimated in the Jewish and Christian belief systems. This story of signs suggesting Muhammad's prophetic status and confirmation by a scholar of Jewish and Christian scripture certainly presents as a product of Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham's theological agenda. However, this does not mean that Waraqa's status as a Christian who "attached himself to Christianity and studied its scriptures until he had thoroughly mastered them" should be rejected.³⁹¹ Indeed, when the obviously biased

³⁸⁸ Guillaume, 83.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 107

³⁹¹ Ibid., 99.

aspects of the story are removed, there is no reason to conclude the basic facts of Waraqa's personality are incorrect.³⁹² Drawing from sources collected by Ghada Osman, Waraqa's character appears to be that of a monk, such as those described above, trained in Syria. That Waraqa had no children or wife suggests he was a monk who took a vow of celibacy.³⁹³ This is supported by the fact that Khadija is reported to have visited him alone, an act that would have been beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior, because she was married and because relations with a first cousin was not taboo. However, Waraqa as a celibate monk posed far less of a threat to Khadija's marriage and reputation.

Waraqā was one of four *hunaḥā* reportedly seeking Abrahamic knowledge and tradition.³⁹⁴ The other three are less remarkable, though two became Christian. In terms of Christian influence on Muhammad, Waraqa appears to be the most likely source for monastic traditions. While there is specific information about Waraqa, it is also clear that Christian monks, largely from the Syrian Church, lived along trade routes in the peninsula. Working as a trader along the profitable route that ran into Syria-Palestine, Muhammad would have had ample opportunity to meet Syrian monks. Thus, knowledge of Christianity would have most likely come from a Monophysite monk, either Waraqa or any other monk in early Muslims' spheres of travel.

Therefore, influence from Christianity on the rituals discussed here suggests that it would have been limited to the number of prayers per day, and this would have been learned through contact with Monophysite monks. Prostration was a known Christian practice in worship, but in Monophysite Syrian worship, it was not in use. Kneeling was

³⁹² Sidney Griffith, "The Gospel in Arabic," *Oriens Christianus*, 69 (1985), 146, and Ghada Osman, "Pre-Islamic Arab Converts to Christianity in Mecca and Medina: An Investigation into the Arabic Sources," *The Muslim World*, 95 (2005): 67-80.

³⁹³ Osman, 70.

³⁹⁴ Guillaume, 98-99.

common to Monophysite worship, but that does not appear in salāt. Syrian monks, and many other Christians, faced east while praying, not to a specific geographic point but to the rising sun. Recalling the criteria for influence – similarity in ritual, contact and extent of contact – it seems that the most likely influence was in prayer times and number.

Muhammad certainly had opportunity to observe Monophysite Christians at prayer, but they would not have provided much influence because the first criterion, similarity in ritual, is not satisfied. This conclusion is not definitive, but it is, in this scholar's opinion, the most likely conclusion. A syncretic influence on the specific rituals discussed here from Christianity is not supported by evidence, save the number of prayers performed.

Chapter 9: Conclusions on the Origins of Salāt

To understand Islam, one must understand salāt. It is the means by which a Muslim actively displays submission to God, which is perhaps the most important concept in Islam. It is one of the primary obligations proscribed in the Qur'an, and therefore, can be understood as Muhammad's practice, for it was from the Prophet's lips that the Qur'an and command to perform salāt was first uttered. Though it has not received much secular study, the development of salāt is clearly a central part of Islamic history. Therefore, determining influences from practices in other religions aids in a clearer picture of how Islam began and grew in the region.

The topic, however, is a difficult area to study, largely because of the incomplete written record as it relates to prayer ritual in many of the sixth and seventh century religious traditions in the region. While deciphering the origins of salāt is a formidable challenge, this study has shown that a close inspection of sources that are available combined with a historical review of various theologies and cultural relationships yields a clearer picture of how ritual prayer was practiced during Muhammad's time. Using the phenomenon of syncretism and applying the criteria of similarities in practice, contact and the extent of it is a means of understanding how the salāt ritual was formed.

As mentioned in the introduction, this study has not sought to define the essence of salāt. Ritual, theology and belief are united in performance of the daily prayer. The elements are inseparable and on the point of essence, salāt must be viewed as purely Islamic. The author thus does not agree with what William Graham calls essence in

origins.³⁹⁵ Rather, the purpose here has been to illuminate a part of Islamic history that has not received exhaustive scholarship.

Religions do not spring into practice fully formed, and because they are the product of human action and thought, they are necessarily a union of human experiences, knowledge and inspiration. As discussed in the section on terms and concepts, syncretism in this study is defined as the use by a religion of a religious practice previously employed in one or more traditions in a different way. Put another way, while the ritual practices discussed in this study may have been similar to those practiced elsewhere in the region, they were distinctly Islamic once incorporated into Muslim worship. Locating practices that meet the criteria for syncretic influence – similarity in action, contact and the extent of contact – is a means of determining syncretism at work. For this reason, religious traditions have been investigated individually so as to isolate and determine the origins of Muslim prayer.

Because Muhammad was a member of the Quraysh tribe, determining contact is unnecessary. Syncretic influence then, according to the criteria employed in this study, should be evident in rituals used in both the indigenous practices and *salāt*. The non-Abrahamic indigenous traditions of the peninsula are difficult to determine, but by piecing together archeological finds and information from various texts, it is possible to understand the indigenous tradition as henotheistic with recognition of a high god, Allah. Worship of deities took place at shrines throughout the peninsula. F.E. Peters found Bedouin graffiti that suggests shrines were “places of prostration.” While there is some debate about whether people practicing the indigenous traditions would have prostrated, records show Bedouin prostrated at the Ka’ba.

³⁹⁵ Graham, 55.

Textual evidence also supports the practice of prostration by *hunafā*. This information must be viewed with some skepticism as there was a propensity of later Muslim writers to support Muhammad's prophetic status through interpretation of pre-Islamic Arabian monotheists. Though there are instances of ritual prostration in other traditions in the region, they are infrequent, and the indigenous practice appears to be the most likely source for prostration in *salāt*.

Muhammad and his followers had frequent and lasting contact with Jews in the region. Contact is established by several sources, such as Muhammad's *Constitution of Medina*, indicating his familiarity with the Jewish tribes in Yathrib. Another source is the Qur'an, which discusses Judaism at length. The criterion of contact is thus proven.

It has been shown that prostration was most likely not practiced by the Jewish communities with whom Muhammad had contact. While it once had a place in worship, it had fallen out of use by the time of Muhammad. However, considering the teachings of Rabbi Rav as they relate to the practice of bowing, it is possible that *rukua* was influenced by the Jewish bow in prayer. This is a tentative conclusion.

A firmer conclusion can be reached on the matter of ritual washing before prayer. Throughout the Jewish communities in Syria-Palestine, Yemen and Yathrib, washing was a common practice. Adhering to tradition, Jews washed their hands and feet with water. In the absence of water, earth was proscribed by the Babylonian Talmud. Virtually the same practice is found in relation to Muslim prayer. Contact and similarity then indicate syncretic influence on this aspect of *salāt*.

Jews at the time faced Jerusalem when praying. The Qur'an shows that Muslims prayed towards Jerusalem first; only later did they pray towards Mecca. This is a clear example of syncretism at work. The similarity is obvious.

Zoroastrianism has also been shown to have been an influence on salāt. One of Muhammad's first followers was Salmān the Persian. Salmān had been at one time a priest in a Zoroastrian fire temple. He was thus privy to the practice of Zoroastrian prayer. Because it was the elite rather than the laity who had the obligation to uphold correct practice, Salmān would have had an intimate understanding of how Zoroastrian prayer was practiced. This included ritual washing and prayer five times a day. Thus, there was close contact between Muhammad, his early followers and at least one person who had firsthand knowledge of Zoroastrian prayer ritual.

The similarities between Zoroastrian washing, prayer times and salāt are clear. As in the Jewish tradition, washing with earth and water was a practice in Zoroastrianism. Unlike Jewish practice, however, earth was required in ritual washing, rather than serving as an alternative to water. However, that the practice existed indicates the possibility for syncretic influence. It is likely that the presence of this practice in both Zoroastrian and Jewish ritual mutually reinforced this aspect of salāt.

More clearly a Zoroastrian influence is praying five times a day. In the Qur'an five times for prayer is not explicitly stated. However, it is clear from hadith that Muhammad prayed five times a day. Because of contact and similarity, it seems that the tradition of performing salāt five times a day was influenced by the Zoroastrian tradition.

Christianity, specifically Monophysite Christianity, was practiced throughout the Northeast Africa, Southwest Asia region. It is likely that Muhammad had contact with

these Christians, the strongest possible contact being Khadija's cousin, Waraqa. Other sources of contact include the monks who lived near trade routes. While there was contact between early Muslims and Christians, evidence does not reveal many similarities between the two faiths' rituals.

It has been shown that prayer times were important to many Christians in the region. It was expected that Monophysite Christians pray at least three times a day. Frequency of prayer is then presumably a Christian influence on *salāt*. Because this was a practice important in other religious traditions in the region, most notably Zoroastrianism, it seems that Christian prayer times were influential in conjunction with other rituals.

Many Christians, particularly monks, faced east when praying in anticipation of Christ's return. They did not face a fixed geographic location, such as Jerusalem. There is evidence of Christian prostration in Egypt, but it does not appear to have been a practice common to those Christians early Muslims were likely to have had contact with. Because the gospels record Jesus saying that purity is based on the inner being and not the physical body, it seems unlikely that ritual washing would have been employed by Christians in the region at the time. While there was little Christian influence on the *salāt* rituals considered here, that does not mean that other aspects of Christian practice and theology did not influence Islam. They certainly did, but evidence does not support influence on *salāt*.

This study has intentionally not attempted to answer the question of why *salāt* includes certain rituals and ignores others. Nor has this study delved into the issue of how specific rituals were selected. These are questions that may never be answered. However, as modern scholarly study advances, accumulating ever more archeological finds, time-

period texts and in-depth studies, future research and writing may move towards answering the difficult questions of why and how.

Then again, in religious history, inspiration is an influence that must be considered when deciphering the historical record. Since the beginning of Islam, many Muslims have looked to Muhammad and his companions for an example of pious salāt practice. Hodgson writes that “if something is possible (though proof or disproof is unattainable), and if it is desirable, then it may be presumed true until disproven.”³⁹⁶ Who can conclude with certainty that the daily prayer ritual was simply an assembly of pre-existing rituals, Muhammad and his early followers mere compilers of practice? Responsible historical scholarship must make room for the possibility that inspiration was as much a factor in the formation of salāt as the phenomenon of syncretism. Nevertheless, this study has shown that non-Islamic rituals did influence the formation of Muslim prayer.

³⁹⁶ Hodgson, vol. 1, 159.

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