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"NOTHING BUT TIME DESTROYS US": THE DENIERS OF RESURRECTION IN THE QUR'ĀN

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Abstract

In this posthumously published paper, Patricia Crone (d. 2015) examines a corpus of verses in the Qur'ān in which the *mushrikūn*, the supposedly pagan opponents of the qur'ānic prophet, are portrayed as objecting to the doctrine of the resurrection, one of the central tenets of the Qur'ān. In contrast to the traditional understanding of the *mushrikūn* as idolaters ignorant of monotheism, the evidence of the Qur'ān itself suggests that the *mushrikūn* were familiar with the concepts of judgment and resurrection but were either skeptical about them or denied them outright. The Qur'ān attributes statements to them that indicate that the resurrection was an ancestral doctrine they had come to reject, not a new teaching. Not only do the *mushrikūn* appear to have been directly familiar with monotheistic concepts, but the Qur'ān attributes statements to them that seem to reflect biblical phraseology. The author concludes that the most radical deniers may have represented a strain of eternalism or rationalism current in the late antique world in which the Qur'ān was revealed.

Editor's Introduction: Patricia Crone (1945–2015)

In the preface to the first volume of her *Collected Studies in Three Volumes* (published not long after her passing in July 2015), Patricia Crone makes a poignant remark about legacy and remembrance:

> Would you not like to be understood for what you were in your own time rather than what some will make of you? We live short lives, try to make our

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> mark, hoping for some kind of afterlife in memories about us. We owe it to past people to try to understand them, just as we hope future people will respect us.[1]

There are few scholars today whose legacy is as assured as that of Patricia Crone. Her influence on the contemporary study of the Qurʾān and Islamic origins is practically unmatched among scholars of her generation, and she is guaranteed a place among the titans in the field. Her contribution to the study of early and classical Islamic tradition has likewise been monumental.

Although Professor Crone is talking about Muḥammad in the quotation above, it is difficult not to detect a subtext to her observation that we would all prefer to be remembered for what we actually were and did rather than for what others said we were and did, for she was extremely conscious of the degree and frequency with which her work had been misrepresented. Like her mentor John Wansbrough, she is still often subject to attacks by people who have not read her carefully—sometimes one wonders if they have read her at all—but who claim to be able to refute or correct her, or seek to persuade others that her ideas have no merit.

It has seemed quite appropriate to introduce this piece in such a fashion because the subject at hand is, of course, immortality. When initial planning for this journal began some years ago, I approached Professor Crone about contributing to the inaugural issue. During one of the sessions of the Qurʾān Seminar organized by Gabriel Said Reynolds and Mehdi Azaiez at Notre Dame during 2012–2013, we discussed a recurring theme in her work over the years, namely that of a third site of importance to the proto-Islamic community alluded to in the Qurʾān besides Mecca and Medina—that is, another city, presumably in northern Arabia, that might have been an arena for the unfolding of the critical events that shaped the early *ummah* alongside the two Hijazi locations celebrated and sanctified by later tradition. We talked about the possibility of her revisiting this subject, perhaps in the light of new developments in the study of political consolidation and the spread of Christianity in northern Arabia.[2] After Professor Crone's passing, I contacted her literary executor, Michael Cook, in the hopes that she had commenced working on this piece. Investigation yielded the discovery that she had not been able to undertake the project of which we had spoken, but that she had

1. Patricia Crone, *The Qurʾānic Pagans and Related Matters. Collected Studies in Three Volumes, Volume 1,* ed. Hanna Siurua (IHC 129; Leiden: Brill, 2016) (hereafter *CS1*), xii.

2. Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Therese Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam: Verbreitung und konfessionelle Zugehörigkeit. Eine Hinführung* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007); see also now Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) and Isabel Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra: Eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

earmarked a talk on a different subject she had given at Notre Dame in 2011 as a potential contribution instead.[3]

The present piece is the result. It treats a group of statements by the opponents of the qur'ānic prophet in which they express skepticism about the resurrection. It should be located in the context of a larger collection of studies by Professor Crone concerning the worldview of these supposedly pagan adversaries, a worldview that—contrary to the assertions of the mature Islamic tradition—can hardly be reduced to "paganism" at all. As she herself acknowledged, Professor Crone's research in this area was spurred by the groundbreaking study of G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam,* in which Hawting argues that based on the evidence of the Qur'ān itself, one would not naturally conclude that the qur'ānic *mushrikūn* were polytheists, but rather, it seems, subscribed to some form of monotheism that the qur'ānic prophet deemed insufficient or incomplete.[4] Professor Crone subsequently devoted a number of articles to the systematic attempt to discern the actual contours of the religious outlook of these "pagans."

Professor Crone discusses the subject of the denial of the resurrection by the *mushrikūn* at greater length in a two-part article published in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* in 2012–2013.[5] There is significant overlap between the present piece and that article, but the material is approached from a somewhat different direction here. In particular, Professor Crone's focus in the present piece is on the interpretation of the qur'ānic statements about time, death, and future punishment attributed to the Prophet's opponents. Thus, despite the overlap with the *BSOAS* article, the treatment of the subject in its present form has particular value for those interested in the Qur'ān, and so has seemed entirely suitable for inclusion here in the inaugural issue of *JIQSA*.

In the aforementioned preface to volume 1 of her *Collected Studies,* Professor Crone is disarmingly candid about her scholarly engagement with the Qur'ān. She notes that after the publication of *Hagarism,* coauthored with Michael Cook—a work that earned both of them a seemingly unshakeable reputation as radical revisionists—she did not address the subject of the

3. The original talk, entitled "Who Were the Deniers of the Resurrection in the Qur'an?," was delivered on October 6, 2011 at the Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame. Professor Crone's contributions to the Qur'ān Seminar project are included in Mehdi Azaiez et al. (eds.), *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

4. G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

5. Patricia Crone, "The Quranic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection (Part I)," *BSOAS* 75 (2012): 445–472 (= *CSI,* 125–158); eadem, "The Quranic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection (Part II)," *BSOAS* 76 (2013): 1–20 (= *CSI,* 159–182).

Qur'ān or Islamic origins again for almost twenty years, being primarily interested in the intervening period in researching and writing about the history of Islam *per se* rather than the foundations of the tradition.[6] A handful of articles about the Qur'ān and related matters in the 1990s led to a much more prolonged engagement with the subject during the final two decades of Professor Crone's life; the majority of her relevant articles on the topic date to 2004–2016, a period during which she also continued a robust publication program on other topics, including two massively important monographs, *God's Rule* (2004) and *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran* (2012).[7]

Professor Crone's pattern of publication during these years is important to note because the articles pertaining to the Qur'ān that she published in this period have now been brought together into the first volume of her *Collected Studies*. Taken as a whole, these groundbreaking articles constitute the equivalent of an indisputably important and deeply challenging monograph in Qur'ānic Studies, focusing on the Qur'ān's place in its late antique milieu and rigorously pursuing the method of allowing the Qur'ān to speak for itself, at least to the extent to which this is possible. The "chapters" of this potential monograph, as significant as any other publication in the field over the last ten years (and surely more significant than most of them), treat issues that have now become central again in the study of the Qur'ān after a prolonged period of neglect: the society and culture in which the Qur'ān was revealed, at least insofar as they may be discerned through their impact on the statements of the scripture itself; the development of the qur'ānic prophet's message to his opponents and the community he sought to reform or overthrow; and Arabian society's relationship to the larger late antique world, particularly the appropriation and adaptation of earlier textual traditions in the Qur'ān's message.

Taken collectively, the message of this collection of articles is loud and clear: not just the Qur'ān itself, but the culture of those who opposed its prophet was deeply imbricated in the larger late antique world, particularly the Jewish, Christian, and biblical traditions, and to see this properly, we must rely on the evidence of the Qur'ān itself and not on later Islamic representations of where the Qur'ān and its prophet came from. Thus, in the piece at hand—a concise rehearsal of Professor Crone's most important insights on the subject—we see that the religiosity implied by the statements the Qur'ān attributes to the *mushrikūn* indicates that these people came from a culture in which monotheistic ideas had significant traction. Not only were

6. Crone, *CS1,* xiii–xiv.

7. Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); eadem, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

the *mushrikūn* familiar with 'Judeo-Christian' ideas, but they appear to have lapsed and *rejected* them, so that we may align their perspective with a larger phenomenon of radical skepticism that was characteristic of the late antique age.

As recovered from her files, the original draft of the paper presented here was supplied with only the barest footnotes. I have added others to supply citations that have seemed indispensable, generally drawn from the longer piece Professor Crone published in *BSOAS* (or, in one instance, from another published article); these have been clearly marked to distinguish them from those she actually provided in the original text. A few of those citations have been altered slightly for the benefit of the reader, and two of her quotations of primary sources expanded slightly for the sake of clarity.

The editors of *JIQSA* must extend special thanks to Michael Cook, Sabine Schmidtke, and especially Hanna Siurua, editor of Professor Crone's *Collected Studies,* for their invaluable assistance. Those of us who were lucky enough to study with her or otherwise receive her advice and tutelage know well that her critiques of students, like her critiques of sources, were blunt and unsentimental, sometimes difficult to hear, but judicious, fair, and indisputably beneficial. We offer our condolences to those students, as well as to Professor Crone's family and friends; they surely need no reminder of her gracious personality and inimitable style of teaching, but we hope nevertheless that this presentation of a small, final part of her work serves as fitting testimony to her scholarly legacy, granting her an immortality that no one could ever deny.

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Introduction

One of the main problems in studying the rise of Islam is that we know so little about the context. Our key source is the Qurʾān, but we have no literature from northern Arabia to relate it to, except for poetry that was collected later, and which rarely helps. Most scholars react by going to the exegetical works; there you get lots of information about both the Messenger, Muḥammad, and his opponents, but it does not always inspire trust. The early exegetes commented on each verse as an independent unit regardless of its qurʾānic context, which allowed them to fit each verse into a historical context that they themselves supplied. A generation ago you more or less had to follow the exegetical tradition, but then Muslims themselves began to reject this approach because they wanted to reinterpret the Qurʾān; now Islamicists are also interpreting the Qurʾān in the light of the Qurʾān itself, using the

exegetical literature as secondary literature rather than as an authoritative source.

Yet we still need a context to which to relate the Qur'ān, and it is clear that we have to look for it outside Arabia, in the religious debates of the Near East. It would of course have been better if we had evidence for those debates in Arabia itself, but we do not, and there is enough overlap between what is going on in the world outside and in the Qur'ān for the external material to help.

The question that interests me is this: what kind of religious milieu was it that the Prophet broke away from? Who are the people he calls *mushrikūn*, 'polytheists' or 'pagans,' in the Qur'ān? Formerly, people thought they knew the answer, for the historical tradition, including the exegetes, tells us that the *mushrikūn* were idolaters who worshipped stones and images. However, in 1999 Gerald Hawting showed that this is not actually the picture you get from the Qur'ān.[8] Time and again it is clear that the so-called 'pagans' believed in God, and what is more, the *same* God as the Messenger himself, that is, the God of the biblical tradition. The Messenger calls them polytheists because they *also* believed in lesser beings, who are sometimes called angels and sometimes gods, who functioned more or less like saints in later Islam and Christianity: that is, you hoped they would intercede for you and help you. They were intermediaries.

Some of these intermediaries were, like some saints, female. Those named in the Qur'ān were pagan deities known from Arabian archaeology and epigraphy, such as the goddesses al-Lāt, Manāt, and al-'Uzzā. Pagan deities were often reduced to angels in Late Antiquity. In a famous Greek inscription of the third century, Apollo speaks of himself and other Greek gods as "angels," and as small parts of God.[9] The old Near Eastern deities Nirig, Sin, Shamash, Bel, and Nanai appear as "holy angels" on an Aramaic magic bowl in Sasanian Iraq; the old deity Baalshamin turned into the angel Balsamos in Manichaeism.[10] Apparently, something similar was taking place in Arabia.

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8. [Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*; see my comments above concerning Professor Crone's remarks about this work elsewhere. –MP]

9. A third-century inscription from Oenoanda in Lycia proclaims: "Born of itself, untaught, without a mother, unshakable, not contained in a name, known by many names, dwelling in fire, this is God. We, his angels, are a small part of God" (Stephen Mitchell, "The Cult of Theos Hypsistos between Pagans, Jews, and Christians," in Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 81–148, 86).

10. [James Alan Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1913), no. 36; *Cologne Mani Codex*, line 49, in Iain Gardner and Samuel N. C. Lieu (eds.), *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 54. These citations have been supplied from Patricia Crone,

So the *mushrikūn* were monotheists who operated with mediator figures, which were at least sometimes pagan deities by origin, and this outraged the Messenger. But apart from this, there is hardly anything pagan in the Qur'ān, and not a lot of disagreement between the Messenger and the so-called 'pagans' either. There are only three big points of disagreement between them: (1) the mediators, or "partners" (*shurakā'*), as the Messenger calls them; (2) the Day of Judgment and the resurrection; and (3) the Messenger's own prophetic status. That is all; agreement is presumed on all the rest. The Messenger and his opponents came from the same people, and apparently they had all grown up as monotheists, but not as *true* monotheists, as the Messenger eventually decides. What I want to do here is to look at those who denied the resurrection.

Believers, Doubters, and Deniers

As everyone knows, the Messenger of the Qur'ān was a doomsday prophet. People had to repent, for it would not be long before the Day of Judgment would come, and all sinners would go to Hell. This is the message of the *sūrah*s classified as Meccan, on which the present paper focuses. In one passage in Sūrat al-Maʿārij the Messenger says:

> Someone has asked about the punishment to come. The unbelievers (*kāfirūn*) cannot avert it. …They see it as far away (*baʿīd*), and We see it as close (*qarīb*). (Q Maʿārij 70:1–2, 6–7)

So some unbelievers in Mecca *believed* in the Day of Judgment, they just did not think it would come anytime soon. But there were also unbelievers who had their doubts. For example, we hear about a rich man who

> went into his garden… and said, "I do not think that this will ever perish, nor do I think that the Hour is coming. But *if* I am brought back to my Lord, I shall surely find [there] something better in exchange." (Q Kahf 18:35–36)

This man sounds like an eternalist: he thought the world would last forever. Yet he was also willing to consider the alternative, and assumed that he would do fine under those circumstances too. He was not worried about the Day of Judgment, even as someone who believed in it. That was the trouble with a lot of the unbelievers in Mecca.

"The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities," *Arabica* 57 (2010): 151–200, 186 (= *CSI*, 86), n. 73–74. –MP]

However, we often hear of people who express doubt about the Day of Judgment:

> When we are dust, shall we [return] in a new creation (*khalq jadīd*)? (Q Raʿd 13:5; similarly Isrā' 17:49, 98; Sabā' 34:7)
>
> When we die and become dust and bones, shall we be raised up again, and also our forefathers (*ābāʾunā al-awwalūn*)? (Q Ṣāffāt 37:16–17)
>
> When we die and become dust and bones, shall be we judged? (Q 37:53)

And so on; there are many more examples. God retorts:

> Does man think that We cannot assemble his bones? (Q Qiyāmah 75:3)
>
> If you have doubts about the resurrection (*al-baʿth*), [remember that] We created you from dust… (Q Ḥajj 22:5)

You cannot always be sure whether the opponents doubt or actually deny the resurrection, but some are certainly described as categorically denying it:

> They deny the Hour… (Q Furqān 25:11)
>
> The unbelievers say, 'The hour will never come to us.' (Q Sabā' 34:3)

Sometimes they deny not only the resurrection but the afterlife altogether:

> There is nothing but our life down here; we will not be resurrected. (Q Anʿām 6:29)

The leading people of a past nation, "who did not believe and who denied the meeting in the hereafter," said the same:

> There is nothing but our life down here. We die and we live, but we will not be resurrected. (Q Muʾminūn 23:37)

In the same vein, the Messenger's contemporaries said:

> There is nothing apart from our present life. We die and we live, and nothing but time destroys us (*mā yuhlikunā illā al-dahr*). (Q Jāthiyah 45:24)

So three positions are described in the Qurʾān: belief in the resurrection, skepticism about it, and outright denial of it. Those who denied the resurrection seem always to have denied the afterlife altogether—at least we never hear from them of any other form of the afterlife.

I want to zoom in on these hardline deniers. Who were they? They were certainly what the Qur'ān calls polytheists (*mushrikūn*), for in Sūrat al-Najm we find that

> those who do not believe in the hereafter (*lā yu'minūna bi'l-ākhirati*) name the angels by female names… (Q Najm 53:27)

—the angels in this *sūrah* being al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt.[11] Yet it is as believers in God that the polytheists deny the resurrection:

> They swear their strongest oath by God that God will never resurrect those who die. (Q Naḥl 16:38)

They sound rather like the fifteenth-century Diego de Barrionuevo:

> I swear to God that Hell and Paradise are nothing more than a way of frightening us, like people saying to children, "the bogeyman will get you."[12]

Ancient Fables

If the Messenger's opponents were biblical monotheists, then one would expect them to have grown up believing in the resurrection, like this Diego. In fact, some of them still believed in the resurrection and others merely doubted it. But even those who denied it outright speak of it as a stupid old doctrine, not as a new claim introduced by the Messenger:

> What, when we have become dust, we and our fathers, shall we be raised from the dead? We and our fathers were promised/threatened (*wu'idnā*) this before; it is nothing but fables of the ancients (*asāṭīr al-awwalīn*). (Q Naml 27:67–68)[13]

The unbelievers could, of course, be saying that their forefathers knew the doctrine of the resurrection as something that *others* believed in, but to which they had never subscribed themselves; however, in a review of the reasons that they might have for rejecting the Messenger, God Himself asks:

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11. [As specified previously in vss.19–20 of Sūrat al-Najm. –MP]

12. John Edwards, "Religious Faith and Doubt in Late Medieval Spain: Soria *circa* 1450–1500," *Past and Present* 120 (1988): 3–25, 25.

13. [In "Quranic *Mushrikūn*," Professor Crone notes the attempts by both classical exegetes and modern scholars to discern what these "fables" could have been; see "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (I)," 455 (= *CS1,* 136), n. 21. –MP]

> Have they not pondered the words (*al-qawl*), or has anything come to them which did *not* come to their ancient fathers? (Q 23:68)

God's point is clearly that nothing the Messenger is saying departs from their own ancestral doctrines. Further evidence for this view appears in the following vignette:

> The one who says to his parents, "Ugh, are you promising (or threatening, *ta'idāninī*) me that I will be resurrected (lit. got out, *ukhraja*) even though generations have passed away before me?" And they [the parents] ask for God's help [saying to the son], "Woe to you, believe! God's promise/threat (*wa'd*) is true!" But he says, "It is nothing but fables of the ancients." (Q Aḥqāf 46:17)

What is so striking about this passage is that it is the parents who play the role of believers and the son who is cast as an arrogant denier of the resurrection. If the Messenger had introduced the doctrine of the resurrection to pagans who had been holding out against it, it should obviously have been the older generation that typified denial of this doctrine, while the son should have stood for the younger generation who were willing to break with their parents for the sake of the truth. Instead, the parents are believers while the son dismisses the doctrine as old nonsense. Thus the denial of the resurrection is here described as a new doctrine that was leading the young astray.

There is another passage that starts by telling us that the unbelievers dismiss the resurrection as ancient fables (Q 23:82–83) and continues by asking a series of questions designed to bring out the absurdity of the unbelievers' position:

> Say, "To whom belongs the earth and all in it, if you know?" They will say, "To God!" Say, "Why won't you let yourselves be admonished?" (Q 23:84–85)

And again:

> Say: "Who is lord of the seven heavens, and the lord of the mighty throne?" They will say, "[They are] God's!" …Say: "In whose hand is the dominion (*malakūt*) over all things… ?" They will say, "God's!" Say: "How can you then be so deluded?" (Q 23:86–89)

The Messenger cannot understand how the unbelievers can think of God as the lord of the universe and yet deny the resurrection. However, here you have a passage showing that the opponents came from the same biblical tradition as he did: they think in terms of seven heavens and of God's having a throne, and they know the term *malakūt*.

The "First Death"

Now I want to adduce some more specific evidence. On one occasion the hardliners say,

> There is nothing apart from our first death—we will not be resurrected. (Q Dukhān 44:35)

Why not say there is nothing apart from our first *life*? Later in the same *sūrah*, the Messenger says of the people in Paradise:

> They will not taste death there, except the first death. (Q 44:56)

The first death here is the death they have already experienced.[14] So what is the *second* death? This expression is not actually used in the Qur'ān, and for this reason the exegetes had trouble with it. However, it does appear in the Jewish targums, the Talmud, the Apocalypse of John, Syriac texts, a Greek work preserved only in Ethiopic, and Manichaean literature. In this literature, the "second death" stands for eternal damnation.[15] What the unbelievers are saying when they insist that there is only one death is that they will not go to Hell, because there is no such thing: they will not be resurrected.

This is confirmed by another qur'ānic passage in which the unbelievers condemned to Hell tell God that they now realize that

> twice you have made us die (*amattanā*) and twice you have made us live (*aḥyaytanā*). (Q Ghāfir 40:11)

Again, the second death here is clearly the eternal damnation that the unbelievers are now suffering. In line with this, a story set in the future depicts people in Paradise chatting and passing the cup around. One man tells of how he had a friend who did not believe in the resurrection. He now saw the friend suffering in Hell for his denial and praises God for having himself escaped this fate. The Messenger then asks,

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14. Zamakhsharī has an abstruse explanation involving the idea that we were dead before we were born, so that when we die it is for the second time. But this is disproved by the passage in which the Messenger himself says that people of Paradise will not taste death, except the first death. The reference must be to the death that they have already died, as Zamakhsharī himself accepts. In other words, our death down here is the first death, not the second. [Cf. "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (I)," 457–458 (= *CS1,* 139–140), citing Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf ad* Q 44:35. –MP.]

15. [For detailed discussion and citation of these varied sources, see "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (I)," 458–461 (= *CS1,* 140–143). –MP]

> So will we [really] not die more than our first death and will we [really] not be punished? (Q 37:58–59)

The hapless friend is suffering the second death in Hell that the unbelievers denied.

It is almost always the unbelievers who speak of the first death, or have their own words turned against them. The Messenger uses the expression only once, in Q 44:56 (cited above); in other passages, he says of the one who enters the Fire *not* that he is dying a second death but, on the contrary, that he will never die there (Q Fāṭir 35:36) or that "he will neither die there nor live" (Q Aʿlā 87:13). So the idea of eternal damnation as the second death seems to have come more naturally to the unbelievers than it did to the Messenger. One may infer that they had all learned the expression as part of the religious vocabulary of the community in which they grew up. The *mushrikūn* are denying the resurrection and eternal damnation in the language in which these doctrines had been taught to them. It is the Messenger who is breaking away from this community and developing new imagery to express his own view of them.

"We Die and We Live"

In two of the qurʾānic passages we have already seen, the unbelievers say,

> *We die and we live*, but we will not be resurrected. (Q 23:37)
>
> *We die and we live*. Nothing but time destroys us. (Q 45:24)

Why do they use that word order? The exegetes explain that the unbelievers meant that "we die but our children live on" or "some of us die but others live." However, the Messenger uses the same word order himself:

> [The unbelievers] have adopted gods who do not create, who can do nothing and who have no power over *death, life, or the resurrection*. (Q 25:3)[16]

We have seen it also in the verse in which the unbelievers in Hell say,

> Twice You have made us die (*amattanā*) and twice You have made us live (*aḥyaytanā*). (Q 40:11)

We seem to be dealing with a fixed expression. This is what it seems to reflect:

16. The exegetes do not say anything about the word order here.

> I, even I, am He; there is no god besides me. I kill/make dead (*āmît*) and I make alive (*ăḥayeh*)… (Deut 32:39)

Another passage echoes God's speech in Deuteronomy:

> The Lord kills (*mēmît*) and brings to life (*məḥayeh*)… (1 Samuel 2:6)

In 2 Kings 5:7, an Israelite king asks:

> Am I God to kill and to make alive (*ləhāmît ûlhaḥăyôt*)?

I don't know why God used this word order in His first book, but it came in handy when Jewish exegetes began to look for proof of the resurrection in their scripture. It now seemed self-evident to them that when God said, "I kill and I make alive," He was talking about death and resurrection. Jews who denied the resurrection said no—that it meant that God killed one person and gave life to another. The rabbis responded by adducing the next part of Deuteronomy 32:39, "I wound and I heal," which proved to them that God was talking about one and the same person: just as God healed whomever He had wounded, so He would resurrect those whom He had killed. At least, that is what Raba, a Babylonian rabbi who died in 322, argued.[17]

The commentators on the Qur'ān may well be right when they take the *mushrikūn* to be saying that "some of us die and some of us live," or "we die and our children live on," but you need the Hebrew Bible passage to see why they expressed themselves like that. The Qur'ān uses the same word order in refutation of the polytheists on two occasions, as we have seen, but elsewhere God says of Himself:

> Say: it is God who gives life and kills/makes dead (*yuḥyī wa-yumītu*). (Q 44:8)
>
> It is We who give life and We who bring death. (Q Ḥijr 15:23)
>
> It is He who gives life and death. (Q Ḥadīd 57:2)

He is correcting the inversion. Like the expression "the first death," the inverted word order shows the polytheists to be closer to the biblical or parabiblical literature than the Messenger was. It is the *mushrikūn* who deny the inverted word order derived from the community, because that was the

17. Yifat Monnickendam, "'I Bring Death and Give Life, I Wound and Heal' (Deut. 32:39): Two Versions of the Polemic on the Resurrection of the Dead," *Hen* 35 (2013): 90–118 (Hebrew original published in *Tarbiz* 76 (2007): 329–352). My thanks to Menahem Kister for drawing my attention to this study and to Dr. Monnickendam for allowing to me read the English version before publication.

formulation in which the doctrine was defended in communities in which the Pentateuch, or books derived from it, were authoritative. For his part, the Messenger is correcting the word order because he no longer feels bound by their scripture.

The concept of damnation as the second death was common among Jews and Christians, as well as Mandaeans and Manichaeans, but the allusion to Deuteronomy 32:39 points in a Jewish direction. It was the Jews who had to find their prooftexts for the resurrection in the Pentateuch. Still, there were some Christians who used it as well. The Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, probably composed in Antioch or Edessa around 300–320, used it.[18] More strikingly, so does Aphrahat, a Christian from the Sasanian side of the border who died around 345. He tells us that it is right for us to fear the second death, and that terrible suffering awaits the wicked who do not believe in the resurrection, concluding (after diverse other points) that the living mouth testifies, "I kill and I make alive." He also adduces other pentateuchal passages used by the rabbis concerning the second death.[19] The Pseudo-Clementines are Jewish Christian, and Aphrahat represents a Christianity that is both close to the traditions of the rabbis and deeply hostile to Judaism, probably because the local Jewish and Christian communities were not fully distinct in his time. In short, the religious environment in which the *mushrikūn* and the Messenger had grown up seems to belong somewhere on the spectrum between Judaism and a Christianity close to its Jewish roots.

I have to remind you that you should not envisage the qurʾānic environment as some place in the desert full of bedouin. The Qurʾān indicates that we are in an agricultural community within the olive-growing zone, with a fair degree of literacy. You also hear a lot about religious disputation, and the disputations seem to have been of the formal kind popular all over the Near East. So it was quite a developed environment.

In line with this, the so-called 'pagans' come across as a varied lot. There were at least three different kinds of them. The first were what you might call traditional believers, who saw God as the creator and ruler of everything, venerated the lesser beings as intercessors, and believed in the resurrection as

18. *The Clementine Homilies* 20.3 (*ANF* 8.82).

19. [In "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (I)" Professor Crone cites Aphrahat in the Latin edition of Parisot and the English translation of Valavanolickal; here I substitute references to the more recent and widely available translation of Adam Lehto instead: *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 27; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010). For Aphrahat's discussion of the second death, see *Demonstrations* 8.19–25 (trans. Lehto, 232–236), and cf. 7.25 (trans. Lehto, 215–216). For his citation of Deut 32:39, see 8.10, 25; 22.3 (trans. Lehto, 226, 236, 461); for Deut 33:6, see 22.1–3 (trans. Lehto, 460–462). Professor Crone acknowledges Joseph Witztum for drawing her attention to Aphrahat's use of Deut 32:39. –MP]

well as in messengers. Their error, from the Messenger's point of view, lay in their veneration of the lesser beings, their lack of anxiety about the Day of Judgment, and their rejection of him. The second lot are really a subgroup of the first. They also believed in God as the creator and governor of all things (see Q 23:82–89), and they too venerated lesser beings, but they had lost faith in the resurrection: some doubted it, others denied it outright. You can call them the traditional deniers.

The third lot are the radicals, and there are only a few passages on them, so they are unlikely to have been numerous. The only certain passage about them is the one in which the unbelievers say, "We die and we live, and nothing but time destroys us." In other words, God does not bring death or life, as He claims in Deuteronomy and as the unbelievers deny by using the Deuteronomic word order. They cannot have seen Him as the creator, ruler, or judge of the universe either. Then there is the rich man who went into his garden saying, "I do not think that this will ever perish." Maybe he was just speaking hyperbolically, but, as I said, he sounds like an eternalist, someone who believes that the universe has no beginning or end, and so no creator, ruler, or judge either. This third lot use a strikingly reductionist formulation, and you have that elsewhere too: "nothing but time destroys us"; "there is nothing but our life down here"; the resurrection is "nothing but fables of the ancients." Reductionism is characteristic of positivists, who hold reason to rule out claims based on revelation. Did they believe in God or the lesser beings? I would assume not, but there is no way of proving it.

I do wish to mention, though, that you also meet people who sound like positivists in Medinan *sūrah*s as well. They pretend to believe in God and the Last Day, but they don't, and when they are told to, they say, "Shall we believe as the fools believe?" (Q Baqarah 2:13). The Messenger angrily responds that *they* are the fools, perhaps with reference to Psalms 14:1, "The fool says in his heart: there is no God." We also hear of People of the Book, and specifically Jews, who do not believe in God and the Last Day in the Medinan *sūrah*s, but this material is extremely complicated, so I leave it aside to go outside Arabia.[20]

Deniers of Resurrection outside Arabia

There is plenty of evidence outside Arabia of people who denied the resurrection and/or the afterlife altogether, usually in a rationalist vein. You find them among Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews alike.[21]

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20. [Professor Crone discusses the Medinan material briefly in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (I)," 471–472 (= *CSI*, 157–158). –MP]

21. [This section represents only a brief rehearsal of the main points of the

On the Zoroastrian side, the attestations start to appear in the third century, when the priest Kerdīr put up three big inscriptions proclaiming that he had been on a heavenly journey and seen Paradise and Hell with his own eyes:

> He who sees this text
> May he not be incredulous of the things beyond
> for he should hold it to be certain that there is a Paradise,
> there is a Hell, and the one who does good will go to Paradise,
> the one who sins will be cast into hell.[22]

There were clearly people who had doubted or denied this. In fact, there are surprisingly many references to disbelief in the afterlife and in God or the gods in Zoroastrian literature, several of them dating to the sixth century.[23]

On the Jewish side, there is nothing unusual about denial of the afterlife, at least not if you go sufficiently far back in time.[24] There is a fair amount of evidence relating to the period from around 200 to 400, but let me go straight to 553. In that year, Justinian (r. 527–565) issued a famous novella in which he took it upon himself to legislate about the language to be used in the synagogue service and in which he added the following warning on a completely different subject:

> And if there are some people among them who shall attempt to introduce ungodly nonsense, denying either the resurrection or the last judgement or that the angels exist as God's work and creation, we want these people expelled from all places, and that no word of blasphemy of this kind and absolutely no erring from that knowledge of God shall be spoken. We impose the harshest punishments on those attempting to utter such nonsense, completely purifying in this way the nation of the Hebrews from the error introduced into it.[25]

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second part of Professor Crone's *BSOAS* article on this topic, "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 1–20 (= *CS1,* 159–182). –MP]

22. [Cited in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 4 (= *CS1,* 162), n. 11: trans. D. N. Mackenzie in Georgina Herrmann, *The Sasanian Rock Reliefs at Naqsh-i Rustam: Naqsh-i Rustam 6, The Triumph of Shapur I* (Iranische Denkmäler 13, Reihe 2, Iranische Felsrelief I; Berlin: D. Reimer, 1989), 61; Philippe Gignoux (ed. and trans.), *Les Quatres inscriptions du mage Kirdīr* (Cahiers de Studia Iranica 9; Leuven: Peeters, 1991), 99. –MP]

23. [Professor Crone relates these in more detail in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 4–5 (= *CS1,* 162–164). –MP]

24. [The most famous example is that of the Sadducees, whom Professor Crone discusses briefly in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 7 (= *CS1,* 166). –MP.]

25. [Originally cited in abbreviated form, and here given in full as cited in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 7–8 (= *CS1,* 166–167): Novella 146 (*Peri Hebraiōn*), cap. 2, in Amnon Linder (ed. and trans.), *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit: Wayne

Here there are two heresies addressed: denial of the resurrection and the Last Judgment, and denial that the angels exist as God's creation. Whether the first heresy amounts to a denial of the afterlife altogether one cannot tell. The second heresy was not to the effect that the angels did not exist at all, but rather that they were uncreated. Apparently, they were regarded as divine. This is nothing if not intriguing: it is exactly the same concatenation of heresies that we meet in the Qur'ān. It is hard to believe that there is no connection.

On the Greco-Roman side, there was also nothing unusual about denial of life after death back in the days when the empire was pagan, but you hear much about such denial after the victory of Christianity as well. Gregory of Nyssa (d. after 394) composed a dialogue in which he takes the role of the doubter who suspects that the soul dies with the body. He explains to his sister that scripture orders one to believe in the immortality of the soul, so one does so "by a kind of interior slavery, rather than assenting to the argument by a voluntary impulse."[26] The problem is this:

> [T]he body, being composite, must be dissolved into those elements from which it is composed. When the combination of the elements in the body is broken up, each element is likely to be drawn to its own kind. The very nature of the elements returns each to its own kind by some inevitable attraction… So where will the soul be after this? Anyone who says that it is in the elements will have to admit that it is identical with them. …It cannot be in the elements if its nature is different, and there is no other place in the universe where the soul could be…[27]

That everything was composed of four elements (earth, air, fire, water) or four elementary qualities (hot, cold, wet, dry) was the axiom on which all late antique science was based. But if that was true of the soul, it could not survive as an independent entity, and how could the soul be an exception? Gregory's sister groans that he is arguing like the Stoics and Epicureans. She does not deny that the universe is made of four elements; she just thinks there are also things that you can only see with the mind. People who deny that even go so far as to eliminate the very divinity that maintains the universe, she says. But whoever says that "there is no God" is a fool: she explicitly quotes Psalms 14:1. Gregory agrees, and so she manages to convince him.

State University Press and Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1987), 409. –MP.]

26. St Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 29.

27. Ibid., 30–31. [The passage from Gregory of Nyssa is cited in a slightly different way in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 11–12 (= *CS1*, 171–172). –MP]

The doubter here is envisaged as an educated Christian who continues to think in the empirical terms associated with non-Platonic philosophy: all beliefs must ultimately be grounded in sense perception. If you take that view, there are only two arguments in favor of God: one is the fact that all humans seem to have the idea, and the other is that the universe is so well ordered that there must be a mind behind it. You could also respond, however, that God is not a separate being up there; rather, He permeates the world and is in everything—this was the Stoic position. You could also argue that chance can account for the order—this was the Epicurean position. But the idea of the world as the outcome of chance struck most people as implausible until the discovery of natural evolution, so the standard argument for God's existence was that from design: just look around you and see how ingeniously everything is organized. It is a very old argument, and it is constantly used in the Qur'ān in proof of God's power and the resurrection.

We meet deniers of providence again in Nemesius of Emesa, who wrote around the year 390, and then once more in the work of Theodoret of Cyrrhus, who died around 460 and who wrote a book against such people. They too denied the afterlife. Theodoret tells them,

> Now the [pagan] Greeks… were directed by nature alone and were convinced of the truth of these things. …Their poets and philosophers alike believed and taught that the wicked would be punished and the just rewarded in a future life. …Perhaps you, too, persuaded by nature, instructed by these truths… will join your voice to theirs and agree that these things are so.[28]

They seem to have been Christians, nominally at least, but you had to base your arguments on nature and the ancient Greeks to persuade them.

Around the year 500, we have the famous story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, written to convince people of the reality of the resurrection. It became enormously popular, and the Qur'ān also has it.[29] The attestations of the narrative continue after the Arab conquests: around 700 there were Syrians who wished to know,

> How is it clear that the soul does not die when one does? Some people think so.

The author, Pseudo-Athanasios, himself retorts,

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28. [Theodoret, *On Providence* 9.24: *Theodoret of Cyrus, On Divine Providence*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Ancient Christian Writings 49; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 126–127. Professor Crone deviates slightly from the Halton translation in citing it here, as it preserves a textual error; see the parallel citation in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 13 (= *CSI*, 173–174), n. 66 for clarification. –MP]

29. [This is the narrative of the *aṣḥāb al-kahf*; see Q Kahf 18:7–26. –MP]

> Some foolish people think that the human being does not differ from animals in anything. The death of a human being is just like that of an animal, since [humans] don't have an immortal soul. For, it is said, humans and animals have the same death once their blood has been spilt.[30]

In Iraq, on the former Sasanian side, John of Phenek tells us around 690 that the demons are responsible for a number of errors. Some of them have persuaded men

> that there is no God at all, and others that there is a God but that He is not providential. …They have persuaded others to call the mute elements "God."[31]

We hear much more about such people from the Muslims, who tell us about them under the label of "Dahris."[32]

The Dahris were nominal Muslims who came in endless varieties. Some just denied creation from nothing, while others denied the creation altogether. The most radical of them were eternalists who denied that the world had a creator, ruler, or judge, or that there were any angels, spirits, prophets, or revealed books. They were empiricists who accepted evidence only in the form of sense impressions, above all personal observation, and a limited amount of reasoning. They were also materialists who held everything to be composed of four elementary qualities (*ṭabāʾiʿ*), which were combined and recombined forever. Some held there to be a fifth principle, spirit, which permeates and regulates everything, in the Stoic style. Most of them were doctors, astrologers, and others studying natural phenomena, and they are often called "physicists" or "naturalists" (*aṣḥāb al-ṭabāʾiʿ*). All denied that

30. [Cited in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 15 (= *CSI*, 176), n. 73: Ps.-Athanasios, "Quaestiones ad ducem Antiochum," *MPG* 28, 608, 681 (questions 17, 134); cf. Gilbert Dagron, "L'Ombre d'un doute: l'hagiographie en question, VIe–XIe siècle," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 46 (1992): 59–68, 62ff. Professor Crone here acknowledges Yannis Papadoyannakis as the source for these references. –MP]

31. [Cited in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 15 (= *CSI*, 176), n. 75: John of Phenek, *Book of the Main Points of the History of the Temporal World*, MS Mingana Syr. 179, *memrā* 9. Professor Crone here acknowledges Richard Payne as the source for this reference. –MP]

32. [Or *dahriyyah*, discussed in greater detail in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 15–19 (= *CSI*, 176–181). In the address presented as the author's preface to the third volume of her *Collected Studies,* Professor Crone poignantly notes that, but for lack of time, she would have devoted a book to the Dahris, "Godless people on whom I have written some articles" ("Remarks on Receipt of the 2014 Middle East Medievalists (MEM) Lifetime Achievement Award," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 23 (2015): iii–vi, vi; reprinted in *Islam, the Ancient Near East and Varieties of Godlessness. Collected Studies in Three Volumes, Volume 3,* ed. Hanna Siurua (IHC 131; Leiden: Brill, 2016), xi–xv, xv). –MP]

there was any form of afterlife. When the body died, the entire human being, including what others called the soul, reverted to the elementary qualities of which it was composed. Their views can be followed down to the sixth/twelfth century, and to some extent beyond.

The reason they were called Dahris is undoubtedly that the Muslims identified them with the qur'ānic unbelievers who said that nothing but time (*al-dahr*) would destroy them. From the tenth century onwards, this is made explicit. Al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), for example, mentions that some Arab pagans said:

> There is nothing but our life down here, we die and we live.

Then he explains:

> They are referring to the elementary qualities (*al-ṭabāʾiʿ*) which are perceptible in this lower world: they are reducing life and death to the composition and dissolution of these qualities. That which brings them together is nature (*al-ṭabʿ*), and that which destroys them is time: "Nothing but time destroys us…"[33]

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) says much the same, adding that they held the movement of the heavenly sphere to act on the elementary qualities, sometimes resulting in life and sometimes in death, so that there was no need to postulate a maker who makes the choice.[34]

Shahrastānī and his like did not have any independent evidence for such beliefs in pre-Islamic Arabia. They simply inferred from the Qur'ān that they must have existed there.[35] We do not have any independent evidence for the existence of such beliefs in Arabia either, but we do at least know that they existed outside of Arabia at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān. On this basis I would say that their inference is right: the deniers of the resurrection in the Qur'ān belong to a wider trend in the Near East of trying to get away

33. [Cited in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 17 (= *CSI*, 178), n. 79: Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq in Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Al-Mughnī*, vol. 5 (ed. M. M. al-Khuḍayrī; Cairo: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa'l-Irshād al-Qawmī, 1965), 156. –MP]

34. [Cited in "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)," 19 (= *CSI*, 181), n. 92: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr ad* Q 45:24. –MP]

35. [In "Quranic *Mushrikūn* (II)" Professor Crone elaborates at greater length on the points raised here at the end of the conclusion to this paper. There, she notes that the clear implication is that some of the exegetes in fact read the qur'ānic passages discussed here in such a way that they were able to recognize that the *mushrikūn* were not pagans but rather monotheists. That is, the tradition does at times preserve an authentic, or at least non-doctrinaire, conception of the worldview of the *mushrikūn*. –MP]

from a cosmology and morality based on revelation. All have their intellectual roots in pagan systems of thought, and the deniers of the Qur'ān may still be 'pagans' in the sense that they have not formally converted to either Judaism or Christianity. But it is still some Jewish or Christian system that they are trying to get out of.