

Mecca And Its Cube

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[Author's note: Mohammed of Mecca is denoted "MoM". Further evidence for the "Petra Theory" is provided in part 2 of this essay.]

In the opening statements of my monograph on "The Forgotten Diaspora", I address the plight of defending a heterodox theory. (The issue is discussed further in its Postscript.) Did the Ashkenazi Jews REALLY come from the Pontic Steppes? Did they REALLY descend from a Turkic peoples—the former [k]Hazars? My conclusion was YES.

Needless to say, that verdict doesn't sit well with those who are determined to uphold conventional Judaic narratives about pure bloodlines and divinely-ordained homelands. As it happens, similar push-back is encountered the moment one broaches the oft-derided "Petra theory" of Islam's origins. Mention it, and one is often met with a scoff.

Why such obduracy?

It is not easy to disabuse ourselves of misapprehensions when we have come to depend upon those same misapprehensions to maintain hallowed lore. It is no easy task to dump buckets of ice-water over the heads of those who are drunk on an intoxicating dogmatic elixir. After all, hidebound ideologues are determined to not see certain things. And they will begrudge anyone who claims to see what they insist isn't there to be seen. ("I don't believe my lying eyes; so you shouldn't believe yours either.") Sneers ensue.

The present essay is the result of putting my foot down and saying, "Enough's enough." As we'll see, the evidence is there for anyone who cares to look. The problem is that few care to really look.

This doesn't require becoming an expert on the Nabataeans (though that wouldn't hurt). And it doesn't require one to memorize every archeological discovery between Damascus and Aden (though that wouldn't hurt either). What it does require is an open mind, some perspicacity, and a hefty dose of resolve.

So where shall we begin?

As legend has it, at some point in the late 5th century, a Sabaean leader known as Amr ibn Luhay ibn Qamah ibn Khindaf led a band of (Qahtanite) Arabs a thousand kilometers north of his homeland, Himyar (modern-day Yemen) to settle somewhere in the barren deserts of Thamud: the western region of Arabia now known as the Hijaz. His clan, the Banu Khuza'a, may have hailed from any of three major Himyarite cities: Zafar, Najran, or Ma'rib (present-day Sana'a).

A bit of historical context helps to paint the picture. In Zafar, there was a (Qahtanite) cubic shrine known as the "kaaba" at Tabalah. There was another kaaba located at Jabal Taslal in Najran. And there were major temples at Barran and Awwam in Ma'rib—all dedicated to the Sabaean moon-god, "Al-Makah". Sure enough, the Banu Azd of Marib worshipped "Al-Makah"; and made pilgrimages to his temple. Some of the Banu Harith converted to Christianity; and built a church at Najran (known as the "Kaaba of Najran"). Meanwhile, many Himyarites worshipped the godhead, "Rahman" (Semitic for "Merciful").

Some of these locutions should sound oddly familiar.

The question arises: From whence did such pre-Islamic memes come? We find a possible answer in Ibn Hisham's recension of Ibn Ishaq's "Sirah". (Ibn Hisham was himself of Himyarite descent.)

According to the famed Islamic hagiographer: At some point, Amr ibn Luhay ventured farther north, into Nabataea, and was inspired by the Nabataean traditions... which he brought back with him to his settlement in the Hijaz.

One might wonder: Was that fabled Hijazi settlement located at the place that eventually came to be called "Makkah"? It's hard to say. Prior to the Quraysh occupying the location-in-question, it seems to have been occupied by (Yemeni) Himyarites; and before that, perhaps even the Amalekites. Funny enough, when Hebrew scripture mentions the Amalekites in Psalm 84, it refers to a "Valley of Bakka[h]", which served as that people's place of pilgrimage. It should be noted, though, that the Amalekites originally hailed from the southern Levant, in a region that would later be dubbed "Arabia Petraea" by the Romans.

In other words: The area-in-question was associated with the Nabataean capital, Petra. Might THAT have been where said valley was located? And might THAT have been where the aforementioned memes originated?

The earliest reference to a location with the auspicious moniker was—it turns out—a Kufic inscription from southern Nabataea (known in Classical Antiquity as "Midian" and in Late Antiquity as "Arabia Petraea"). The inscription referred obliquely to an auspicious personage: "Abd [slave of] M-K-a[t]". While the etymology of the name is unclear, it seems to invoke the Biblical name of the Aramaean king, "Ma'akah" (ref. chapter 10 of Second Samuel). But here's the thing: The Aramaeans were never in the Hijaz; their kingdom was in the northeastern Levant. So this would only make sense if the origins of Islam's "temenos" (the theological center of the world) lay...well...not in the Hijaz, but somewhere a bit farther north.

As it so happens, there was a place that may have been known as "Bakkah" in pre-Islamic times. It is mentioned in Ibn Hisham's writings, wherein he makes reference to "Allah, lord of Bakkah" in a context that is unclear.

From whence did the term, "Ba[k]ka[h]" come? Lo and behold, it is used in Psalm 84:5-6, when referring to the valley ("Emek ha-Baka") through which people shall pass on their pilgrimage to Bet[h]-El (the House of God) in Jerusalem. Hence the verse in the "Recitations" that references "the first house created for mankind at Bakkah" (3:96). Tellingly, though, when it comes to extra-Koranic Islamic sources, we don't hear reports about the HIJAZI Mecca (alt. "Bakkah") as an auspicious place until Al-Azraqi wrote about the reign of Abbasid caliph Al-Mansur (r. 750's) in his "Kitab Akhbar Makkah" c. 865.

The provenance of "Bakkah" leaves us many clues. The moniker was not conjured from thin air. As it turns out, it was lifted from Psalm 84, where it is mentioned as a blessed place through which supplicants pass on pilgrimage. It is described as a lush valley (i.e. NOT an arid place in the Hijaz). Recall that, for the fabled binding of his son, Abraham sacrificed a goat (not an animal found in the Arabian desert) on a wooden pyre (from trees that would not have existed in the area). (An animal that one might have sacrificed in the Hijaz would likely be a gazelle, an oryx, or possibly a desert fox.) In sum: The tale makes sense in the Levant; but not in the Hijaz.

We might note a slew of other topological parities between descriptions of "Makkah" in Mohammedan lore and Petra's landscape. Jebel al-Madhbah is the mountain outside of town on which there was a sacred site—replete with an altar. In the 1st century B.C., the Greco-Roman historian, Diodorus Siculus of Sicily

commented that there was a temple in “Arabia” that was revered by the many Arabs. In the 2nd century A.D., Ptolemy mentioned the temple in his writings. To exactly what temple they might have been referring, we can’t be certain. It was definitely NOT in what is now known as Mecca. These historians may have been referring to Emesa (now “Homs”) or to Petra or somewhere else in “Arabia Petraea”.

We might also look at DIS-parities between descriptions of the original home of the Mohammedan movement and Mecca. 80:27-32 refers to fields of grain and grapes; of lush vegetation, olive orchards, date palms, gardens, verdant foliage, and of grass lawns (with which, we are told, god has furnished the book’s audience). CLEARLY, this could not have been describing the barren deserts of the Hijaz. Rather, we are presented with Levantine environs.

An explicit reference to a city called “Makkah” did not appear until 741. It occurred in the “Continuatio Byzantia-Arabica” (a.k.a. the “Chronicle of 741”; sequel to the “Chronica Byzantia-Arabica”), written by a pro-Ummayyad author. (It is thought have been based on slightly earlier Syriac works.) The chronicle was composed in the final year of Byzantine Emperor Leo III’s reign—pursuant to the Byzantine defeat of Umayyad Caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik’s invading forces. The text places “Makkah” in southwestern Mesopotamia (possibly “Arabia Petraea” / “Palaestina Salutaris”); not in Arabia.

An indication that “Mecca” (qua Hijazi “temenos”) was a post-hoc concoction is the discrepancy in the two—yes, there are only two—references to the city in the Koran itself. 3:96 refers to it as “Bakkah” (possibly meaning “place of weeping”). Only 48:24 refers to it as the familiar [valley of] “Makkah”. {1} Both are Medinan (later) surahs. Meanwhile, the two Meccan (earlier) surahs in which an allusion is made to the location (6:92 and 42:5-7) refer to it as “Umm al-Qura” [“mother of settlements”]. This is hardly a descriptor for which a small desert settlement would have qualified at the time. Other passages that allude to the location (27:91) simply refer to the “qura” [settlement]. This is, to put it mildly, highly suspicious. {2} It seems that even god was not consistent in his nomenclature; and did not see fit to refer to what is now “Mecca” by its proper name.

We find, then, that we may be dealing with two separate places. The initial settlers of the location in the Hijaz (the aforementioned Khuza’a tribe) seem to have set up a shrine to the preeminent deity, “Hubal” (who was typically portrayed as a moon-god). That structure was eventually fashioned as the “kaaba” under Qurayshi stewardship. {3} The new-fangled shrine would have incorporated a panoply of other deities that were popular amongst the local tribes. The preeminent deity was THEN alternately referred to by the Semitic moniker, “Allah”. {4}

THAT cubic shrine is not to be confused with the aforementioned (much older) “kaaba” at Tabalah, in the ancient Himyarite city of Zafar. Later, that shrine would come to be known as the “Kaaba al-Yamaniyya” (the Yemeni Kaaba), as attested in Bukhari’s Hadith (5/59/641-645) as well as in Hisham ibn al-Kalbi’s “Kitab al-Asnam”. Such a shrine had its origins in the lore of the Nabataeans. Indeed, the term “kaaba” (used for a cube-like shrine) derived from the Nabataean Syriac term: “ka’abu”. Sure enough: In Nabataea, “ka’abu” referred to a cubic shrine (comprised of stone blocks) in Petra. That shrine was used to pay tribute to the Nabataean godhead, Dushara. So the use of the Arabized “kaaba” for an analogous purpose (first for the shrine in Yemen, and later for the one in Mecca) makes sense.

In sum: The Meccan cube mimicked the antecedent Yemeni cube...which mimicked the antecedent (Nabataean) cube at Petra. {7}

The earliest description of a cubic shrine that OSTENSIBLY correlated with the Meccan cube comes from Al-Azraqi’s “Kitab Akhbar Makka” [“Book Of Reports On Mecca”]. In the early 860’s, Al-Azraqi redacted a version composed by his grandfather...who had himself purportedly based the material on

accounts by Ibn Ishaq. (We don't even have that. Al-Azraqi's version was further redacted and embellished in the 10th century by a writer named Al-Khuzai.)

Al-Azraqi describes the gazelles and trees that were originally painted on the walls of the cubic shrine...which just so happened to mimic the paintings found on the walls of Al-Qalis church in Sana'a: a structure that had been erected in the 6th century (by the Himyarite king, Abreha, who died the year MoM was supposedly born). Here's the thing: The measurements he gave fit the Nabataean cube in Petra, NOT the Meccan cube. He also describes the hill of Muzdalifah, which only exists in Petra. (Recall that Petra is also where we find the landscape and environs described in Islamic lore—replete with the streams, flora, and hills described in the oldest documentation.)

Sure enough, Petra was located in what was then dubbed “Arabia Petraea” (i.e. southern Levant), which corresponded roughly with the Biblical “Edom” / “Midian”. While this was not part of Aram proper, the Aramaeans controlled much of the Levant during the Iron Age, and their language (Aramaic) predominated throughout the region. It should come as little surprise, then, that the domain (which would have been ruled by the aforementioned Aramaean king, “Ma'akah”) was often referred to as “Aram-Ma'akah”. (!) The eastern and southern Levant eventually became Nabataea. Classical Arabic script derived in large part from the Nabataean version of Syriac script; so all this makes perfect sense.

Al-Azraqi's “Kitab Akhbar Makka” includes descriptions of the cube's size, as well as (what seems to be) the and account of the “Safa[h]” and “Marwa[h]” hills. This brings us to the pre-Islamic (pagan) rituals surrounding the hills now known as Mina and Arafat. On Safa was the idol for Na'ila. On Marwa was the idol for Asaf. The switch occurred per 2:158 (a MEDINAN verse, funny enough), which argues that “it is no sin” to worship at these locations. That belated proviso indicates that this was a point of contention up until the later years of MoM's ministry.

But where did such monikers come from? “Safa[h]” was the term that the Jewish historian, Josephus used when referring to a hill in northeast Jerusalem: Scopus. Meanwhile, “Marwa[h]” seems to be a variation on “Moriah”: the hill known as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which—according to Abrahamic lore—corresponds to the place on which Abraham almost sacrificed his son. So running between the Safa and Marwa hills was essentially running between Scopus and Moriah (the Temple Mount in Jerusalem), which were separated by the valley of Jehosephat (the Kedron Valley). It is no surprise that this description made its way into Islamic lore; and was transplanted from Jerusalem to Mecca. {31}

Another hill is referenced in Mohammedan lore: “Hira”—the “ghar” / “jabal” in which there was the fabled cave that MoM used to visit on the outskirts of town; and where he purportedly received his first revelation on the fabled “Night Of Power”. This may have referred to the ancient city of “Hir[t]a”. But the actual mountain was likely what came to be dubbed “Jabal al-Madhbah”—a rocky promontory on the outskirts of Petra that served as a ceremonial site for the Nabataeans. This was likely the original “Jabal al-Nur” that made it into Mohammedan lore.

Recall that a similar semiotic re-purposing occurred with another bit of landscape around the Temple Mount in Jerusalem: the Valley of Hinnom (the valley of death in Judaic lore), which was rendered “Ge-Hinnom” in Hebrew and “Gehanna” in Syriac. THAT is the basis for the name of hell in CA: “Jahannam”.

In each of these instances, we are reminded that it's worth inquiring as to what the earliest Mohammedans may have (ORIGINALLY) been talking about when we hear things that later came to be associated with the Hijazi city of Mecca. {27}

Other clues are worth noting. Across the Levant and into northern Arabia, pre-Islamic Arabs worshipped a variant of Ishtar, an antelope deity named “Athtar”. To the present day, antelope remain inscribed on the walls of the Meccan cube.

As we’ve seen, the Yemeni “kaaba” was the original Arabian cube. It served as the “Dhul Khala[sa]” temple for the Bajilah, Khatham, Hawazin, Umamah, and other (Kahlani) tribes of the southern Hijaz. {5}

All was copacetic until the Ishmaelites decided to establish a distinct new (Mohammedan) religion. Since the Yemeni “kaaba” posed as a rival to the (new) “kaaba” at Mecca, the southern “kaaba” was destroyed by the Mohammedans. {6} And so it went: The razing of the cubic shrine at Zafar occurred in the 7th century. It was undertaken in concert with the Banu Abmas tribe, who had allied themselves with the Mohammedan forces.

Assuming we were to believe that either Abraham or his son (Ishmael) had originally erected the cube at (what is now called) “Mecca”, there is no account in Mohammedan lore of how, exactly, the purported Abrahamic shrine eventually came to become a pagan shrine. More to the point, there is no explanation for why the Abrahamic deity would have allowed it to become a pagan shrine for (we are led to believe) MILLENNIA before finally deciding to intervene. Such things are a conundrum—if, that is, we grant the traditional Mohammedan account.

Once we consider that Abraham’s father, Terah, purportedly hailed from Harran, it makes little sense that the son would end up in Arabia. We might also note the account of Abraham building an altar at Mamra, which was a place of large trees located on the Judean countryside slightly north of Hebron. What would possibly have possessed him to leave a verdant place for the barren deserts of the Hijaz?

And are we to suppose that Moriah, the hill where Abraham was tested by (almost) sacrificing his favorite son (Isaac in Judaic lore, Ishmael in Islamic lore), was located IN THE HIJAZ?

This brings us to another point: According to Islamic lore, it was Ishmael (rather than Isaac) who was the auspicious son of Abraham; Ishmael who sired the blessed Abrahamic lineage; and so—of course—Ishmael who was responsible for erecting the Meccan cube. However, MoM did not seem to be aware of this fact during his time in Mecca; and peculiarly did not receive the relevant revelation (2:127) until exiling the Jews from Yathrib-cum-Medina. Oddly, 14:37-40 makes no reference to either Abraham OR Ishmael constructing the structure-in-question when mentioning “your sacred house”. Even more telling, the (earlier) Meccan verses only mention ISAAC (and his son, Jacob), as in 19:50. (!) It wasn’t until Surah 2, one of the last chapters composed, that Ishmael is finally singled out as significant (ref. verses 125-127).

Even the authors of the Koran were confused about the occurrence of Abrahamic prophets in Arabia prior to MoM. 28:46 claims that MoM was THE FIRST prophet to come to the Arabians...even as 10:47 claims that a prophet had already been sent to every nation. This also contradicts the fact that Abraham and Ishmael were considered prophets...and allegedly built the Meccan cube (per 2:125-129).

Interestingly, in the ten places to which it is alluded in the Koran, the shrine-in-question is referred to simply as the sacred “house” [bayt] (2:125/127/158, 3:96-97, 5:97, 8:35, 14:37, 22:26/29, and 106:3) rather than as a “cube”. Meanwhile, the term “kaaba” is only used once (5:97) as a way of DESCRIBING that structure (as cubic). As mentioned, the term was generic—as the authors of the Koran ALSO used this term to describe the “Dhul Khalasa” temple (i.e. the Yemeni cube) at Tabala / Zafar (used by the Banu Daus). And it was the same appellation for the cubic shrine in Petra used by the Nabataeans to worship Dushara.

The Mohammedans soon had the “Dhul Khalasa” destroyed (as attested in Bukhari’s Hadith no. 3020,

4355-57, and 6333 when speaking of the campaign in Yemen lead by a Jarir Al-Ahmas).

As mentioned, there were other cubic shrines in Arabia. During the pre-Islamic era, the Christian kaaba of Najran (at Jabal Taslal) was a place of pilgrimage for generations—especially of the Banu Khath'am. There were surely other antecedent kaabas throughout in the Middle East—each used in its own fashion during the millennium prior to the construction of the Meccan cube by Hijazi pagans. {8} If such (Nabataean) memes were able to migrate as far south as Himyar, it seems eminently plausible that they would have also had an influence in the intervening region (i.e. the Hijaz).

Bear in mind that there were other cubic shrines throughout the Middle East that long predated Islam. {8} The “Kaaba-i Zarathustra” [alt. “Ka’ba-[y]e Zartosht”; Cube of Zoroaster] is located at the site of the Naqsh-i Rostam in Fars. It is from the mid-3rd century; though it is part of a necropolis that dates back to the Elamites in the Iron Age. This cubic shrine is located 12 kilometers northwest of Takht-i Jamshid [Throne of Jamshid; a.k.a. “Persepolis”], which was the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire. Part of the structure is referred to as the “Bon Khaanak” [Cold Foundation]. In a key inscription, the Zoroastrian priest, Kartir denounced all the other major religions: Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Mandaeanism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. (Bear in mind: such shrines were often Assyrian before they were Persian.)

Heading down to the Hijaz, the cubic shrine at *Nakhla* was used (by the Mudar) to worship the goddess, Al-Uzza...who, incidentally, was seen as the consort of the Nabataean godhead, Dushara...who it turns out, was alternately referred to as “Allah”.

So what of the “ka’abu” at Petra that was used by the Nabataeans? In his “Bibliotheca Historica” (1st century B.C.), Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily wrote about some faraway place in Idumea (what came to be known alternately as “Arabia Petraea”). The relevant passage reads: “A temple has been set up there, which is very holy and very revered by all [people of the region].” He was referring to a location that was clearly NOT in the Hijaz; but rather somewhere in Nabataea (which included Idumaea and present-day Jordan). In other words: the structure to which he was referring would have been in close proximity to Petra. Here’s the catch: That was the only documentation of religious activity of Arabs outside of Himyar (Yemen).

Prior to (much later) Islamic sources, there is NOT A SINGLE piece of documentation about an explicitly Hijazi place named “Makkah” (a matter I explore further in part 2 of this essay).

It is quite possible that the routine of bowing toward Jerusalem each day was a sop to the Elkesaites, a syncretized Jewish-Christian sect (similar to the Essenes) who may have still been prominent in the area at the time. (“El-Kesai” meant “hidden god” in Syriac.) It is either them, the Mandaeanes, or the Manichaeans to whom the early Mohammedans were referring when they spoke of the “Sabians”. {30} The Elkesaites were known for praying each day while facing the City Of David. Moreover, the Mishnaic tract on “Sukkah” prescribes the circumambulation of the temple seven times.

In Petra, there were numerous temples—among them:

- The Great Temple
- The Kasr al-Bint
- The Temple of the Winged Lions

...as well as the “Khazneh” (treasury), the “Deir” / “Dayr” (monastery), the “Jabal an-Nmayr”, and even a massive amphitheater that could hold almost 9,000 people. This is in addition to the cubic shrines just

outside the main gate—*reminding us that the Nabataeans had a penchant for cubic shrines.*

There was also a shrine on the outskirts of the city atop the Jebel al-Madhbah. Meanwhile, there was the grand “Khirbet ad-Dharih” 100 kilometers to the north. (Note that these are modern Arabic names for such temples; as we cannot be sure what they would have been called by the Nabataeans.) In addition, there were major temples to the south at the ancient cities of *Hegra* (Al-Hijr) and *Duma[tha]* (from the Assyrian “Adummatu”).

When the Koran inveighs against the pagan gods of the cubic shrine, its authors seem to have in mind “Hu-Baal” [spirit of Baal; alt. “Hubal”], who seems to have been a moon-god. This MAY have been an alternate moniker for the Arab moon-god, Ruda. He also may have had some relation to “Baal-Shamin” [lord of heaven] or “Dhu[l]-Shara” [lord of the mountain; alt. “Dushara”]. (Also recall the Nabataean goddess, “Kaabu”.) There were, of course, various other pagan gods in the region—from Allat, Aglibol, and Abgal in Palmyra to the weather-god, Quzah and the sun-goddess, Nuha.

Note that Allat, Al-Uzza, and Manat were worshipped as far north as Hatra in Nineveh (dubbed “Beit Elaha” at the time), amongst a people who obviously recognized some version of the Abrahamic deity, “Elaha”...and SPOKE SYRIAC. In other words: These three “gharanik” (pagan goddesses) would have been deities with which the Nabataeans—and thus early Mohammedans—would have been quite familiar. Hence the reference to them in the Satanic Verses in Surah 53 of the Koran (that is: the need at first to recognize them; then—pursuant to an update—to denounce them).

Indeed, a tell-tale sign that Petra was the focal point in the (original) “Recitations” is the mention of the Nabataean triad (Al-Uzza, Allat, and Manat / Manutu) in what would later be dubbed the “Satanic verses”. That triad was originally worshipped—in conjunction with the godhead, Dushara—in PETRA. So why the pressing concern about them? Is it not peculiar that the authors felt the need to address these “cranes”, as they were called? What could the explanation for this be?

The “mu-H-M-D” figure would have declared to his Abrahamic audience—wherever it might have been—that he was divinely ordained to call people back to the Faith of Abraham. It was therefore natural for him to seek to gain the favor of local Jewish communities. One step he took at that juncture was to adopt Jerusalem as the qibla—thereby imitating the Jewish practice of turning towards Jerusalem when praying. At a later period, when he had broken with the Jews and found it more useful to distinguish his movement, he adopted a new qibla: Petra. (For those directly to the south, this new vector would not have made much of a difference.)

LATER, after the Mohammedan movement sought to distance itself from its Nabataean roots, it established a new temenos. This switch may or may not have had something to do with the son of Al-Zubayr ibn al-Awwam of Basra (referred to only as “Abd Allah”), who asserted the mantle of Khalifa in the Hijaz between 683 and 692 (in conflict with the Umayyads in Damascus); which prompted him to abscond with the black stone from Petra and set up a NEW cubic shrine at the site that came to be “Mecca”.

Even in the earliest years, meticulous records were kept of the Saracen conquests. Yet...a conquest of Petra is NOT MENTIONED in the narratives of the Mohammedan conquests of the Levant. Why not? The most plausible explanation for this: The Ishmaelites were already there!

It is telling that the Umayyads operated out of Syria / Jordan (what had been Nabataea) rather than out of Mecca. This makes sense, as the Nabataeans welcomed the construction of christian churches in their realm—even in their capital, Petra! (To reiterate: Documentation of a settlement now known as Mecca does not appear until c 741, over a century after MoM’s death.)

There is also numismatic evidence that the early Mohammedans were somewhat vague as to the nature of their Abrahamic creed—notably: coins during the Umayyad period (some of which feature menorahs; others of which feature crosses). During its embryonic stage, it is only natural that the Mohammedan movement underwent a metamorphosis—illustrated by a change in semiotics. This makes sense in light of the fact that the first Mohammedans did not see their “din” as entailing a NEW religion, but as a corrective to a Faith that had existed since Eden: from Adam and Eve—through Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon, and Isaiah—onward through Jesus Christ. The idea was straight forward: There is, and has always been, only one true Faith: the unsullied Abrahamic Faith, which was simply submission to a unitarian “Allah”.

It makes sense, then, that participants in the early movement referred to themselves simply as “mu-min-eeen” (those who believe)—a general descriptor which does not indicate a distinct sect. Even “mu-slim-eeen” [alt. “mu-slim-un”] simply means “those who submit [to the Abrahamic deity]”. Hence the caliph during the last decade of the 7th century, Abd al-Malik, was referred to as the “amir al-mumineen” [commander of the believers].

Archeological evidence for the “Petra theory” includes the consistent orientation of the earliest mosques over a wide range of locals—in which the qibla is almost always pointing (roughly) toward Petra rather than toward Mecca. Take, for instance, the “**Masjid al-Qiblatayn**” [“mosque of the two qiblas”] in Yathrib-cum-Medina: so dubbed because—as the story goes—it was built before MoM switched the direction from Jerusalem to Mecca c. 624 (ref. 2:145-149 in the Koran). In 1987, when the structure was renovated, it was discovered that the original “mihrab” (apse indicating the direction of the qibla) faced toward Petra (which is—admittedly—in roughly the same direction as Jerusalem from that site).

Was this an aberration? As it turns out, the Masjid al-Qiblatayn was not the only mosque with two “maharib” (thus two qiblas). In the 7th century, another mosque with two “maharib” was erected across the Red Sea: at Zeila in Abyssinia (a.k.a. “Avala” / “Havilah”; in present-day Somalia). To this day, it is locally known as the “**Labo Qibla Masjid**” (mosque with two qiblas). Sure enough, the first qibla in THAT mosque faced Petra as well.

So what’s going on here? Were these flukes? Archeology reveals something quite startling. Behold the original foundations of:

- The **Kufa** AND **Wa[s]sit** mosques in Mesopotamia
- The **Humeima Palace** mosque, the **Mushatta** mosque, AND the **Amman Citadel** in Jordan
- The mosque of **Umar** at Bosra AND the **Umayyad mosque** at Damascus in Syria
- The great mosque of **Ba’albek** AND the **Anjar** mosque in Lebanon
- The **Khirbat al-Minya** (in Galilee) AND the **Khirbat al-Mafjar** (on the West Bank) in Palestine
- The mosque at **Be’er-Sheva** in the Negev
- The **Fustat** mosque near Cairo in Egypt

The fifteen earliest mosques (all built prior to c. 730) ALL (initially) had a “maharib” that faced PETRA. In other words, the qibla was originally Petra, not Mecca. This was during the Umayyad period.

If the Meccan cube is what Mohammedan lore claims it is, then the archeological record—which is there for anyone to see—poses a rather inescapable conundrum.

Note that the qibla of the old mosque at Sana'a in Yemen is difficult to discern, as Mecca and Petra are at a similar trajectory from the site. Even the great mosque of Guang-zhou in southern China has a qibla facing Petra (though—of course—from that far away, Jerusalem is in roughly the same direction).

The evidence goes on and on. The “Masjid as-Sahabah” at Massawah in Abyssinia had a new “mihrab” facing Mecca put in (at the end of the 7th century) long after its original construction in the mid-7th century. What was its original qibla direction? Archeological evidence is inconclusive. Another possible instance is the “Umar” mosque at Duma[tha] (present-day Dumat al-Jandal); which is also from the mid-7th century.

Are there any exceptions to this trend? Yes. The mosque at Alor [alt. “Aror” / “Ror-uka”] in Sindh, commissioned by Umayyad military commander, Mohammed ibn Al-Qasim c. 712, was too far away (~4,300 kilometers) for the builders to discern an accurate trajectory—what with it being on the far side of the Hindu Kush. Meanwhile, the Great Mosque of Cordoba was constructed by Umayyad caliph, Abd al-Rahman (who hailed from Palmyra) c. 785...with a mihrab facing due southward. The odd choice of that qibla was likely a “fuck you” to the Abbasids. (In the late 960's, Al-Hakam II added a new mihrab facing Mecca.)

It's no wonder, in verse 2:142, we hear that “fools will ask WHY they changed the qibla from that to which they were accustomed.” (That is: They'll wonder why Mohammedans turned away from the direction they originally faced.) The explanation for this was a pithy declaration: “The east and west belong to god!” End of discussion.

The message here was simple: Don't ask. When the qibla is changed, all we hear is that it was thenceforth to be directed toward the “masjid al-Haram” (ref. 2:142-150)...which was...somewhere important.

According to the conventional interpretation, the above statement was referring to the switch of the qibla from Jerusalem to Mecca. However, the standard account of this qibla change does not jive with the timeline. We are told that the alteration was done BEFORE the seizure of Mecca (which occurred at the beginning of 630); but that would not have made sense, as the Kaaba was—allegedly—still dedicated to Hubal and the other pagan gods of the Quraysh at that point.

Couple all this with the fact that at no point in the Koran does it stipulate that the “qibla” is toward Mecca. In fact, the Koran only mentions “Makkah” (alt. “Bakkah”) a couple times, in passing; and gives no indication of its location. We are just told that it is the “mother of settlements”. (A “Bakkah” is mentioned in Psalm 84:6 as a lush valley of blessings; while Koran 3:96 refers to it as a place of blessings.)

The most comical rebuttal to the fact that all these early mosques had “maharib” facing Petra (something that can be empirically measured and corroborated) comes from David A. King, who contends that there was a distinction to be made between “historical orientations” and “modern directions”. (!) No kidding.

King asks us to pretend that those are somehow TWO DIFFERENT things; as if geographical directions were magically different in the 7th century than they are today. Moreover, he insists that the architects of every one of these mosques must have made mistakes. And, due to some incredible coincidence, they happened to make them ALL have a “mihrab” facing the exact same place, regardless of their myriad geographical locations. In other words, every one of the mistakes miraculously conspired to the same convergence. Gadzooks!

King was mainly responding to a book by Daniel Gibson entitled “Early Islamic Qiblas”. (Note that Gibson had personally visited the mosques discussed; King had not.) King's perfidy is quite striking;

especially once we consider that he is denying something that can actually be OBSERVED with the naked eye (with or without a GPS). Note that he didn't deny that the qiblas did, indeed, point toward Petra; as he COULDN'T deny it. Rather, he proffered a slew of absurd rationalizations for the fact that NONE of the maharib-in-question point toward Mecca—which, in effect, further proved Gibson's point.

King shows how ridiculous one needs to be in order to explain away that which is there for the rest of the world to see. For him, what we silly empiricists don't grasp is HOW those mosques faced Mecca—not geographically, but THEOLOGICALLY. (In other words: “Yes, maybe these maharib were PHYSICALLY pointed toward Petra, but they were MEANT to point toward Mecca in the minds of the architects.” Q.E.D.) This is a reminder that some are willing to deny empirical evidence in order to refute anything they don't fancy.

Meanwhile, the evidence is there for anyone to see who cares to look.

Suffice to say: This widespread archeological pattern would be a rather bizarre coincidence BUT FOR Petra playing an auspicious in the Mohammedan movement during its earliest generations. In other words, the qibla of every mosque built in the century following MoM's death faced Petra. In fact, not a single mosque from this early period has yet been excavated with a “mihrab” facing Mecca. (!)

This uncanny exigency would indicate either that everyone across the globe was making the exact same mistake (a massive coincidence) or that—during the religion's first century—the focal point was the Nabataean cube.

That so much archeological evidence is incompatible with the standard Mohammedan narrative is not surprising. It explains why the current custodians of the Kaaba (the House of Saud) are reticent to allow any archeologists to analyze the cubic shrine. Such secrecy is typical. (Hint: It is for similar reasons that the Vatican's curia is reluctant to let “outside”—i.e. REAL—scholars investigate the vast store of artifacts / documents beneath Saint Peter's basilica.)

When an institution is built on farce, it will always have something to hide. With all the EXTENSIVE digging and development in central Mecca during the past generation or two (by the House of Saud), there have been exactly ZERO archeological finds. In other words, no artifacts whatsoever have been unearthed in a city that is supposed to have been contemporaneous with MoM—artifacts which, we might suppose, would be highly valued (and, presumably, enthusiastically announced) by those doing the continual excavations in the city. This peculiar silence is as deafening as it is revealing.

There are possible explanations for the disjuncture between the earliest and current qibla orientations. It might be supposed that the initial qibla was intended to face JERUSALEM—which would entail ROUGHLY the same direction as Petra (contra Mecca) for mosques located far enough away. The problem is that Petra is over 160 kilometers south of Jerusalem (as the crow flies); so anything within a couple thousand kilometers east or west of the Negev would have had to have been WAY OFF to mistake the direction toward one as the direction toward the other. The supposition is also untenable because the Al-Aqsa mosque (a.k.a. the “Qubbat al-Sakhrah”), which is IN JERUSALEM ITSELF, has its original qibla facing Petra / Mecca (both are in roughly the same direction from that location). One doesn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to recognize the implications of this. Clearly, Jerusalem was NOT the determining factor for the qibla at the time.

In Jerusalem, there is a cavern located directly beneath the Sakhra on Mount Moriah (a.k.a. the Temple Mount) within which the Saracens seem to have put two mihrabs (one dedicated to David, the other dedicated to Solomon) in the early 8th century. {22} Neither points toward Mecca. (From Jerusalem,

Petra and Mecca are in roughly the same direction.) Also in the cavern are shrines to Abraham and Elijah (again, facing directions other than Mecca). This means that, at the time, there was no pressing need to have a qibla facing in any particular direction.

But never mind any of that. In spite of the problems with the supposition that Jerusalem was the intended direction (for the qibla of the earliest Mohammedans), let's assume—for the sake of argument—that it WAS the case that Jerusalem represented the initial “temenos”; and thus the direction of prayer. The existence of the aforementioned mosque foundations (in which the qibla was directed toward the Levant) makes sense ONLY IF we were to conjecture the following: The direction was not changed from Jerusalem (or from Petra, as the case may be) to Mecca during MoM's tenure as leader of Medina (as the conventional story goes); but rather was changed—as it were—long after the fact (that is: generations after MoM's lifetime).

Changed by whom? Well, by caliphs seeking to sanctify Mecca rather than the ANTECEDENT Abrahamic “temenos” somewhere in the Levant. This means that later impresarios of Mohammedan lore altered the lore from the one that existed for the century immediately following MoM's ministry. It makes sense, then, that caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan had the governor of Kufa destroy all the mosques in the city and rebuild them c. 705—a rather peculiar thing to do...unless, that is, it was decided there was something wrong with the way they were built. (!)

There is an additional conundrum regarding this sudden change in orientation. 3:96 claims that the Meccan cube was THE FIRST (legitimate) house of worship for mankind; while 34:43-45 explains that MoM decided that the qibla should be CHANGED TO Mecca. So was or was not Mecca the original “temenos”? Does this mean that Abraham was really a Hijazi, that the Jews mistakenly supposed that he dwelled in Canaan, and that the Mohammedans were merely rectifying Judeo-Christian errancy?

This is difficult to explain away.

Bottom line: Whenever the qibla is mentioned in the earliest Islamic texts (e.g. Koran 2:143-145), Mecca is never referenced. Instead, the text speaks only of a “place of gathering” [“masjid al-haram”]. Even more incriminating: In addressing MoM, this passage calls the new qibla “YOUR qibla”, insinuating the Meccan location was a novelty devised for the Mohammedan movement. Moreover, Al-Tabari recounts that Ibn al-Zubayr transitioned the black stone TO “Mecca”. As if this were not already a quandary, 48:23 stipulates: That which has been established by god never changes. Go figure.

ASSAYING GEOGRAPHY:

The “Petra theory” of Mohammedan origins has broad—though not conclusive—scriptural evidence. Notable are passages in Islam's sacred texts (regarding the landscape around the location-in-question) that describe a place very much like Petra...rather than anything that resembled the place in Arabia now called “Mecca”. Bear in mind, the latter is located on the Tihamah: the barren coastal plain of the Hijaz. In other words, it is a place that exhibits none of the landscape features found in Islamic scripture's descriptions of the settlement's environs. 80:24-32 in the Koran refers to cultivatable land—replete with flora and fauna (grass with grazing “an'am”; and even trees bearing fruit like figs, dates, and pomegranates). This bears no resemblance to the barren, arid landscape of “Mecca”—which is primarily rocks and sand.

Petra, on the other hand, IS in a valley, by a river, amongst olive trees...AND would have been not too far from Sodom (and thus from the pillar of salt MoM passed on his daily strolls). As mentioned earlier, per the Torah, Sodom was NOT in Arabia; it was near the banks of the Jordan River.

In the writings of John of Damascus during the last two decades of the Umayyad era (the 730's and 740's), he comments—with palpable incredulity—that the Ishmaelites were starting to suggest a novel place for the “aqedah” (Abraham’s binding of his son) in a desolate place deep within the deserts of the Hijaz. He notes that this makes no sense, as there are no trees in the location that came to be “Mecca”, meaning that there would have been no wood with which to build the pyre.

In other words: The “Seal of the Prophets” in Mohammedan lore actually dwelled in a place that was clearly NOT the location in the Hijaz now known as “Mecca”—which, to be clear, is not in a valley, is not by a river, and for which the nearest olive tree is well over a thousand kilometers away. (Interesting fact: There are actually no rivers in Arabia.) {13}

Abrahamic scripture offers more clues. During his days in his hometown (retroactively designated “Mecca”), MoM—and the “mushrikun” with whom he was contending—were said to have regularly passed by the mound of salt that used to be Lot’s wife (near the site of the city of Sodom; per the Torah). As the story goes, Lot’s wife was turned into a “pillar of salt” by the Abrahamic deity as she fled the doomed city—which would have been located somewhere in the Jordan River Valley near the Dead Sea; NOT in the deserts of the Hijaz. {9} (She was turned to salt for the crime of turning her head to look back at the city as it was being razed.)

It seems, then, that MoM hailed from a place in the vicinity of the Levant. Per the descriptions, “Arabia Petrea” would be the furthest south that would still make any sense for this storied event (though most people place the location of Sodom somewhere in Moab, further to the north in present-day Jordan).

As I discuss in my essay on the Syriac source-material for Islamic lore, while growing up, MoM sometimes accompanied his uncle on sojourns to places in Syria. From Mecca, this would have been a 2-month camel-ride through the desert EACH WAY; and it would have likely gone through Petra. This beggars the imagination. From Petra, such destinations would have been only a fortnight away. It is far more plausible, then, that the origin for such trips was somewhere from within the (Syriac-speaking, Arab) Nabataean / Tanukhid / Ghassanid domain than from deep within the barren sands of the Hijaz. Another point worth considering: In the tales of MoM’s sojourns to Syria, we would have heard of the Syriac-speaking Arabs (i.e. the Nabataeans, Tanukhids, and/or Ghassanids) as well as at least passing mention of Petra (which would surely have been a major stop along the route). We hear no mention of either. This omission only makes sense if MoM was HIMSELF a Syriac Arab; and Petra was the origin of such sojourns.

Other Biblical passages indicate that this may have all occurred in the Jezreel Valley. For instance, we are told in Genesis that Abraham erected his first altar “beside the oaks of Moreh.” As the story goes, Abraham dwelled in Canaan (likely near Hebron): 1,220 kilometers away—as the crow flies—from the location that later came to be named “Mecca”. If we are to take the traditional accounts seriously, “Abram” would have been an AMORITE. Indeed, “Abram” was an Amorite name—as recorded in cuneiform by the Hyksos in Sinai. At no point in his life would this fabled patriarch have been anywhere near where the Meccan cube now exists.

So if MoM was passing by the old salt-mound of Torah-fame on the daily basis, it means that he was residing in either the Jordan or Jezreel Valley. The upshot of this is that, in the conventional Mohammedan narrative, the antecedent Hubal [Hu-Baal] shrine in Mecca is simply conflated with Abraham’s fabled shrine to Yahweh in Canaan, near the Jordan River...as if the former had originally been the latter...and as if the latter had been in the southern Hijaz all along.

Recall that the precursor to Classical Arabic script, Kufic, derived from the Nabataean version of Syriac. This makes perfect sense if the initial center of Mohammedan activity were in the region that corresponded

with Nabataea.

All this explains why no record for the fabled Medinan Constitution exists. Considering that it would have been drafted in the 620's, it would have been composed in Syriac...using the Nabataean alphabet...and probably NOT in Yathrib-cum-Medina.

It is interesting to note that the most frequently named places in the Koran are “A[a]d” (23 times) and “Thamud” (24 times). The former is an un-specified place that was punished by the Abrahamic deity; the latter referred to the northern Hijaz. It is safe to surmise that the Koran focuses primarily on an area that was not very close to the place that came to be called “Mecca”. This indicates that those who first propounded the “Recitations” were most concerned with locations that either (A) only became relevant after the Islamic empire had spread or (B) were proximal to the original center of the Faith (what is likely to have been somewhere other than present-day Mecca). Either explanation undermines the standard Mohammedan narrative. {10}

It might also be noted that Damascus, Tadmor (dubbed “Palmyra” in Greco-Roman), and Petra were the primary inland trading hubs in the Levant at the time. Meanwhile, there were several ports along the Mediterranean—notably the Philistine port-cities of Ashdod and Gaza. The Phoenician port-cities of Ashkelon, Siduna (now “Sidon”), Tyre, Sycaminon (now “[k]Haifa”), and Byblos had been trading hubs on the Mediterranean for thousands of years. And the port-city of Caesaria Palaestina [Maritima] had been a trading hub since it was founded by the Romans in the 1st century B.C.

Farthest to the south (in what is now Yemen), the major mercantile hubs would have been the Judeo-Christian communities of **Najran**, **Thoma**, **Ma'rib**, and **Azal** (present-day Sana'a). **Zafar** was the old Himyarite capital. **Eudaemon** (present-day Aden) was a major port city.

When it comes to the Hijaz, the record is telling. North of the aforementioned Yemeni hubs, only **Ta'if**, **Yathrib**, and the port-town of **Jeddah** (and sometimes the Jewish oasis settlements of **Tayma** and **Khaybar**) are referenced in mercantile documents up to the mid-8th century. Khaybar would have been important, as it was on the route between Yathrib and Petra. (The Tayma oasis was much farther inland.) Other places were simply known for their wells (i.e. resting places for caravans)—as with **Thanyat al-Murra** (in the Rabigh valley, on the coast) and **Badr** (halfway between Thanyat al-Murra and Yathrib). {11}

But here's the thing about Hijazi routes: It is a relatively straight shot from Tai'f to Yathrib; with no reason whatsoever to veer off to the location (over 80 kilometers inland from the Red Sea; i.e. from Jiddah) that is now called “Mecca”. Such a bizarre route would have entailed an utterly pointless detour into the sweltering, barren Arabian deserts from the “Tihamah” (that is: from the far-more-hospitable Hijazi coastal plain along the Red Sea). That's why no such place (i.e. “Bakkah” / “Makkah”) is mentioned in the trading documents of the time.

Considering the location of these hubs, we find that the existence of Mecca makes very little sense. It should come as no surprise, then, that the earliest map to show a trading hub called “Makkah” does not appear until c. 900. (!) This is strange...if, that is, we assume the city was as significant in the 7th century as Islamic historiography claims that it was.

To get a complete picture of the region, other ancient hubs are worth noting. I mention SIXTY of them in part 2 of this essay. The list gives us a good idea of how extensive the Nabataean trade network really was around the time the Mohammedan movement would have begun; and shows how much has been elided ever since.

Archeology has discovered numerous maps of trade-routes in Arabia from the 6th and 7th century, NONE of which show a “Makkah”...or ANYTHING in that location. The first passing reference to a “Makkah” in a document did not occur until c. 741: over a century after MoM’s death. (See Patricia Crone’s “Meccan Trade And The Rise Of Islam” and Robert Hoyland’s “Seeing Islam as Others Saw it”.) Moreover, as we’ve seen, the quiblas did not start facing Mecca until after the Abbasids took power c. 750.

This is odd if we are to suppose that Mecca was what Mohammedan lore purports it to have been; especially considering the fact that the frankincense and myrrh trade from Yemen (up through Petra, to the port-city of Gaza) had been thriving since Classical Antiquity.

That a settlement in the location of present-day “Mecca” does not exist on ANY trade-route maps—EVEN ARABIAN MAPS—until c. 900 is actually unsurprising considering the logistics of geography. If boats were docking at Eudaemon (that is: Aden; which was known for its frankincense and myrrh) at the southern end of Arabia, and then transporting goods up to Nabataea and Palestine (esp. the port-cities of Aela and Gaza), they would have simply sailed up the “Bahr al-Ahmar” (a.k.a. the Red Sea) to the gulf of Aqaba (rather than—pointlessly—engage in an arduous journey across barren desert for over 1,200 kilometers).

As mentioned, barring the oasis locals at **Tayma** and **Khaybar**, the only major settlements in the Hijaz that seems to have existed at the time were **Yathrib** (primarily Jewish; known for its silver) and **Ta’if** (which had its own cubic shrine, to Al-Lat), both of which were slightly farther inland (on the western Arabian plateau). It would have made no sense for a place located where “Mecca” NOW IS to exist along any medieval trade route.

Note that there were three Jewish tribes residing in Yathrib during the 6th and early 7th century: the Banu Qaynuqa (who were known to be allied with the pagan Banu Khazraj) as well as the Banu Nadir and Banu Qurayza (who were known to be allied with the pagan Banu Aws). (For more on this point, see Patricia Crone’s “Meccan Trade And The Rise Of Islam”.)

Being a nomadic Bedouin region, one would be hard-pressed to find anything in the Hijaz that would resemble what we’d now think of as a bustling urban center. During Late Antiquity, the most that one might have encountered were mercantile hubs in the desert, which were agglomerations of long-term, make-shift settlements (tents and clay huts) along known caravan routes.

For further corroboration of the present thesis, we might even look to Islamic scripture. In studying the earliest references to the fabled “Hijra” (the migration of MoM from his hometown to Yathrib-cum-Medina), Patricia Crone found that NONE of them used “Makkah” as the name for the point of origin; they simply refer to the Hijaz. Such sources often mention several instances of “hijra”; and designate a place in the Levant as the destination. (!) Moreover, the Islamic dating of years beginning with the year of THE “hijra” (as a unique event c. 622) does not begin until the 9th century.

Hence MoM may actually have been a “Mohammed of Petra”...which would mean that the actual man on whom the legend is based was not a Qurayshi Arab; he was a Nabataean Arab hailing from a place in a valley, by a river, amongst olive trees—as salient passages in scripture stipulate. {12}

It may well be that Petra was referred to as the place of weeping [Syriac: “Bakkah”] by the time MoM was born. This would make sense. For Petra had, indeed, incurred many tribulations during the 6th century—including a devastating earthquake that virtually razed the city.

There are other topographical clues. In his Hadith, Bukhari mentions that MoM used to enter the city-in-question from the “high thaniya” and leave from the “low thaniya”. Such routes of ingress and egress refer to cracks in the rock wall—something that makes no sense with respect to (what is now called) Mecca; but

makes perfect sense if referring to Petra. We might also note that the town of Humeima, which is referenced throughout Mohammedan lore, was only about 44 kilometers from Petra. {14}

Another point worth noting: Three Koranic passages (32:3, 34:43-44, and 36:2-6) contradict the notion that Abraham dwelled in Arabia. Each states that the denizens of the Hijaz had not yet received a prophet by the time MoM arrived on the scene. (A bromide in Islamic polemic is that god had sent Abrahamic prophets to ALL NATIONS...except, that is, to Arabia...and, well, to every other region of the planet that wasn't the Middle East.) It would seem that even god himself (read: the authors of the Koran) were not aware that Abraham was supposed to have constructed the Meccan cube.

MORE HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

In addition to Patricia Crone's "Meccan Trade And The Rise Of Islam" and "Hagarism: The Making Of The Islamic World", Reuven Firestone has also done some interesting work on the subject of Islam's origins. Note especially his "Journeys In Holy Lands: The Evolution Of The Abraham-Ishmael Legends In Islamic Exegesis" (1990). He then penned two follow-up articles: "Abraham's Association With The Meccan Sanctuary And The Pilgrimage In The Pre-Islamic And Early Islamic Periods" (in *Le Muséon*; 1991) followed by "Abraham's Journey To Mecca In Islamic Exegesis: A Form-Critical Study of a Tradition" (in *Studia Islamica*; 1992). Also worth noting: Another alternate history of early Islam was provided by Yehuda D. Nevo in his "Crossroads To Islam". There is much to explore on this topic, and hopefully further work will be done.

Mohammedan scribes kept meticulous records of their conquests, but—while mentioning the conquest of Damascus and Jerusalem, never mention Petra. The only logical explanation for this is that they were ALREADY THERE; so it was not a place that needed to be conquered.

Looking to the centers of power in the first centuries of Islam, we find further corroboration of the present thesis. The notion that Petra was the original center of the Mohammedan Faith comports with the fact that the earliest Muslim leaders chose Damascus (and alternately Kufa, Basra, and Samarra), NOT MECCA, as their capital. (Basra was originally dubbed "Prat d-Maisan" in Aramaic; "basratha" was the Syriac term for "settlement".) The capital was then Baghdad under the Abbasids...then Cairo for the Fatimids and Mamluks...and then Constantinople-cum-Istanbul for the Ottomans. For Shiites, Qom and Karbala would become the traditional centers of the Faith. Even the (Wahhabi) House of Saud—who eventually came to control Mecca—opted instead for Riyadh as their capital. {15}

What's going on here? There are, of course, many possible explanations. But the fact remains that, from the 7th century, Muslims opted for virtually every major urban center BUT Mecca. This would make perfect sense if Mecca was not established FROM THE GET-GO as an auspicious place. In other words: It was not consecrated as the "temenos" of Islam until later on in the Faith's development.

(Abdullah ibn Zubayr's dissenting caliphate purportedly operated out of Mecca from c. 683 to 692, demonstrating that Mecca was a viable option. Nevertheless, even after Ibn Zubayr was ousted, the prevailing caliph, Abd al-Malik, opted to remain in Damascus. The Umayyads, it seems, saw lands to the north as their home-base.)

The “Petra theory” indicates that “Islam”, the identity of post-Hijra Mohammedans as “Muslims”, the place now called “Mecca”, AND the prophet-hood of a “Mohammed” were ALL post-hoc confabulations. Also note that the Koran is addressed more to the BELIEVERS (“mu’mineen” / “mu-minun”) than to “Muslims” per se. In fact, the book is addressed almost ENTIRELY and EXCLUSIVELY to men “who believe”, as in 4:136. That is even the title of Surah 23.

Meanwhile “muslims” is a moniker found mostly in the Medinan (later) surahs—typically in the form: “Bear witness that we are [of the] muslims” (where “mu-S-L-M” is a general descriptor that simply means “one who submits to god’s will”; noting that the appellation comes from the Semitic root, S-L-M).

Nevertheless, it is “believer” [“mu’min”] qua Abrahamic monotheist that is the operative concept throughout the book. 22:78 (a Medinan verse) is the only explicit declaration of the label “Muslim” in the Koran. {16} Indeed, other “People of the Book” (like cooperative Jews, Samaritans, Mandaeans, and non-Trinitarian Christians) qualified as “believers” in the salient sense, as indicated in 2:62. Even Abraham himself is described as a “mu-S-L-M” (one who submitted to god), as in 3:67.

Only once does the Koran seem to intimate “Islam” as a unique religion (3:19). The eight other places the lexeme is used, it simply means “submission” (2:208, 3:85, 5:3, 6:125, 9:74, 39:22, 49:17, and 61:7). This is a rather peculiar oversight for a tract the (purported) sine qua non of which was the formal inauguration of a refurbished—and distinct—Abrahamic Faith. Yet it is in keeping with the archeological records. The earliest (Kufic) inscriptions refer not to a leader of the MUSLIMS, but simply to a leader of the believers: “amr” of the “mu-mineen”. Their dominion was the dominion not of anyone called the “Muslims”, but of the “mu-mineen”.

Also note that “mu-H-M-D” does not appear as a proper noun in the Koran. The lexeme is used only four times (3:144, 33:40, 47:2, and 48:29) as a general descriptor (meaning “one who is praised”). {17} The term was based on the antecedent Semitic tri-root “H-M-D”, which was likely used in Syriac to indicate a revered figure of some sort.

The two centuries it took for the now-familiar Mohammedan narrative to emerge in the archeological record (from the time of the eponymous prophet’s death) afforded ample time for virtually ANY apocrypha to gestate...including a revamped account that transplanted its hero from southern Canaan to the Hijaz. The idea would have been to retroactively render him—whoever he was—a Qurayshi (rather than a Levantine) so as to depict him as the progenitor of the ensuing Arab (i.e. Umayyad) empire. The point of this adjustment would have been to establish, for the first time, an Abrahamic prophet with a distinctly Arab (read: Ishmaelite) pedigree; using the banished son, Ishmael as a genealogical touchstone. Such a post-hoc adjustment would have made perfect sense if the Arabians (and, even more, subsequent Arab leaders; i.e. the Umayyads) were seeking to posit an explicitly ARAB prophet in the Abrahamic tradition...thereby ameliorating any pending grievances about their (heretofore diminished) Ishmaelite lineage.

To reiterate: This would have also involved retroactively rendering the cubic shrine to the moon-god, Hubal (originally established by the Banu Khuza’a tribe; progenitors to the Qurayshi Meccans) as the shrine to Yahweh that had been erected by Abraham two millennia earlier.

Such a narrative leap seems spurious to us now; but it may have seemed eminently plausible to the original target audience: highly-superstitious, largely illiterate Bedouins in the Dark Ages (i.e. those who wouldn't have known any better). “You know all those Abrahamic stories you've heard about? Well, THIS is where it all happened. Right here, in our own back-yard, the Hijaz. (!) So, at it turns out, WE are the REAL chosen people.” Thus the Ishmaelite lineage, not the one through Isaac, was the FAVORED Abrahamic lineage.

Presto! The perfect recipe for a sumptuous Arabian etiological myth. And the once-disgraced Ishmael is redeemed at long last. Consider ayah 110 of Surah 3, in which the Koran's protagonist proclaims that “You [believers] are the best of all peoples ever raised up for mankind...” and then ask: What sort of super-being—who purportedly created ALL mankind—is moved to say such a thing to one particular group? (Of course, this verse was composed so as to furnish followers with the handy rationalization: “God chose US; for WE are his favorite!”)

So what of the emergence of a distinct Mohammedan creed? Let's answer this by looking at the sequence of caliphates.

The Mohammedan capital during the first three caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman) is, of course, the matter in question. Legend has it that these caliphs operated out of Yathrib, which had been re-christened “Madinah an-Nabi” [City of the Prophet]. This is unlikely, as—contrary to Mohammedan lore—there were no major structures built at that location until the early 8th century. Umayyad caliph, Al-Walid (r. 705–715) seems to have been the first to erect a mosque there (the Masjid an-Nabawi); which Abbasid caliph, Al-Mahdi expanded during his reign (r. 775–785). The problem, of course, is that Saudi archeologists are about as common as Paraguayan submarine captains; so archeological evidence for anything on the Arabian peninsula is very hard to come by.

The veracity of the standard Islamic narrative regarding the Rashidun caliphs is up for debate. The primary sources for these folkloric figures is Islamic material composed long after the fact by those who would have had a vested interest in the promulgation of said folklore. Such accounts are therefore question-begging. So who were the first four caliphs, if they existed at all? Contemporaneous sources are very sparse.

Let's start with Abu Bakr. At the time, there was an Arab tribe in the vicinity of the Lakhmids (Arab vassals of the Persians) that was known by the name “Bakr” [ibn Wa'il ibn Qasit ibn Hinb ibn Afsa]; who were adversaries of the Banu Taghlib. They seem to have lived as far north as what came to be dubbed “Diyar Bakr” at the northeastern perimeter of Syria. That indicates from whence the legend of that figure may have come. {23}

And who were Umar, Uthman, and Ali? Again, nobody can be quite sure. Umar likely hailed from the Syriac city of Hir[t]a (not from Mecca, as Islamic hagiographies assert). In the 720's, Leo the Isaurian mentions an “Umar” (a variation on the Semitic term for leader: “A-M-R”) as the putative author of the Koran. That was the moniker used for the name of the second caliph.

Uthman seems to have hailed from Ta'if, born to a wealthy merchant family. (I discuss him more at length in my essay, “Genesis Of A Holy Book”.)

An extra-Islamic source from the late 7th century mentions an “Amir of Hir[t]a” named “Ali” who lived a couple years past when the Islamic patriarch is said to have died at Kufa. (It was in Kufa that the Ali'd movement emerged.) Accounts of Ali are especially muddled due to the highly partisan accounts of Sunni

and Shia.

Of the four figures on which the (fabled) Rashidun caliphs were based, at least three seem to have hailed from Mesopotamia, not from Arabia. (Ta'if was in the Hijaz.) There is almost no record of their existence until the late 8th century, and only then from Islamic sources. Most of the earliest information comes from the accounts of the Ibn Ishaq...material that was redacted by the Abbasid historiographer, Ibn Hisham of Basra in the early 9th century...which was ITSELF redacted by the Persian historiographer, Muhammad ibn Jarir of Tabaristan (a.k.a. "Al-Tabari") c. 900. The rest comes from the (dubious) Hadith of Shuab al-Iman, which was compiled by Al-Bayhaqi in the 11th century; and the (even more dubious) accounts of the Mamluk historiographer, Ibn Kathir in the 14th century. We should keep this in mind whenever a "rashid" caliph (or ANYTHING in the standard Islamic narrative pertaining to the 7th century) is discussed.

It is worth noting that when the Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiyya ibn Abi Sufyan of Damascus came to power in 661, he minted coins that included both Christian iconography (crosses) and Zoroastrian iconography (a crescent moon and a star), something that would have made no sense in an Islamic context. The former coins used Syriac script; the latter used Pahlavi (Middle Persian) script; as Classical Arabic did not yet exist. Tellingly, Mu'awiyya adopted the moniker "khalifat Allah" ["deputy of god"], not "khalifat rasul Allah" ["deputy of the messenger of god"]; as the latter did not have any semiotic purchase at that time. He was alternately referred to as "amir al-muminin" (leader of the faithful) and "M-L-K" (the Semitic term for "king"). The Byzantines referred to him as the "proto-symboulos" of the Arabs. And when he wrote about the Umayyads in the 9th century, the Abbasid chronicler, Ahmad ibn Yahya ibn Jabir of Baghdad (a.k.a. "Al-Baladhuri") referred to Mu'awiyya as "Khosrow of the Arabs". There was no mention of a novel Mohammedan religion. {24}

During a visit c. 670, a Frankish pilgrim named Arculf wrote that the Saracen leader (Mu'awiyya) had erected a RECTANGULAR prayer structure on the Sakhra atop Mount Moriah (a.k.a. the Temple Mount) in the 660's (per a Gaelic amanuensis, Adomnan of Iona c. 700). Mu'awiyya ruled until 680. The Dome of the Rock, an octagonal structure, was not erected until the early 690's (by the Umayyad caliph, Abd Al-Malik ibn Marwan). It is this latter structure that included an inscription that represented the inauguration of Classical Arabic as a distinct liturgical language. {25}

So going back to the 7th century, there is no evidence that things originated in the Hijaz. We know that when Ali took over in 656, the Mohammedan movement's home-base was Kufa. (Did the caliphate LEAVE Medina to go FARTHER AWAY from Mecca? This is implausible.) In 661, the Umayyads took over, establishing their capital in Damascus. In 744, amidst some strife, they relocated their home-base to Harran (in Niniveh), where it remained for their last six years in power. Shortly after the Abbasids took over c. 750, official Mohammedan historiography began to be composed in the new liturgical language, CA (see my essay, "The Syriac Origins Koranic Text").

Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan didn't have sovereignty over Mecca for the first eight years he was in power. At the time, the location was under the control of an amir named Abd-ullah ibn Zubayr of the Banu Asad ibn Khuzaymah (a clan of the Quraysh). The Banu Asad spoke Nabatean Syriac (probably of the sort found on the Namara inscription). It is THEY who likely invented the pilgrimage tradition to Mecca.

What was Abd-ullah ibn Zubayr doing prior to his decision to go to the Hijaz and assert sovereignty? By some accounts, he'd held a post at either Basra or Petra. After defecting from the Umayyads, he decided to set up shop in the location in the Hijaz now known as Mecca. (Why there? Possibly because it was near Ta'if, which may have been his hometown.) It is possible that it was he who took the sacred black stone with him; and established the Hijazi site as the new temenos...replete with its own cubic shrine.

Meanwhile, the caliph (Al-Malik) designated Jerusalem as the temenos, and thus the qibla. (!) That qibla held until 750, when the Abbasids came to power (and set up shot in Kufa).

It is telling that Al-Malik's heir, Walid built his great mosque in Damascus, leaving Mecca (still) without a major structure. And when Umayyad caliph, Hisham opted to build the kingdom's greatest mosque, he did so in the newly established Palestinian capital: Ramla. These would have all been odd choices had Mecca been considered the temenos.

The Abbasids promptly moved the capital back to Kufa...and shortly thereafter to Peroz-Shapur [re-christened in Syriac: "Anbar"] in 752...and then to a novel location: Madinat al-Salam ["City of Peace"; later named "Bagh-dad", meaning "god-given" in Aramaic and/or Pahlavi] by the caliph, Al-Mansur c. 762.

That grand city was founded on a site that had been inhabited by Syriac-speaking Nabataeans (in the vicinity of the former Persian city, Ctesiphon). This new capital was designed by two Persians (one Zoroastrian, one Jewish); and—intriguingly—was inspired by the "Apadana" of Persepolis.

It was probably around this time (the mid 8th century) that another new city was founded in the Hijaz: Mecca. Meanwhile, the ancient city of Hegra was re-christened "Mada'in Salih" ["Cities of Salih"], based on Mohammedan legends of a prophet known as Salih (purported grandfather of Hagar).

It seems that it was the Abbasids who finally designated Mecca as the official Mohammedan temenos. The decision may have been inspired by the deeds of (the aforementioned) Abd-ullah ibn Zubayr. Ibn Zubayr had a history with Rashidun caliph Uthman, and—as legend has it—was appointed by Uthman to compile the "Recitations" (a matter I explore in my essay, "Genesis Of A Holy Book"). Again, Ibn Zubayr was from the Banu Asad, who's tongue was SYRIAC. (For more on how the "Recitations" were originally in Syriac, see my essays on the Syriac Origins Of The Koran.)

So if Mohammed of Mecca (MoM) was a man who neither was named "Mu-H-M-D" nor was from Mecca, then who might he have been, and where might he have been from? As I discuss in Appendix 3 of my essay, "Genesis Of A Holy Book", at the time, this sobriquet (meaning "one who is praised") was an honorific, not a given name. So the question arises: Is there any record of an Arab cynosure in the region at that time who was referred to in this way? As it turns out: Yes.

Lo and behold: The Lakhmid rebel leader in Hir[t]a (a.k.a. "Al-Hirah"), Iyas Kab-shah of the Banu Tayy [Kab-shah was Persian for "famed / honored king"] (rendered in Arabic "Ilyas ibn Qabisah al-Ta'i") was a Syriac-speaking, Arab vassal of the Sassanians...that is, before revolting against his Persian overlords. A contemporary of the Syriac patriarch, Babai The Great, he came to power in his own right c. 622...at which time he set up shop in...you guessed it...Petra. He was known by the nom de guerre, "Mu-H-M-D". According to Thomas the Presbyter, a Syriac-speaking Saracen leader conquered Palestine c. 634. He identified that leader as "Tayyaye of Mahmet". The Armenian historian, Sebeos alternately identified the figure as "Am[i]r" (leader of the Ishmaelites) and "Mahmet".

Other documentation is worth considering. For example, in the mid-9th century, the (Nestorian) historian, Ishodnah of Basra wrote about the events of the 7th and 8th centuries (where, interestingly, he referred to caliph Abu al-Fadl Ja'far ibn Al-Mutasim as king of the Tayyaye; not as the "khalifa").

In Mohammedan lore, a post-hoc adjustment was made to change that migration (from Hir[t]a to Petra) to the fabled "hijra" (from Mecca to Medina). According to Abbasid hagiographer, Ibn Hisham, it was Ibn Ishaq (c. 765) who first mentioned the "hijra" from Mecca to Medina. That account was not written until c. 833.

There are other clues that folkloric emendations occurred. The opening of Surah 17 states that god carried MoM from the holy shrine to the distant shrine (that is: from the “masjid al-hara[a]m” to the “masjid al-aqsa”). (The term, “masjid” is from the Nabataean “masg-dha”, meaning a sanctuary or place of worship.) This wording is telling, as it leaves things oddly vague. It is quite possible that it meant “from Petra to Jerusalem”. In c. 900, the Persian writer, Al-Tabari spoke of the “masjid al-hara[a]m”, describing it as being upon higher ground looking down over a river. This could not possibly have been in the place now referred to as Mecca (there have never been any rivers on the Arabian peninsula); nor could it be referring to Jerusalem (there were no rivers in the valleys surrounding the Temple Mount). What it DOES describe is a shrine that existed on the outskirts of Petra (where there WERE waterways). And to top it all off, Petra was sometimes referred to as “Kadesh” (holy place) in Classical Antiquity. That comes from the Syriac “Q-D-S”, which came to mean “holy” in Arabic (and eventually the moniker used for the city in which “the farthest mosque”). If not for the present thesis, this would be an odd coincidence.

2:144 says to turn your face toward the “masjid al-haram” (noble sanctuary) rather than specifying Makkah / Bakkah or the Kaaba. Such vague wording could refer to virtually any sacred space. The author may well have been enjoining his audience to turn FROM Petra (the pagan temenos) TO Jerusalem (the Abrahamic temenos). Otherwise, the author surely would have specified “Mecca”, to make it clear he wasn’t referring to JUST ANY “noble sanctuary”. Indications that “masjid al-haram” may have been referring to a hallowed place in Jerusalem is the characterization of it as “my house” in the Koran. The Temple Mount was always referred to as god’s house. Moreover, the inner sanctum of the temple (the holy of holies, and thus the dwelling place of the Abrahamic deity) was a cubic room.

This alteration of the qibla would have made sense at the time, as the Mohammedan movement was likely seeking to eschew their pagan heritage, and divorce themselves from the legacy of the Nabatean cube.

Of course, the city of David would only do for the time being. Indeed, Jerusalem would have needed to be a temporary fix, as it was affiliated with the legacy of the Jews and Christians. The Mohammedans needed a unique temenos: one that was tailored to suit their newfangled Ishmaelite identity; and the city of David didn’t quite fit the bill. {25} The Abbasids would eventually designate a Hijazi location (dubbed “Mecca”) as the axis mundi. (Recall that the qiblas in all masjids did not start facing Mecca until after the Abbasids took control c. 750.) In doing so, they would be forced to manufacture an etiological myth to justify that choice. The modified Abrahamic lore would designate the recently-founded “Umm al-Qura” [“mother of settlements”] as the venue for the fabled “Akedah” (recast as the “adha” of Ishmael); as if that location had been pivotal to Abrahamic lore ALL ALONG.

That was not the only new city the Abbasids founded. They rejected the city of Damascus as the seat of the caliphate, as that had been associated with the dreaded Umayyads. So they built a new Islamic capital near the site of the old Ctesiphon, christening it “Bagh-dad” (Middle Persian for “god-given”). That the city was named using Pahlavi rather than CA nomenclature is very telling (a matter I explore in my essay on “The Syriac Origins Of Koranic Verse”). While Baghdad was being built, the Abbasids temporarily relocated the capital to Kufa (near the former Lakhmid capital of Hir[t]a), then to Anbar (which had formerly been known as Peroz-Shapur). Tellingly, the onomastic “Anbar” was also from Middle Persian, not CA.

The Syriac-speaking Arabs of “Nabatu” (the Nabataeans) are not explicitly accounted for in Mohammedan lore. This is further testament to the fact that those Arabs who became Mohammedans (i.e. the Ishmaelites / Saracens) saw THEMSELVES as part of the Nabataean peoples. (This topic is explored at length in my essays on the Syriac origins of the Koran.)

What of the matter of Arabs conversant in the Abrahamic tradition? Is it true that there were Jewish Arabs (i.e. Jews who were considered Arab) in Late Antiquity? Yes. In fact, mention of Jewish Arabs goes back to the late 2nd / early 1st century B.C., with the writings attributed to the Maccabean leader, Alexander Jannaeus, which recounted the wars waged against the Pharisees, Seleucids, and Nabataeans. During this time, the (Syriac-speaking) Nabataeans (who were recognized as Arabs) lost territory in Gilead. (Jannaeus overtook the Roman city of Gadara, which was located on the Nabataean frontier; and seems to have made it as far as Gerasa.) Here, the the Sadducees were characterized as Arabs.

But wait. Going back to Classical Antiquity, weren't Arabs associated with the Arabian peninsula? No. Until the Middle Ages, the ethnic group (known alternately as Saracens or Ishmaelites) was associated with Nabataea: a region known in the Greco-Roman vernacular as "Arabia Petraea". This corresponded to the lands east and south of the Dead Sea, (initially known as the lands of Moab and Edom), in which Syriac was spoken. Thus the etymology of the term, "Arab" has Greek origins; which makes it peculiar that the Creator Of The Universe dubbed his native language "arabiyyah" in the Koran. To wit: The name for his language did not COME FROM his language. While Arabic was based on Syriac, the NAME "Arabic" was Hellenic (that is: Greco-Roman).

In the 1st century B.C., the Greek historian, Diodorus of Sicily referred to "Arabia" in his "Bibliotheca Historica"; and even mentioned that the Arabs had erected a temple there. And where, exactly, was that? Diodorus describes a location in the vicinity of...you guessed it...PETRA. In other words, he thought of Nabataea as Arabia—in keeping with the Greco-Roman label "Arabia Petraea". A century later, when Saul of Tarsus wrote (in his letter to the Galatians) that he went to "Arabia", he was almost certainly NOT referring to the Arabian peninsula. He was probably referring to this area—wandering in what was known as "Paran" (the Biblical "wilderness", which corresponds to the Negev desert).

As late as the 7th century (AFTER the Mohammedans overtook the region), geographers were still under the impression that "Arabia" referred to the southern part of the Levant. This is attested by the Armenian polymath, Anania of Shirak in his "Ashkharatsuyts", where he explicitly correlated "Arabia" with "Paran". He even mentioned that this Levantine region contained within it the location of what the Arabs sometimes referred to as "Mecca". (!) How, then, did people refer to the Arabian peninsula? It was called "Yoqtan". Meanwhile, the people of the Hijaz were thought of as OTHER, associated with "Thamud". (Note the legend of the Abrahamic prophet, Salih.) Such alterity would not make sense of the originators of the Mohammedan lore thought of THEMSELVES as Hijazis.

The Christmas Eve sermon by Byzantine patriarch, Sophronius of Jerusalem in December of 634 (on the verge of the Arabs overtaking Palestine) described the conquering peoples as "the godless Saracens". Not only was Sophronius unaware of a new religion; at that point, the Arabs were not even known to be monotheistic. Sophronius apparently still associated them with Nabataean culture; so thought of them as pagan.

During the Rashidun and Umayyad eras, the Mohammedans were referred to as either "Saracens" or Ishmaelites ("Sons of Ishmael") by virtually everyone in the region writing commentaries or chronicles. Their dominion was referred to as the Saracen / Ishmaelite kingdom; and their leader was referred to as the Saracen / Ishmaelite king (alt. "amir al-mu-mineen"; leader of the faithful). The Syriac "Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius" from the 7th century is a case in point.

The etymology of "Saracen" is telling. Those in the western Levant (what the Romans called "Palaestina Prima") referred to the Ishmaelites as "Easterners". This was "Sh[a]-R-K[i]" in the indigenous language: Syriac. That was rendered "Sarakenos" in Greek (by the Byzantines) and "Saracin" in Old French (by the

Franks). The Anglicized version followed. Had the people in question primarily hailed from the middle of the Hijaz, this label would not have made any sense. For, in that case, they would have all come to Palaestina Prima exclusively from the south (up through Idumaea). The area dubbed “Arabia” at the time went from Syria (at its northern end) down to “Arabia Petraea” (at its southern end): a topic I discuss in my essay on the Syriac Origins Of Koranic Verse. {21} Prior to the Mohammedan conquests, the Arab peoples were simply known as, well, Arabs (a topic I explore in my essay on “The Syriac Origins Of Koranic Verse”). Tellingly, the “Chronicle” by Thomas the Presbyter mentioned a battle between the Romans and the Arabs of “the praised one” [“Mu-H-M-D”] in Palestine, just inland from Gaza, c. 634. What happened? “About four thousand poor Palestinian villagers were killed: Christians, Jews, and Samaritans. The Arabs ravaged the whole region.” Not the Muslims. The Arabs (alternately known as the “Ishmaelites”). There was not yet any identifiable new Faith, Islam to speak of.

According to the “Petra theory”, the Umayyad ruler, Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan is most likely the figure who (at the end of the 7th century) instigated the lore that would eventually coalesce into “Islam”—replete with nascent versions of (what would later become) the conventional Mohammedan narrative: MoM as the “Seal of the Prophets” (last messenger of the Abrahamic deity) who grew up as a Qurayshi merchant in Mecca. It is at THIS point that we first catch wind of a novel Faith that is referred to “Islam”.

Only thereafter would “Islam” as a distinct religion be posited in contradistinction to antecedent Abrahamic traditions. In such a case, the strategy is relatively straight-forward (from the perspective of the Umayyad caliphate): Legitimize the metastasizing Arab Empire via the declaration of a new Faith that was mutually exclusive with the Faiths of the (Zoroastrian) Sassanian Empire to the east AND of the (Christian / Trinitarian) Byzantine Empire to the west...not to mention distinct from the Faith of the Jews...even as it superseded ALL of them. {18} The Nabataean roots of both Classical Arabic AND the “Kaaba” (as well as some of the newfangled Mohammedan lore) could then be disregarded entirely.

Concocting a newfangled religion by co-opting extant lore is a good strategy for controlling a populace. When a new memplex appropriates memes from antecedent memplexes, it rarely announces that this is what it has done; as it likes to fashion itself as sui generis. Of course, ALL memplexes are derivative...even as NONE openly concede this fact.

So what of the emergence of an entirely new religion with a distinctly Ishmaelite pedigree? Establishment of a religion is an effective way for a government to consolidate—and subsequently maintain—power. Roman Emperor Constantine employed the strategy in the early 4th century—commissioning the fabrication of an OFFICIAL “Christianity”, defined at the Council of Nicaea in the spring of 325...then at subsequent ecumenical councils during the rest of the 4th century. (That process culminated with the Edict of Thessalonika c. 380, whereby the official Nicene creed was rendered the IMPERIAL creed.) Constantine retroactively attributed his vision of “Sol Invictus” [solar deity of triumph] to the Abrahamic deity. The rest was history.

Making Nicene Christianity the official STATE religion proved to be an effective stratagem—as Emperor Theodosius would demonstrate 55 years later with the aforementioned edict. The embryonic Israeli government would do so in the 20th century, pursuant to World War II—concocting a revisionist version of “Zionism” in order to justify the establishment of a theocratic ethno-State in Palestine. Tragically, in all these cases, the ploy worked.

By proffering a potent enough ideology, rulers can get their subjects to go along with almost anything (see Robespierre, Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Kim Il Sung, Pol Pot, etc.) In each case, we find some version of Providentialism (a.k.a. “Manifest Destiny”), which invariably involves an ethno-centric worldview (and usually some kind of cult activity). The Umayyad caliph Malik likely had a similar stratagem in mind. This comports with the archeological evidence; as nothing is mentioned of an individual with a given name, “Mu-H-M-D”...or even a new holy book...until after his reign. This indicates that a precipitous

transition probably occurred around this point (the last decade of the 7th century). Archeological evidence seems to support this. Indicative of this awkward metamorphosis: A Byzantine coin dated to c. 647 had “Mu-H-M-D” over-written in Syriac, leaving the image of an emperor holding a cross in-tact (though with the visage erased).

In a seemingly careless moment, Malik even admitted that the Koran was created during his reign. When he speculated about the time of his death, he noted that he was born during the month of fasting, became caliph during the month of fasting, and had the Koran compiled during the month of fasting; and so may even die during the month of fasting. Why would he make such a statement if the task had already been completed more than a generation earlier—that is: during Uthman’s caliphate (as other parts of Islamic historiography stipulate)?

In this scenario, the material from which Malik worked may simply have been excerpts from an extant lectionary—recitations cobbled together in an ad hoc fashion from a potpourri of sources. Even then, the content of the “Recitations” was—invariably—undergoing a metamorphosis. For the earliest copies of what came to be the current “Cairo” version of Islam’s holy book would still not emerge until later.

And so it goes: The initial movement (under the aegis of the aureate Mohammedan enterprise) may well have simply been an Abrahamic revival movement. Said movement was later appropriated by the Umayyad rulers after the fact—and subsequently codified in uniquely “Islamic” terms so as to distinguish it from pre-existing monotheistic Faiths. This was done for purely political purposes. {19}

One of the snags in the “Petra theory” is that it makes it more difficult (though not impossible) to account for Abu Bakr and the subsequent two “rightly-guided” caliphs: Umar and Uthman—who were ostensibly denizens of the Hijaz. (Ali is another story entirely.) To wit: Pursuant to a Petra-based genesis, what would have been THEIR basis for succession? Granted, the traditional accounts of these figures (the exalted “Rashidun”) could be a post-hoc fabrication—just another part of the hallowed folklore later used to legitimize the new imperialism. This is not too far-fetched; though there remains much work to be done to account for such figures.

More to the point: If this were all true, how would the movement’s epicenter have eventually transitioned—logistically speaking—from Petra (in Idumea) to Mecca (in the Hijaz) between MoM’s alleged ministry and the Umayyad Dynasty...even as the throne of the Caliph ended up in Damascus? This is unclear—unless, that is, the tale of MoM is a COMPLETE fabrication.

The only hypothesis is that the governor of Petra at the time, Abdullah ibn Zubayr (a Mohammedan), rebelled against the Umayyad caliphate (headquartered in Damascus) c. 683; and sought to relocate the Kaaba...which had been inherited from the Nabataeans in Petra to an alternate place. Consequently, he allied with the Abbasids (headquartered in Baghdad), who eventually selected the Hijaz as the home-base of the new-fangled Faith.

Tellingly, it was Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705 in Damascus) who would be the one to build the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (c. 691) and begin to assert a new Arab identity: an Abrahamic Faith with an Ishmaelite pedigree, replete with a new liturgical language (Classical Arabic). To what extent “Makkah” was on the agenda AT THAT POINT—and how important a role it was playing IN THIS NEW SCHEME—is anyone’s guess.

We might note that the Battle of the Zab (c. 750) took place in Mesopotamia. It was THAT event which ushered in the Abbasid era. And it was the Abbasids who eventually relocated the focal point of the new religion to the Hijaz. The Muslim historian, Al-Tabari (ref. “Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk”; vol. 20, no. 537) even goes so far to say that Ibn Zubayr destroyed the (original) Kaaba—that is: the one in his own city,

Petra.

As it so happens, an entire year (year 70 after the Hijra; c. 690) has been redacted from Al-Tabari's history, which would have been around the time that the Hijazi settlement at "Makkah" would have become the "temenos" for the new Faith...beginning with the (anti-Umayyad) imams of Kufa.

As it came to pass, it was in Kufa that scribes began modifying the (Nabataean) Syriac script—a process that would eventually yield Classical Arabic. Sure enough: The first mosques with a qibla that facing the Hijazi "Makkah" were in Kufa. And THAT would promptly become the major theological center of the burgeoning Mohammedan movement. It is no great feat to connect the dots here.

Again, the MOTIVATION to re-write the history so that a Hijazi site rather than a Nabataean / Palestinian site was the "temenos" is plain to see: To rationalize an Ishmaelite-centric reification of the Abrahamic legacy. Said re-location of the "temenos" was—naturally—concomitant with the need to accord to the new prophet (as the SEAL OF all prophets) an explicitly ARABIAN pedigree. For an Arabian target-audience, the appeal of doing so is self-explanatory.

On the dome in Jerusalem (dubbed "al-Qubbat al-Sakhrah"), caliph Malik had inscribed the following proclamation in an early version of Classical Arabic: "The Messiah, Jesus, son of Miriam, was only a messenger of god...So believe in god and his messengers. And say not 'three'. Cease!" (This would become verse 171 of Surah 4 in the Koran.) The inscription then stipulates that a figure (referred to as "one who is praised") is the "messenger of god". The main thesis was that the Abrahamic deity did not have a son. In other words: The central message being conveyed was that any contention of a triune god was nonsense. The primary focus of the inscription was NOT on a distinctly new Faith (with its own holy book); it was on the one-ness of god; and thus the rejection of the Trinitarian model. {25}

Concluding Thoughts:

It is worth considering the formidable explanatory power of the "Petra theory" for the genesis of the Mohammedan movement.

First: It explains the otherwise inexplicable disappearance of the Nabataeans; as well as the abrupt, complete abandonment of Petra. No need to be confounded. The Mohammedans WERE the (former) Nabataeans and Ghassanids; and the newly-minted Ishmaelites opted to divorce themselves from the legacy of their (former) pagan capital. Theories about droughts and famines don't add up, as no such conditions were reported by others in the region. Suffice to say: When one group of people vanishes, and another group—who speaks the same language (see "The Syriac Origins Of Koranic Verse") and shares some of the same folklore (see "Syriac Source-Material For Islamic Lore")—suddenly appears in roughly the same area, it is not unreasonable to suppose that they might be the same people, though with a new group identity. {26}

Second: It provides an alternate explanation for how a band of Bedouins from the Hijaz suddenly stormed out of the barren deserts of Arabia and—within a single generation—conquered THE ENTIRE MIDDLE EAST, as well as much of north Africa. There were likely only a few thousand Hijazis at the time. Are we to suppose that they hopped on camels (there were no horses), and conquered the Levant, all of Mesopotamia, and much of Persia...pushing back the armies of the Byzantine Empire and OBLITERATING the Persian Empire with such expediency? Such an astonishing feat doesn't sound quite as implausible once we consider that the conquering peoples already had a viable civilization in the Levant; and had simply opted to re-invent itself.

Recall that MoM was likely a post hoc fabrication, concocted by the Saracens (i.e. EASTERNERS) for largely political reasons. {21} These zealously monotheistic Arabs sought an ideological flashpoint to mobilize members of their burgeoning movement. What better way to do this than to posit a warrior prophet, chosen by god? Behold a campaign of agit-prop that could be used on anyone brought into their fold. As with Constantine vis a vis Christianity, this novel creed would serve to unify an ethnically diverse, expanding dominion. Its theme was unimpeachable; and could be used to justify their hegemonic campaign.

And so it went: The Mohammedan pitch furnished members with a *casus belli*, as well as a rationalization for their cause; and did so in a way that Nabataean paganism (and itinerant Syriac monks) could not. Moreover, this made-to-order Messianic creed provided Arabs with an exciting new identity: a distinct Ishmaelite pedigree that surely galvanized participants. (I explore the appeal of that pitch in part one of my series, “About Mohammed”.)

In considering various explanations for the archeological record, we mustn't underestimate the power of memetic inertia. After all, debunking coveted myths is far more difficult than purveying them. (We might recall the words of Mark Twain: “It's easier to fool the masses than to convince them that they are being fooled.”) It's why people are inclined to spread juicy gossip rather than disregard it. Such is the nature of memetic inertia.

To propagate an enticing rumor is second nature; to terminate the rumor requires self-discipline. And so it goes with maintaining one's position on things in which one has a staunch vested interest. The desire to stand one's ground and save face is one of the most powerful forces in the known universe; so people are far more likely to dig in their heels than abandon the hallowed ground on which they stand. This predisposition is only amplified when vested interests are involved; and souls are (believed to be) at stake.

The “Petra theory” involves conjectures that comport with the later development of the canon of Hadith. However, rough theoretical compatibility does not mean inexorable logistical contingency, let alone (conclusive) corroboration. So we must be cautious in arriving at facile conclusions. Indeed, we could easily indulge in fanciful suppositions here—“filling in the gaps” by positing a spruced-up alternative narrative. That's tempting; but we would then risk committing a mis-step similar to the one that religious apologists commit: pretending to know things we simply don't know...and, most likely, may not ever be able to know for sure.

What many of us often forget is that it's okay to admit, “We just don't know.” After all is said and done, conjecture is only conjecture; which—though unsatisfying—sometimes is all we'll ever have. {20} Certainty can be elusive as well as illusory. We must always be careful not to confuse a coveted hypothesis with conclusive-ness. “My personal hunch is X” can slowly become “X has just GOTTA be the explanation.” This is especially so when one is BANKING ON X being true.

Pet theories are often not seen as a mere theory by the pet-owner, especially after having reared it. While making a concerted effort to avoid dogmatism, it is also important to refrain from bouts of hyper-skepticism (and its close cousin, over-speculation). Either way, we must resist the urge to put forth inferences merely out of convenience—the easy way out of a quandary. Rejecting false certainties does not require concocting other false certainties to take their place.

Regarding the “Petra theory” as it now stands, agnosticism may well be the most prudent course. There is more evidence presented in part 2 of this essay. If there is anything I missed (or simply got wrong), I'm all ears. Critical feedback is encouraged. As is the case with my essay on “The Forgotten Diaspora”, this is

not the final word on the matter. Rather, it should serve as a point of departure for further inquiry. Indeed, this is an on-going, open-ended process that will continue to evolve as further evidence comes to light. Clearly, several questions remain; and more investigation is warranted.

FOOTNOTES:

{1 This ayah refers to the location as THE VALLEY OF “Makkah”. However, present-day “Mecca” is located at the inner edge of the Hijazi coastal plain known as “Tihamah”. Petra is in a valley. Mecca can only be said to be situated in a valley in an extremely vague sense. There are some nearby hills on its outskirts; though the nearest mountain to the current city is over 8 kilometers away. In any case, this is THE ONLY time a location by that name is mentioned in the entirety of the Koran. Elsewhere, the “mother of settlements” (wherever it was) is not mentioned by name.}

{2 In describing the fabled “Night Journey”, the opening verse of Surah 17 refers to what could be EITHER Mecca or Petra as “the sacred place of worship” and to what might be Jerusalem as “the remote house of worship”. Such vague references are telling.}

{3 The Quraysh were a subset of the “Banu Kinanah” tribe of southern Arabia.}

{4 The Arabic moniker, “al-Lah” is derived from the Syriac, “eloah”—with which the Late Aramaic “alah[a]” and the Ancient Hebrew “eloah” (royal plural, “elohim”) were related. Recall that “Allah” is the Nabataean cognate of the aforesaid Aramaic (“Elah” / “Elaha”). Also note that the Phoenician term for the supreme deity was “Aliyy”, derived from the Old Semitic root, “El”.}

{5 There were various Kahlani tribes—notably the Banu Azd of Marib and the Banu Hamadan.}

{6 There are various etymological coinky-dinks involved here. A Semitic term for virgin is “ka’ibah”. During a trip to Petra in the late 4th century, in reporting on the temple to Dushara, Cypriot bishop Epiphanius of Salamis may have been confused by the aforesaid homophony, and consequently mistaken the “ka’abu” for a shrine to a virgin goddess—perhaps Dushara’s mother. The notions of virgin purity and of sanctity may have had hermeneutic parity.}

{7 There are alternate theories for the etymology of “kaaba”. One theory is that it was the Tamil term for Shiva, “Kabaali”. This is likely a coincidence, as Old Tamil is based on proto-Dravidian, which dates back to the 4th millennium B.C. exclusively in regions east of Persia (mostly, southern India). Cross-pollination of memes was, of course, possible between the Far East and the Middle East during Classical Antiquity. (For example, the Meluhha people of the Indus Valley civilization are alluded to in ancient Sumerian records.) However, even if the Sumerians / Akkadians adopted this phoneme from the Far East, Semitic precursors were typically not based on Sumerian, let alone on Dravidian. So this particular meme would have had to have migrated on its own, irrespective of etymology. That is possible, though rather unlikely.}

{8 How is it that the Abrahamic deity was not inclined to intervene in any of those other cases? The world's FIRST cubic shrine seems to have been the Akkadian "Abu" temple at Eshnunna (now "Tell Asmar"), dedicated to Tishpak c. 2300 B.C. Next was a Zoroastrian structure near Persepolis (at Naghsh-e Rostam) in Fars: an Achaemenid "Kaaba-[y]e Zartosht" [Cube of Zoroaster] at Mardvasht that was erected in the early 5th century B.C. (over a thousand years before Mohammad was born). Where was the Abrahamic deity then? Why not any revelation for the Persians when they worshipped Ahura-Mazda at THEIR "kaaba"? When the Nabataeans erected their cubic shrine in Petra, they were employing a similar architectural idiom...as would the Himyarites when they erected their cubic shrine in Zafar...and as would the Quraysh when they erected their cubic shrine in Mecca. }

{9 Abraham may have originally hailed from a Chaldean town known as "Ur"—roughly 1.6 thousand kilometers away from the Hijazi location eventually dubbed "Mecca". Suffice to say, the authors of the Koran expected their audience to be clueless about geography. }

{10 Both "A[a]d" and "Thamud" were mentioned so frequently to remind the audience what god did to people who displeased him. These were places / tribes that he destroyed for their lack of fealty. }

{11 The "spring by the sea" [Yanbu al-Bahr] may or may not have existed as a trading port at the time. }

{12 An early document that may have mentioned Mecca by name was a Christian eschatological tract, the "Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius". The document was originally written in Syriac by a pro-Roman/Byzantine author, but is difficult to date (probably originating at the end of the 7th century, though the eventual use of the moniker "Makkah" in the text may well have occurred only in later recensions). Tellingly, in this text, the invading Arabs are referred to as "Sons of Ishmael" (i.e. Ishmaelites), not as "Muslims". Conspicuously, no religion called "Islam" is mentioned. This is rather odd if FAITH had been the primary way the invaders (the antagonists in the tract) had defined themselves at the time. Moreover, the derided "mushrikun" of MoM's hometown are said to be an agrarian people, tending olive trees and other flora (ref. 6:136-139 in the Koran): an impossibility in Arabia. Petra, though, is located in a valley with trees, and had plenty of irrigation. }

{13 The only way out of this geographical conundrum is to suppose that it was not Abraham himself, but his son Ishmael, who established the Meccan cube. This requires one to assume that Ishmael somehow ended up the Hijaz; then establish his own cultic practices amongst the indigenous people (Bronze Age Bedouin). This is plausible insofar as we take seriously the Biblical account that, at Sarah's request, Abraham banished Hagar and Ishmael from Canaan; and this fabled mother and son subsequently made the 1,400-kilometer journey south into the deserts of western Arabia (for no apparent reason)...with their destination on barren land that was nowhere near any trade-routes...AND that Ishmael somehow (eventually) made it all the way back to Hebron for his father's funeral (Genesis 25:9). Yet EVEN THIS is contradicted by Bukhari in his Hadith (vol. 4; no. 583), which tells us that when Abraham banished Hagar and Ishmael, he first sat them under a tree not too far from the Kaaba, next to the (what was referred to as) the "Zam-Zam" well. He then escorted them to the place (a valley) to which they were to be exiled. (In the Koran, "Bakkah" is the place where Hagar wept for her banished son.) Wait. The "Zam-Zam" well? Where did THAT come from? As it turns out, there was a "Zam-Zam" spring—as well as a Mount Arafat—at Lalish in northern Mesopotamia. These two sites became integral parts of the Yazidi pilgrimage...which seems to have had Assyrian origins. In the end, Abraham would have never been anywhere south of Edom. Some Abrahamic accounts even state that Abraham entered Canaan via She[c]hem, which is from the north (i.e. Galilee, via Syria; as that city is located to the north of Jerusalem). Clearly, he did not come up through Edom. Even when he eventually made it to Hebron farther to the south, it would have been a matter of having come from the north. }

{14 The reification of a storied city is not unheard of. Indeed, it is common for cities to take on mythical status, as with—say—the hanging gardens of Babylon or the Achaean place of spell-binding opulence, “Sybaris” (in what is now Calabria). Around the world, examples abound wherein we hear, “This is supposedly the place where...” in local folklore.}

{15 In 1744, Prince Muhammad ibn Saud entered into his Faustian pact with the religious fanatic, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab of the Najd. After the first World War (that is: pursuant to the demise of the Ottoman Empire), the theocratic Saudi state achieved dominion across Arabia. The final step was ousting the only regime to have claimed Mecca as their capital: the Hashemites (in 1925). Of course, by then, Riyadh was already the Saudis’ center of operation. The Hashemites—who HAD operated out of Mecca—had enjoyed sovereignty in the Hijaz during the 19th (and first quarter of the 20th) century; but were banished. It’s worth recalling that the triumph of the House of Saud—and thus of Wahhabism—was the result of British backing (which involved yet another Faustian alliance). The exiled Hashemites now rule Jordan...which, yet again, was the result of British bumbling. The dunderheaded “mandate” following the first World War collapsed after the SECOND World War...leading to further disaster across the region (including the ethnic cleansing of Palestine).}

{16 6:163 is a peculiar passage, as MoM is instructed by the Koran’s protagonist to proclaim that he is the first of the Muslims (i.e. of those who submit to god’s will). This is, of course, in direct contradiction to the rest of Koranic historiography, in which a raft of preceding (Abrahamic) prophets are all deemed to have been Muslims...all the way back to Adam. Conventional lore does not make MoM the first MUSLIM; it simply makes him the LAST PROPHET...of a religion (Islam) that had existed since the days Adam and Eve roamed Eden. This narrative falls apart if we do NOT suppose that all the antecedent Abrahamic prophets were bona fide Muslims.}

{17 “Mu-H-M-D” as a GIVEN name was established post hoc. In other words, it imputed to the “nabi” retro-actively from what had merely been a general descriptor. Testament to this fact is that, throughout the Koran, the prophet-in-question is referred to by A DOZEN OTHER general descriptors: “[a]H-M-D” [praiseworthy], “bashir” [announcer], “mu-bashir” [one who announces], “shahid” [witness], “siraj munir” [lamp], “noor” [light], “da’i” [implorer], “khatam an-nabiyyin” [seal of the prophets], “nadhir” [bearer of a warning], “mu-dakir” [one who reminds], “mu-zamil” [one who is wrapped], and “mu-dathir” [one who is covered]. The first reference to “Mohammed” occurred in a tract attributed to a 7th-century Bagratuni (Armenian) writer, Sebeos: the sacred history of the Armenians now known as “A History of Heraclius”. Tellingly, the author referred to the Arab conquerors not as “Muslims”, but as those who were of the stock of Abraham by Ishmael, son of Hagar (alt. “sons of Ishmael”). He mentions in passing that their leader was referred to as “Mahmet”. Said figure “became prominent”, as he is the one who persuaded the Ishmaelites to recognize the god of Abraham. The author notes that this man was versed in Mosaic lore; and consequently unified all the Arab tribes under one Faith. Tellingly, it was not until the early 8th century that we find an explicit statement of Islam and of Mohammed. It appears in an inscription on the Umayyad mosque in Damascus: “Our Lord is god; Our religion is Islam; and our prophet is Mu-H-M-D.” Still no mention of a new holy book. As for the use of these other terms, it is likely that they were general descriptors. For more on “Mu-H-M-D”, see Appendix 3 of my essay: “Genesis Of A Holy Book”. For more on “Islam”, see my essay: “The Syriac Origins Of Koranic Text”.}

{18 The Byzantine Empire was essentially just the Eastern Roman Empire (“Basileia ton Romaion”), which was later affiliated with the Eastern Orthodox Church (the original liturgical language of which was Koine Greek) rather than the Roman Catholic Church (the liturgical language of which was Vulgar Latin). This demarcation became especially salient pursuant to the Great Schism of the 11th century. In any case, during Late Antiquity, the western and eastern Roman empires followed two separate POLITICAL paths, roughly concomitant with the disparate denominations of Christianity.}

{19 Regarding the initial movement’s conception of “believers”: Descriptions of the fabled Medinan constitution attest to this fact; as it is said to have equated the Ummah with all “People of the Book” [“Ahl al-Kitab”]—that is: not exclusively with the Mohammedans, but with Sabians [Mandaeans], Samaritans, Jews, and (non-Trinitarian) Christians as well. (Funny enough, the Abrahamic deity did not deem this fabled document sufficiently important to ensure its survival for posterity.) This contrasts starkly with what came to be the prevailing taxonomy. In the current categorization, “believers” (“mu’mineen”; i.e. those with “iman”) are equated exclusively with Muslims; whereas non-believers (“kuffar”; i.e. those who conceal, which includes fellow Abrahamic confessors) are—ipso facto—equated with all non-Muslims. “Ummah” is now a label pertaining exclusively to the world’s Muslims; thus disqualifying other “People of the Book” along with the rest of mankind.}

{20 Want a conjecture for how Mecca REALLY came to be? Consider this: In the year 713, an earthquake destroyed many of the free-standing structures in Petra (while structures built into the cliffs remained mostly intact). Let’s suppose that Caliph Abd al-Malik OFFICIALLY established Islam c. 691, as that is when the Dome of the Rock was erected; and when he commissioned the use of a new liturgical language: Classical Arabic. It was also the FIRST time a revelation known as the “Recitations”, a distinct Faith known as “Islam”, a figurehead formally recognized as “Mu-H-M-D”, and a community identified as “Muslims” appear in the historical record. By the time that earthquake occurred, Al-Malik’s heir, Al-Walid was caliph. The destruction—possibly taken as an ominous sign—called for the designation of a new “temenos” for the new-fangled Faith. Al-Walid selected a place in the Hijaz, as that is where his family was originally from. His grandfather (Al-Malik’s father, Marwan ibn al-Hakam) hailed from Ta’if. (Ta’if was a center for the Banu Thaqif, and had served as the “temenos” for the Arabian goddess, Allat; though its pagan history would promptly be erased.) That particular town was not ideal, as it was situated in the midst of steep, mountainous terrain—and so was not readily accessible to pilgrims. The place where Mecca was founded is located less than a hundred kilometers northeast of Ta’if, on the other side of the Hunayn valley. As it happens, that valley is where a storied battle had taken place c. 630...which is precisely the year—we are told—that MoM seized Mecca! Voila: The makings of a founding myth.}

{21 The Persians referred to the Arabs as “Tazi”; which prompted the Chinese to refer to them as the “Dashi”. The appellation, “Easterner” (“Saracen”) for the early Ishmaelites makes sense, as a similar label was applied to Syriac Christians (e.g. Jacobites, Nestorians, Chaldaeans, etc.) by Roman (Latin and Greek) Christians—who derisively referred to them as “Eastern Christians”. Such a characterization stands to reason, as Eastern Christians spoke the same language as the “Saracens”: *Syriac* (until, that is, Arabic became the lingua franca of the region over the course of the late 8th and early 9th century). Procopios of Caesarea-Palaestina used the term “Sarakenos”. The ethnonym was also used in the Doctrine Jacobi c. 634. As we’ve seen, “sons of Ishmael” was the other way of characterizing this group. In the 7th century, the Syriac (monophysite) patriarch of Tur-Abdin, Gabriel of Qartmin (that is: of Beth Qustan), was said to have met with the leader of the “sons of Ishmael”. In the early phase of the Mohammedan movement, never was the term “Muslim” used. (For more on the term, “Muslim”, see my essay on “The Syriac Origins Of Koranic Text”.) Fulcher of Chartres referred to “Saracens” in his memoirs c. 1124. And in his travelogues, a monk named Bernard referred to the Al-Aqsa mosque as a “Saracen synagogue”. Their language was often referred to as “the Saracen tongue”. The appellation, “Saracen” held through the late

medieval period, during which time Dar al-Islam fragmented far beyond the binary (creed-based) Sunni-Shia divide that had existed since the caliphate of Ali. Even so, for many centuries, even Kurds and Turks were subsumed under the “Saracen” banner—as was the case with the (Sunni) Ayyubids, who were routinely referred to as “Saracens” by both the Franks and Byzantines. The appellation held even with Shiites—as with the (Arab / Berber) Fatimids. The first Muslim ethnicities to be held in contra-distinction to “Saracens” were the Seljuks (who hailed from the Eurasian Steppes) and Mamluks (who operated out of Cairo): both of Turkic pedigree. (The Saffarids, Samanids, Ghaznavids, and Ghurids—who were all Persian—did not interact with the West, so weren’t given an Occidental exonym.) Moors, Turks, Kurds, Mongols / Tatars, and Persians eventually came to be seen as ethnically-distinct kinds of Muslim. Thereafter, the ethnic ramification of Dar Al-Islam would continue—with the Andalusians / Maghrebis (Moorish), the Ottoman Turks (western Turkic), the Buyids and Safavids (Persian), the Ilkhanate (Mongol / Tatar), and the Mughals (eastern Turkic, mixed with Indian). In spite of this, the antiquated taxonomy persisted. In the 13th century, Dominican monk, Burchard of Magdeburg [alt. of Mount Zion] referred to Muslims as “Saracens” in his “Description Of The Holy Land”; as did both the Dominican monk, Ric[c]oldo of Monte Croce “Contra Legem Sarracenorum” [Against The Laws Of The Saracens] AND the Franciscan monk, Magister Thietmar of Westphalia in his travelogue. In the 14th century, writers like Niccolo of Poggibonsi (a Franciscan pilgrim) and Ludoph von Suchem (a German priest) were still referring to Muslims as “Saracens” in their travelogues. And as late as the 15th century, the Dominican writer, Felix Fabri of Ulm referred to Arab Muslims as “Saracens” in his extensive writings; as did the Franciscan pilgrim, Francesco Suriano in his “Treatise Of The Holy Land” c. 1485 (though such writers tended to use alternate labels for non-Arab Muslims, like Moors, Turks, Tatars, and Persians). By the Enlightenment, the appellation “Saracen” had become somewhat out-dated; as the Ummah had become too ethnically diverse to be associated with one particular race, let alone with lands to the east. By then, Muslims no longer hailed exclusively from the eastern Levant (they’d made it as far west as Andalusia); so “Easterner” no longer made much sense. (Eventually, a confabulated etymology was touted, whereby “Saracen” was said to have derived from Abraham’s wife, “Sarah”. But this made no sense, as Ishmaelites were considered HAGARENES in Abrahamic genealogy; as they were the progeny of Hagar, not Sarah.) By the time the Franciscan monk, Eugene Roger penned “The Holy Land” in 1664, the medieval term “Saracen” was no longer used. However, the use of “Ishmaelites” continued. For example, in the 18th century, the (Polish) Jewish writer, Gedaliah (a disciple of the Ashkenazi leader, Judah the Pious) referred to Levantine Muslims as “Ishmaelites” in his work, “Seek The Peace Of Jerusalem”. However, the “sons of Ishmael” were no longer merely from east of the Jordan, and were certainly not exclusively Arab; so that too became somewhat of a colloquialism. From the beginning, the Mohammedans were alternately referred to in Syriac as the “Ma-hagrae”, meaning “those who have migrated”. This is the term that served as the basis for the Arabic “Mu-hajirun” (rendered “Magaritai” in Greek). They were alternately conceptualized as Ishmaelites (i.e. sons of Ishamel) and Hagarenes (descendants of Abraham via Hagar; see Footnote 28 below). The term “Mu-S-L-M” for that group was not used until the 740’s (as an endonym); which supplanted the original moniker for Mohammedans: “Mu-min-eeen”—a general descriptor for “those who believe” (i.e. the Faithful within the Mohammedan movement). During the Enlightenment, the prevailing moniker was “Mohammedan” or some variation thereof. In any case, by the modern era, Muslims were primarily referred to as “Muslims”; as that is how they referred to themselves. For more on this onomastic metamorphosis, see the work of Crone, Cook, Donner, Shoemaker, and Hoyland.}

{22 The “Sakhra” may correlate with the Arabic locution “maqam Ibrahim”: the stone of Abraham; or that on which Abraham stood. The “masjid al-hara[a]m” mentioned in Islamic lore can be alternately interpreted as any space that served as the place of prayer. (Even “place of prayer” is vague, as “masjid” can also be interpreted as “sanctuary”. For more on “hara[a]m”, see Footnote 50 of my essay on “The Syriac Origins Of Koranic Text”.) The semiotic of this lexeme—as it may have existed in the 7th century—is

somewhat unclear. Note that the Temple Mount was also referred to as “Q-D-S”, which is simply an Arabized version of the Semitic “kadesh”, meaning “holy”. The cavern beneath the Sakhra rock was also known as the “well of souls”, which is where the Ark of the Covenant was placed (so legend has it). In reality, this was the summit of a hill (Moriah) upon which was located the threshing floor of a Jebusite named Arahunah; the very spot that the Hebrews later designated as the dwelling place of their godhead, Y-H-W-H. This divine presence (“shekhinah”) was originally in a tent (“tabernacle”) at S[h]alem, then in a small cedar temple located on Moriah (which may have correlated with the place known as “Bet[h]-El”), and later in a rectangular stone temple (the fabled “second temple” erected by Zeru[b]babel ben Shealtiel in the 6th century). At one end of the temple was a cubic space, traditionally known as the “holy of holies” or the “house of god” (hence “Bet[h]-El”). That inner sanctuary served as the worldly abode of the Abrahamic deity (according to Judaic theology). What often goes unmentioned is the hollow that was dug into the ground underneath the hill’s summit. It was in that space that the first Mohammedans may have built shrines. In any case, they were engaged in some sort of idolatry from the earliest days of their movement (see Footnote 29 below).}

{23 The Lakhmids were Arabs who were largely Syriac Christians—which is to say that they spoke Syriac and were well-versed in Abrahamic lore. The Lakhmids were vassals of the Persians up to their last leader: Al-Numan III [ibn al-Mundhir IV] of Hir[t]a, who ruled until 602. Al-Numan III had a Jewish mother and was reared by the renown (Arab) Christian poet, Adi ibn Zayd al-Ibadi. Having fallen out of favor with his Persian overlords, he was eventually overthrown by an Arab lackey of the Sassanids: I[lyas] ibn Qabisah al-Ta’i: the Arab figure of the Banu Tayy upon whom the legend of MoM is likely based). Soon thereafter, I[lyas] ibn Qabisah HIMSELF would vie for Arab independence—though the exact circumstances of these squabbles are shrouded in mystery. Sporadic clues come from hazy accounts of the fabled Battle of Dhi Qar, which seems to have occurred at some point between 602 and 622, and involved the Banu Bakr. Accounts of this period are convoluted, as I[lyas] ibn Qabisah is often conflated—rightly or wrongly—with a figure known as Hani ibn Qabisah (leader of the Banu Bakr). The relationship between each of these men (assuming they are not one-in-the same figure) and the Sassanids—and with each other—is unclear. According to the standard Islamic narrative, the (Abrahamic, Syriac-speaking) progeny of I[lyas] ibn Qabisah were eventually overthrown by the Arab general, Khalid ibn al-Walid ibn al-Mughira c. 633. It is anyone’s guess exactly how and when the folklore surrounding I[lyas] ibn Qabisah (as “Mu-H-M-D”) and Hani ibn Qabisah (as “Abu Bakr”) may have emerged. What we do know is that the result was an independent Arab (possibly Maghar-ite) State in the vicinity of the former Lakhmid domain, which was referred to as “Tachka-stan” by the Armenian historian, Sebeos. Sebeos recounted how this “praised one” (“Mahmet”) of the Arabs established a Syriac religious community (which was comprised of both Ishmaelites and Jews, as its membership was based on their common descent from Abraham). The rest, as they say, was history. Or not.}

{24 For more on this matter, see “The First Dynasty Of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate” by Gerald R. Hawting; “In God’s Path: The Arab Conquests And The Creation Of An Islamic Empire” by Robert G. Hoyland; and “God’s Caliph: Religious Authority In The First Centuries Of Islam” by Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds. For a broader general reading on the present topic, see “Hagarism And The Making Of The Islamic World” by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook. Also note “The Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research Into Its Early History” by Karl-Heinz Phlig; as well as “Witnesses To A World Crisis: Historians And Histories Of The Middle East In The 7th Century” and “The Last Great War Of Antiquity” by James Howard-Johnston. For those who read French, another notable work is the 3-volume “Le Coran Des Historiens”, the findings of a project headed by Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye. Regarding the history of the pilgrimage to Mecca, the best scholarship was done by F.E. Peters in his 1994 book, “The Hajj”. Though flawed, it is well-researched.}

{25 The inscribed passage characterizes a “praised one” (“Mu-H-M-D”) as a “servant of god” (“abd-ullah”) and a “messenger of god” (“rasul Allah”), then makes mention of a “prophet” (“nabi”); though there is no explanation for who that figure might be. It subsequently declares Jesus of Nazareth to be “Rasul Allah”, and equates the “Messiah” with “Abd-ullah”; which means that all of these terms were general descriptors; not appellations for a singular figure. The passage then admonishes the “people of the book” (those of the Abrahamic Faith) against embellishing their religion (via Trinitarianism). It goes on to describe *Jesus* as the “rasul” [messenger] and “abd” [servant] of god; and concludes that the true Abrahamic Faith is one of “submission” (“Islam”)—a matter I explore in my essay on “The Syriac Origins Of Koranic Text”. It is also very telling that there is no mention of a “Quran”; nor of a final revelation; nor of a last prophet. Even more telling, there is no mention of the “Mi’raj” (the fabled Night Journey): the event that the Dome was purportedly built to commemorate. (!) Clearly, this inscription was made well before (what eventually became) Islamic lore had coalesced. }

{26 Another example of this phenomenon is discussed in my essay on “The Forgotten Diaspora”, where the abrupt dissolution of the great (Jewish) [k]Hazar Empire in the North Caucasus was promptly followed by the emergence of Ashkenazim in Eastern Europe. That entailed a migration of over 2,000 kilometers, whereas the present thesis entailed virtually no migration at all. }

{27 There are other possibilities. “Safa” may come from the Safa Hills of Nabataea, located just south of the Nabataean city of Suada in Coele-Syria (Hellenized to “Dionysus Soada”). Many etymologies continue to be shrouded in mystery; and such matters warrant further investigation. }

{28 The name for the female figure known as “[h]Agar” seems to have come from the name of the Dilmunite location known as “[h]Agarum” [alt. “Akarum”], which served as the temenos for the godhead “Inzak” (possibly a correlate of the Babylonian “Shamash”) going back to the 2nd millennium B.C. The location likely corresponded to what came to be called “Al-Ahsa” / “Al-Hasa” (in Arabic). Up until the Mohammedan conquests, Dilmun would have been part of the Lakhmid kingdom (Arab vassals of the Sassanians), during which time the city may have been known as “Pit-Ardashir” (Middle Persian). Tellingly, the Dilmunites also used the Semitic moniker “El” for their godhead. Why? Because—in addition to Persian—they would have spoken SYRIAC. }

{29 Still doubt whether bowing to—and circumambulation of—the Kaaba constitutes idolatry? Do a simple thought experiment. Change its shape from a cube to a humanoid figure. (Does the structure need to be an actual STATUE? Clearly, idolatry is not defined by the SHAPE of the object-in-question; it is the TREATMENT of the object.) Would anthropologists who stumbled upon the exact same activity oriented around a DIFFERENT object hesitate to characterize it as idolatry? What if the worshippers notified them that the structure was not believed to ITSELF be the deity, but just REPRESENTED the deity? Fair enough. But consider that, per Juche, there is idolatry of Kim Il Sung in North Korea. Supplicants do not believe that a statue of their patriarch is ACTUALLY HIM. Indeed, they would kow-tow to ANY effigy of the deified figure. After all, idols are generally seen as proxies for the ultimate object of devotion, not just the object of devotion ITSELF. That’s how shrines work. So, to the claim of MERE representation, the aforementioned anthropologists might reply: “Ok, so any other statue could be treated in the same manner?” The answer would be: “No. It needs to be THIS PARTICULAR statue.” Case closed. }

{30 An early Muslim source (cited by the Ayyubid historian, Abu al-Fida of Damascus in the early 14th century) provides the following account of the “Sabians”, to whom the source refers as a Syriac people: “The [Syrians] are the most ancient of nations, and Adam and his sons spoke their language. [Here, he’s probably thinking of the precursor to Syriac: Old Aramaic.] Their religious community is that of the Sabians, and they claim that they received their religion from Seth [brother of Cain and Abel] and Idris

[Enoch]. They have a book that they ascribe to Seth [probably referring to the Syriac “Book of Enoch”]. In it, good precepts are recorded—such as enjoin truth-speaking and courage, and give protection to the stranger; and evil practices are mentioned, from which they are commanded to abstain. The Sabians had certain religious rites—among which are seven fixed times of prayer, five of which correspond with that of the Muslims.” Abu Ismail Maghribi also noted that the Sabians fasted for a full lunar month. Regardless of who they may have actually been, the fact that the authors of the Koran saw fit to single out the Sabians (as fellow “People of the Book”) is quite telling. The sect was clearly on their mind while they were formulating their new creed. Little would they know that, shortly thereafter, the group would cease to exist. (This is the case whether we conjecture that the label referred to the Elkesaites, Mandaeans, Manichaeans, or anyone else.) It is laughable to suggest that this particular sect was worth mentioning in an eternal book, composed billions of years ago. (The universe is over 13 billion years old; and the Final Revelation is believed to have existed since the beginning of time.) Becoming so quickly dated not only belies claims of the eternality of the “Recitations”; it shows how time-bound (read: short-sighted) the authors really were. We are expected to believe that the message was addressed to all mankind, and that it was pertinent to the history of the entire world. Would the Sabians really have been worth mentioning? Recall that the target audience included people who would live well over a thousand years later, in far-away lands. Today, even those living in the Middle East aren’t sure what, exactly, this exonym might be referring to. Are we to suppose that someone living in Des Moines, Iowa today should be able to relate to...the Elkesaites? Of all people, would the Creator of the Universe have opted to mention a soon-to-be-defunct religious group when seeking to make what was supposed to be a timeless point? Of course not. The explanation is quite clear. At the time, Syriac-speaking Arabs from Arabia Petraea (who were seeking to establish their own Abrahamic creed) WOULD have been concerned with such a sect. After all, the Nabataeans spoke a dialect of Syriac and regularly interacted with Syriac-speaking Jews and Christians throughout the Levant. }

{31 “Marwa” is a phonetic contortion of “Moreh”, which was itself a variation on “Moriah”, the site of the temple mount in Jerusalem. But what of “Safa”? Well, as it turns out, this was an alternate name for mount Skopos [Lookout] in Jerusalem (as referenced by Josephus). Obviously, these would NOT have been the hills between which the banished Hagar and Ishmael was frantically looking for water; as the mother and son would have been in a barren desert; not in the Kedron Valley. UNLESS...the people composing the material, being from the area, were familiar with the two aforementioned Judean hills; so were apt to incorporate them into their tale. It would have been later, as the Islamic narrative was created, that the two hills were purported to have been in the Arabian desert over 1,200 kilometers to the south. Laughably, two rock outcroppings in Mecca are now said to have been the two fabled hills. Another theory: Originally, the hills were not “Safa” and “Marwa”, but Mina and Arafat. Bottom line: The Islamic lore was adapted from antecedent lore; and most certainly did not originate in what is now known as Mecca. }