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### Islam and the Religions of the Ancient Orient: A Reappraisal. Part I

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Richard S. Tomback

ISLAM AND THE RELIGIONS OF THE ANCIENT ORIENT:  
A REAPPRAISAL

PART I

The problem of Islam's and Muhammed's debt to Judaism has occupied occidental scholarship since the early nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> That Muhammed consciously borrowed concepts, laws, cultic terminology and literary themes from Jewish sources can scarcely be proven, in as much as we may by no means ascribe to Muhammed a special liking for Jews or for Judaism, and indeed in his lifetime, as well as in the many of his writings he left behind him, there are traces of animosity and enmity against both. The second *sūrā* of the *Qur'ān sūratu 'al bagarati* makes this quite clear in verse eighty which reads *wa qālū lan tamasana 'annāru 'illa 'ayāman mā'adūdatan* "and they (the Jews) say: The fire shall not touch us but for a few numbered days".<sup>2</sup> When one looks at the vocabulary of the *Qur'ān*, it is possible, rather easily, to see the linguistic borrowings that Muhammed absorbed from the various people and cultures surrounding him. Of the more than two hundred and fifty foreign words identified by Jeffery in his study, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran*,<sup>3</sup> "many were transferred from the languages of the Jews and Christians of northern Arabia, that is, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac ... many of the theological technical terms used in Islam are derived from their counterparts in Jewish and Christian Northwest Semitic. *Zakat*, *ṣadaqā*, *ṣalat*, *taūrā*, etc., are all examples of such borrowings, although it is not always clear whether these words are derived exclusively from either Jewish or Christian usage. Even the testi-

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentum Aufgenommen?* Bonn, 1833 (Leipzig, 1902). See also the English translation, *Judaism and Islam*, Bangladore, 1898.

<sup>2</sup> The Quran, standard text, reprinted many times. In his commentary on this verse 'Abdallah Yūsuf'Ali notes, "the Jews in their arrogance might say: whatever the terror of Hell may be for other people, oursins will be forgiven, because we are the children of Abraham, at worst we shall suffer a short punishment and then be restored to the bosom of Abraham". *The Holy Quran Text, Translation and Commentary*, Abdallah Yusuf Ali, 1946.

<sup>3</sup> See the extensive introduction to Jeffery's book for the various traditional and often differing opinions of the Muslim commentators to the *qur'ān* on those vocabulary items suspected of being of non Arabic origin. Jeffery indicates how the authorities differ as to the possibility or impossibility of the quranic revelation containing terms of "suspicious" or "foreign" origin. These claims often leading to the questioning of the orthodoxy of the commentator.

mony of faith, *lā' ilaha 'illa 'allah*, "there is no God but 'Allah', reminds one strongly of the *šhema*".<sup>4</sup> The traditional Muslim view of Islam as viewed by the *Qur'ān* itself is seen in the second *sūrā*; *sūratu al baqarati*, verse two, *dalika 'al kitāb lā' rāib fihi hudan lilmuttaqina*, "this is the book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear God". That this book was revealed in Arabic was stated by Muhammed in the twelfth *sūrā*, *sūratu yūsufa* where in the second verse states, *'inna 'anzalnahu qur'ānan 'arabiyan lā' alakum tā' aqilūna*, "we have revealed to you it, by way of an Arabic *qur'ān*, in order that you may learn wisdom".<sup>5</sup> As 'Abdallah Yusuf 'Ali notes in his explanation of the term *qur'ān*, it may mean: something (1) to be read, or (2) recited, or (3) proclaimed. It may apply to a verse, or a *sūrā*, or to the whole Book of Revelation".<sup>6</sup>

In the last half century several scholars have devoted a considerable amount of effort to further elaborate upon the Judeo-Christian sources of quranic narratives and concepts. Among them have been C.C. Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (New York, 1933), J. Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1926), H. Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Gräfenhainichen, 1931), A. Katsh, *Judaism and the Koran* (New York, 1962) and most recently D. Masson, *Monothéisme Coranique et Monothéisme Biblique Doctrines Comparées* (Paris, 1976). In each of the above works and in the earlier works of scholarship such as the pioneering volume of Abraham Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentum aufgenommen?* (Bonn, 1833) the main thrust of investigation was the investigation of sources of influence. Those works which insisted upon a Jewish influence were counterbalanced by those which insisted upon and stressed the Christian roots of Muhammed's inspiration and message. As Maxime Rodin has emphasized in an important study, "studies of this genre are assuredly very necessary. Islam was not born in a sealed container in an environment sterilized against the germs as other ideologies as Muslim authors and certain others frequently imagine".<sup>7</sup> A glance at any of the more recent scholarly introductions to the Old Testament and collections of translated texts will demonstrate the necessity of studying the more important cultures of the Ancient Near East in order to gain an insight into the interaction of ideas, events and personalities.<sup>8</sup> As it is highly presumptuous to claim that one can correctly study the history of Ancient Israel and

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Newby, Observations About an Early Judeo-Arabic, *JQR*, lxi no. 3, 213-214.

<sup>5</sup> See standard quranic texts, published many times.

<sup>6</sup> 'Abdallah Yūsuf 'Ali, *op. cit.*, 550.

<sup>7</sup> Maxime Rodin, "A Critical Survey of Modern Studies on Muhammed", 25, in *Studies on Islam*, translated and edited by Merlin L. Swartz, Oxford, 1981.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent collection of texts in translation pertaining to both the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament see, James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, third edition with supplement, Princeton, 1969.

at the same time ignore the great world religions with whom she came into contact; likewise the study of Islam, its background in the period of the *'al jāhiliyya* "the pre-Islamic period of paganism" and the great world civilizations whose influence, we now know, penetrated the Arabian peninsula for centuries if not for more than a thousand years cannot be ignored.<sup>9</sup>

In a study by W.F. Albright, *Islam and the Religions of the Ancient Orient*, published as part of a collection of essays in 1964, Professor Albright remarked, "there is a mass of evidence in favor of the relatively recent date of most of the concrete elements in Islamic religion and culture .... The gap which separates Greco-Roman civilization from ancient oriental is much greater than that which divides Islam from Hellenism. Religiously, Islam is an integral part of the Judeo-Christian tradition and owes very little directly to the religions of the ancient orient".<sup>10</sup>

Keeping the position of Professor Albright in mind, we hope to point out and analyse the possibility of the survival, in Islam, via possibly Judaism, of concepts which in origin may be one of the major literary and religious themes of Sumero-Babylonian civilization.

The second *sūrā* of the *qur'ān*, *sūratu 'al baqarati*, verse 255, is known as *'āyat 'al kursi*, the "verse of the throne". Such is the reverence which Islam has for this particular verse that 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali in a footnote to his translation to the *qur'ān* comments, "who can translate its glorious meaning, or reproduce the rhythm of its well-chosen and comprehensive words? Even in the original Arabic the meaning seems to be greater than can be expressed in words".<sup>11</sup>

The relevant portion of the verse itself reads, *'allahu lā 'ilaha 'illa huwa 'al hayyu 'al qayyūmu lā 'taḥaduhu sinatun wa lā 'nawmun*, "God, there is no god but He, the Living, the Everlasting, slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep". As to the expression *'al hayyu 'al qayyūmu*, usually translated as the Living, the Everlasting, Jeffery in his Study *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* states that the commentators to the *Qur'ān* are unanimous that the meaning of the phrase is *'al qāimu 'al dāimu*, but that there are many difficulties over the form . . . "the only possibility is to take it as on the measure

<sup>9</sup> On the possibility of Jewish penetration into the Arabian peninsula before the rise of Islam see provisionally the following: *Introduction to the Jewish Foundation of Islam* C.C. Torrey, by Franz Rosenthal, KTAV reprint, 1967, x-xiv. Also see the important and controversial article by Chaim Rabin, *Islam and the Qumran Sect* in *Qumran Studies* 112-130, where-in Professor Rabin finds with-in Islam the survival of several of the tenets adhered to by the Qumran sectarians.

<sup>10</sup> W.F. Albright, "Islam and the Religions of the Ancient Orient", 175, in *History, Archaeology and Christian Humanism*, N.Y. 1964. In a footnote to the above article Professor Albright states that there exists with-in Islam specific rites and practices taken over by Muhammed or his followers from pre-Islamic times, such as circumcision and the procession around the *kā'abah*. Though, in his opinion the sum of these exceptions is still far inferior to the total of later borrowings.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, 'Abdallah Yūsuf 'Ali, 102.

*qay'ūlu*, and there is reason to suspect all words of this form. Some of the Muslim authorities have it as a word borrowed from the Syriac, while other authorities would derive it from the Hebrew, especially in connection with *hay*'.<sup>12</sup>

Psalm 121:4 reads *hinnē lō' yanūm welō' yisān šōmer yisrā'el*, "behold the Guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers". The content of this verse seemingly contrasts with Psalm 78:65 *wayiqaš keyāšen 'adōnay kegibbōr mitrōnen miyyāyin* "The Lord awoke, like a mighty man stimulated by wine".<sup>13</sup> It is anthropomorphisms such as these, which as mere accommodations to human speech, were designed to produce a particular psychological effect in the mind of the worshipper or priest during a particular private or public act of devotion. As has been recognized since the "dawn" of Biblical interpretation, there are passages in the Old Testament which represent God as appearing before men in human form,<sup>14</sup> while in many other passages He dispatches an angel to represent Him.<sup>15</sup> Yet the Old Testament is nowhere committed to the conception of God as a being essentially human in form or having any of the physical or psychological limitations of human beings.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See in this connection the phrase *bārūk hay lā'ad weqayyām lanesah* "blessed be He who liveth for ever, and endureth to eternity" in the *bārūk šē'amar* "blessed to be He who spake" prayer, said every day in the traditional Jewish prayer book. On the form and antiquity of this prayer see Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Period of the Tannā'im and the Amōrā'im* its Nature and Patterns, Jerusalem, 1966, 103, 170 (in modern Hebrew). Also see Lane Arabic-English Lexicon 1544, cols. 1-2 for discussion of the relationship of the phrase *yā hayyu yā qayyūmu* to the Hebrew of Exodus 3, 14, *'ehyeh 'asēr 'ehyeh*. Al-Tabbari in his commentary on the *Qur'ān* Cairo, n.d., *tafsīru sūratu'al bawarati 'ayyatu 255 wa'ima qawluhu "al hayyu"*, *fā'innāhu yā'ani 'alladī lahu al hayātu 'addāimtu walbaqāu 'alladī la'awwalu lahu bihaddīn wa lā' ahīrun lahu bi'amidīn 'al qayyūmu qalā' al qāimu 'ala kulu šayin* "as to the word 'al hayyu (the Living one), its meaning is He to whom there is everlasting and eternal and everlasting life, to whom there is no fixed beginning and no end . . . the Everlasting, namely, He who is established over all things".

<sup>13</sup> Amos Ḥakam in his commentary on Psalms makes the following valuable observation concerning the second half of verse sixty five in Psalm 78 *kegibbōr hayyōšē' lammilḥamā weqōlōt rinnā wezimrā yōšē'im mippiw meḥamat yayyin šēšātā wehayayin mefig'et paḥdo* "like a warrior in battle, the sounds of praise and jubilation being emitted from his mouth, while the stimulation of the wine which He drank dispels His fears". *Dā'at Miqrā Sefer Tehillim* Amos Ḥakam Jerusalem, 1981 (in Modern Hebrew).

<sup>14</sup> Gen. 18, 1, 32, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Ex. 3, 2, Judges 6, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Walther Eichrodt in his *Theology of the Old Testament* vol. 1 makes the following valuable observation: "the possessor of this highest form of life can obviously not be bound by the limitations which circumscribe human personality. Hence it is generally found that, where there is further reflection on this question (God as spiritual rather than a corporeal being subject to the same limitations as His creations), there is also an explicit denial of such limitation on the Divine being. . . . God does not sleep (Psalm 121:4); He does not have eyes like the eyes of men (Job 10, 4 f.), for He is the searcher of hearts and does not have to depend upon outward impressions (I Samuel 16:7; Psalms 44:22; 139:23 f.). . . . Yahweh's divine life, exalted over all created things, rests at its deepest level on moral perfection", *TOT* 1, 214-215.

The Psalmist's petition in Psalm 121:4 for Yahweh's sleepless protection and the assurance that the petition was granted, *hinnē lō' yanūm welō' yišān šōmer yisrā'el* "The Guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers" finds its parallel in the aforementioned second *sūrā* of the Quran, verse 255, where we find the phrase *lā' taḥuduhu sinatun wa lā' nawmun* "slumber seizes Him not, nor sleep". 'Al Tabari in his Quranic commentary relates in the name of 'abu ja'afar "*lā' taḥuduhu sinatun*" *lā', yaḥuduhu nū'asun* . . . sleep does not overcome Him, sleepiness does not overcome Him, *wa'al wasanun ḥuthuru 'annawni* and regarding *wasanun*, this means strong sleep".<sup>17</sup>

As in the Old Testament spiritual conception of God, we likewise find in the quran that *'allah* i.e. God, therefore has no need for sleep or rest. The activity of God is self subsisting. God is not subject to slowed down activity, as verse 255 in the Quran goes on to say *wa lā' ya'ūduhu ḥifazahuma* "He feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them".<sup>18</sup>

The problem of the relationships which ancient civilizations have had upon each other has occupied the skills of many well-known scholars in the last two centuries. In particular, the problem of the Mesopotamian background of Hebrew Civilization has been the subject of many studies. Among them we might cite A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1949), A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago, 1963), the Anchor Bible commentary on *Genesis* by E.A. Speiser, (New York, 1964) and the outdated in many ways but still useful volume by L. W. King, *Legends of Babylon and Egypt, Schweich Lectures of 1916* (London, 1918). To assume that all or most ideas or terminologies in Hebrew tradition having parallels in the literature of Mesopotamia originated in the east and moved westwards is not a scientifically sound principle, and is virtually tantamount to pan-babylonism.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, with this in mind, it is our intention to suggest the possibility of a conceptual relationship between *Yahweh* and *'Allah* as "Gods" who do not rest nor sleep and *Enlil* as he "who Feigns Sleep" (lit. "who sleeps a false sleep" *ša ṣa-lal sar-ra-a-ti ṣal-lu*, BL 208: 17 f.

Psalm 78. a didactic Psalm which emphasizes the disobedience of the people and their ingratitude in spite of the compassion and forgiveness

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, al Tabari, 389.

<sup>18</sup> As to the ability of God to sustain His activity see in particular Isaiah, 40.28 *'elōhē 'ōlām 'ādōnay bōrē' qešōt ḥā'ares lō' yī'af welō' yigā' 'eyn ḥeḡer letebūnātō* "Yahweh is the God Eternal, Creator of the ends of the earth, who does not tire or fatigue, His is understanding unsearchable".

<sup>19</sup> Two useful articles recently published which deal with the problem of the possible Babylonian influence upon the book of Genesis are, W.G. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis", *JTS* XVI, (1965) and W.G. Lambert, "New Light on the Babylonian Flood", *JSS*, V (1960), 113-23.

meted out to them by God. The third strophe of the Psalm, verses 65-66 read *wayiqas keyāšen 'adōnai kegibbōr mitrōnen miyyāin wayak šārāw 'āhōr herpat 'ōlām nātan lāmō* "The Lord awoke, like a mighty man stimulated by wine, and He smote His adversaries on the rear and covering them with everlasting shame". God as viewed by the Psalmist had abandoned His people to their enemies, that He had seemed as one asleep. Then, by means of the stimulation of wine and the excitement of battle, He fell upon His foes and caused them, to flee. In a Sumerian poetic composition "O Raging Sea" *a-ab-ba-hu-luh-ḥa*, published recently by R. Kutscher,<sup>20</sup> we perceive a similar mood of despair resulting from the calamities visited upon them owing to the anger of *Enlil*. The mood of the composition is established with its opening two verses (*ez*)*in\* hu-luh ḥa-zu a-ša-ib-ba-zu en-še nu-šed,-dè a-a (d)mu-ul-lil (en)umun kur-kur-ra eš-še nu-si-du-a* "Oh, you angry dwelling(?) father(?), your angry heart, until when will it not be pacified? Father Enlil, until when will he not calm down?" King of the Foreign Lands, until when will he not calm down? Somewhat later in the composition we find a list of divine epithets, that is "official" titles assigned to Enlil in accordance with his function and rank in the Sumerian-Babylonian pantheon.<sup>21</sup> We are most concerned with the seventh epithet, *a-a (d)mu-ul-lil-ù-lul-la ku-ku* "Father Enlil, who Feigns Sleep (Lit. who sleeps a False Sleep). According to R. Kutscher in his volume *RS*, p. 49, the origin of the epithet (He who Sleeps a false Sleep) may be referring to his (Enlil's) hoped for rise to save his people from destruction. The text, in stanza XI, in an extremely relevant passage, lines 153-159 reads, *am-al-na te mu-un-zi-zi (d)mu-ul-lil al-an te mu-un-zi-zi, alim-ma al-na te mu-un-zi-zi nibru(ki)a dur-an-ki-ri te mu-un-zi-zi e-si ka-na-ag-ga mu-ma-al-la-ri te mu-un-zi-zi si kur-kur-ra mu-ma-al-ri te mu-un-zi-zi* "The Wild Ox is asleep, when will he rise? Enlil is asleep, when will he rise, The Dignitary is asleep, when will he rise? In Nippur, over the *Duranki*, when will he rise? Over Nippur, the Place of Fate Deciding, when will he rise? Over the temple he set up for the life of the land, when will he rise? Over (the temple) he set up for the life of the foreign countries, when will he rise."<sup>22</sup>

Returning to the seventh epithet of *Enlil* in our present composition, it is instructive and illuminating to notice that the terms "sleep" and "sleeping one" are also used for the sleep of death. Note in particular in *CT XV*, 18 in

<sup>20</sup> All texts and translations from *a-ab-ba-hu-luh-ḥa*, "Oh, Raging Sea" edited and translated by R. Kutscher, Yale, 1975. Henceforth abbreviated *RS*.

<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of divine epithets in the Sumerian-Babylonian religion see Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (= *Studia Orientalia*, 7, 1938). Tallqvist classifies hundreds of titles, some of which are attributes of particular gods while others are the exclusive property of specific deities. Also see *RS* 107-109.

<sup>22</sup> Thorkild Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, edited by William L. Moran, Cambridge, Mass, 1970, 346.

a cultic song to *Dumuzi* the reading *am-e a-ge<sub>18</sub> na-de-en (u<sub>8</sub>) sila-bi u-bi a-ge<sub>18</sub> bi-ku* "O Wild Bull, how (fast) you sleep, how (fast) sleep ewe and lamb". We also find in a somewhat later historical composition, the Annals of Aššurbanipal = (VAB 7) 56 vi 75 the following phrase *ešmētišunu alqâ ana mat Aššur ešemēšunu lā ša-la-la ēmid* "I took their bones with me to Assyria and thus prevented their spirits from being at rest (in their tombs)."

In the religious literature of the nascent Christian Church of the first century C.E. we find a similar association of death and sleep. Chapter five, verse fourteen in Ephesians reads, "Awake you sleeper, rise from the dead, the Messiah will shine upon you!" Taken as an isolated phrase "sleep" and "falling asleep" are individual eulogisms and metaphorical expressions of death or dying. With the Messiah shining upon them (the dead) something of his essence is communicated to them. "In his Light they become light: even though they slumbered in the darkness of death, in (the power sphere of) the Lord they now have become light" (5:8).<sup>23</sup>

We have, in the above paragraphs, sought to trace the "origin" of specific Biblical and Quranic phraseology of a similar nature (i.e. that God does not rest or sleep). Our quest for these "origins" have taken us back to a Sumerian composition "Oh, Raging Sea", *a-ab-ba hu-luh-ha*, with its varied collection of heroic epithets of the god *Enlil*. It is the longing for the "rise" of *Enlil* from his sleep that his petitioners mention repeatedly in the composition. It is possible that the seeming sleeplessness of a god be associated, at least in the monotheistic literature of the Old and New Testaments and the later Quran with the salvation and creative powers of God. These same ideas "creation, salvation" being applied by the early Christians to the ultimate act of creation and redemption, that of the resurrection from the dead.

<sup>23</sup> Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4-6*, N.Y. 1974, 576-577. Perhaps the attitude in Ancient Israel towards gods who sleep may best be illustrated by the story in the First Book of Kings, in the "contest" on Mt. Carmel between the Prophet Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Chapter eighteen, verse twenty seven reads, *wayyehi bašahorayim wayehattel bāhem eliyāhū wayōmer qir'ō beqōl gadōl kī 'elōhim hū kī siah wekī sig lō wekī derek lō 'ūlay yāšen weyiqāš*. "When noon came, Elijah mocked them, saying, shout louder! After all he is a god, but he may be in conversation, he may be detained, or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up" (translation The Prophets JPS 1978). Also note the existence of the Punic and NeoPunic cultic functionary *mqm'lm*, for which see R.S. Tombback *A Comparative Semitic Lexicon of the Phoenician and Punic Languages*, Missoula, 1978, 197, and references cited there.