

Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East

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Abstract

*This paper offers some reflections on the nature of the identity of the seventh-century Arabian conquerors of the Middle East based on the author's own experience of writing about this topic in his book *In God's Path* (Oxford 2015). This subject has been considerably enlivened by the influential and provocative publications of Fred Donner (*Muhammad and the Believers*, 2010) and Peter Webb (*Imagining the Arabs*, 2016). What follows is an attempt to respond to and engage with these publications and to offer some thoughts on how this debate might productively move forward.*

Introduction

This article began its life as a reply to some negative reviews of my book *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the First Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), in particular those by Fred Donner and Peter Webb. However, in the process of reflection I became more interested in the issues which underlay their reviews, especially the matter of the identity of the key participants in the Arabian conquest of the Middle East. Both scholars have written books which deal innovatively with this issue and which, despite their recent date, have already had a substantial impact upon the field.¹ This is due in part to the originality of their ideas and in part to the current enthusiasm for this topic, for, as Webb has recently observed, “the study of communal identities in the early Muslim-era Middle East is perhaps

1. Donner articulates his theory in three works: “From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-identity in the Early Islamic Community,” *al-Abhath* 50-51 (2002-03): 9-53; *Muhammad and the Believers. At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2010); and his review of my *In God's Path* in *Al-‘Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 23 (2015): 134-40. Webb presents his theory in his book *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), on which see Philip Wood's review in this issue of *Al-‘Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā*; in his review of my *In God's Path*: “The March of Islam”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 March 2015, 24; and in the article in the following footnote.

the most direct pathway into the heart of pressing questions about the rise of Islam”.² What follows is a discussion of their theories about the identity of the Arabian conquerors together with some ideas of my own and replies to what I feel are misunderstandings of my position in *In God’s Path*. Since the three of us have thought long and hard about this topic, it is to be hoped that it will be of some benefit to readers to see our different perspectives contrasted and compared.

Although it is by now something of a ritual, it is necessary to highlight, for newcomers at least, the paucity of documentation coming from within the community of the prophet Muhammad in the first sixty years after his death in 632 CE, which makes it difficult to say anything concrete about this community’s self-definition. It is not just that documents are few, but also they are not really of the right sort (mostly they are army requisition notes, tax demands, prayers and coin legends) to yield information on this topic.³ Inevitably this has led to a proliferation of theories about what was going on. It is crucial to bear in mind, though, that all are to some extent speculative—notwithstanding their purveyors’ often assiduous protestations to the contrary—and the scraps of evidence that are deployed to underpin them are open to different interpretations. For example, the most striking thing in the eyes of many is that Muhammad is not mentioned on any media until the 680s, but conclusions from that vary from the non-existence of Muhammad (Yehuda Nevo) to the ecumenical nature of early Islam (Fred Donner).⁴

We do of course have voluminous accounts from Muslim authors of the ninth century telling us exactly what Muhammad and his companions said and did throughout their lives, but since these also serve as legal and moral proof texts there is good reason to be critical of their worth as historical texts.⁵ One solution offered in the past was to “step outside” and use non-Muslim sources that predate the crystallization of the official Muslim view of their sacred past in the second half of the eighth century.⁶ I adopted that solution myself for some time, though also striving “to bring out the parallels and similarities between the reports of Muslim and non-Muslim witnesses”.⁷ However, I have become convinced in recent years that

2. “Identity and Social Formation in the Early Caliphate,” in *Routledge Handbook on Early Islam*, ed. Herbert Berg (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 129.

3. Jeremy Johns, “Archaeology and the Early History of Islam: The First Seventy Years,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 46 (2003): 411-36.

4. Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2003), esp. III.3. Donner promotes his ecumenical Islam theory in all three of his works listed in note 1 above.

5. There is a huge literature on this topic, but arguably the best introductions to it are still Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 3-17, and R.S. Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), ch. 3.

6. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 3.

7. Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 591. I would like to note here that I did not write *Seeing Islam* in order to refute *Hagarism*, which some students have told me is a commonly held opinion, but rather to penetrate deeper into the question of Islam’s origins, with the idea that I was going to find out the Truth of the matter (strange as that seems to my now cynical/wiser self), but certainly with no sense that *Hagarism* was wrong.

this approach is not really valid, since the two bodies of material are much more intertwined than had previously been thought,⁸ and so I changed tack. As I put it in my introduction to *In God's Path*:

I do not want to champion non-Muslim sources over Muslim sources; indeed, it is my argument that the division is a false one. Muslims and non-Muslims inhabited the same world, interacted with one another and even read one another's writings. In this book the distinction I make is simply between earlier and later sources, and I favor the former over the latter irrespective of the religious affiliation of their author (pp. 2-3).⁹

Fred Donner and Jens Scheiner failed to pick up on this change of stance in their reviews and it was also missed by Glen Bowersock in his recent book, who likewise assumed that I was following my older position of distinguishing between non-Muslim and Muslim sources.¹⁰ In the case of *In God's Path*, I chose instead to write according to the methods that a historian of any other civilization would employ, avoiding the usual sectarian approach of Islamic studies and privileging early sources over later ones irrespective of whether they were by Muslims or non-Muslims. The pioneer of this approach was Lawrence Conrad, who has greatly influenced my thinking, and it has recently been taken up by Antoine Borrut in his sophisticated discussion of the ways in which the later Umayyad caliphs were portrayed and remembered.¹¹

Terminology

If we are to investigate the identity of the members of the early Islamic community, we need to pay heed to the ways in which they referred to themselves and in which others referred to them. Of course, we have to be attentive to the fact that there was often a discrepancy between the two sets of terms, since outsiders to a group often apply labels to its members that they would not use themselves and that they may reject as inaccurate or offensive. Given that my book *In God's Path* was aimed at a non-expert audience, I decided to use the widely accepted terms Arab and Muslim, but, as I acknowledge, there are problems with this:

Both terms [Arab and Muslim] are to some degree inaccurate, since the conquerors were neither all Arabs nor all Muslims, and the meaning of both terms was in any case

8. Noted in my *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 26-32.

9. My source appendix on pages 231-33 sometimes harked back to my earlier stance, as unfortunately an unrevised version of it was used in the final text.

10. Donner, "Review of *In God's Path*," 135; Jens Scheiner, "Reflections on Hoyland's *In God's Path*," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 7 (2016): 25-26; Glen Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 5. Not appreciating my intention, Donner and Scheiner censure me for not acknowledging those who had advocated using non-Muslim sources before me.

11. Conrad already advocated this approach in his "Theophanes and the Arabic Historical Tradition: Some Indications of Intercultural Transmission," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 15, 1990, 1-44). See Antoine Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir. L'espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbasides* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), which discusses this exact point on pages 137-66.

evolving in the immediate aftermath of the conquests (p. 5).¹²

Moreover, though these two terms are the usual ones employed by ninth-century Muslim authors to designate the followers of Muhammad and the Arabian conquerors of the Middle East, they only feature very rarely in our surviving seventh-century texts. So what did the early conquerors call themselves?

The Conquerors as Non-Confessional Believers

Donner dislikes use of the terms “Muslim” and “Islam” for Muhammad’s time and the first decades thereafter because he feels it is wrong to assume that “Islam from its earliest days constituted a separate religious confession distinct from others.”¹³ This is true inasmuch as it certainly cannot be what Muhammad had wanted to achieve. The Qur’an makes it clear that he believed that there had only ever been one true religion (*dīn al-ḥaqq*)—Christianity and Judaism were simply the result of people introducing false doctrines into it—and he was now calling on everyone to return to the original pure form that had been conveyed by all God’s messengers from Adam to himself. As the Qur’an says, “with regard to religion we have prescribed for you what we entrusted to Noah, and what we have imparted to you is (the same as) what we entrusted to Abraham, Moses and Jesus: uphold the (one true) religion and do not become divided over it” (42:13). So Muhammad was not trying to devise a new creed. Many of his contemporaries, of course, disagreed and regarded him as an innovator, but this is a very common experience for would-be religious reformers: they preach a return to the true form of the faith, their reform program is rejected and their followers are repudiated by the mainstream, which means that these followers, if they hold firm to the reformer’s utterings, will end up by giving rise to a new sect rather than reforming the old faith. This is what happened in the case of Jesus, Luther, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and many others.¹⁴

The ur-monotheism preached by Muhammad, by the very fact that it was, in his eyes, the only true faith of all mankind, was in this sense free of all sectarian divisions, or as Donner puts it: “independent of confessional identities.”¹⁵ Muhammad wished to bring together under one umbrella all those who would affirm the oneness of God and the imminence of the Day of Judgement and who were prepared to live piously.¹⁶ This is unproblematic. It is

12. To get round this problem of the evolution of the term Muslim some modern scholars coin new terms; e.g. Aziz al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), 63 (proto-Muslim), and *id.*, *The Times of History: Universal Topics in Islamic Historiography* (Budapest: Central European University, 2007), 102 (palaeo-Muslim).

13. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 9.

14. There is a slight complication in Muhammad’s case in that we do not really know the nature of the religion in which he was raised.

15. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 11.

16. Possibly for apocalyptic reasons, i.e. an ingathering of mankind under one religious banner in time for judgement day, as is argued by Donner (Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 13). However, it is difficult to distinguish in our sources between eschatological speculation (continual and ubiquitous; see chapter 8 of my *Seeing Islam*) and apocalyptic action, i.e. a decision that we must act now to be ready for the imminent End. For an excellent recent argument in favor of the latter in the case of Muhammad’s community, see Stephen

easy to believe that Muhammad was happy to welcome everyone to his new community—Islam still today has a strong missionary component to it and accepts all comers without restriction.¹⁷ Moreover, it was increasingly taken as a given in the Late Roman world that there was only one true religion and that it was the same religion that had been imparted by God to Abraham. As Paul the Apostle put it in his letter to the Galatians, “the believers (those of belief) are children of Abraham” (3:7). Paul’s attitude towards the Jews is similar to that of Muhammad vis-à-vis Jews and Christians: they are still children of Abraham, it is just that they are “disobedient children for rejecting Jesus as the Christ”.¹⁸ Interestingly, Paul also has a universalist view of “the faith of Abraham” (Romans 4:16), emphasizing that it is belief in Christ that saves (“the righteous will live by faith”, Galatians 3:11), not practice of the law, and in this respect “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

However, Donner throws in an extra ingredient which would make Muhammad’s community unusual: “Believers could be members of any one of several religious confessions—Christians or Jews¹⁹ for example—if the doctrines of their religious confession were consonant with strict monotheism and not too inimical to the Believer’s other basic ideas.”²⁰ So within Muhammad’s community, says Donner, there were Jews and Christians who continued to be Jews and Christians, following their own customs and laws, but acknowledging Muhammad as “the community’s supreme political authority.”²¹ The idea is interesting, but is it backed up by the evidence? No source actually specifies an individual who was in this situation,²² but does the Qur’an allow for this eventuality? Let us have a look, beginning with the Qur’anic verse that Donner regards as a clear support of his thesis:

Those who believe, and Jews and Sabians and Christians—those who believe in God and the Last Day and who act righteously—will have no fear and shall not grieve (on the Day of Judgement) (5:69)

Shoemaker, “‘The Reign of God Has Come’: Eschatology and Empire in Late Antiquity and Early Islam,” *Arabica* 61 (2014): 514-58.

17. In the fourteenth century, for example, Ibn Khaldūn wrote: “In the Muslim community, the holy war is a religious duty, because of the universalism of the (Muslim) mission and (the obligation to) convert everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force” (*The Muqaddimah*, tr. Franz Rosenthal, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958, 473 = I.3.31).

18. Jeffrey Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 13.

19. It is a moot question whether Jews at this time would have thought in terms of being a believer—was not being a Jew the key to salvation rather than being a believer? (See Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1999)—my thanks to Adam Silverstein for this reference)—but I leave that aside for the purposes of this article.

20. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 11.

21. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 16.

22. Donner points to people who worked in the conquerors’ administration or spoke positively about them, but as Patricia Crone observes in her review of Donner’s book, “evidence for warm attitudes and collaborators is not evidence for full integration without conversion” (“Among the Believers,” *Tablet*, August 10, 2010: <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/42023/among-the-believers>, paragraph 5).

One could interpret this for or against Donner, since on the one hand, “those who believe” are distinguished from Jews, Sabians and Christians, intimating an awareness of confessional boundaries, but, on the other hand, they are categorized together with Jews, Sabians and Christians in respect of their common belief in God and the Last Day, their righteous behavior and an implication of easy entry into heaven.²³ Thus, although it is not made explicit in what way other monotheist groups related to Muhammad’s community in this world, they certainly would appear to be on a par with Muhammad’s community in the next world, sharing equally in the benefits of the afterlife. As 5:65 says: “If the people of the book believe and are god-fearing we shall efface their evil deeds and admit them to the gardens of bliss”. This implies, says Donner, that, in the Qur’anic view, “proper piety, avoidance of sinful behavior, is what saves, alongside a basic abstract belief in one God and the Last Day” and consequently “it is virtually immaterial to which monotheism community one belongs.”²⁴ This is nicely illustrated by 2:111-112, which first quotes what the people of the book say: “Only those who are Jews and Christians will enter paradise” and then contrasts it with the Qur’an’s own position: “Rather whoever submits before God and is virtuous will have his reward with his Lord, they shall have no fear and shall not grieve.”

Christians and Jews could, therefore, continue on in their faith as long as they did not do anything that violated the core tenets of the original monotheism and as long as they properly followed the message that God had addressed specifically to them: “If they uphold the Torah and the Gospel and what has been sent down to them from their Lord, they will eat (the fruits of paradise) that are above them and below their feet” (5:66).²⁵ Donner postulates that “those individuals among the *ahl al-kitāb* who embrace right belief and right action will be welcomed among the believers,”²⁶ and the Qur’an does frequently emphasize that these two qualities will provide succor on the Day of Judgement:

Whoever follows my guidance will have no fear and shall not grieve (2:38)
Whoever believes and is righteous will have no fear and shall not grieve (6:48)
Whoever is God-fearing and is righteous will have no fear and shall not grieve (7:35)
As for he who believes and does good he will have the finest recompense (18:88)
Whoever says our Lord is God and is upright will have no fear and shall not grieve (46:13)

However, even if Muhammad allowed Jews and Christians to join his non-confessional form of monotheism, it does not mean that many of them did so. The Qur’an seems to suggest that

23. The verse is repeated at 2:62 with the addition of “they will have their reward with their Lord”. Another list has: Believers, Jews, Sabians, Christians, Magians and Associators (*alladhīna ashrakū*), and this time it is said that God will distinguish between them on Resurrection Day (22:17)—presumably the Magians and the Associators do not get an easy entry into heaven. Note that the expression “will have no fear and shall not grieve” is particular to these expressions about the rewards for virtuous believers (see below) and seems to imply that all will go well for them on Judgement Day.

24. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 20.

25. Though note that the Qur’an only ever talks about the situation of righteous Jews and Christians in the next life, never in this life.

26. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 21.

only a few of them accepted the call, while most of their co-religionaries were dismissive. Sometimes this is stated only briefly: “Among them is a moderate community (*umma muqtaṣida*), though most of them act evilly” (5:66); “Among them are believers, but most of them are wicked” (3:110); “they (the Jews) do not believe except for a few” (4:46). Occasionally it is set out at length: “Among the people of the book is an upright community; they recite God’s revelations through the night, prostrate, believe in God and the Last Day, command good and prohibit evil, are quick to do good things and are righteous” (3:113-114). It is often argued that these were Judaeo-Christians of one sort or another,²⁷ but it may be that they were regular Christians who decided to accept Muhammad’s Christological position.²⁸

Two conditions for membership of Muhammad’s community perhaps limited its appeal. The first was submission to Muhammad as head of the community, for discussion of which see the next section below. The second condition was a strict monotheism that allowed no room for any divine entities besides God; Muhammad’s strongly anti-Trinitarian stance, in particular, would have posed a problem for any orthodox Christian. The opposite of believers are deniers (*kāfirūn*) and the Qur’an makes it abundantly clear that those who say that God is “the Messiah son of Mary” or “the third of three” or that Jesus was a son of God are very definitely deniers and not believers (e.g. 5:17: “Those who say that God is Christ son of Mary have certainly disbelieved”). What they had to do is spelled out in verse 4:171: “O people of the book, do not exceed proper bounds in religion and speak only the truth about God. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God and His word, which He cast into Mary [...] so believe in God and His apostles and do not say ‘three’; desist (from that), it will be better for you.” Donner takes this to mean that Christians were “seen as suitable for ‘rehabilitation’ and inclusion among the believers.”²⁹ This seems reasonable, but surely only in the way that you can join most religious groups, namely by disavowing your former incorrect beliefs, in this case the Trinity. Donner adds a couple of extra mitigating factors regarding “passages that seem to contradict our hypothesis”, namely that “these particular Qur’anic verses were not widely known among the Believers” or that the Believers were happy to live with the contradictions between the false doctrines of the people of the book among them and the Qur’anic doctrines.³⁰ Yet Christian Trinitarian views were diametrically opposed to the original monotheism that Muhammad sought to revive, and both were core beliefs to the respective communities, so it is hard to see how they could pass unnoticed or be disregarded.

An illustration of how non-Muslim cooperation with Muhammad could have worked is illustrated by a document that is commonly known as the “Constitution of Medina”. It marks the foundation of Muhammad’s polity and is widely considered to have been faithfully

27. Most recently see Patricia Crone, “Jewish Christianity and the Qur’an,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74 and 75 (2015 and 2016): 225-53 and 1-21. This option is then seen as explaining the origin of some of Muhammad’s Christological doctrines (a prophet but not son of God, not crucified, preached to the Israelites etc).

28. Of course, Christians who adopted Muhammad’s anti-Trinitarian position would have run the risk of excommunication from their own community.

29. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 26.

30. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 26-28.

transmitted and to be what it says it is, namely “a writing from the prophet Muhammad between the Believers and the Muslims of Quraysh and Yathrib, and those who follow them, join with them and fight alongside them”.³¹ Those who adhere to this document are “a single community (*umma wāḥida*) to the exclusion of the (other) people” (§1) and for them “the inner part (*jawf*) of Yathrib (i.e. Medina) is sacred” (§49).³² Each clan is still responsible for its own affairs, but “they help one another against whoever fights the people (who are signatories) of this document” (§45), and God and Muhammad are the arbiters for all parties (§§26, 52). Importantly for Donner, among its adherents are the Jews who are specifically catered for in a number of clauses. As I noted back in 1995, the document seems to have been “meant as a blueprint for a politico-religious community, uniting Muslims and Jews under the protection of God (*dhimmat Allāh*) so that they might fight” God’s enemies.³³ However, its purpose is not to advocate a non-confessional form of monotheism, but simply to say that confessional differences should be put aside (“the Jews have their religion and the Muslims have their religion”, §28) so that all efforts could be directed towards fighting the unbelievers. A unifying formula is advanced that all parties could agree to: a believer is “he who has affirmed what is in this document and believes in God and the Last Day” (§25). Although signatories are most frequently designated as “believers” (32 times), the terms “Muslim” (3 times) and “Jew” (6 times, excluding the term “Jews of Banū...”) are used, which suggests some distinctions are made within the overall category of believers. Again one could take this as for or against Donner’s theory. The participants in the Constitution of Medina could be part of a grand a-confessional religious movement, but it could also be argued that what the Constitution shows is that Muhammad had formed a community of “Muslims”/“submitters (to the One God)” and that he was willing to enter into military pacts with other monotheist communities for the sake of the greater purpose of defeating ungodly opponents. In either case, though, Donner is right that belief in one God and the imminent reality of the Last Day was a key component of the identity of the members of Muhammad’s community, who referred to one another as “believers”.

The Conquerors as Muhammadans

Both Christian and Muslim scholars who strove to categorize religious groups would typically name them after their founder (e.g. Bardaisanites, Marcionites, Lutherans, Calvinists, Azraqites, Ibadites, Zaydis, Ahmadis, etc). For at least four centuries European scholars did the

31. The sense of the phrase “the Believers and the Muslims” is unclear (perhaps a hendiadys), and Donner’s explanation (Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 33) that Believers = believing Jews + Muslims is not very satisfying (if “believers” comprise both Jews and Muslims, there would be no need to say “and the Muslims”). The Constitution also mentions “the *muhājirūn* of Quraysh” (§3) with no hint that this group overlaps with the Believers and/or Muslims.

32. The paragraph numbering is that of Michael Lecker, *The Constitution of Medina: Muhammad’s First Legal Document* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2004), who provides text, translation and commentary and cites earlier literature. For a more recent study see Saïd Arjomand, “The Constitution of Medina: A Socio-Legal Interpretation of Muhammad’s Acts of Foundation of the *Umma*,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 555-75.

33. “Sebeos, the Jews and the Rise of Islam,” *Muslim-Jewish Relations* 2 (1995): 94.

same thing and frequently referred to believers in Muhammad's mission as Muhammadans.³⁴ It was dropped out of respect to Muslims, who objected that they followed God, not a man. I would certainly not recommend re-adopting it, but the term does serve to remind us that acceptance of Muhammad's mission was one of the key defining features of Islam from its first days. Our earliest Christian witnesses to the conquests, from the late 630s onwards, describe the conquerors with reference to Muhammad.³⁵ And the north Mesopotamian monk and chronicler John bar Penkāyē, who states that he is writing in the year 687, makes clear the importance of Muhammad to his followers, calling him their "guide" and "instructor" and asserting that "they kept to the tradition of Muhammad [...] to such an extent that they inflicted the death penalty on anyone who was seen to act brazenly against his laws".³⁶

Both the Qur'an and the Constitution of Medina reinforce this view of Muhammad, that he was supreme arbiter and leader of his community. Both make the point that if members have a disagreement, they should defer to the judgment of Muhammad.³⁷ A number of times the Qur'an states that "the Believers are those who believe in God and His messenger" (24:62, 49:15), commands its audience to "believe in God and His messenger" (4:136, 7:158, 57:7, 64:8), warns that God's enemies are those who "disbelieve in God and His messenger" (9:81, 9:84, 48:13), and urges its members to "fight those who do not believe in God and the Last Day and who do not forbid what God and His messenger have forbidden" (9:29). And occasionally the simple promises of reward to those who believe and behave are extended to include allegiance to Muhammad; e.g. "Whoever of you is obedient to God and His messenger and does good will be brought his reward" (33:31). This is of course pretty much in line with the standard Muslim confession of faith—"I witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His messenger", the first step in becoming a Muslim since at least the eighth century. It is true that other verses say only that believers were those who believed in God and the Last Day and do not mention Muhammad, as pointed out by Donner,³⁸ but that just goes to show that none of these elements were as yet formalized into a rigid creed, so we cannot justifiably favor some elements over others.

Donner seeks to play down Muhammad's status, especially his role as a prophet, since he worries that this would give Muhammad's community greater confessional distinctiveness.³⁹ It is nevertheless evident from the Qur'an's own testimony that many did find this membership criterion too much for them and they rejected Muhammad's role as a messenger for a variety of reasons, such as fear that he was some sort of sorcerer (14:47, 25:8, 26:153, 26:185,

34. Probably the last two major Western academics to do so were H.A.R. Gibb (d. 1971): *Mohammedanism: An Historical Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), and Joseph Schacht (d. 1969): *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950).

35. See my "The Earliest Christian Writings on Muhammad: An Appraisal," in *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources*, ed. Harald Motzki (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 277 n. 6 ("a prophet who has appeared with the Saracens"), 277-78 (the *ṭayyāyē d-Mḥmṭ*); and two longer descriptions come in the 660s—the Khuzistan Chronicle and Sebeos (*ibid.*, 278 and 283)—that make Muhammad the leader and instigator of the conquerors.

36. *Ibid.*, 284.

37. Qur'an 4:65; Constitution of Medina, §§26, 52.

38. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," 38.

39. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," 34-44.

30:58, 46:7), or that he could not be genuine since only angels brought down messages from God.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the Qur'an does make Muhammad say that "I am only a man like you", it is just that "it was revealed to me that your God is one God" (41:6), and so there was no big gulf that separated him from ordinary mortals. Moreover, accepting him did not require rejecting any of the previous prophets and warners that God had sent to mankind, which in the Qur'an's inclusivist worldview was a particularly long line-up, comprising figures like Adam, Noah, Lot and Job, and a couple of Arabian characters (Hud and Salih), as well as the A-listers Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

A big change in the status of Muhammad for his community is heralded by three Arab-Sasanian *dirhams* on the margin of which is inscribed a truncated Muslim profession of faith: "In the name of God, Muhammad is the messenger of God". All were minted at Bīshāpūr in Fārs and bear the usual imperial bust on the obverse and a Sasanian fire-altar on the reverse. Two of them are dated to the years 66 and 67, which in the Hijri era correspond to 685-86 and 686-87 CE, and the issuing authority is named as 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Abd Allāh. He was married to the sister of the would-be-caliph Ibn al-Zubayr, and his brother was entrusted with the governorship of Sīstān by Ibn al-Zubayr's brother in AH 66. The earliest attested Islamic profession of faith, therefore, comes from the party of Ibn al-Zubayr, the rival to 'Abd al-Malik (685-705 CE). The contemporary north Mesopotamian monk John bar Penkāyē says of him that "he had come out of zeal for the House of God," and so it was presumably to bolster his religious claims that he placed the name of Muhammad on his coins. 'Abd al-Malik, once he had triumphed over Ibn al-Zubayr and all other contenders, decided to take over this idea, though prefacing it with "there is no god but God", thus making the confession of faith that is still used today.⁴¹

The Conquerors as Emigrants (Muhājirūn)

The most substantial corpus of seventh-century material that we possess are the numerous papyri related to the local Arab administration in Egypt, which start from 21/642. The new armies had not only to be paid, but also to be fed, housed and equipped, which led to a flurry of documentation as demand notes were dispatched and receipts were issued for a wide variety of goods, such as grain, oil, fodder, blankets, saddles and horses. Most of these texts are written in Greek and a number of them refer to the conquerors as *magaritai* (or *mōagaritai*), which is matched by the appearance of the term *mhaggrē* (or *mhaggrāyē*) in Syriac literary texts from the 640s onwards. Both terms are evidently intended to convey the Arabic word

40. A point discussed by Patricia Crone, "Angels versus Humans as Messengers of God," in *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity*, eds. P. Townsend and M. Vidas (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 315-36.

41. This point is made and discussed in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 550-52. Donner's claim that "the earliest documentary attestations of the *shahāda* found on coins, papyri and inscriptions dating before about 66/685, include only the first part of the later 'double *shahāda*': 'There is no god but God'—Muhammad is not yet mentioned" (Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 112; also Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," 47) is incorrect. The creedal statement "Muhammad is the messenger of God" is attested in our extant documentary record *before* the statement "there is no god but God".

muhājir, which features in the Qurʾan and the Constitution of Medina.⁴² Crone and Cook take it to be the earliest self-identifier of the conquerors, and they became interested in it for its Biblical allusions: Hagar and *Hijra* (i.e. Exodus), which in their view cast the conquerors “as Hagarene participants in a *hijra* to the promised land”.⁴³ In the Qurʾan it is often linked with *jihad*, both being conducted “in God’s path”, and in early Arabic poetry it means those who accept to leave tribal life to settle in a garrison city in order to participate in the conquests. It becomes contrasted with and opposed to the idea of *taʿarrub*, returning to desert life, or to the person of the nomad (*badū* or *aʿrābī*), who continues to lead a carefree existence as a desert pastoralist, shirking his duty to fight for God’s kingdom on earth. This clash of values is frequently encountered in verse, as when one poet worries that his beloved “is alarmed by the remnants of nomadism in a garrisoned soldier (*aʿrābiyya fī muhājir*)”, and in the terse statement of one early governor of Iraq that “a *muhājir* is never a nomad (*laysa bi-aʿrābī*)”.⁴⁴

The word has the meaning, then, of both soldier and settler, but to the conquered peoples it simply served as a label for the conquering armies, and in the rare cases that *magarītai* features in a bilingual Greek-Arabic document it is rendered in Arabic by the word *juyūsh*, that is, troops.⁴⁵ As I noted in my book *In God’s Path*:

Since it is the most common word for the conquerors in the seventh century, employed by themselves and by the conquered, we should really speak of the conquests of the *muhājirūn*, rather than of the Arabs or Muslims, which only become popular terms in the eighth century. At the least, we should recognise this primary impulse of the movement after Muhammad’s death, namely to conquer and settle, a message that must have originated in the early drive to recruit the nomadic tribes of Arabia and the Syrian desert (p. 102).

The term *muhājir* also had economic implications, for it was linked to entitlement to the revenues that accrued from the conquered lands (*ḥaḥ*). The settler soldiers automatically received regular stipends (*ʿaṭāʾ*) paid out of these revenues, but conversely if they were to abandon the *hijra* lands in which they were garrisoned they would automatically forfeit

42. Scheiner, “Reflections on Hoyland’s *In God’s Path*,” 26, resurrects Sidney Griffith’s doubts about whether the Greek and Syriac terms were derived from the Arabic, which seems unwarranted given their simultaneous appearance. See my *Seeing Islam*, 180, n. 25, and Ilkka Lindstedt, “*Muhājirūn* as a Name for the First/Seventh Century Muslims,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74 (2015): 68 (this article provides a nice illustration of the use of the term in Arabic literary texts).

43. *Hagarism*, 9.

44. Saleh Said Agha and Tarif Khalidi, “Poetry and Identity in the Umayyad Age,” *al-Abhath* 50-51 (2002-3): 80. The governor is al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf who makes this statement in the course of his inaugural speech in 75/694 (Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje *et al.*, Leiden: Brill, 1879-1901, 2: 864). Note that in Sabaic and Ethiopic *hajar* means town or city, and in Sabaic we find the same contrast as in Arabic between *muhājirūn* and *aʿrāb*; e.g. the inscription Ry508 qualifies the tribesmen of a region with the words: “their town-dwellers and their Bedouin” / *hgrhmw w-ʿrbhmw* (cited in Hoyland, *In God’s Path*, 263).

45. Jean Gasco, “Sur la lettre arabe de Qurra b. Šarīk P. Sorb inv. 2344,” *Annales Islamologiques* 45 (2011): 269-71. For more discussion about the significance of the term and its occurrence in the seventh century see Patricia Crone, “The First-Century Concept of *Hijra*,” *Arabica* 41 (1994): 352-87; Kh. Athamina, “*Aʿrāb* and *Muhājirūn* in the Environment of *Aṣṣār*,” *Studia Islamica* 66 (1987): 5-25; Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 141-46.

their stipends.⁴⁶ The term drops out of the documentary record in the first half of the eighth century as a consequence of the professionalization of the army, which meant that stipends were no longer determined by past entitlement but only in return for ongoing military service.⁴⁷ The trajectory of this term, from high frequency to disappearance, nicely illustrates the fact that the identity of the early conquest community was evolving in the course of the first century of its existence.

The Conquerors as Subjects of the “Commander of the Believers”

Moving a little later in time, we encounter the term “believers” in the context of political ideology. We have no texts from the time of the four Medinan caliphs (632-60) that tell us how they conceptualized their rule,⁴⁸ but the fifth caliph, Mu‘āwiya (661-80), styles himself as “commander of the believers” on five coins minted at Darābjird in southwest Iran in the year 43/663-64 and on three building inscriptions.⁴⁹ This is written in Persian on the coins (*amyr y wrwyšnyk’n*) and in Greek (*amira almoumenin*) and Arabic (*amīr al-mu‘minīn*) on the inscriptions. There are also two papyri which are dated according to the “dispensation of the believers”/*qaḍā’ al-mu‘minīn*, presumably also relating to the way that Mu‘āwiya chose to portray the nature of his rule.⁵⁰ Does “believers” refer here just to the conquerors or is Mu‘āwiya reaching out to all monotheists? Donner takes the title as evidence that “the members of Muhammad’s religious movement continued to conceive of themselves in the first instance as Believers as evidenced by the Qur’an,”⁵¹ i.e. as non-confessional believers in God and the Last Day. Before accepting this, however, there are a few points that need to be borne in mind. Firstly, the title only appears on coins in southwest Iran, a region that was a stronghold of Zoroastrianism with a very low Christian and Jewish population, and, as noted above, the Qur’an excludes Zoroastrians from the category of believers. Secondly, one could read this not as an ecumenical move by Mu‘āwiya, but as a projection of power, a claim to

46. This is clearly stated by Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim, *Kitāb al-amwāl*, ed. Abū Anas Sayyid ibn Rajab (Cairo: Dār al-Hudā, 2007), 1: 317. See also Petra Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 65 and 77-78.

47. Discussed in Crone, *Slaves*, 37-41, and Hoyland, *In God’s Path*, 164-66.

48. The inscription of ‘Umar I (634-44) published by ‘Ali ibn Ibrahim Ghabban (“The Inscription of Zuhayr, the Oldest Islamic Inscription (24 AH/644-5 AD), the Rise of the Arabic Script and the Nature of the Early Islamic State”, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 19, 2008) accords him no title. This is also true of the inscriptions mentioning ‘Umar and ‘Uthman (644-56) published by Frédéric Imbert, “Califes, princes et compagnons dans les graffiti du début de l’Islam,” *Romano-Arabica* 15 (2015): 64-66. Note that the inscription of ‘Umar at *ibid.*, 64 and fig. 2, is likely to be quite late, if not modern, since the *lām* of al-Khaṭṭāb sits on the following *khā* and the medial *alif* is written, both of which are late features.

49. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 690-91. The building inscriptions are on two dams in the Hijaz (in Arabic) and on a renovated bath complex at ancient Gadara, at the southern end of the Sea of Galilee (in Greek). For discussion of their physical setting see Donald Whitcomb, “Notes for an Archaeology of Mu‘āwiya: Material Culture in the Transitional Period of Believers,” in *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State*, ed. Antoine Borrut and Fred M. Donner (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2016), 11-27.

50. Yusuf Raḡib, “Une ère inconnue d’Égypte musulmane: l’ère de la juridiction des croyants,” *Annales Islamologiques* 41 (2007): 187-204.

51. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 99.

have usurped the Byzantine Emperor as God's representative on earth. This is implied in his alleged challenge to the emperor Constans: "Deny (the divinity of) Jesus and turn to the Great God whom I worship, the God of our father Abraham".⁵² And it is also suggested by one of his Arabic inscriptions, which commemorates the construction of a dam in the Hijaz.⁵³ It contains a request from Mu'āwiya to God for forgiveness, strength and support, and a plea to let "the believers profit by him", evidently maintaining that he stood between God and the faithful, and the latter needed him for their wellbeing.

Thirdly, "believer" is a standard in-group designation for any religious grouping, the out-group designation being "unbeliever". Both are, for example, ubiquitous terms in Late Antique Christian texts, referring both to individuals and to concepts such as "the polity of the believers" and "the city of the believers, in which virtue and justice reside".⁵⁴ Emperor Heraclius took the title of "the believer-in-Christ king" (*pistos en Christō basileus*), and so Mu'āwiya is effectively taking matters to their logical conclusion by proclaiming himself "commander of the believers". Assuming that his subjects did accept this designation, i.e. called themselves believers, how could we tell if they were using it in an "ecumenical" vein (à la Donner) or in the same way as Christians and Jews used it, i.e. to indicate their membership of an in-group as defined against the out-group of unbelievers? The principal evidence that Donner adduces in support of the ecumenical sense of the term is the presence of Jews and Christians in the new imperial administration and army. Yet every successful conquering army in history has attracted to their cause, and often actively recruited, willing outsiders, and all conquerors leave in place the lower echelons of the previous administration and then tend to pick for the more senior posts the most talented, often favoring those who were not members of the *ancien régime*. Observers often remark upon their indiscriminate choice of personnel. For example, the comment of the churchman and historian Bar Hebraeus about the Mongols—"With the Mongols there is neither slave nor free man, neither believer nor pagan [...] Everyone who approaches them and offers to them any of the mammon of the world, they accept it from him, and they entrust to him whatsoever office he seeks; all they demand is strenuous service and submission"—finds some echo in the lament of John bar

52. Hoyland, *In God's Path*, 105 (quoting Sebeos, a contemporary of Mu'āwiya). The importance of Abraham to Muslims is noted in the mid-seventh-century *Chronicle of Khūzistān* (Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 187-88) and is of course emphasized in the Qur'an, but Christians also thought that their faith "took its beginning from Abraham, the first of the fathers" (Adam H. Becker, *Sources for the History of the School of Nisibis*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008, 25, citing the sixth-century bishop Simeon of Beth Arsham).

53. George C. Miles, "Early Islamic Inscriptions near Ṭā'if in the Ḥijāz," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 7 (1948): 237-41.

54. Olympiodorus the Deacon (6th-century), "Commentary on Ecclesiastes", *Patrologia Graeca* (ed. J.P. Migne) 93 (1865): 536 (*tōn piston hē politeia*); Procopius of Gaza (d. ca. 520), "Commentary on Isaiah", *Patrologia Graeca* (ed. J.P. Migne) 87.2 (1865): 1857 (*polin tēn tōn piston*). For a wealth of other examples see under *pistoi* / "believers" in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*. Note that Olympiodorus' expression ("administration/government of the believers") is reminiscent of the aforementioned phrase *qaḍā' al-mu'minīn* that occurs in two early Arabic papyri.

Penkāyē that under the new Arabian rulers “there was no distinction between pagan or Christian, the believer was not known from a Jew”.⁵⁵

The Conquerors as Arabs

The idea that the Arabian conquerors were Arabs, once ubiquitous, has received quite a hammering of late. The reason for this is twofold. First, it has been noticed that the Arabian conquerors seldom called themselves Arabs in their writings,⁵⁶ though the term does feature in Arabic poetry. Secondly, it has become increasingly common to define Muhammad’s movement as a wholly religious one (in a spiritual/pious non-material vein) without any hint of “nationalist” or ethnic undertones.⁵⁷ This point has been made most forcefully by Donner and it has been embraced enthusiastically by many young scholars. In particular, Peter Webb has convincingly argued for “the comprehensive construction of Arabness in the early Muslim period.”⁵⁸ As the conquerors ranged far afield, they encountered ever more peoples, many with a much more ancient and illustrious pedigree than themselves. This prompted the new leaders to use their new found wealth and power to redefine and project their identity in a way that would highlight their difference from and superiority to all other peoples. Accordingly, the sense of the term Arab was expanded in geographical scope (e.g. incorporating within it groups like the South Arabians, who had never defined themselves as Arabs before Islam) and historical depth (going all the way back to Abraham and his son Ishmael, “father of the Arabs”) and equipped with a literary patrimony (pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and lore). This sense of difference is reflected in the expression that occurs very often in Arabic historical texts referring to the first century of Islam: *al-‘arab wa-al-mawālī*, the latter being members of the conquered population who became affiliated to the conquerors, usually to perform services for them. The expression would appear to correspond to the Latin *ingenui et clientes*, where the first word means free and noble, and if so then the term Arab also had a social dimension to it. Moreover, from the number of times that Arab is used when Muslim or Arabic-speaker is meant, it must have been perceived to be closely associated with the religion and language of the conquerors.⁵⁹ Given that the latter enjoyed privilege and

55. Bar Hebraeus is quoted by D.O. Morgan, “Who ran the Mongol Empire?” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 114 (1982): 124, who adds: “All sorts and conditions of men were inevitably conscripted by the conquering Mongols to lend a hand in administering their newly-acquired possessions”. John bar Penkāyē is cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 11.

56. Pointed out by Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 505-25.

57. See especially Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, xii, 218.

58. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 5.

59. E.g. the financial governor of Khurāsān in the 720s wrote to the governor about the mass conversions to Islam, saying: “Who will you take the tax from now that all the people have become Arabs” (al-Ṭabarī, 2.1508); Abū Muslim, the leader of the Abbasid revolution in the East, was ordered “to kill every Arabic-speaker in Khurāsān” (*ibid.*, 3.25, 2.1937).

prestige, many of the conquered applied the term to themselves, which led to competing notions about what it meant to be an Arab.⁶⁰

In order to reinforce his point that a new Arab identity was forged in the wake of the Arabian conquests, Webb chose to deny the term Arab any meaning for the period before this, stating bluntly that “for over 300 years before Islam ‘Arab’ never appears in Latin or Greek literature to identify Arabian communities” and that “the inhabitants of the geographical area now known as Arabia did not call themselves Arabs”.⁶¹ However, this assertion is both unnecessary and untrue. It is unnecessary because Webb’s argument for the emergence of a new Arab identity after Muhammad in no way precludes the existence of a different sort of Arab identity before Muhammad. And it is untrue because we do actually have a few examples of persons self-defining as Arabs in late antiquity:⁶²

1. “Rufinus son of Germanus, bird-augurer, Arab” from Qanawāt (southern Syria)
2. Mar’ al-Qays, “king of all the Arabs” from Namāra (southern Syria)
3. Two soldiers named John “from the lands of the Arab *ethnos*”, from Pella
4. “John the blessed cell-dweller, Arab” from near Jericho

The names in numbers 1, 2 and 4 signal that there was likely a big difference between this late antique Arab identity and the early Islamic one that we know from our Muslim sources. I have argued elsewhere that the basis of this late antique Arab identity was probably geographical, connected with the province of Arabia that was created with the Roman annexation of the Nabataean Kingdom in 105-6 CE, principally because the above four inscriptions were all found in the territory of Roman Arabia and because provinces of the Roman Empire tended over time to generate a sense of identity.⁶³ This process, combined with the declaration of universal citizenship for all imperial residents in 212 CE, gave a new

60. In my *In God’s Path*, 163, I contrast the narrower geographical/genealogical definition (from Arabia/an Arabian tribe) with an emerging broader linguistic-cultural definition. See also Patricia Crone, “Imperial Trauma: the case of the Arabs,” *Common Knowledge* 12 (2006): 107-16 (note p. 112: “the locally made Arabs had swamped the category”).

61. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 47, 95; cf. *ibid.*, 40: “nor does it seem pre-Islamic Arabians called themselves Arabs”.

62. References given in Hoyland, *In God’s Path*, 23, and *id.*, “Arab Kings, Arab Tribes and the Beginnings of Arab Historical Memory in Late Roman Epigraphy,” in *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, ed. Hannah Cotton *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 379, 392.

63. *Ibid.*, 392-93. Fritz Mitthof, “Zur Neustiftung von Identität unter imperialer Herrschaft: Die Provinzen des römischen Reiches als ethnische Entitäten,” in *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1100*, ed. Walter Pohl *et al.* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), e.g. 70: “Die Provinzen galten im 2.-4. Jh. nicht nur als Verwaltungseinheiten, sondern auch als (pseudo-) ethnische Entitäten”. Note that it was not only that the provincial labels were applied to inhabitants of these provinces by the Romans, but that these inhabitants started to refer to themselves by these labels (“We Syrians” etc). Even when administrative borders changed, people’s conceptions of their province often did not; for example, Epiphanius of Salamis, writing in the fourth century, describes Petra as being “the main city of Arabia,” even though in his day it was in Palestina III Salutaris (Hoyland, “Arab Kings,” 392). In Arabia’s case this is perhaps because it was the Nabataean kingdom before it was the province of Arabia, putting its history back into the first millennium BC.

twist to the meaning of the term Arab. Whereas classical writers had used it rather vaguely and liberally (and incorrectly) to apply to anybody who lived in or hailed from the Arabian Peninsula and adjoining desert areas, it now became increasingly reserved for natives of the province of Arabia, which was called “province of the Arabs” (*provincia araborum*) in official documentation.⁶⁴ These settled provincial Arabs are clearly distinguished in our literature from the pastoralists who lived among and around them, but were not imperial citizens, and who were designated by such terms as “Saracens” (in Greek and Latin), Ṭayyāyē (in Aramaic and Persian), and *aʿrāb* (in the Qurʾan and in the inscriptions of pre-Islamic Yemen).⁶⁵ For example, John Cassian, writing in the early fifth century, observes that some monks killed in the Judaeian desert by “Saracens” were mourned “by the whole people of the Arabs” (*a universa plebe arabum*). And the sixth-century historian Procopius of Caesarea, informs us that al-Ḥārith ibn Jabala, a powerful tribal chief based in the region around Bostra and a key ally of Byzantium, “ruled the Saracens among the Arabs” (*en arabiois*).⁶⁶ There is also a nice link between the late antique and the early Islamic worlds in the appearance of the Greek expression for dating by the era of the province of Arabia, “year x according to the Arabs (*kata arabas*)”, in the inscription of Muʿāwiya at the baths of Gadara in what would have been the north of Roman Arabia.⁶⁷

It is also possible that there was a linguistic dimension to the term Arab in late antiquity. The reason for thinking this is the coincidence of a number of new developments in the period 470-630. Firstly, there is the emergence of inscriptions written in the Arabic language and in recognisably Arabic script from Najrān in the south to Aleppo in the north. It used to be thought that there were no more than three or four of these, but there have been a number of discoveries in the last few years that have brought the number up to more than thirty, and there is every chance that many more will be found as more professional surveys

64. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 137, notes that *arḍ al-ʿarab* is probably the earliest geographical term for “Arabs’ land” and that it did not refer to the whole of the Arabian Peninsula (*jazīrat al-ʿarab*), but to “Mecca and the wider al-Ḥijāz”; it would then be a perfect fit, geographically and linguistically, for *provincia araborum* (*arḍ* is the term used to designate a province on early Islamic seals).

65. So it was not that Saracen replaced the word Arab (*pace* Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 47), it is simply that the two came to refer to different things. Since the Arabs were just inhabitants of a backwoods province, whereas “Saracens” designated all pastoralists who were not Roman citizens (as was the case also for the term Ṭayyāyē in the Syriac-speaking and Persian realms), who presented both military threat and opportunity, it is not surprising that Saracens (and Ṭayyāyē) are dramatically more common in our sources. I should emphasize that the terms Saracens, Ṭayyāyē and *aʿrāb* are applied to the pastoralists of Arabia by outsiders, and were not, so far as we know, used by them.

66. Hoyland, “Arab Kings,” 392. For the late antique period Webb’s point that one should not translate Saracen and Ṭayyāyē by “Arab” is, therefore, correct, but since Greek-speakers and Syriac-speakers kept using these two terms for many centuries after Muhammad to mean subjects of the caliphate, one presumably should translate them by “Arab” and/or “Muslim” at some point. Webb does not grapple with the problem that group labels can shift in meaning over time.

67. Yiannis Meimaris, “The Arab (Hijra) Era mentioned in Greek Inscriptions and Papyri from Palestine,” *Graeco-Arabica* 3 (1984): 177-89 (nos. 1-5 = late antique, no. 6 and Nessana papyri 60-66 = Islamic).

are carried out in Saudi Arabia and neighbouring areas.⁶⁸ Secondly, there is the employment of Arabic alongside Greek in a bilingual inscription on the lintel of a church in the village of Ḥarrān, south of Damascus, that was commissioned by one Sharaḥīl son of Zālim, described as a phylarch in the Greek text. He evidently wielded some power in the region and should be seen as emblematic of a newly emergent Christian Arabophone elite in the province of Arabia. Thirdly, there is the use of the term ‘*arabī*’ in the Qur’an to refer to the language in which it is revealed, which is patently close to the language of the aforementioned sixth-century Arabic inscriptions. When one adds to this the enhanced presence of Christianity and the increase in commercial activity from Najrān to Damascus at this time, one gets a sense of major changes taking place in this region.⁶⁹ Whether this is also connected with developments in Arab identity is too early to say, but it seems premature to rule it out entirely. The exciting discoveries of such innovative and dedicated scholars as Laïla Nehmé and Ahmad al-Jallad are bringing new insights to this field and are sure to lead to a revision of current thinking.

I fully sympathize with Webb’s desire to prevent the retrojection of the Arab identity forged in the Islamic period into pre-Islamic Arabia. Medieval Muslim authors did just that and many modern scholars have followed them, and it has certainly impeded a clear understanding of the identities of the various peoples of the Arabian Peninsula before Islam. However, Webb’s conviction that Arab identity arose *ex nihilo* in the Islamic period leads him to dismiss too quickly any signs of its existence in Late Antiquity. It takes Webb, for example, less than five pages to conclude that pre-Islamic poetry shows that the term Arab meant nothing to its authors.⁷⁰ Part of the problem is that he operates with the notion that either we have a coherent all-embracing Arab identity or no identity, whereas a much more nuanced approach is needed. Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry would have been intended for internal consumption, mostly involving intertribal activity, so rarely necessitating reference to any higher-order identity terms. An example of one of these rare occasions is the verse by Durayd ibn al-Ṣimma: “I travelled throughout the land and yet I do not see the like of Ibn Jad‘ān among the Arabs”;⁷¹ presumably the term was used to imply how widely Durayd

68. Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 410-15; Christian Robin *et al.*, “Inscriptions Antiques de la Région de Najran (Arabie Séoudite Meridionale),” *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Comptes Rendus* 2014, esp. 1087-1107; Laïla Nehmé, “New Dated Inscriptions (Nabataean and pre-Islamic Arabic) from a Site near al-Jawf, Ancient Dūmah, Saudi Arabia,” *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 3 (2017): 121-64 (on a new Arabic inscription dated 548-49 CE); ‘Abdallāh al-Sa‘īd, “Nuqūsh ‘arabiyya bi-lukna nabaṭiyya,” *al-Sahra*, September 5, 2017: <http://alsahra.org/?p=17938> (6 plausibly pre-Islamic Arabic graffiti from the Hegra-Tabuk region). Others have been found by Ahmad al-Jallad, who will be publishing them in due course.

69. Robin, “Ancient Inscriptions,” 1052-5; Patricia Crone, “Quraysh and the Roman Army: Making Sense of the Meccan Leather Trade,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70 (2007): 63-88; Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and His People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 133-40, 263-76.

70. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 66-70.

71. Louis Cheikho, *Majānī al-adab fī ḥadā’iq al-‘arab*, vol. 6 (Beirut, 1913), 290. The Hebrew University’s concordance of early Arabic poetry throws up at least ten references on top of those looked at by Webb. A couple more are analyzed in Agha and Khalidi, “Poetry and Identity in the Umayyad Age” (not cited by Webb). It is also a shame that Webb decided to take no account of poets who lived into the Islamic period, though born before it,

searched. There is no hint of course of a politically-conscious Arab community, but nor does it endorse the idea that the term had no meaning. I am absolutely not suggesting that “it was the powerful desire to realize this latent collective identity as ‘Arabs’ in political form that really generated the Believers’ expansion and the creation of their empire”⁷² or that “there was one pre-Islamic ‘Arab’ identity”. I just feel that one should factor into the equation of the rise of Islam and the ensuing conquests all the complexities of the late antique setting.

The Conquerors as Muslims

Crone and Cook observed long ago, in reference to Muhammad’s followers, that “there is no good reason to suppose that the bearers of this primitive identity called themselves ‘Muslim’”.⁷³ The Qur’an does employ the word “Muslim”, but only to indicate the action of submitting to God rather than to qualify members of a defined group, except perhaps for the Qur’anic phrase “He called you the Muslims” (*huwa sammākum al-muslimīn*, 22:78). Even in the Dome of the Rock inscription in Jerusalem, it does not appear to have a technical sense: *naḥnu lahu muslimūn* evidently means “we are submitting to Him” rather than “we are Muslims for him”. Similarly, the phrase *al-dīn ‘ind Allāh al-islām* should be translated “religion in God’s view is about submission (to Him)” rather than “religion in God’s view is (the faith that bears the name) Islam”.⁷⁴ However, the creed of the conquerors might have been distinguished from Judaism and Christianity even before their naming had been settled, and there are good reasons to believe that this would have been the case. The first and most obvious one, mostly ignored by armchair academics, is that war is nasty. Once people start dying, the lines between the opposing groups tend to harden. Not having any worries about political correctness, Muslim authors happily talk of beheadings and large-scale slaughter, though, as Donner is right to emphasize, they also speak of peace treaties and non-aggression pacts.⁷⁵ This leads us to a second factor that might have precipitated the erection of communal boundaries. In return for protection of their life and property the conquered had to pay a

which would have yielded at least forty references to “Arab(s)”, since they appear to demonstrate an increase in the use of the term even at this early stage.

72. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 218; Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 5. Contrary to what both imply (*ibid.*, 17 n. 15, lumps me with those who “view Islam’s rise as a racial/national movement”), I have never written that Arab ethnogenesis drove Muhammad’s movement or the Arab conquests. Often authors are using the label “Arab” because it is convenient, not because they necessarily think that all so labelled were participants in an outpouring of ethnic/nationalist sentiment (just as one can speak of the French conquest of north Africa without meaning that it was a consequence of French ethnogenesis, so also one might write about the Arab conquest of the Middle East without meaning that it resulted from Arab ethnogenesis).

73. *Hagarism*, 8. Though as noted above, the term Muslim seems to have more of a confessional sense in the Constitution of Medina.

74. Max van Berchem, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum II.2 Jérusalem* (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1927), 231 (no. 215, inner band, *islām*), 250 (no. 217, copper plate on lintel of north door, *muslimūn*). Possibly Muslim became a technical term not so much because the community was now becoming confessionally distinct from others, but because it was attracting large numbers of converts, who had to make a declaration of submission (*islām*) to the one God and to their new community.

75. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 107-9.

special tax, a poll tax, and this was not paid by the conquerors.⁷⁶ This differential tax status may initially have only signified the distinction between conquerors and conquered, but it very soon came to be perceived and represented as one between followers of Muhammad's religion and the people of the book (Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, etc), prompting many to "convert" to gain this tax-free status and so further reinforcing the divide between the religion of the conquerors and all other faiths.

A final factor that must have some relevance to the question is the radically changed situation in which the Hijazis found themselves as their conquests progressed. They were now rulers of a vast empire that comprised numerous different peoples and cultures. Donner takes it for granted that change was gradual and there was initially continuity of ideology between Muhammad's community and the subsequent conquest society, but possibly the drastically changed situation and/or the entry into the ranks of the conquering army of vast numbers of non-Hijazis forced a swift rethinking of aims and expectations.⁷⁷ One could even argue that a discontinuity between the Prophet's days and later times was perceived by the early conquerors, who mythologized it in the tale of how the caliph 'Uthman lost Muhammad's ring down a well halfway through his reign, ushering in a period of more unjust rule. But whether rapid or gradual, Donner is right that one of the changes was the transition from a confessionally open religious grouping to a more tightly defined and exclusivist one.⁷⁸ However, the present state of our evidence does not allow us to reconstruct this transition or ascertain when it occurred. One could argue, for example, that 'Abd al-Malik's citation of the Qur'anic verses instructing Christians not to "say three" or that God has a son on the Dome of the Rock indicates that Christianity was not yet perceived as a distinct confession from the conquerors and that the caliph was still trying to attract the Christians into the believers' fold. Yet, in the absence of context or commentary, one could equally make a good case for the opposite view: that 'Abd al-Malik was being deliberately confrontational and intended to demonstrate the superiority of the conqueror's religion over those of the conquered.⁷⁹

Conclusions

The question of the identity of the seventh-century Arabian conquerors is a difficult one to answer, but it is clear from the above that there is much more to be said about it and in certain fields, such as epigraphy and Qur'anic studies, there have been some fascinating discoveries and important advances. By way of conclusion, I would just like to comment on some of the challenges that I have encountered in writing on this topic.

76. For discussion and references see Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, 72-74.

77. Patricia Crone, "Two Legal Problems bearing on the Early History of the Qur'an," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994): 7, speaks of "discontinuity of a more drastic kind" in trying to explain why the meaning of a number of Qur'anic words and concepts seem to have been unknown to the generation after Muhammad.

78. To my mind Muhammad had already initiated this process when he changed the *qibla*, opted for Ramadan as the month of fasting and instituted the hajj, as these sort of practices tend to mark out people as different.

79. One could likewise interpret the early Muslim use of churches for prayer as either a reflection of non-sectarianism (Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," 51-52) or as a demonstration of colonial power.

Acceptance of Diversity

At the beginning of *In God's Path* I quoted the aphorism of Marc Bloch that “to the great despair of historians men fail to change their vocabulary every time they change their customs”. This is particularly worth bearing in mind for the period of the rise of Islam, since the rapid transformation in the fortunes and circumstances of Muhammad’s followers is likely to have led to equally quick shifts in the meanings of the terms that we use to speak of them. Moreover, one must accept that people do not operate with just one label for themselves, but employ different ones according to context and over time. Even if being a “believer” were paramount, other affiliations—to tribe, to city or region, to fellow traders or agriculturalists, and so on—would still have been in play.

As regards the term Arab, “Each individual could hold several passports,” as one scholar has recently remarked in a consideration of ethnic identity in early medieval Europe.⁸⁰ It is possible, then, that some of the early conquerors would have used all the terms “believer”, “Muslim”, “*muhājir*” and “Arab” in different contexts, since they are in no way contradictory, but have different significances and connotations. As regards the term Arab, it might be better not to worry about ascertaining the moment of Arab ethnogenesis, or even thinking that there would have been such a moment,⁸¹ but rather to accept that terms like Arab have been around for millennia, but who, what and where they refer to have changed frequently in the course of those years. In this respect Webb is certainly right to draw a line between the pre-Islamic and Islamic senses of the term (even if he negates the former), for there is no doubt that Arab came to be applied to many more people in many more places and with much changed content in the aftermath of the Arabian conquests. In sum, we need to have a nuanced approach when handling these terms and we should not get too fixated on coming up with a single term to describe the conquerors, the more so as their enormous success attracted huge numbers to their venture, quickly making the conquest society a very pluralist one.⁸²

The Role of Religion

The most common criticism against my book, *In God's Path*, was that I was trying to minimize or even reject the role of religion. Thus Webb alleges that I neglect religion in favor

80. Herwig Wolfram, “How Many Peoples are (in) a People?” in Pohl *et al.*, *Visions*, 105.

81. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 6: “The moment when self-styled ‘Arabs’ began to imagine an ancient history for themselves is precisely when meaningful ethnogenesis was underway,” but do we know that the self-styled Arabs of late antiquity that I listed above did not imagine an ancient history for themselves? I am increasingly thinking that ethnogenesis, with its implications of a people born anew and its close links to the “birth” of the new peoples of Europe out of the ashes of the Roman Empire, is not a helpful concept for thinking about identity shifts in the wake of the Arabian conquests. Was Arab ever an ethnic term, as opposed to a geographical, supratribal, linguistic or cultural one? For some thoughts see Chris Wickham, “Conclusions,” in Pohl *et al.*, *Visions*, 551-58.

82. See my *In God's Path*, 56-61, for the idea that the conquest armies comprised many non-Arabs and non-Muslims in their ranks, and the excellent study of Wadād al-Qāḍī, “Non-Muslims in the Muslim Conquest Army in Early Islam,” in *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State*, ed. Antoine Borrut and Fred Donner (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2016), 83-128.

of “realpolitik” and adopt “a secular perspective,”⁸³ and Scheiner attributes to me the views that “it was not religious zeal that motivated the conquests” and that “Islam functioned as an integrating factor but not as means of personal motivation”.⁸⁴ Donner goes further and makes the repeated charge that I seek “to avoid a religious explanation of any kind,” “to downplay the religious impetus” and view the Arab Muslim conquests as a process “that lacked a religious underpinning.”⁸⁵ In reality I strongly emphasized the importance of religion to the conquests:

I do not want to belittle the role of religion but rather to expand its remit. Religion is integral to the conquests and the evolution of an Islamic Empire, but religion is not just piety and devotion, especially not in the seventh century; it is as much about power and identity as spiritual yearnings and righteous behavior (p. 5).

Furthermore, I pointed to the conquerors’ “ideological commitment” (p. 62), which I prefer to the rather amorphous term “zeal”, and I underlined the mutually reinforcing motivations of God and booty: “the gains won by fighting for God made His warriors more desirous to serve Him in war and worship” (p. 64).

It would seem, therefore, that what divides me and these reviewers is not whether religion contributed to the Arabian conquests, but rather the nature of that contribution. This to some extent reflects a difference in the approaches of the disciplines of Islamic Studies and History. Whereas the former tends to stress heavily the belief aspect of religion, the discipline of History, while acknowledging this aspect, also seeks to bring out its socio-economic and political dimensions. So whereas Donner focuses on Islam “as a religious movement—not as a social, economic or ‘national’ one,”⁸⁶ I strove to bring out its other traits, such as its strong integrative capacity, which enabled it to assimilate the native population into the conquest society, a crucial precondition for the formation of a new civilization. I also take it for granted that, as a historian, one should look more to long-term processes rather than to individuals to explain major events and phenomena, so in seeking to explain the Arabian conquests one would want to consider what lay behind the collapse of Ḥimyar and Axum, the drop in settlement in east Arabia, the endemic fighting between Byzantium and Iran, the expansion of the Turks into the Middle East and so on, rather than just concentrate on Muhammad’s activities in the Hijaz.⁸⁷ One could construe this as an attempt to reduce the role of religion, as my critics did. However, I think it is just a recognition that, like it or not, humans are embedded in the material world, so that even piety and spirituality cannot be regarded as free of all worldly connections (though they will often be portrayed as such), and that we

83. Webb, “The March of Islam,” 24.

84. Scheiner, “Reflections on Hoyland’s *In God’s Path*,” 25.

85. Donner, “Review of *In God’s Path*,” 137-38.

86. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, xii.

87. In the first draft that I sent to Oxford University Press I actually did not discuss Muhammad at all, since I felt that in some respects it made sense to separate out Muhammad’s missionary work from the onset of the Arabian conquests, but it was felt to be unacceptable not to mention him at all.

are all to some extent subject to larger forces that both limit our ability to act and drive it in ways that we do not fully control.

Isolationism and Exceptionalism

Patricia Crone once mused on the dearth of new studies on the relationship of Islamic law to Roman law and attributed it to “the intellectual isolation in which Islamic studies have come to be conducted since the First World War.” Her explanation for this was that “as the era of the colony gave way to that of the mandate and eventually to that of independence, Islamicists increasingly preferred to study Islam as an autonomous system developing internally in response to its own needs and by the use of its own resources.”⁸⁸ Historians, by contrast, find it helpful and instructive to compare and contrast different cultures and polities. Donner states that “the basic argument of *In God’s Path* is that the expansion of Muḥammad’s community, which took over most of the Near East in the seventh and eighth centuries, should be seen as akin to the expansions of other ‘peripheral peoples’.”⁸⁹ However, I do not argue that the various expansions have some “intrinsic similarity,”⁹⁰ but rather that the weakness of Eurasian empires at this time and the simultaneous emergence of a number of different peoples who had been deemed marginal by their imperial neighbors should make one pause for thought and ponder whether there are common environmental or geopolitical forces at work. In each case, though, the emergence is triggered in different ways, follows a different trajectory and results in different entities. Yet it seems to me that it facilitates and enhances our understanding of the rise of Islam to think about the bigger picture rather than to look solely to Muhammad and West Arabia, but that does not mean that I wish in any way to downgrade the importance of the Prophet and his homeland.

A related problem is the idea of Islam’s exceptionalism⁹¹—that Islam is so radically different that it cannot be subject to the usual rules of historical enquiry. This idea lies behind the disinclination to compare Islamic civilization with any other and the desire to portray the Islamic conquests as different from that of any other group. As noted by Aziz al-Azmeh, “claims for exceptionalism are used to justify an egregious disregard to both the normal equipment

88. *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1, 6.

89. Donner, “Review of *In God’s Path*,” 136.

90. Donner, “Review of *In God’s Path*,” 136. Likewise I do not argue that the Arab conquests are “similar to the Germanic invasions” and I certainly do not “see them both as processes that lacked a religious underpinning” (Donner, “Review of *In God’s Path*,” 138); I actually made the opposite point, i.e. *not* that religion was less important to the Arab Muslims, but that religion was a lot *more* important to the Germanic kingdoms than Islamicists tend to think; e.g. see Emöke Horvath, “The Role of Arianism in the Vandal Kingdom,” in *Religion, Ritual and Mythology: Aspects of Identity Formation in Europe*, ed. Joaquim Carvalho (Pisa: Edizioni Plus, 2006), 171-79. There are, therefore, some grounds for fruitful comparison.

91. This term has been commandeered recently by Shadi Hamid in his book *Islamic Exceptionalism* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2016), where he argues that Islam is unique in its relationship to politics. He is right that modern Islam is quite different from other contemporary religions in its involvement with politics, but in the past other religions, including Christianity, became intertwined with the political sphere. He is also right that the beginnings of a religion have some impact upon its future course, and yet many Christian groups have employed violence despite Jesus’ injunction to turn the other cheek, and plenty of Muslim ones have urged peace despite Muhammad’s role as a military leader.

of the historical science and the usual workings of human societies.”⁹² This is particularly evident in recent works dealing with the conquests. Webb states that my “purpose is to explain Islam’s rise in rational terms, comparing it to other world empires,” letting it be known that he regards both strategies as misplaced.⁹³ And it is common to encounter assertions such as “the success of the conquests is virtually beyond plausible historical explanation”⁹⁴ and “the dynamism of Islam’s expansion defies explanation in ordinary human terms,” or even that we should “dissuade historians from striving vainly to explain the almost inexplicable in normal historical terms”.⁹⁵ I assume that there is a (presumably subconscious) apologetic aim at work, striving to counter the heavily negative press Islam receives in our day. However, to my mind such an approach, though well intentioned, does a disservice to the subject, and to Muslims for that matter, since it implies that they and their past are not part of the ordinary ebb and flow of human history. In my own words from my book, “my aim is to re-integrate these conquests and their impact into the fabric of human history, against the prevailing trend to see them as utterly exceptional, and I hope thereby to make them more explicable according to the usual norms of human behaviour” (p. 6). That does not mean that I wish to downplay their extraordinary nature—I emphasize that “the achievements of the Arab conquerors were immense”—but I feel that to give differential treatment is to risk exclusion, and it is surely better for all concerned if Muslims and their history participate, and are included, fully in the struggle of humanity to understand where it came from and where it is going.⁹⁶

92. *The Times of History*, 249. Cf. Chase Robinson: “The supposed ‘exceptionalism’ of Islamic History says as much about professional expertise and religious belief as it does about the history made by Muslims: the laws of history (insofar as they exist) are not suspended in southwest Asia” (“Reconstructing Early Islam: Truth and Consequences,” in *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. Herbert Berg, Leiden: Brill, 2003, 134).

93. Webb, “The March of Islam,” 24. He also says that I call the conquests “ordinary”, which I do not (I do not use that word in the book, rather I call them an “immense” and a “stunning” achievement), and “an accident which Arabians happen to pull off”, whereas I offer a list of plausible causes. He also says that it is my “principal argument that Islam’s rise was not exceptional,” which I do not say at all in the book; but I would say that it was not exceptional in the literal sense of being an exception to human history at large. Yet it is surely not the job of a historian either to write a paean to his/her subject or to say that it is inexplicable.

94. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” 50.

95. James Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 463 and 464.

96. Arguing in a slightly different but related vein, Crone concludes her reply to Robert Serjeant’s review of her *Meccan Trade* by saying “I have simply refused to treat the Arabs as an exception to the normal rules of history, and something is badly wrong in Islamic studies if I have to justify this procedure” (“Serjeant and Meccan Trade,” *Arabica* 39, 1992, 240).

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