Arabic *Fatḥ* as 'Conquest' and its Origin in Islamic Tradition[1]

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Abstract

The Arabic term fatḥ (*pl.* futūḥ) *is often translated as "conquest," but this meaning is not intrinsic to the root f-t-ḥ either in Arabic or in other Semitic languages. Rather, the word was applied to episodes in the expansion of the early Islamic state by later Muslim writers who described these events following a particular use of the word* fatḥ *in the Qur'ān, where it referred to an act of God's grace that was favorable for the community. This might include instances of actual conquest, but could also be applied to other ways in which an area came into the state, such as by treaty agreement. The rigid translation as "conquest" is therefore potentially misleading.*

Scholarship on the rise of Islam routinely translates the Arabic word *fatḥ* (pl. *futūḥ*), when used in the context of the first expansion of the Believers' movement, as "conquest."[2] In this, it follows classical Arabic usage, which offers "conquest" as one of the secondary meanings of *fatḥ*, and used the term to refer to that extensive genre of accounts--called the *futūḥ* literature--that described the Islamic state's seemingly inexorable expansion during its first century or so.[3] From classical Arabic, the term was

1. I am grateful to Carel Bertram, George Hatke, Ilkka Lindstedt, Jens Scheiner, and especially *UW's* anonymous reviewers for many helpful comments on the draft of this article.

2. Several other scholars have discussed the meanings of the word *fatḥ*. See in particular Rudi Paret, "Die Bedeutungsentwicklung von arabisch *fatḥ*," in J. M. Barral (ed.), *Orientalia Hispanica sive studia F. M. Pareja dicata* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), I, 537-41; G. R. Hawting, "al-Ḥudaybiyya and the conquest of Mecca. A reconsideration of the tradition about the Muslim takeover of the sanctuary," *JSAI* 8 (1986), 1-23; Hani Hayajneh, "Arabian languages as a source for Qurʾānic vocabulary," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān in its historical context, 2* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), 117-146, at p. 144 on f-t-ḥ; and Chase F. Robinson, "Conquest," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*. General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Brill Online 2015. Referenced 25 February 2015. In the nature of things, there is much overlap in the discussion among these four articles and the present one.

3. On the *futūḥ* literature, see Albrecht Noth and Lawrence I. Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historiographical*

adopted into other Islamic languages in the sense of "conquest;" thus it forms part of the etymology, for example, of the Ottoman Turkish term *fatḥ-nāme*, or official announcement of a military victory.[4] The present note considers how the word *fatḥ* became associated with these events and the appropriateness of translating it as "conquest."

As mentioned already, "conquest" is a secondary meaning of *fatḥ* in Arabic; as is well known, the basic meaning of the verb *fataḥa* in Arabic is "he opened," with the verbal noun *fatḥ* meaning "opening." In this respect, Arabic is consistent with cognate languages in the northwest Semitic group, in which the primary (and sometimes the only attested) meanings from the root *f/p-t-ḥ* have to do with the concept of "opening" (e.g., "to open;" "door, gate, entrance;" etc.).[5] In these languages, meanings related to "conquest" occur sparingly and, one might say, tangentially: in the northwest Semitic inscriptions, for example, the form *nptḥt* is attested with the meaning "to be thrown open, said of an army camp,"[6] and one can imagine that in any language, it might be said that a city "was opened" when it yielded to an invader, but this is not the same as giving the active form of the verb the meaning "to conquer." The only exception among the northwest Semitic languages is Syriac, where in addition to the basic meaning "to open" the verb *ptaḥ* can mean "to conquer," as in Arabic. This Syriac usage is, however, likely a borrowing from the Arabic, and occurs almost exclusively in the works of later authors such as Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286), Michael the Syrian (d. 1199), and Elias of Nisibis (d.1046).[7] Most of the earlier Syriac chronicles, such as the anonymous *Chronicle up to 724* and the anonymous *Chronicle up to 846*, seem to use other words when describing events such as the Sasanian and early Islamic conquests in the Near East: *kbash* or *ethkbash*, "to conquer/be conquered;" *qrab*, "to fight," or *qarbā*, "a battle;" *ḥrab*, "to devastate, lay waste;" *npaq*, "to invade;" *nḥat*, "to descend upon, march against."[8] *Ptaḥ* with the meaning of "to capture" is found once in the context of the Islamic conquests in the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn* (written *ca.* 775), but generally

Tradition: A Source-Critical Study (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994); Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: the beginnings of Islamic historical writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), 174-82; Lawrence I. Conrad, "Futūḥ," in Julie S. Meisami and Paul Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998)," I: 237-40.

4. On these see *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd ed.), "Fatḥnāme" (G. L. Lewis).

5. E.g. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), s.v.; G. del Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartin, *Diccionario de la Lengua Ugarítica* (Barcelona: Ausa, 1996-2000), 358; J. Haftijzer and K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 948-51; M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Christian Palestinian Aramaic* (Leuven & Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2015), 344-45.

6. Haftijzer and Jongeling, 950.

7. Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin; Correction, Expansion and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, and Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), 1265-66, provides references. I am indebted to two anonymous reviewers for clarifying the Syriac references for me.

8. These two texts are found in Ignatius Guidi, E. W. Brooks, and J. B Chabot (eds.), *Chronica Minora* (= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, Scriptores Syri, Textus, Series tertia, tomus IV) (Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae and Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1903-5), e.g. pp. 145-47, 232-35.

it uses other words for "conquer/conquest.".[9] This suggests that the Arabic use of the root *f-t-ḥ* for "conquest" was not yet current in Syriac when these texts were compiled.[10] In sum, Arabic *f-t-ḥ* in the sense of "to open" is fully consonant with the northwest Semitic evidence, but it seems that we must look elsewhere for an explanation of Arabic *f-t-ḥ* in the sense of "to conquer."

Surprisingly, the root *f-t-ḥ* has not (yet) turned up as a common noun or verb in pre-Islamic North Arabian inscriptions; *ptḥ* is attested as a personal name in Ḥismaic and Safaitic, but this cannot provide any guidance on the meaning of the root.[11]

Sabaic (one of the Epigraphic South Arabian languages) seems, at first glance, particularly promising as a possible source for the meaning "to conquer" in Arabic, because the dictionaries state that in South Arabian the verb *ftḥ* can mean "to conquer" or "to lay waste."[12] (Surprisingly, Sabaic does not seem to know the meaning "to open" with this root.) This might be taken as evidence that Arabic *fataḥa* "to conquer" is a loan-word from South Arabian, an idea that seems even more plausible in view of the fact that the military terminology of classical Arabic contains some loan-words from South Arabian, such as *khamīs*, "army" (from Sabaic *ḫ̲ms*, "army, infantry").[13] One assumes that these terms became current in Arabic in the centuries before the rise of Islam, when the South Arabian kingdoms and their culture exercised significant political and cultural influence over areas to the north, including the Ḥijāz.[14]

There are, however, reasons to question whether Arabic *fatḥ* with the meaning "conquest" actually does have a South Arabian etymology. For one thing, the dictionaries' attestations of Sabaic *ftḥ* are few, and often seem amenable to other meanings, opening

9. *Incerti auctoris chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum* (ed. J.-B. Chabot, Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1933), 151.3 [=*CSCO,* Scriptores Syri, Series Tertia, Tomus II, Textus], on the conquest of Dara; cf. *The chronicle of Zuqnīn*, *Parts III and IV, A.D. 488-775,* translated by Amir Harrak (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999), 143. Note that the same text (*Incerti auctoris...*), p. 149, line 13, referring to the conquest of Palestine, uses the word *kbash;* p. 151 line 7, referring to the conquest of Caesarea, again *kbash;* p. 151 line 24, referring to the conquest of Arwād, *ethkbash;* etc. Sokoloff, *Syriac Lexicon*, also lists a single reference to *ptaḥ* in the Syriac translation of the lost Greek *Chronicle* of Zacharias Rhetor, who died in the mid-6th century; but the translation may be of considerably later date.

10. Some Arabic words were, however, borrowed into Syriac early in the Islamic era, evidently from Umayyad-era Arabic texts; see Antoine Borrut, "Vanishing Syria: Periodization and Power in Early Islam," *Der Islam* 91:1 (2014), 37-68, at 49; see also *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn,* 25-28, for a discussion of Arabisms in the chronicle (dated to 775).

11. I thank Ilkka Lindstedt for this information (email, 28 July 2015).

12. Joan Copeland Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982 [=Harvard Semitic Studies, no. 25], p. 412-13; A.F.L. Beeston et al., *Sabaic Dictionary* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters, and Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1982), p. 47.

13. The dependence of Muḥammad's community on South Arabian (Ḥimyarite) military practices is emphasized by John W. Jandora, *The March from Medina. A Revisionist Study of the Arab Conquests* (Clifton, N.J.: Kingston Press, 1990), esp. 50-51. Jandora's Appendix B, p. 131, provides a list of military terms in Arabic that he considers of South Arabic origin; the list does not, however, include *fatḥ.*

14. On Ḥimyar's military and political expansion northward into the Arabian Peninsula, see Christian Julien Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and *Arabia Deserta* in Late Antiquity. The Epigraphic Evidence," in Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 127-71, esp. 137-39.

the possibility that the translation "to conquer" proposed by the modern lexicographers was influenced by their knowledge of the Arabic usage. Moreover, it is indisputable that the primary meaning of South Arabian *fṯḥ* is "to render judgment" or "to decree;" in this it seems closely cognate with the Ethiopic (Geʿez) root *f-t-ḥ*, which shows no trace of any meaning related to "conquest."[15]

The easy assumption of a South Arabian origin for Arabic *fataḥa*, "to conquer," is rendered even more dubious by the evidence of the Qurʾān. Since the Qurʾān is the oldest surviving monument of Arabic literature and seems to hail from a west-Arabian milieu,[16] one would expect to find the South Arabian meaning of *fatḥ* as "conquest" reflected in its vocabulary if, in fact, this was the origin of the later Arabic usage. However, although the word *fatḥ* and other words derived from the root are used almost forty times in the Qurʾān in a variety of ways, in no case does *fatḥ* in the Qurʾān obviously mean "conquest."[17] This suggests that if South Arabian *fatḥ* did mean "conquest," such a meaning was not known to the Arabic represented by the Qurʾān. On balance, then, it seems that the association of the South Arabian root *f-t-ḥ* with the concept of "conquest" is dubious and should be held in reserve, at least until new evidence comes to light. It also suggests that the development of the meaning "conquest" for *fatḥ* must be a development within the evolution of Arabic itself, and not a meaning derived from some earlier Semitic language.

The Qurʾānic data, then, must be examined in more detail, because it offers the earliest literary examples of Arabic usage of words from the root *f-t-ḥ*.[18] We can classify the Qurʾān's use of words from the root *f-t-ḥ* into four categories, which we shall call groups A, B, C, and D:

A. A first group of Qurʾānic passages clearly has *fataḥa* (or related words) with the regular northwest Semitic meaning of "to open" (such as "opening the gates of heaven.") They include, at least, Q. 7 (al-Aʿrāf): 40; Q. 12 (Yūsuf): 65; Q. 15 (al-Ḥijr): 14; Q. 23 (al-Muʾminīn): 77; Q. 38 (Ṣād): 50; Q. 39 (al-Zumar): 71 and 73; Q. 54 (al-Qamar): 11; and Q. 78 (al-Nabaʾ): 19. These need not detain us further here.

B. Another group of Qurʾānic passages seems to use *f-t-ḥ* in the sense of "to decide

15. Wolf Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987), 170. The meanings for the Ethiopic verb *fatḥa* cluster around the concepts of "to open, loosen, set free, absolve" and "to judge, decide, pass judgment."

16. On the date and locale of the Qurʾān text, see F. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: the beginnings of Islamic historical writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), ch. 1; Nikolai Sinai, "When did the consonantal skeleton of the Qurʾan reach closure? Part 1," *BSOAS* 77 (2014), 273-92.

17. See the discussion in Robinson, "Conquest."

18. I have set aside here a search of the corpus of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, in view of the fact that it is all transmitted to us by authors of the Islamic period. Some recent studies, however, have profitably utilized the poetry to reveal shifting meanings of certain key words, going back to the pre-Islamic era: Peter Webb, "*Al-Jāhiliyya:* Uncertain Times of Uncertain Meanings," *Der Islam* 91:1 (2014), 69-94, and Suzanne Stetkevych, "The Abbasid Poet Interprets History: Three Qaṣīdahs by Abū Tammām," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 10 (1979), 49-64 [both on *jāhiliyya*]; Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs. Arab identity and the rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), esp. ch. 2 (60-109) [on *ʿarab*]. See also Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity. A critique of approaches to Arabic sources* (Berlin: Gerlach, 2014), 101-11.

between" two parties or "to render judgment."[19] These include Q. 7 (al-Aʿrāf): 89, 26 (al-Shuʿarāʾ):118, and 34 (al-Sabaʾ):26 and (as we shall see below**)** probably a number of others. Q. 7: 89, for example, reads (in part); "[...] Our Lord, decide/judge between us and between our people with truth; You are the best of deciders/judges" [*rabba-nā ftaḥ bayna-nā wa bayna qawmi-nā bi-l-ḥaqqi wa anta khayru l-fātiḥīna*]. As was pointed out long ago by J. Horovitz, this usage seems to be derived from or cognate with the Ethiopic *feṭḥ*, "judgment, verdict, decision;"[20] it might be considered even more likely that this signification came into both Arabic and Ethiopic from the South Arabian, which as we have seen above also uses the verb *ftḥ* with the meaning "to obtain a judicial order; initiate a lawsuit; give judgment."[21]

C. Several verses seem to use *fataḥa*, with the preposition *ʿalā*, in ways that extend semantically the sense of "to open." Two verses (Q. 6 [al-Anʿām]: 44 and Q. 7 [al-Aʿrāf]: 96) use *fataḥa ʿalā* to mean "to bestow upon" or "to grant" (a meaning perhaps not semantically too distant from the basic idea of "to open;" cf. the English "open-handed."). Q. 7: 96, for example, says "And if the people of the villages had believed and been God-fearing, We would have opened/bestowed upon them blessings from the heavens and the earth..." [*wa-law anna ahla l-qurā āmanū wa-ttaqaw la-fataḥnā ʿalay-him barakātin min al-samāʾi wa l-arḍi...*]. A third verse (Q. 2 [al-Baqara]: 76) uses the same construction but evidently with the meaning of "to reveal or disclose" previously hidden things. This meaning, too, is not very distant from the basic meaning of "to open:" "[...] Do you talk to them about what God has opened/revealed to you...?" [*...a-tuḥaddithūna-hum bi-mā fataḥa llāhu ʿalay-kum...*].

D. There remain, however, several Qurʾānic passages that use the verbal noun *fatḥ* (or other words from the root *f-t-ḥ*) in which the exact meaning is more difficult to discern. They include Q. 2 (al-Baqara): 89; Q. 4 (al-Nisāʾ): 141; Q. 5 (al-Māʾida): 53; Q. 8 (al-Anfāl): 19; Q. 14 (Ibrāhīm): 15; Q. 32 (al-Sajdah): 28 and 29; Q. 35 (al-Fāṭir): 2; Q. 48 (al-Fatḥ): 1, 18, and 27; Q. 57 (al-Ḥadīd): 10; Q. 61 (al-Ṣaff): 13; and Q. 110 (al-Naṣr): 1. The word *fatḥ* in these verses seems to refer to some momentous event that is good for the Believers, but its exact nature is not clear, or seems different in different verses.[22] Q. 35:2 speaks of the "mercy that God opens (? grants? reveals?) to the people" [*mā yaftaḥi llāhu li-l-nāsi min raḥmatin*]. Some of these verses suggest that the meaning of *fatḥ* may be something like "judgment," thus making them similar to group B, or they may imply that *fatḥ* refers to some kind of victory or success, although its exact nature remains elusive.

The word *istaftaḥa*, "to ask for a *fatḥ*," usually against the unbelievers or other opponents, occurs in some of these verses and would fit either meaning—i.e., *fatḥ* as

19. Paret, "Die Bedeutungsentwicklung," emphasizes this meaning in particular, as does Hayajneh, "Arabian languages,"144.

20. Josef Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1926), 18, note 2; see also Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 221-2; Rudi Paret, *Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz* (2nd ed. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1977), 167. See in particular Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez*, 170.

21. Biella, *loc. cit.*; Beeston, *loc. cit.*

22. Paret, "Bedeutungsentwicklung," links such events with a "decision" by God (meaning C here).

"judgment" or as "victory." (Q. 2: 89; Q. 8: 19; Q. 14: 15). A few verses seem to associate or equate *fatḥ* with *naṣr*, "aid" or "assistance," presumably from God (Q. 61: 13; Q. 110: 1, and more distantly, Q. 48: 1-3). In these last cases, it may be that *fatḥ* is used in a sense akin to that in section C above, "a bounty bestowed by God."

The context at the end of *sūra* 32, in which there is much mention of the Last Judgment, might tempt us to infer that *fatḥ* there is a reference to the Last Judgment itself (verses 25-32)--the word *fatḥ* is even used in the phrase *yawm al-fatḥ*, "the day of the *fatḥ*," which has a ring of finality to it (Q. 32: 29). References to *fatḥ qarīb*, "a near *fatḥ*" (Q. 48: 18; Q. 61: 13) might also be taken to suggest a connection with a Day of Judgment presumed to be imminent, but still in the future. Q. 5: 52 states, "Perhaps God will bring the *fatḥ* or a command from Him..." that will make opponents repent [*fa-ʿasā llāhu an yaʾtiya bi-l-fatḥi aw amrin min ʿinda-hu...*], suggesting that it is something in the future. On the other hand, Q. 8: 19, Q. 48 verses 1, 18, and 27, and Q. 57: 10 all state that the *fatḥ* has already come, and is not something in the future: for example, Q. 8: 19 reads, "if you ask for a *fatḥ*, indeed the *fatḥ* has already come to you" [*in tastaftiḥū fa-qad jāʾa-kum al-fatḥu*]. So, all things considered, the temptation to understand *fatḥ* as a reference to the Last Judgment seems ill-founded.

This thicket of seemingly inconsistent or contradictory meanings of *fatḥ* and related words in the Qurʾān resulted in different glosses being supplied by the commentators, depending on what the context seemed to require: so the word *fatḥ* is explained as meaning not only "opening" but also "judgment," "victory," or "assistance," or sometimes all together.

The commentaries on *sūra* 48 (*sūrat al-Fatḥ*) are especially instructive. In the first verse of this *sūra*, "Verily, We have granted (?) you a clear *fatḥ*" [*innā fataḥnā laka fatḥan mubīnan*], the words *fataḥa* and *fatḥ* are usually construed by modern translators to mean something like "victory."[23] In doing so, they follow the medieval commentators, who for the most part explain this verse as a reference to Muḥammad's agreement with Quraysh at al-Ḥudaybiya.[24] Al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* provides a variety of reports arguing that in this verse *fatḥ* means *ḥukm* (a judgment) against those who opposed Muḥammad and in support of those who backed him; in summarizing, he paraphrases the verse to mean, "We gave a verdict of assistance (*naṣr*) and victory (*ẓafr*) against the polytheists (*kuffār*) and with you." So al-Ṭabarī offers both the meanings of "judgment" and "victory/assistance" as glosses. Moreover, almost all the traditions about this passage cited by al-Ṭabarī link it to

23. The translations of Pickthall, Arberry, Dawood, Muḥammad ʿAlī, ʿAbdullāh Yūsuf ʿAlī, Fakhry and Droge all translate as "victory." Bell renders the verse "Verily We have given thee a manifest clearing-up," which seems to draw mainly from the meaning of the adjective *mubīn* and leaves the meaning of the verb and noun *fataḥa* and *fatḥ* unclear. Paret translates the verse as "Wir haben dir einen offenkundigen Erfolg beschieden," thus giving the sense of "success" to *fatḥ*. Droge translates "victory," but in a footnote says that the literal meaning is "we have opened for you a clear opening."

24. This association is noted by U. Rubin, "The Life of Muḥammad and the Islamic Self-Image. A Comparative Analysis of an Episode in the Campaigns of Badr and al-Ḥudaybiya," in Harald Motzki (ed.), *The Biography of Muḥammad. The issue of the sources* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), 3-17, at p. 4, and by Hawting, "Al-Ḥudaybiyya and the Conquest of Mecca."

al-Ḥudaybiya, where the verse is according to some commentators supposed to have been revealed.[25]

The *Tafsīr* of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767)--one of the earliest extant commentaries--also links this verse to the al-Ḥudaybiya episode. According to Muqātil, the verse was revealed by God upon Muḥammad's return from al-Ḥudaybiya to Medina, and he glosses it as meaning "We rendered for you a clear judgment in your favor, i.e., Islām."[26]

Despite a certain confusion surrounding the exact meaning of *fatḥ* in the Qurʾān, howevr, one thing is immediately clear: nowhere in the Qurʾān does the word *fatḥ* seem to mean "conquest." The equation of *fatḥ* with "victory" by some commentators comes perhaps nearest to the idea of conquest, but this signification ("victory") seems to be no more than an intelligent guess at the meaning of *fatḥ* based on its context; several other possible meanings seem equally apt ("assistance", for example) and, in any case, "victory" is not the same thing as "conquest." The commentators' association of *fatḥ* in Q. 48 with the incident at al-Ḥudaybiya is instructive here. The commentators may have considered the al-Ḥudaybiya episode a moral victory for the prophet in his struggle against the polytheists of Mecca, but it certainly could not in any way be considered a "conquest." The Islamic tradition of later times considered the armistice that the prophet concluded with the Meccans at al-Ḥudaybiya to be a diplomatic *coup*; Ibn Isḥāq states baldly, "No previous victory (*fatḥ*) in Islam was greater than this."[27] But the import of this victory does not seem to have been immediately clear to many of Muḥammad's close followers, who according to some reports complained that he had conceded too much to the Meccan negotiators and were disappointed to be unable to perform the pilgrimage.[28] In military terms, the "raid" was a complete flop, for Muhammad and his followers were required to turn back without attaining their stated objective of performing pilgrimage. It is very difficult, therefore, to consider the al-Ḥudaybiya episode, consistently described by the commentators as a *fatḥ*, in any way a "conquest," even if it may be considered a "victory."[29] Hawting argues that al-Ḥudaybiya was called a *fatḥ* because it resulted in the "opening" of the Meccan sanctuary;[30] but Muḥammad and his followers were only allowed to visit the sanctuary a year later, so this argument seems a bit far-fetched. Paret, going against the majority of the commentators, suggests that *fatḥ* in *sūra* 48 [*sūrat al-fatḥ*] refers not to al-Ḥudaybiyya at

25. Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (30 vols., Cairo: al-Matbaʿa al-maymanīya, 1321/1903), XXVI, 42-5.

26. Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr* (ed. Aḥmad Farīd, 3 vols., Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmīya, n.d. [ca. 2003?]), III, 244.

27. Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīra al-nabawīya* (ed. F. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen: Dieterich, 1858-60), 751. The translation is that of A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad. A translation of Ibn Isḥāq's* Sīrat Rasūl Allāh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 507.

28. E.g., Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīra al-nabawīya* (ed. F. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen: Dieterich, 1858-60), 746-53.

29. Paret, "Bedeutungsentwicklung," opines that the association of *fatḥ* with "conquest" derives from the *fatḥ Makka*, but it seems more likely that this phrase is itself a back-formation of later *sīra* -tradition; it does not occur in the Qurʾān, nor does the Qurʾān contain any explicit reference to the event. Moreover, the occupation of Mecca by Muḥammad's forces is only slightly more plausibly considered a "conquest"—"surrender" would be a more apt description.

30. Hawting, "Al-Ḥudaybiyya and the conquest of Mecca."

all, but to *fatḥ Makka*, the conquest of Mecca.[31]

What, then, did the Islamic historiographical tradition intend when it drew on the term *fatḥ* and its plural *futūḥ* to designate that genre of reports that related to the expansion of the early Islamic state? Since, as we have seen, *fatḥ* in the Qurʾān does not seem to mean military conquest, and since there were other available Arabic roots (such as *gh-l-b* or *q-h-r* or *ẓ-f-r*, all known to the Qurʾān) that did convey more unequivocally the meaning of conquest, it seems that the key point of designating collections of such reports with the label "*futūḥ*" must have been something other than the military dimension of these events. Nor was the object merely to collect and tabulate evidence for the expansion of the early Islamic state and community, although that was doubtless a significant secondary consideration. The main goal, rather, seems to have been to show that this expansion was an act of God's favor, a divine blessing bestowed upon his prophet and those faithful Believers who followed him. To make this point, the traditionists who collected reports of battles and treaty-agreements and compiled them to form the *futūḥ* literature selected from the Qurʾān a term or usage that specifically made the expansion a sign of God's grace--a *fatḥ* in the sense of the two Qurʾānic verses cited in section C above, in which God bestows some blessing or benefit upon (*fataḥa ʿalā*) the Believers (Q. 6:44 and Q. 7:96). In the conquest accounts we sometimes find exactly the phrase "God bestowed [a place X] upon [the conqueror Y]," *fataḥa llāhu [X] ʿalā [Y]*;[32] in such passages, the emphasis is clearly not on the exact manner of a place's submission, but rather on the fact that it was overcome with God's help. Each place that came to be absorbed into the expanding Islamic state--whether by conquest, or by treaty agreement, or by voluntary affiliation--could thus be seen as a *fatḥ*; God had "bestowed it upon" the Muslim community and state, as an act of divine grace.[33] Indeed, even in modern colloquial Arabic when one wishes to invoke God's blessings on someone, one may say *yiftaḥ Allāh ʿalayk*." This terminology is thus part of the salvation-historical agenda of nascent Islamic historiography, with its emphasis on how God directed historical events to realize his designs for mankind and for his favored community, the community of Muḥammad and his followers.[34]

The designation of reports about the expansion of the early community of Believers as *futūḥ* seems to be part of a broader process by which Muslim traditionists in the second and later centuries AH sought out Qurʾānic words or phrases to designate institutions or phenomena that, in earlier years, had been referred to by other, non-Qurʾānic, words--a

31. Paret, "Bedeutungsentwicklung."

32. For example, al-Wāqidi, *Kitāb al-maghāzī* (ed. Marsden Jones, London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 636, 655, dealing with the seizure of certain fortresses at Khaybar.

33. B. Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 93-4, is right to state that "Underlying this usage [of the term *futūḥ*], clearly, is a concept of the essential rightness or legitimacy of the Muslim advance...," but he seems not to emphasize the idea that the expansion is an act of God's grace and stresses rather the presumed illegitimacy of those regimes overthrown.

34. On the salvation-historical character of Islamic historiography, see John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Noth and Conrad, *Early Arabic Historiograhical Tradition*; Donner, *Narratives*.

process I have elsewhere called the "Qurʾānicization" of Islamic discourse.[35] The object of this process was, of course, to legitimize the renamed institutions in Islamic, i.e. Qurʾānic, terms. The best-attested example is the shift in the term for head of state from *amīr al-muʾminīn* (the term found in all early documents so far discovered) to *khalīfa* (a Qurʾānic term which seems first to be used in this sense by ʿAbd al-Malik in his coinage, near the end of the first century AH). The development of the terminology of *futūḥ* offers another example; the term *futūḥ* seems gradually to supplant (or to augment) earlier terms, such as *ghazwa*, *maghāzī*, or *sarīya* that were already in use.[36]

Our reflections leave us with some questions. The first is whether we should continue to translate *fatḥ* in these contexts simply as "conquest." Is a suitable alternative term available? Could we, for example, refer to al-Balādhurī's famous *Futūḥ al-buldān*, usually translated as "The Conquest of the Nations," by something like "The Divine Bequeathing of the Lands" or "The Regions Bestowed by God's Grace"? These seem rather clumsy; something like "The Incorporation of the Nations" might be smoother, but then it lacks the crucial component in the term *fatḥ*, its reference to the working of divine grace.

A second question is whether our facile equation of *fatḥ* with conquest has caused us to overemphasize the importance of military action—conquest—in the expansion of the early Islamic state, and in so doing to neglect or ignore the degree to which the Islamic state may have expanded by means of compromise with, cooperation with, and even concession to the so-called "conquered" peoples.[37] A purely military model cannot adequately explain the long-lasting expansion of the early Islamic state, and its eventually successful integration of millions of new people. Recent research by a number of scholars has helped clarify the ways in which the Arabic-speaking populations of the desert fringes of Syria and Iraq were integrated into the realms of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires.[38] Some townsmen of the Ḥijāz appear to have had close commercial ties with Syria, or to have owned property

35. Fred M. Donner, "The Qurʾāncization of Religio-Political Discourse during the Umayyad Period," in A. Borrut (ed.), *Écriture de l'histoire et processus de canonisation dans les premiers siècles de l'islam. Hommage à Alfred-Louis de Prémare*, *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerrannée* 129 (2011), 79-92.

36. It is difficult to prove this without undertaking a comprehensive examination of all existing reports, and in any case all reports we have are found in later compilations that may have edited earlier reports to insert the later terminology. However, it is worth noting that one of the earliest extant chronicles, the *Taʾrīkh* of Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ (d. 854) seems to use the word *futūḥ* mainly (but not exclusively) in section headings rather than in the text of reports contained in these sections, suggesting that the word was part of the compilation process and not found in the earlier reports themselves. Interestingly, the *Taʾrīkh* of Abū Zurʿa al-Dimashqī (d. 893) uses the word *futūḥ* only once, in a report according to which someone told the *amīr al-muʾminīn* that the killing of the Qadarite Ghaylān (d. 749) was *min futūḥ allāh*, "one of God's blessings."

37. On this possibility see Fred M. Donner, "Visions of the Early Islamic Expansion: Between the Heroic and the Horrific," in Nadia Maria El Cheikh and Sean O'Sullivan (eds.), *Byzantium in Early Islamic Syria* (Beirut: American University of Beirut and Balamand: University of Balamand, 2011), 9-29.

38. See, for example, the essays in Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity. Allāh and His People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Robert G. Hoyland, "Arab Kings, Arab Tribes and the Beginnings of Arab Historical Memory in Late Roman Epigraphy," in Hannah M. Cotton, Robert G. Hoyland, Jonathan J. Price, and David J. Wasserstein (eds.), *From Hellenism to Islam. Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) pp. 374-400.

there.[39] All this suggests that the inhabitants of the Arabian fringes, and even of the towns of western Arabia, were on familiar terms with the people of Syria and Iraq, and vice-versa, which could have provided conditions for cooperation between the Arabians and those they knew in Syria and Iraq. Muʿāwiya, when he became governor of Syria in 18/639 established close relations with the powerful Syrian tribe of Kalb—if these ties had not already been made shortly after he arrived in Syria with his brother and predecessor, Yazīd b. Abī Sufyān, in 13/634;[40] and we know that the Umayyads after him maintained close ties with the Kalb and other Syrian tribal groups. This suggests that the process we usually call the conquests, while it certainly involved military confrontations, should not be seen solely in military terms. In this context, our concern over the meaning and proper translation of *futūḥ* can be seen as more than a mere quibble over terminology. Rather, by misunderstanding the semantic content of the term *fatḥ*, we may have allowed ourselves to misconstrue the character of the process of expansion to which it refers.

39. Michael Lecker, "The Estates of ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ in Palestine: Notes on a new Negev Inscription," *BSOAS* 52 (1989), 24-37.

40. *EI (2)*, "Kalb b. Wabara, II—Islamic Period" [A. A. Dixon]; Gernot Rotter, *Die Umayyaden und der zweite Bürgerkrieg (680-692)* (Wiesbaden: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, in Komm. bei Franz Steiner, 1982,) 128-29.

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