FROM 'PAGANISM' TO 'MONOTHEISM'
A Theory on the Semantic Reversal of the Semitic Root ḤNP

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RÉSUMÉ

J'ai été intrigué par le sujet de cette thèse dès l'année 2015, lors de mes premiers contacts avec le syriaque. Je faisais alors une liste de mots que je copiais des dictionnaires des langues sémitiques dans un cahier pour des fins de mémorisation. Au cours de cet exercice, j'ai noté le mot *Ḥanpūtā* dont la traduction en arabe est *Ḥanīfiyya*. Selon qu'ils soient employés en syriaque ou en arabe, ces deux mots partagent la même racine sémitique ḤNP et devraient, en apparence, avoir un sens similaire. Ils portent néanmoins deux sens totalement opposés. Dans les sources syriaques de l'époque préislamique, les dérivés de la racine ḤNP se traduisent en païen, paganisme, etc. Cependant, dans l'historiographie arabo-islamique, il s'agit de la religion monothéiste du prophète Mohammed. Comment est-ce qu'un tel renversement dans le sens de cette racine a bien pu avoir lieu ?

La question centrale traitée dans cette thèse est celle que d'autres chercheurs qui s'intéressent à la philologie sémitique et aux origines de l'islam se sont déjà posées. Cependant, alors que les publications précédentes, lesquelles sont exposées dans le chapitre I, se limitent généralement à des analyses philologiques ou littéraires, cette thèse défie les barrières disciplinaires de l'académie et part à la recherche d'une explication véritablement historique du renversement sémantique. Tout en se basant sur des sources à la fois araméennes et arabes, au-delà de la philologie classique et de la littérature critique, ce travail aborde la question du renversement sémantique sous l'angle d'une histoire conceptuelle du paganisme. Dans ce travail, les usages et les évolutions des sens associés à la racine ḤNP sont alors expliqués par deux phénomènes qui se déroulent de manière simultanée dans la Syro-Mésopotamie et l'Arabie de l'antiquité tardive, à savoir : la formation des orthodoxies religieuses judéo-chrétiennes et la prolifération de monothéismes hétérodoxes d'inspiration biblique.

ABSTRACT

My attention was caught by the subject of this thesis back in 2015, during one my first encounters with Syriac literature. At that time, I was making a list of words which I copied from Semitic language dictionaries into a notebook for memorization purposes. During this exercise, I noted the Syriac word *Ḥanpūtā*, which translates into *Ḥanīfiyya* in Arabic. While these two words share the same Semitic root ḤNP and would therefore be expected to carry similar significations, they had nonetheless totally opposite meanings. In pre-Islamic Syriac-Christian sources, things or individuals associated with the root ḤNP are reprehensible for their paganism. However, in early Arabic-Islamic historiography, *Ḥanīfiyya* is the monotheistic religion of the prophet Muhammad. How could such a drastic semantic reversal have taken place?

The central question dealt with in this thesis is that which other researchers who are interested in Semitic philology and the origins of Islam have already asked themselves. However, while past academic studies, which are presented in Chapter I, are limited to philological or literary assessments, by challenging the disciplinary barriers of the academy, this thesis seeks a genuinely historical explanation of the semantic reversal. Instead of classical philology and literary criticism, while relying on Jewish and Christian Aramaic as well as on Arabic-Islamic sources, the question is tackled under the perspective of a conceptual history of paganism. In order to explain the semantic reversal, gradual change in the meanings associated with ḤNP are traced and analyzed in light of two phenomena which occurred simultaneously in the late antique Near-East: the formation of rabbinic and ecclesiastical orthodoxies, and the proliferation of heterodox monotheisms of Biblical inspiration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Ahmed Fekry Ibrahim who instructed me on the history of early Islam and granted me the freedom to think, design and execute this present project. Over the course of the last year and a half, we had very fruitful intellectual deliberations which allowed me to expand my knowledge of the general field of early Islam beyond a sectarianism which is more and more palpable among the different schools of the discipline. Since English is only my third language, Professor Ibrahim also helped me ameliorate the quality of my writing.

I also wish to thank my dearest friend, my life partner and my most intimate confidant, Bérénice Tomb, for her love and support. Her contribution to the thesis in terms of advice, reflection and revision is immeasurable. She assisted me in every step of this work, brought editorial help and perfected the graphic quality of the two original figures (2 and 3) proper to this thesis. Her passion for knowledge as well as her intellectual sharpness are exceptional. I am looking forward to the next episode in a long, healthy, happy and bright life.

ܒܪܢܝܣ (ܛܠܛܘܒ) ܕܡܫܝܚܬܝ ܘ ܚܒܝܒܘܬܐ ܠܟܝ ܘ ܚܕܘܬ ܢܦܫܝ.

My brother, Naji Osmat, to whom I wish success and prosperity, encouraged me through my time at McGill's IIS. Our constant conversation made me able to deepen my thoughts and refine them. He also helped me translate into English pertinent excerpts from the work of German scholar Theodor Nöldeke.

My friend Haytham has been my strongest moral support during the time that I spent at McGill.

Finally, I cannot be more grateful to my father Bachir and to my mother Ghada who have financed my studies and trusted my choices from the beginning. Their love and care gave me

strength and full-confidence in my capabilities. Not only has their council been key to my becoming, but they have also been my principal source of education. Since I decided to dig into the history of religions, they unhesitantly supported and appreciated my studies in Syriac and Semitic literature. Unlike most people - even among the learned inhabitants of our most sacred Lebanese mountains - they have understood the importance of pursuing such a scientific quest which seems a useless luxury to so many in today's society.

* I will also use this preliminary section to express my admiration for those who have put together the monumental database found on archive.org. Without such a centralized open-source database, a multidisciplinary research such as this present thesis would have been impossible. Archive.org is a modern-day Library of Alexandria. Although it lacks some organization, it is nothing less than a technological *tour de force* and, possibly, a turning point in contemporary intellectual and scientific history.

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CONVENTIONS

The Arabic excerpts which I cite in this thesis are transliterated according to the system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) as specified on the website of the Institute of Islamic Studies. For the Syriac texts, I adapted the IJMES system to some vocalizations and phonetic forms which do not exist in Arabic. The following chart clarifies these forms.

ܐ◌ܶ	Transliterated as *ē*
ܐ◌ܳ and ◌ܳ followed by *waw* (ܘ)	Transliterated as *ō*
◌ܽ followed by *waw* (ܘ)	Transliterated as *ū*
Silent or consecutive *alephs* (ܐ)	I preferred to transliterate silent and consecutive *alephs* as regular underlined *alephs* (*a̲*) instead of the sign (ʾ) which is usually used
Silent letters *yōd* (ܝ), *waw* (ܘ) and *hē* (ܗ)	Transliterated according to IJMES' indications and underlined

Most Semitic texts have been vocalized and transliterated. The exceptions are names of geographic places and names of Syriac authors who are better known by their Europeanized names. The original language versions of the texts which I translated myself can be found in the footnotes.

The footnotes and bibliography have been generated through Zotero. They follow the guidelines of the seventeenth edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

INTRODUCTION

Historical and academic contexts

It is commonly assumed that the era preceding Muḥammad's mission is defined within the Muslim tradition as *jāhiliyya*, the age of ignorance.[1] This general perception of the pre-Islamic Near East as a land of ignorance derives from an interpretation of the Qur'ānic verse 26, Sūrat al-Fatḥ, which reads: "[...] those who disbelieved had put into their hearts chauvinism - the chauvinism of the time of ignorance (*jāhiliyya*). But Allah sent down His tranquility upon His Messenger and upon the believers."[2] This verse, and specifically the word *jāhiliyya*, is traditionally understood as a time when people failed to proclaim the unicity and supremacy of God.[3] Yet, defining ignorance as the ignorance of the sole supremacy of the one true God has led to a popular and widespread interpretation of *jāhiliyya* as "barbarism" and "heathendom."[4] However, despite the Qur'ānic concept of *jāhiliyya* being understood as synonymous with "heathendom," other verses within the Islamic scripture contrast and nuance the commonly thought meaning of ignorance as idolatry. For example, the Qur'ān expressly indicates the presence of 'people of the book' (*ahl al-kitāb*) who are groups of monotheistic believers who, despite *jāhiliyya* followed a more or less 'upright path.' The most pertinent Qur'ānic excerpt, for its definition of *ahl al-kitāb* in pre-Islamic Arabia, can be found in Sūrat al-Baqara, verses 62 and 63. This excerpt reads as follows:

> "(62) Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans [before prophet Muḥammad] - those [among them] who

[1] Al-Tahānawī, "Jāhiliyya," *Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn wa-l-ʿUlūm*, 1777, http://lisaan.net "al-Jāhiliyya: *huwa al-zamān alladhī qabl al-biʿtha*."
[2] Qur'ān, Al-Fatḥ, 48:26.
[3] Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, "Tafsīr, Qur'ān 48:26.," *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Taʾwīl Al-Qur'ān* (Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2002), http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=48&tAyahNo=26&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1.
[4] "Djāhiliyya", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Leiden:Brill).

> believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness - will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve. (63) And [recall] when We took your covenant, [O Children of Israel, to abide by the Torah] and We raised over you the mount,[5] [saying:] take what We have given you with determination and remember what is in it that perhaps you may become righteous."[6]

According to this Qur'ānic reference, there were not only ignorant pagans prior to the rise of Islam, but also Jews, Christians and others[7] who followed the foundational tenets of the Qur'ānic definition of monotheism, such as the worship of the supreme God and the belief in the Day of Judgement. Nevertheless, at various points, the Qur'ān also states that many Jews, Christians and 'people of the book,' in general, have erred away from the path which God had revealed to them through many pre-Muḥammadan prophets. For example, the verses that follow the above-mentioned excerpt state that the Jews should be cursed for turning away from the law of Moses[8] and for not observing the Sabbath.[9] If historical, these excerpts indicate that (at least some) Jews were "transgressors" of their own divine law in the years preceding and concomitating with the Muḥammadan mission. During *jāhiliyya*, many Christians, too, were among these transgressors of the divine law. For, while in one instance, the Qur'ān criticized those Jews who mocked Jesus and did not abide by his prophecy,[10] on other occasions, the Islamic scripture accused the Christians who "transgressed" of "commit[ting] excess in [their] religion or say[ing] [falsehoods]

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[5] The Mount is, here, a direct reference to Moses' reception of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, Book of Exodus, Chapters 20 to 24.
[6] Qur'ān, Al-Baqara, 2:62-63.
[7] Pre-Islamic Sabeans remain an undefined category with many scholars debating who this label refers to. Some scholars have confused Sabeans with the Mandeans - a gnostic sect from Southern Mesopotamia. Others have speculated as to whether they corresponded to the Harranians in Northern Mesopotamia. Thorough research has shown that it was the early Muslim scholars who, in their attempt to understand the Qur'ānic term, began referring to the Mandeans as Sabeans. As for the Harranians, they have possibly claimed the 'Sabean' label themselves during the early Abbasid era, in order to qualify as *ahl al-Kitāb* and therefore avoid violent oppression for their astral and polytheistic religion.
For further reading, and a good entry point to the subject, read: François de Blois, "Ṣābiʾ," *EI2* (Leiden: BrillOnline).
[8] Qur'ān, Al-Baqara, 2:64.
[9] Ibid., Al-Baqara, 2:65.
[10] Qur'ān, Al-Ṣaff, 61:6,14.

about Allah,"[11] particularly for their belief in God's sonship, in the Holy Trinity[12] and Jesus' death by crucifixion.[13]

A nuanced perspective on *jāhiliyya* shows that, from a Qur'ānic perspective, the pre-Islamic epoch was designated as such because it was marked by an important decline in faith. Therefore, based on what is evident in polemical discourses of the Qur'ān (like the ones cited above), *jāhiliyya*-ignorance is seemingly as much the product of widespread archaic polytheism, as it is the result of the actions and beliefs of many self-identified Jews and Christians. Even though these monotheists of the Biblical tradition claimed to be on a path of righteousness, in the eyes of the earliest followers of the Qur'ān, they had turned away or knowingly ignored the teachings found in their own divinely inspired scriptures. Despite the responsibility laid on their minds and shoulders which was transmitted to them from God, they had become corrupt, or, at least, were so perceived by the early followers of Qur'ānic ideas.

The Muḥammadan prophecy was, no doubt, a theologically sophisticated and a sharply polemical response to the behaviors and beliefs of many. On a religious and cultural level, the Qur'ān and the messenger incarnated the convergence and culmination of gradual historical developments which had slowly evolved through late antiquity.[14] Later, from the seventh century to the end of the Classical Islamic era (thirteenth century), they were the sparks that launched a literary and intellectual revolution in Arabia, the Mediterranean world and Asia. Beyond their important impact on the "shorter timescale,"[15] similarly to Greco-Roman philosophy and

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[11] Ibid., Al-Nisā', 4:171.
[12] Ibid., Al-Mā'ida, 5:73.
[13] Ibid., Al-Nisā', 4:157.
[14] Maxime Rodinson, *Mahomet* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1961): especially Chapters I and II.
[15] Fernand Braudel, "La Longue Durée," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 13, no. 4 (December 1958), p.732. The french expression is: "*temps moins court*," meaning a timescale that is shorter than the "*longue durée.*"

literature, the Hebrew Bible and Jesus Christ, their mark is sealed in the "longue durée" of human history.[16]

The research that I am bringing forward in this thesis is not a theological elaboration. Instead, it subscribes to the incremental and genuinely historical perspective on pre-Islamic and early Islamic developments. My plan is to tackle a scholarly and historical element which belongs, from an Arabian perspective, to the transition phase between *jāhiliyya* and Islam. It is, thus, a historical endeavor into the linguistic and conceptual origins of *Ḥanīfiyya*, a monotheistic movement to which Muḥammad and a number of other individuals in Arabia belonged. While the historicity of such a movement is still debated, the question of *Ḥanīfiyya* is, for a reason or another, a subject of controversy among modern historians. In this thesis, through the chronologizing and analysis of Syro-Aramaic and Arabic-Islamic historical materials, I will approach the question of *Ḥanīfiyya*, not to understand its core beliefs or explore its theological role within the religious doctrines of Islam, but rather to assess its historical origin as a monotheistic movement in pre-Islamic Arabian society.

The problem to be treated in the present thesis

Ḥanīf is an adjective found in the seventh-century Qur'ān. *Ḥanīfiyya*, which is unmentioned in the canonical Qur'ān,[17] is the abstract and conceptual form of the word *Ḥanīf*. It first appears in textual history in Arabic-Islamic writings from the late seventh and eighth centuries. These words are both derived from the same Semitic root ḤNP.[18] Counter to Jewish and Christian claims that Abraham was one of them, the Qur'ān famously states that, since this Biblical patriarch preceded the Torah (*Tawrāt*) and the Gospel (*Injīl*), "[he] was neither a Jew

[16] Ibid.
[17] This claim will be nuanced later.
[18] The letters P and F are interchangeable in Syriac and Hebrew. The letter P should be read as F in Arabic, and as P/F depending on its pronunciation according to the dialects of the above-mentioned Northwest Semitic languages.

nor a Nazarene, but *Ḥanīfan* and submitted [to Allah], and he was not among those who associate [other deities to the one supreme God]."[19] On the other hand, in the Ḥadīth literature, *Ḥanīfiyya*, takes two related meanings. On a theological level, it is claimed to be *Dīn Ibrāhīm*, the religion of the Biblical Abraham who preceded – and thus did not know – Moses and Jesus, the founders of Judaism and Christianity.[20] This implied that *Ḥanīfiyya* is a monotheistic religion that existed independently from revealed scriptures. On a historical level (which is our main interest), the Ḥadīth clearly describes *Ḥanīfiyya* as a religion to which a number of Arabians adhered in the sixth and seventh centuries.

Like a number of other Arabs of late-*jāhiliyya*, Muḥammad is said by the same Arabic sources to be a *Ḥanīf* and, therefore, a follower of *Ḥanīfiyya*. This idea that Muḥammad was a follower of an independent monotheism of Biblical and Abrahamic influences seems to be consistent with the general historical climate of his times. In fact, research in religious history, as well as archaeological discoveries, have both shown that in the late antique Near East, decades before the birth of Muḥammad, there was already an important proliferation of Biblical and apocryphal narratives. The data also shows that, as these ancient mythologies spread, many Christian, Jewish and Gnostic groups had started to form, both in Syro-Mesopotamia and in Arabia.[21] Given the general context, it is plausible to think that *Ḥanīfiyya* is an original Arabian monotheistic movement which claimed lineage to the Biblical Abraham, preceded the Muḥammadan prophecy and acted as a direct precursor to Islam.

Nevertheless, many scholars would argue against such a supposition. They point to the fact that *Ḥanīfiyya*, as a potential religious belief or group, is not mentioned in the canonical Qur'ān, and only appears in the Ḥadīth genre. Since the earliest prophetic traditions (Ḥadīths),

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[19] Qur'ān, āl 'Imrān, 3:67. Ḥanīfā and Ḥunafāʾ appear again in 2:135, 3:95, 4:125, 6:79, 6:161, 10:105, 16:120, 16:123, 22:31, 30:30 and 98:5.
[20] Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, "Tafsīr, Qur'ān 2:135."
[21] For further reading on the matter consult Hamilton A.R. Gibb, 'Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia', *Harvard Theological Review* 55, no. 4 (October 1962): 269–80.

where all information about this concept is drawn, were written many decades (and sometimes centuries) after the life of Muḥammad, *Ḥanīfiyya* is deemed, by these scholars, to be an anachronistic exegetical artifice meant to give meaning to the unclear Qur'ānic term *Ḥanīf*.[22] Therefore, since there is a lag between the reported events and the moment of their writing, this entailed that written histories were possibly not accurate, which caused many scholars to be skeptical about the truth value of the early Islamic traditions.[23] Given that *Ḥanīfiyya* – as the abstract form of *Ḥanīf* – is primarily found in these early Islamic texts (but not in the canonical Qur'ān which is the Arabic literary work), the general approach to early Islamic sources has, thus, dissuaded a number of researchers in early Islamic history from conceding the existence of *Ḥanīfiyya* as a religious movement in seventh-century Arabia.

But the problem of the historicity of *Ḥanīfiyya* is exacerbated by an additional and a more central problem. Outside of Islamic sources, the meaning of the Semitic root ḤNP seems to contradict the meanings conveyed in the Islamic tradition. The first mention of the root ḤNP in Semitic literary history goes back to the Tell Amarna tablets (fourteenth century B.C.E.). These ancient texts were written in the Akkadian language but included a noticeable amount of Old Eastern Aramaic vocabulary. This archaic text cites the word "*Ḥanpā*," which, in the context of the Tell Amarna inscriptions, is usually translated to "villain" or "deceitful," a curious meaning given the significance of the Arabic-Islamic cognate.[24] Modern lexicographers of the Hebrew Bible associate the word *Ḥanep* to its Arabic correlate *Ḥanīf* in a similarly confusing manner.

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[22] Boaz Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Tabari's History* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 86, quoting Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, pp. 78-79: "[the exegetes] felt the need to *reshape* history in order to conform with both the form and the substance of the Qur'ānic view." This view reflects a general attitude among historians of early Islam. For more insight into this view of Islamic historiography (as *reshaped*), refer back to Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography*, "Chapter III: Theology and Ideology as History," pp. 85-107.

[23] Rodinson, *Mahomet*, pp. 11-15: in the foreword to his book, Rodinson explains the position of influential orientalists such as Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht towards the early Islamic literature. Rodinson agrees that the Ḥadīth is, in itself, not a definitive source of historical knowledge.

[24] François de Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραιος) and Ḥanīf (ἐθνικος): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)* 65, nº 1 (2002), p. 19.

For example, the *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* states that "*Ḥanep* [is an] "adj[ective] [meaning] profane, irreligious," but its Arabic cognate, *Ḥanīf*, designates something or someone who is "inclining to a right state, esp[ecially] the true religion, [in other words] a Muslim."[25] Father Louis Costaz, a modern Semitic literature scholar and the writer of an important Syriac lexicon, has a similarly perplexing take on the root ḤNP. He defines the Syriac verbal form of the root ḤNP, "*aḥnep*," as meaning both "to become a heathen" and "to become a Muslim."[26]

While in an early Islamic context the Arabic cognates of ḤNP designated elements of monotheism, from the Bronze Age until late antiquity the ḤNP cognates in Northwest Semitic languages seem to have consistently designated ungodly and pagan things and individuals. Thus, on an etymological level, the definition of ḤNP that appears in Arabic sources constitutes an obscure and considerable semantic and conceptual reversal.

Strictly speaking, the basic facts on the matter are as follows: the same root, ḤNP, which was closely associated to pagan objects, actions and people in the Biblical literature of antiquity, became, in the wake of Islam, a concept of true faith and the religion of the prophet Muḥammad and earlier prophets. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*'s entry for *Ḥanīf*, which reflects a mainstream academic position on this semantic change, states that "the common Islamic conception of the *Ḥanīf* and the *Ḥanīfiyya* is derived solely from the Qur'ān. The word *Ḥanīf*, when used independently of the Qur'ān, means primarily 'pagan.' [It is therefore] vain to look for religious

[25] Charles Augustus Briggs, Samuel Rolles Driver and Francis Brown, "חָנֵף," *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic : Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible.* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), p. 337.
[26] Louis Costaz, "Aḥnep," *Dictionnaire Syriaque-Français, Syriac-English Dictionary* (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 2011), p. 110.

or ascetic movements or individuals to whom this name was actually applied in pre-Islamic times."[27]

I believe, however, that both the existence of *Ḥanīfiyya* as a proto-Islamic monotheistic movement and the semantic shift from paganism to monotheism which occurs in the Semitic root ḤNP are justified from a long-term historical perspective. But how does the semantic shift occur? And what are the historical factors that could explain such a drastic transformation in the conceptions of 'paganism' and 'monotheism' associated to the Semitic root ḤNP? The answer to these questions will be elaborated in three main parts.

In the first chapter, in order to establish the current state of knowledge on the issue, I will review the general academic literature on the different aspects of the question (philology, nature of *Ḥanīfiyya*, and uses of the root in Syriac). In Chapter II, I will discuss my choice of the sources, methods and theoretical approach to the semantic shift in the Semitic root ḤNP. Finally, in Chapter III, I will apply the analytical model described in Chapter II, which will be expected to lead to a hypothetical and historically coherent explanation of the semantic reversal of the Semitic root.

The shift from 'paganism' to 'monotheism,' in a Biblical and monotheistic context, is a rather intriguing phenomenon. Tackling this question is important for two reasons. On the level of historical linguistics, it is a case study for a peculiar form of linguistic transformation: semantic and conceptual reversals. Linguists usually try to look for factors inherent to linguistic science - therefore excluding historical and other factors - in order to assess this particular case of semantic change.[28] But my project to look into historical, conceptual and religious factors is also relevant to the ongoing debate on the determinants of semantic change in the field of historical linguistics.

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[27] Montgomery Watt, "Ḥanīf," *EI2* (Leiden: BrillOnline).
[28] Lyle Campbell, *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); Antoine Meillet, *Comment Les Mots Changent de Sens* (Gloucester: Dodo Press, 1906).

However, the chief interest of this research is to revive, in a constructive manner, the currently stale debate on the nature and origins of *Ḥanīfiyya*. The skeptical position, held by many scholars in Islamic studies with regard to identifying *Ḥanīfiyya* and the historical *Ḥanīfs* has been an impediment to a constructive understanding of the origins of Islam. On the other hand, as we will see in the first chapter, knowledge has greatly evolved in the fields of late antiquity, Judaism, Syriac Christianity and Islam. While these scientific developments have brought pertinent insight to the question of *Ḥanīfiyya*, there is still no synthetic study that develops a systematic account of this particular issue, save for a couple of recent articles[29] which were able to break the disciplinary boundaries of a number of academic fields. In the continuity of these two studies, and in the hope of contributing to the knowledge of early Islam and the Qur'ānic context, I plan to harmonize, within a historical system, the pre-Islamic meanings of the root ḤNP and the early Islamic account on *Ḥanīfs* and *Ḥanīfiyya*.

[29] See Chapter I, 5.

CHAPTER I

Literature Review

The Question of Ḥanīfiyya *According to Different Schools of Near-Eastern Studies*

In a seminal article meant to synthesize the various data from the pre-Islamic and early Islamic Near-East and Arabia, Hamilton A.R. Gibb noted that "the much-disputed problem of identifying whom the Islamic tradition calls the *Ḥanīfs* displays at once the fact of the existence of such groups and the slender nature of the evidence for their character."[30] While the word *Ḥanīf* is present in the Qur'ān and in the early Islamic tradition, many questions surrounding it remain an obscure riddle, yet to be solved. In addition, although Gibb concedes, in his observation, "the fact of the existence of such groups," this claim remains challenged up until today. There are two reasons for the inconclusive studies of that subject. First, there is a lack of explicit evidence indicating the existence of *Ḥanīfiyya* and its nature outside of Arabic-Islamic sources. Secondly, the semantic contradiction between the Arabic meaning and the Northwest Semitic cognates is unhelpful. Who are these *Ḥanīfs*? What were their real beliefs? Why does an etymology of their name indicate that they were pagan?

The central problem in the study of the question of *Ḥanīfiyya* is that amount of conflicting evidence between the meaning of the Arabic ḤNP derivatives and their Syro-Aramaic cognates. Depending on the assumptions, the choice of sources and many preconceptions, the scholarly opinions on the matter have varied greatly, sometimes translating into grave contradictions. Different conclusions resulted from whether scholars approached *Ḥanīfiyya* as a faith, or as a social group, whether they considered it a later construct or an everlasting theology and whether they took into consideration the semantic distortion between Syriac and Arabic

[30] Hamilton A. R. Gibb, "Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia," *Harvard Theological Review* 55, no. 4 (October 1962), p. 271.

cognates. Additionally, some scholars took the existence of the proto-Islamic faith at face-value in their attempts to build general histories of Islam, while others have limited their efforts to explaining the semantic distortion from a strictly philological perspective. Other researchers have solely taken interest in analyzing Islamic sources, but others have limited their enquiries to pre-Islamic Syro-Aramaic literature. There are also those who have ignored the pre-Islamic literature and confined themselves to analyzing the Christian polemical uses of *Ḥanīf* and *Ḥanīfiyya* (or their Syriac cognates *Ḥanpā* and *Ḥanpūtā*) against the early Islamic conquerors.

In this chapter, I conduct a review of literature that will show how a number of disciplines and approaches converge into studying the question of *Ḥanīfiyya*. I give an account of the different schools of late antique and early Islamic studies, their perspectives, the shortcomings of their approaches and, more importantly, I seek to assess the extent of the fragmentation of knowledge in modern academia.

1. The 'Nöldeke hypothesis' and its long-lasting impact

The compilation and publication of the first *Polyglot Bible* (which contained the Greek *Septuagint* version of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, the Aramaic translation of the Pentateuch known as *Targum Onkelos* and various other texts as well as many lexicons) at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid during the European renaissance constituted a turning point in the genesis of the modern fields of Semitic and Oriental studies. In the following decades, with the success of the Protestant reformation in Northern Europe, the centers of Biblical scholarship and early Oriental studies migrated from the more traditional centers in Southern Europe towards the reformed regions of the Dutch commonwealth and to the Germanic lands of the Holy Roman Empire. With the rise of the modern Western university, a couple of centuries later, came the institutionalization of the fields of Biblical Hebrew (Hebräistik) and Classical

antiquity as propaedeutics for students in the discipline of Theology.[31] Through the periods of the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution, these nascent fields evolved into what we know today as the various schools of Semitic philology and Near-Eastern history. Thus, the starting point of the historical study of ancient Near-Eastern societies and religions in Western-European academia occurred within the earlier study in comparative linguistics and in the literary criticism of ancient Judeo-Christian scriptures.[32] At first, the religious scriptures were approached as trusted historical sources. During the nineteenth century, however, skepticism towards ancient scriptures emerged, leading to suspicion about their authenticity and historical validity. In this context, the methods which developed for the study of the Ancient Near-East and the skepticism towards scriptures which was inherent to the field were later extended to enquiries into Arabic-Islamic materials.

Among the most prominent Classical orientalists who have applied the philological methods of Biblical studies on Islamic documents is Theodor Nöldeke. This nineteenth-century scholar mastered many Semitic languages and authored, at the age of twenty-four, a fundamental *History of the Qur'ān* (*Geschichte des Qorâns*). In 1910, he published *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, an addition to previous philological works on Semitic languages.[33] There, he directly addressed the philological problem of the Semitic root ḤNP by emphasizing the peculiarity of the contradiction between the Arabic word *Ḥanīf*-monotheist and its Syro-Aramaic cognate *Ḥanpā*-pagan.

There are two distinct aspects to remember in Nöldeke's demonstration. First, by refusing to explain the Ḥadīth-based concept of *Ḥanīfiyya* and its etymology, he echoes those who were skeptical towards Biblical scriptures, stating that most of the "[Ḥadīth tradition] is to be regarded

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[31] Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 80.
[32] Ibid. Especially, Chapters I, III, IV of the book.
[33] Theodore Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge Zur Semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1910), p. 30.

with suspicion."[34] Secondly, while acknowledging the difficulty of explaining such a semantic shift between the Qur'ānic *Ḥanīf* and the Syriac *Ḥanpā*, Nöldeke interpreted the semantic distortion with the intention of deducing historical knowledge from philological analysis. He explained that "[the reader] must keep in mind that naïve Arab pagans were ignorant of the nature of other religions, which was the cause of their misunderstanding and misuse of the term."[35]

The first part of his explanation is correct: there is an odd and mysterious linguistic filiation between *Ḥanīf* and *Ḥanpā*. He is to be credited for having pointed out the historical and conceptual importance of this linguistic and historical problem. But the 'Nöldeke hypothesis' (over the question of how the Syriac word for pagan became a key concept for 'true faith' in the Islamic tradition) presents two main shortcomings. It suggests that Arab nomads must have heard the word from the Syrian Christians whom they encountered, and out of gullibility, misunderstood its meaning. How and when their interpretation of that Syriac word ended up in the Arabic-Islamic tradition is left unexplained by the German scholar. In addition, reducing the semantic shift to a misunderstanding on the part of nomadic Arabs is probably influenced by a number of prejudices common among early modern Europeans.[36]

Furthermore, because of his reliance on Semitic dictionaries listing a limited number of definitions which are mostly extracted from Biblical documents, Nöldeke's approach to meaning is static: for example, he overlooks the fact that a word could have multiple meanings – some of which potentially unreported by lexicographers – depending on the context in which this word is

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[34] Ibid. The German text is as follows: "Freilich ist das Meiste, was von diesen berichtet wird, mit Misstrauen zu betrachten."
[35] Ibid. In German, the text reads: "Man muss aber bedenken dass die naiven arabischen Heiden von dem Wesen der andern Religionen keine Vorstellung hatten und daher solch Ausdrücke leicht missverstehen und falsch verwenden konnten."
[36] The nascent studies of social sciences and humanities in nineteenth century Europe were affected by the ideological and cultural context during which they were born. These prejudices were an impediment to nuance and constructive scientific enquiry.

used. In Biblical Syriac, ḤNP derivatives are commonly associated with 'gentiles', in the sense of 'non-Jews', which is arguably interpreted as 'deprived of divinely inspired scriptures.'[37] This leads him to assume that the definition of ḤNP as used in Biblical Syriac reflects all the meanings associated with the Syriac root. This static approach to word meaning suggests that, instead of taking place through a period of time, the shift from 'paganism' to 'monotheism' came abruptly and is thus inexplicable unless it occurs following an accidental and violent rupture. For Nöldeke, this rupture takes the form of a misunderstanding of the word on the part of Arabs.

Both Ḥadīth skepticism and the assumption that the semantic shift occurred abruptly perdure.[38] A twenty-first century Syriast, using the pseudonym Christoph Luxenberg, has claimed that the Qur'ān is Arabized Syriac.[39] This original text, which according to Luxenberg, was mostly written in Syriac, was suddenly transformed with the addition of diacritics by later exegetes and grammarians. According to this hypothesis, the initial meaning of the central document in Islam can be found in a de-Arabization of the Qur'ānic text.[40]

On the question of *Ḥanīf*, Luxenberg echoes Nöldeke's argument that the word seems to be a Syriac calque unenhanced by diacritics. It should therefore bear the exact same meaning as its Biblical Syriac cognate. Thus, according to him, verse 67, Sūrat Āl-ʿImrān, translates as: "[although] Abraham was heathen, he was not of the idolaters."[41] Heathen, here, means that he was deprived of revealed religion – the meaning found in Biblical Syriac – yet did not worship idols. Notwithstanding the overall quality of the work, Luxenberg's textual analysis of the meaning of the Qur'ānic *Ḥanīf* and his exegesis of 3:67 sounds plausible. But this is the case only if one were to totally overlook the polysemic nature of the Syriac root ḤNP. Indeed, like

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[37] François de Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραιος) and Ḥanīf (ϵθνικος)," p. 24.
[38] The best example for a 'hardliner' in the skeptic school is Karl-Heinz Ohlig, *Early Islam: A Critical Reconstruction Based on Contemporary Sources* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2013).
[39] Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin: H. Schiler, 2007), pp. 23-28.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., p. 55: "Ibrahim Ḥanīfā = Abraham the heathen."

Nöldeke, Luxenburg also reduces the semantics of the Syriac root ḤNP to the meaning it bears in the Syriac New Testament without taking into consideration the meaning of *Ḥanpā* (and its derivatives) in other pieces of late antique Syriac and Judeo-Aramaic literature. Furthermore, in line with the skeptical current in German Islamic studies, Luxenberg does not recognize any historical validity to the subsequent Islamic sources.

On the other hand, the 'Nöldeke hypothesis' was amended by Richard Bell, who retains the historical significance of the semantic distortion, but drops Ḥadīth skepticism. A scholar from the mid-twentieth century, he enlarged the philological paradigm by integrating traditional Islamic narratives into his hypothesis on the semantic reversal. Bell has tried to find a historical explanation to the semantic reversal, not through Eurocentric assumptions or through textual and philological demonstration, but by relying on Ibn Isḥāq's Ḥadīth-based biography of Muḥammad. While his analysis departs from the Ḥadīth skepticism shared by Luxenberg and Nöldeke, Bell abides, nonetheless, by the perspective that the semantic shift from 'paganism' to 'monotheism' was a sudden rupture. He explains that, while *Ḥanpā* was a word for pagan up until Muḥammad's time, the semantic shift happened first in the mind of the prophet, over the course of his mission and interactions with Arabian Jews.[42] The author argues that Muḥammad knew that *Ḥanīfiyya*-paganism was the faith of the Quraysh, and this is exactly what drove him to fight his own tribe during the Meccan period. But when the Jews of Yathrib opposed his prophethood, in order to regain support among the Quraysh, he developed a reformed theology, according to which, *Ḥanīfiyya* came to be the original message of Abraham which was eventually perverted by the heathen.[43] Since there is no historical evidence to prove that the polytheistic cult of the Quraysh was called *Ḥanīfiyya*, there is no reason to assume the validity of Bell's theory.

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[42] Richard Bell, "Who were the Ḥanīfs?," *The Muslim World* 20, nº 2 (1930), pp. 121-124.
[43] Ibid., p. 123.

The shortcomings of the philological approach are well explained by Frederick Denny. About deducing historical knowledge from linguistics, he writes: "etymology is, of course, indispensable, but it is not always conclusive." He explains that, from a historical perspective, philology poses, for the researcher, "the danger of being determined exclusively by origins of the words, particularly when current usage is what is crucial."[44]

The sole reliance on linguistics as a primary source of historical knowledge is effectively questionable. As we have seen both in Luxenberg's and Bell's studies, by emphasizing the contrast of meanings and allowing no polysemy for the root ḤNP, the philological premise creates the impression that the semantic reversal occurred suddenly, either because of Qur'ānic exegetes who knowingly transformed the meaning, or in the mind of Muḥammad himself. In reality, there are indications that the meanings have changed over a longer period of time. As François de Blois explains, the meaning of the word as understood by early Muslims - as a monotheistic doctrine – "has its basis in pre-Islamic religious vocabulary."[45] In the first part of Chapter III, I will focus on explaining the evolution of the meanings associated with the ḤNP derivatives in pre-Islamic times.

2. The historical-critical study of Ḥanīfiyya

In parallel to the philological perspective initiated by Semitic studies scholars, a historical-critical approach to *Ḥanīfiyya* was initiated within several modern academic fields. While many have ignored the semantic distortion, some historians acknowledged the semantic reversal and integrated it within their studies. Others have also tried to devise other possibilities for the origins of the word. One of their main objectives was to try to understand the meaning of

[44] Frederick Mathewson Denny, "Some Religio-Communal Terms and Concepts in the Qur'ān", *Numen* 24, nº 1 (1977), p. 29.
[45] François de Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραιος) and Ḥanīf (ἐθνικος)," p. 20.

the term consistently with the historical data found in the late antique and medieval sources which were accessible to them.

British historian, D. S. Margoliouth, was credited by contemporary researchers[46] for initiating the historical-critical approach to the term in his article on the origins of the word Ḥanīf which was published in 1903.[47] He wrote the article a few years before Nöldeke had brought to light his philological hypothesis on Arabs' misunderstanding of the Syrian word. Drawing on Ibn Isḥāq's *Sīra* and on a number of poetic references, Margoliouth builds an explanation of the Qur'ānic *Ḥanīfs* that does not take into account the semantic distortion of ḤNP derivatives. Instead, he develops a theory, according to which, both *Ḥanīf* and *Muslim*, rather than being reflexive of an independent religious-ideological movement, are etymologically derived from Musaylima, the name of an influential figure from the Banū Ḥanīfā tribe of Yamama, in Central Arabia. Musaylima is a pre-Islamic self-declared prophet who had allegedly known Muḥammad. The Muslim prophet called him "the liar" (*al-Kadhdhāb*) following a territorial quarrel.[48]

A rapid response to Margoliouth came in an article published in October of the same year, authored by Charles J. Lyall. In this article, Lyall states that "[Margoliouth's] suggestion was, on historical and etymological grounds, scarcely tenable."[49] After describing those *Ḥanīfs* who are mentioned in the *Sīra*, Lyall notices that "they belonged to the Ḥijāz and the Western regions of the Arabian Peninsula," instead of the plateau of Yamama where Musaylima and the Banū Ḥanīfā used to live.[50] He therefore points to the fact that there is no evidence to relate the *Ḥunafāʾ* of the Islamic tradition to the Banū Ḥanīfā tribe of Yamama. As a solution to the problem related to *Ḥanīfiyya* and the Semitic root ḤNP, Lyall initiates a philological argument,

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[46] De Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραιος) and Ḥanīf (εθνικος)," p.25.
[47] D. S. Margoliouth, "On the Origin and Import of the Names Muslim and Ḥanīf", *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, July 1903, pp. 467-93.
[48] Montgomery Watt, "Musaylima," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Leiden: Brill).
[49] Charles C. Lyall, "The Words 'Ḥanīf' and 'Muslim,'" *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, October 1903, p. 771.
[50] Ibid., p. 773.

according to which, some Arabic (and Hebrew) words could also mean their contrary, and suggests that *Ḥanīf* could be among such words.[51] Even though he advanced the linguistic argument, he acknowledged the difficulty related to the problem of the Semitic root ḤNP, declaring that "the conclusion in regard to *Ḥanīf* is that its origin must be left unexplained, like that of many other words in the Qur'ān and the old poetry."[52] Nevertheless, Lyall's comments as to the difficulty of resolving the question surely did not keep later scholars from elaborating their perspectives on the matter.

In the 1930s, N.A. Faris and Harold W. Glidden got interested in *Ḥanīf* for its importance as a potential entry point to the original faith of Muḥammad. They speculated on whether the Islamic *Ḥanīfiyya* is derived from the dialect of the Nabateans, in whose language, ḤNP cognates designated the followers of some polytheistic and Greek influenced Syro-Arabian religion. The context in which Faris and Glidden's theory was produced was that of speculation, by anthropologists such as Wilhelm Schmidt,[53] about a possibly prehistoric *Urmonotheismus*, a primeval monotheism, which evolved over a long period of time into various polytheistic cults. Faris and Glidden's observation that *Ḥanīfiyya* "can be traced in legend and perhaps in a future historical demonstration to the time of Abraham himself" is highly influenced by these early twentieth century anthropological theories.[54]

Like Faris and Glidden, a number of scholars have also attempted to assimilate *Ḥanīfs* to other religious groups of pre-Islamic Syria and Arabia. For example, Gerhard Böwering equates *Ḥanīf* figures of the Islamic tradition to the sect of the Ebionites, some sort of Christian Jewish

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[51] Ibid., p. 780.
[52] Ibid., p. 781.
[53] For the theory of *Urmonotheismus*, refer to Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories*, trans. H. J. Rose (London: Methuen & Co., 1931).
[54] N. A. Faris and Harold W. Glidden, "The Development of the Meaning of Koranic Ḥanīf," *The Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 19, no. 2, p. 13.

sect[55] which, like Islam, posited that Jesus was the Messiah but rejected his divine sonship.[56] A contemporary historian of Islam, Uri Rubin, has criticized both the philological foundations of the paradigm used to look at *Ḥanīfiyya*, and the unfounded speculations associating *Ḥanīfiyya* with unrelated societies and sects in pre-Islamic Syria and Arabia. Facing a lack of other sources, in his work, Rubin focused on early Islamic materials. Against Ḥadīth skeptics who doubt the historical value of the early Islamic literature, Rubin rightly observed that the question of *Ḥunafāʾ* is treated with a lot of unfounded suspicion, which constitutes a serious impediment for constructive research.[57]

Before bringing forward the hypothesis of *Ḥanīf* being a demonym for those who belong to the Banū Ḥanīfā tribe, Margoliouth had noticed, but did not give too much attention, to the fact that the *Sīra* reports dissensions between various *Ḥanīf* coreligionists over the meaning of *Ḥanīfiyya*.[58] Rubin will build on this fact, which was reported but neglected by Margoliouth, in order to rehabilitate the historical validity of some Ḥadīth-based accounts on *Ḥanīfiyya*.

Among those *Ḥanīf* challengers of Muḥammad identified by Rubin figures a *rāhib* (an ascetic who could be also close to Christianity) by the name of Abū ʻĀmir, a leader of the ʻAws tribe and an ally of Muḥammad's rivals, namely the Jewish tribe of Banū Nadhīr which was based in Khaybar.[59] Drawing on the *Sīra* and *Kitāb al-Aghāni*, he also expands on the case of Umayya Ibn Abī al-Ṣalt, a learned man in Arabia and a convinced *Ḥanīf* who never embraced Islam and who doubted whether Muḥammad represented the real *Ḥanīfiyya*. [60]

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[55] Christian Jews were people who fully adhered to the teachings of the Torah, but believed that Jesus Christ was the Messiah.
[56] Gerhard Böwering, "Recent research on the construction of the Qur'an", in *The Qur'an in its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 74.
[57] Uri Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and Kaʿba: An enquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic Background of Dīn Ibrāhīm", in *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, vol. 3, The Formation of the Classical Islamic World (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 267.
[58] Margoliouth, "On the Origin and Import of the Names Muslim and Ḥanīf," p. 483.
[59] Uri Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and Kaʿba (...)," pp. 268, 269
[60] Ibid, p. 277.

With the aim of rehabilitating the *Ḥadīth* and early Arabic literature as sources of historical knowledge, Rubin argued that the skeptics' conclusions are untenable on logical grounds. For, how could they say that *Ḥanīfiyya* is an 'apologetic construct meant to subscribe the Qur'ān in history,' when some *Ḥanīfs* - who are supposedly the most upright pre-Islamic monotheists - of the early tradition were bitter opponents of Muḥammad, who even doubted his prophethood? Why would there be *Ḥanīf* opponents of the prophet if *Ḥanīfiyya* was a construct aimed at justifying Muḥammad and Islam?[61] Rubin's argument points to the intellectual rigidity of the skeptics and constitutes an incentive for researchers to look into the Arabic sources as more historically valuable.

Following his demonstration on the *Ḥanīfs*' dissensions among each other, Rubin tackled the question of *Ḥanīfiyya*, the "*Dīn*" (law, or religion) of those proto-Muslims. He noticed that these pre-Islamic and early Islamic followers of *Ḥanīfiyya* have held a few common beliefs, but that there was no instituted religious school as such called *Ḥanīfiyya*. The basic tenets of this roughly defined *Ḥanīfiyya* are: the prohibition of idol worshipping, circumcision, and the association of the Meccan Kaʿba to Biblical mythology.[62] Rubin's assessment has shed light on the nature of the early movement as described in the Islamic sources. It has shown the disunity among the *Ḥanīfs* and brought an index of sources, some of which I re-use in my demonstration in Chapter III.

Another important account on Biblical monotheism in Arabia in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras is brought to us by Christian Décobert, who argues that, even prior to Muḥammad's mission, Arabian culture was dominated by Biblical and apocryphal myths and narratives. The evidence he brings to his rather plausible argument draws from a textual analysis of the Qur'ān and from Ibn Isḥāq's biography of the prophet. He identifies, in the Qur'ān, various Biblical and

[61] Ibid, p. 267
[62] Ibid, pp. 277, 279.

apocryphal narratives and elements. The whole analysis that he makes of the *Sīra* focuses on two main elements: first, Baḥīrā, the monk who, according to Ibn Hishām's tradition, predicted the Muḥammadan prophecy; secondly, he brings up the existence of the monotheistic dogma from which Islam might have sprung, namely *al-Ḥanīfiyya*, which he posits to be a product of the growing influence of Biblical elements on Arabia.[63]

This approach to the proliferation of Biblical mythology in Arabia is seconded by Louis de Prémare who hypothesizes that the followers of *Ḥanīfiyya* have played a substantial role in the propagation of Biblical narratives in Arabia. In one of his articles, the French scholar explains how *isra'īliyyāt* (Biblical narratives as they are called in the Islamic tradition) came into Arabia and were then integrated into Islam. While Rubin focused on the Arabian and early Islamic material relating to proto-Islamic beliefs, Prémare sought to investigate how Syro-Hebraic and Gnostic religious elements have integrated or influenced the Peninsula.[64] The French scholar therefore assessed early Islamic historiography in light of the Judeo-Christian scriptures and apocryphal documents which made their way either into the Qur'ān or into the Ḥadīth tradition. He connects the introduction of this Biblical mythology in Arabia to four Qurayshi monotheists who, during the age of ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) separated from the pagans, in order to seek "*al-Ḥanīfiyya.*" During their quest for *Ḥanīfiyya*, they travelled outside of Arabia, learned Biblical languages and religions and brought their knowledge back to Mecca.[65]

The author is also led to speculate on the Manichaean influence on *Ḥanīfiyya* and the origins of Islam.[66] But in his analysis, Louis de Prémare makes an error. He thinks that he has identified an application of the ḤNP derivative *aḥnaf*, by Classical Islamic author Ibn al-Nadīm,

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[63] Christian Décobert, "La mémoire monothéiste du prophète", *Studia Islamica*, nº 72 (1990), pp. 29-32.
[64] Alfred Louis de Prémare, ""Comme il est écrit" l'histoire d'un texte", *Studia Islamica*, nº 70 (1989), p. 32.
[65] Ibid., pp. 45-46.
[66] Ibid., pp. 44-47.

to the pre-Islamic Docetic Christian prophet Mani (216-277). He explains Ibn al-Nadīm's reference to Mani as follows:

> "En effet, [...] il semble bien exister un lien entre la *Ḥanīfiyya* et le manichéisme. Ibn al-Nadīm quant à lui, fera suivre la généalogie de Mani de la remarque suivante : II était le plus *ḥanīf* des hommes (wa-kāna *aḥnaf* al-rajul.) Il notera aussi un peu plus loin la prétention de Mani à être le Paraclet."[67]

A deeper examination of Nadīm's understanding of Mani's message shows that the tenth century Islamic bibliographer used the adjective *aḥnaf* [68] simply in order to indicate that the prophet Mani had a distorted foot (refer to note no. 68 for the full quotation from *al-Fihrist*). This indicates a mistranslation by Prémare which led him to make a wrong assumption with regard to the relation between Manichaeism and *Ḥanīfiyya*.[69]

Despite this mistake, Prémare's analysis, as well as the work of Rubin, are constructive, in that they seek to make sense of the existing evidence instead of emphasizing their contradictions. We will certainly come back to their findings and the repertoire of sources which they constituted in Chapter III of this current research project.

While the philological approach has imposed the general paradigm on *Ḥanīfiyya* as an anachronistic construct, the philological hypotheses have barely evolved in more than a century of scholarship. On the other hand, even though the view of religious texts (be it the Ḥadīth or the Gospels, etc.) as historically pertinent documents remains mostly negative, it is fair to concede that the historical study of scriptures has been more fruitful than a narrow reliance on etymologies, not only for a theological, but especially, for a historical understanding of the meaning of the Semitic root ḤNP. These documents have been effectively investigated by some

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[67] Ibid., p. 46.

[68] As defined in Hans Wehr, "Aḥnaf," trans. J. Milton Cowan, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic: (Arabic-English)* (Urbana, IL: Spoken Language Services, 1994), p. 245

[69] Ibn al-Nadīm, Kitāb Al-Fihrist, ed. Gustav Flügel (Leipzig: F.C.W. Vogel, 1872), p. 335: "*Annahu kāna aḥnaf al-rijlayn wa qīla 'l-rijl al-yumnā wa-Mānī yantaqiṣ sāʾir al-anbiyāʾ*."
My translation: "[Mani] had crooked legs, and it has been said that he had [a distortion in] his right leg, and [he] belittled all the other prophets."

historians and have led to the accumulation of coherent knowledge on the nature of late sixth and early seventh-century *Ḥanīfs* and *Ḥanīfiyya*.

3. Pertinent publications in religious studies

In 1991, French academic Guy Monnot has presented a commented translation of Melkite Bishop of Harran, Theodore Abu Qurrah's (died in 825) *Mīmār fi Wūjūd al-Khāliq wa l-Dīn al-Qawīm*. It is a Christian document originally written in Syriac, but only extant in an Arabic manuscript translation. This ninth-century document is a testimony, from a Melkite point of view, on the various sects and beliefs in the early Medieval Near-East. In this text, Monnot follows the indications of the philologists and lexicographers by translating *Ḥunafāʾ* into "païens antiques."[70] He is not the sole Syriast to have followed the definitions found in lexicons without taking into account the historical context in which the root ḤNP has been employed: for example, Amir Harrak, with the exception of a single footnote, has done the same in his translation of the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*.[71]

On the other hand, in his survey of Syrian Christian perspectives of the Islamic conquest, Michael Penn warned the reader about the unstable semantics of ḤNP derivatives which appear in early Islamic Syriac manuscripts. Among these names: there is *Ḥanpūtā*, the Syriac cognate for *Ḥanīfiyya*, and *Ḥanpā*, the Syriac cognate for *Ḥanīf*. Penn departed from the dictionary-based understanding of these Syriac words, because he judged that their common translation into 'polytheism' and 'polytheist' are restrictive to their true meaning in the context of early Islam. He thus left "*Ḥanpē* untranslated because Syriac writers both before and after the [Islamic]

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[70] Guy Monnot, "Abu Qurra et la pluralité des religions," *Revue de l'histoire Des Religions* 208, no. 1 (1991), p. 53 (note n.11).
[71] Amir Harrak, trans., *The Chronicle of Zuqnin* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 2000), p. 323 n.1. Here, Harrak admits that *Ḥanpā*, in the particular context of the section from the *Zuqnin* chronicle, is meant to designate a Muslim individual.

conquests also used it to polemically refer to other monotheists."[72] Penn argued that the trinitarian Christians, whose texts he analyzed, did not literally mean that their opponents were pagan. What they meant, instead, is that "their beliefs erred, as those of the polytheists."[73]

While the static philology of Nöldeke and other lexicographers (*BDB*, Costaz, etc.) has been primarily restricted to the meanings conveyed by the Syriac Bible, Penn's observation that *Ḥanpūtā* (and other derivatives) does not always mean paganism is a clear break from the general academic tradition. Penn's observation of the instability of ḤNP derivatives in Syriac is corroborated by authors who have worked on Arabic-Islamic sources and who were able to show that up until the tenth century, the meaning of the Arabic cognate *Ḥanīfiyya* was unstable and did not always refer to a clearly defined dogma.[74] Penn's primary source analysis of 'post-Islamic' Syriac documents suggests that static definitions as those advanced by the tenets of the 'Nöldeke hypothesis' are only partially correct. The instability in the meaning of Syriac ḤNP derivatives, he notices, is reflected by inconsistencies in the use of the term in the Islamic period: sometimes, ḤNP refers to Jews, and at other times, it is also used to designate Muslims.[75]

Michael Penn should be commended for his survey of primary sources. His case for the semantic instability of the Syriac words *Ḥanpā* and *Ḥanpūtā* in the early Islamic era (although not the goal of his work) is a key point to acknowledge in our pursuit to find out how the semantic shift from 'paganism' to 'monotheism' occurred. But despite the fact that his work allows a great deal of analysis to the polemic uses of ḤNP derivatives in 'post-Islamic' Christian Aramaic sources, Michael Penn's work ignores the Islamic use of the word in the same era. It is

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[72] Michael P. Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christianity and early Muslim world* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 67.
[73] Ibid.
[74] The cited works of Uri Rubin and Prémare indicate the indefiniteness of the concept in early Islamic sources.
[75] Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, pp. 84-85: citing the *Scholion* by Theodore Bar Konai. On pp. 95-96, citing works authored by Nonnus of Nisibis, Penn reiterates the claim as to *Ḥanpūtā* being used against monotheists.

hard to tell whether, out of an epistemological choice, the American author knowingly ignored the Islamic use of the Semitic root, or whether he was not aware that during the period covered in his book, *Ḥanpūtā*'s Arabic cognate, *Ḥanīfiyya*, was becoming a foundational theological concept in the nascent Islamic faith.

A difficulty that faces the researchers in late antique and religious studies is the wide array of sources and languages that one should look into in order to get a global and more objective picture of the state of knowledge on the issue. While philologists restrict their studies to deliberation over grammar and static semantics, religious studies scholars are often specialized in one subject and language which leads to the exclusion of others.

While this tendency can be witnessed through Michael Penn (in Syriac studies) and some Arabists' works, other scholars have more successfully overcome the obstacles related to various disciplines and languages. They offered synthetic and constructive accounts on the issue at hand. This is the case of Milka Levy-Rubin who, in her tackling of the issue of *Ḥanīfiyya* in the Medieval period, acknowledges the semantic instability and polysemy both in the Syriac and in the Islamic uses of ḤNP derivatives.[76]

Levy-Rubin's initial scope of enquiry is similar to that of Michael Penn. She sought to investigate "the polemic usage of the term *Ḥanīf* among Christians and Muslims in the Middle Ages."[77] But she acknowledges the futile and uncertain Syriac meaning of the word.[78] She departs from her declared objective (to study Christian perspectives of Islam) and is led to investigate the *Ḥunafāʾ* of Harran: a peculiar pre-Islamic sect that, she argues, could be (or not) the original *Ḥanīfs* mentioned in the Qur'ān. Levy-Rubin's paper is surely an important reflection on early and Classical Islam. It ends with a general assessment of the Harranian

[76]Milka Levy-Rubin, "Praise or Defamation? - On the Polemic Usage of the Term Ḥanīf among Christians and Muslims in the Middle Ages", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 28 (2003), pp. 205-207.
[77] As suggested by the title of her publication.
[78] Milka Levy-Rubin, "Praise or Defamation? (...)," p. 205.

Ḥanīfs' influence - which does not seem marginal - on the development of Islamic philosophy, exegesis and the medieval sect of the Ismā'īliyya.[79]

4. Ḥanīfiyya *as a social movement: the suggestions from Rodinson's biography of the prophet*

Up until the mid-twentieth century, most of the understanding of early Islam had been acquired from written sources which were predominantly literary, scriptural and historiographic. In the founding period of the discipline of 'Oriental studies,' such figures as Theodore Nöldeke, Ernest Renan and Wilhelm Gesenius had at their disposal only a limited range of sources. These authors deduced most of their knowledge of ancient religions, languages and societies from the literary and linguistic analysis of religious documents. In the following years, however, various new manuscripts were studied and translated.[80] Then, from the mid-1940s to the early 1950s, in a span of only eight years, new discoveries occurred which constituted a paradigm shift in the scientific understanding of the ancient Near-East. The Coptic library of Nag Hammadi, discovered in 1945, contained monastic and apocryphal documents that deepened the knowledge of the Christian milieu of late antiquity. The Dead Sea scrolls, found in 1948, brought a radically new outlook on the Hebrew Bible and ancient Judaism. In the fields of Near-Eastern and Islamic studies, the Philby-Ryckmans-Lippens 1951-1952 archaeological expedition to the Arabian Peninsula brought, for the first time, archeological and epigraphic data that is pertinent for the understanding of the pre-Islamic context within the Arabian Peninsula.

The main historical synthesis which integrates these new archaeological findings comes in 1961, through the work of Maxime Rodinson. Then a professor of Classical Ge'ez and Ethiopic studies in Paris, Rodinson rewrote the biography of Muḥammad, not with the goal of

[79] Ibid, pp. 212-217.
[80] For example, the scholarly works of Wallis Budge, Margoliouth, etc.

retelling "l'histoire personelle du héros," but in order to understand it within the "la causalité sociale" that made Muḥammad a successful prophet.[81]

This social and geo-political history of Arabia at the time of Muḥammad brings forward a multiplicity of factors at play between the fourth and the seventh centuries. Rodinson's book is indeed multifaceted. It relays the ongoing religious debate between churches and heresies in the Near-East, integrates an analysis of the inner workings of the Byzantine, Persian and Ethiopian empires, assesses the influence of ancient Arabian polytheism and Syrian Christianity on late antique Arabia, and considers the role of natural catastrophes and the constant demographic movement from Southern and Central Arabia towards Syria.[82] In short, in his book, Rodinson builds the first multi-factorial history of the coming of Islam. According to this historical theory, through late antiquity, Arabia ascends as a prosperous and relatively advanced mercantile society, which is culturally influenced by three empires and becomes the main witness to the interplay of many world religions.

Within this wide historical approach, Rodinson described the immediate context of the rise of Islam as follows:[83]

> "[Les arabes] parlai[en]t de catastrophes qui avaient atteint ces peuples maintenant disparus, 'Ad et Thamoud. N'était-il pas concevable que ces catastrophes soient venues en punition du refus qu'ils avaient opposé aux prophètes envoyés vers eux ? Ainsi le Déluge avait puni les hommes sourds aux avertissements de Noé, et Jésus avait menacé Jérusalem, « qui tuait les prophètes » d'un sort analogue. Des hommes comme Mohammad, des Arabes, écoutaient ces histoires, se faisaient ces réflexions. Juifs et chrétiens étaient soutenus par des empires mondiaux, ils étaient encadrés par des organisations puissantes et riches. Leurs prétentions s'appuyaient sur des livres sacrés venus du ciel aux époques anciennes, vénérables par leur antiquité et dont des miracles avaient démontré la validité. [...] Des gens qui pensaient ainsi et qui ne devenaient pas cependant chrétiens ou juifs, il y en avait quelques-uns au moins."

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[81] Rodinson, *Mahomet*, p. 12.
[82] Rodinson, *Mahomet*, especially chapters I (pp. 21-31) and II (pp. 32-63).
[83] Ibid., p. 95.

Well-traveled merchants (in other words a rising Arabian upper class) were alienated from the interests of great empires and official Churches. They had, nevertheless, become inclined to believe in the supreme God of the Bible, because of their awareness of their Biblical lineage to Abraham which they acquired by constant contact with the world surrounding them.[84] These were the *Ḥunafāʾ* , not as a religious group, but as the social and intellectual phenomenon within the historical context put forward by Rodinson.

While the French scholar saw the *Ḥanīfs* as an intermediary phase towards Islam and the chief ideological and spiritual influence on Muḥammad, he was also aware of the semantic distortion in the Semitic root ḤNP.[85] He explains the semantic shift as follows: "Peut-être est-ce par fierté que des Arabes reprirent ce mot de païen, infidèle, de *Ḥanīf*, que les [chrétiens et les juifs] leur accolaient. Ils étaient infidèles, ils chercheraient Dieu en infidèles."[86] He further explains: "On en vint à entendre par [*Ḥanīfs* as infidels] qu'ils cherchaient à se rapprocher d'Allah sans se laisser embrigader dans les rangs des religions reconnues."[87]

One should remember that Rodinson's literary style is exceedingly refined. I suggest that his explanation be read as to mean that some Arabian monotheists who had a non-sectarian approach to God and who did not belong to an established religion were accused of being "infidels" (*Ḥanpē*) by Jews and Christians. They conceded being called so, then consciously or unconsciously diverted and embellished the word's meaning, which eventually came to designate those who did not need divinely inspired scripture to seek true faith, abide by the law of God and know that he is the everlasting master of the universe.

Rodinson's reading of history as a general and complex process is essential to the objectives of this thesis. Although brief, his explanation of semantic change derives from a

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[84] Ibid., p. 96.
[85] ibid.
[86] ibid.
[87] Ibid.

global assessment of important historical factors. While the French historian does not approach the philological problem related to *Ḥanīfiyya* in detail, his insight into this particular question has been central for my reflection and research. His theory on the specific question of *Ḥanīfiyya* is going to be re-used for my discussion in Chapter III. As for Rodinson's *Mahomet*, and especially its first few chapters, it has been foundational for my conception of this research and for my understanding of the epoch as a whole.

5. Interdisciplinary approaches: bringing together the different disciplines and academic traditions

In the first four parts of the above review of literature, I have done my best to expose a comprehensive survey of the studies that I have come across which deal with various aspects of *Ḥanīfiyya* and other closely related questions. This review joins together studies in many fields of enquiry. From Islamic studies to Semitics and late antique Jewish and Christian histories, we witness that the problem of *Ḥanīfiyya* is closely linked to the general understanding of a whole era.

In addition to the wide and theoretically complex vision brought forward by Rodinson's *Mahomet*, my approach to semantic change in the Semitic root ḤNP is influenced by two recently published papers. Their importance lies in the fact that their authors have had the chance to take a step back on past research. They have therefore been able to synthesize many useful, yet fragmented, findings from the different schools and disciplines which I have exposed above. Each one of these two contemporary researchers follows his own original approach which I will be careful to detail in this last part of the review.

François de Blois' approach joins together the two fields of history and philology. He is principally concerned with building a hypothesis of semantic change that could improve knowledge in both fields of late antiquity and of historical linguistics. De Blois begins by

noticing that the Qur'ānic exegetes reckon the word *Ḥanīf* to be among *gharību l-Qur'ān* (oddities of the Qur'ān), which means that it was, up until a late stage, a legitimate subject of disagreement among Muslim scholars.[88] This position is backed by a few scholars who have worked on the development of the concept of *Ḥanīfiyya* - as 'pure (or original) monotheism' in Medieval Islamic history.[89] The polysemy of this Semitic root up to the late classical age of Islam is the starting point of de Blois' enquiry into the evolution of the semantics of ḤNP through the late antique and early Islamic times.

François de Blois' hypothesis on the semantic transformation in the early Islamic period is the first academic piece that truly tries to reconcile the meaning of the Syriac ḤNP derivatives with the semantics of the early Arabic Islamic cognates. De Blois' analysis contains a survey of early Islamic documents, which are compared to the meanings of ḤNP derivatives as they appear in the Syriac *Peshitta* version of the New Testament. He notices that, counter to the uses in Hebrew and in non-Biblical Syriac documents, the Syriac meanings of ḤNP expressed in the *Peshitta* do not specifically refer to 'paganism' as a religious practice and belief, and that they are not necessarily negative.[90] Instead, they designate non-Jewish individuals and populations who remain "candidates for salvation," on the condition that they follow Christ.[91] Drawing on his analysis, de Blois, thus, hypothesizes that the meaning of Syro-Arabic ḤNP derivatives splits at some point in late antiquity. On one hand, it persists as a synonym for 'ungodly,' 'idolater' or 'non-Christian,' and on the other, it evolves from 'gentile,' or 'non-Jew' into 'candidate for

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[88] de Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραιος) and Ḥanīf (ἐθνικος)," pp. 16-17.
[89] Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazali's Use of "Original Human Disposition" (*Fiṭra*) and Its Background in the Teachings of al-Fārābī and Avicenna", *The Muslim World* 102 (January 2012), pp. 2, 4.
For the importance of the theological concept of *Ḥanīfiyya* during the process of "la désavicennisation, ou de la désismâ'ilisation, ou de la désabéinisation" of Islam in the Middle Ages, refer to:
Michot, J.R. 1993. "L'avicennisation de la sunna, du ṣabéisme au leurre de la *Ḥanīfiyya*. À propos du Livre des religions et des sectes, II d'al-Shahrastânî". *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale.* 35, pp. 113-120.
[90] De Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραιος) and Ḥanīf (ἐθνικος)," p. 21.
[91] Ibid., p. 24.

salvation.'[92] De Blois then argues that *Ḥanpā*/*Ḥanīf* as 'gentile' becomes an epithet of Abraham, a pre-Mosaic figure which some (possibly Gnostic) groups have tried to separate from Judaism and the Torah. It evolves from an epithet for 'pre-Mosaic' to become a substantivized adjective which designates "the follower of the religion of Abraham:" a theological theory, born within non-orthodox Abrahamic circles, which designates the upright religion that precedes Judeo-Christian revealed scriptures.[93]

Unfortunately, his observation that *Ḥanpā* evolves from 'gentile' to 'monotheist' is based on a circumstantial argument. Because the Islamic tradition links *Ḥanīf* to Abraham, de Blois considers it a priority to look into a similar theological association between *Ḥanpā* and Abraham in Syriac sources. All what he ends up finding is a single association in Syriac literature between *Ḥanpā* and the Biblical Patriarch. This one quote from the pre-Islamic Syriac translation of the *Life of Clement of Rome*, reads as follows: "Clement's parents were pagans/gentiles (*Ḥanpā*) but nonetheless fulfilled the word of the scripture. [...] And Abraham believed in God, when he was a *Ḥanpā*."[94] This conclusion, that the theological Qur'ānic concept of "*Ibrāhīm Ḥanīfan*" is a direct legacy from Syriac, is nothing more than a conjecture.

The general scientific approach followed by the French academic is ground-breaking: it promises to build a historical explanation of the semantic shift by linking Islamic meanings to Syriac conceptions of the root ḤNP. However, de Blois's interpretation of this single above-mentioned Syriac primary source is a bit far-fetched. His shaky evidence surely raises questions concerning his view of the semantic shift, which according to him, has occurred through theological elaboration, from a mere conception of 'paganism' to an epithet of Abraham which meant "gentile."

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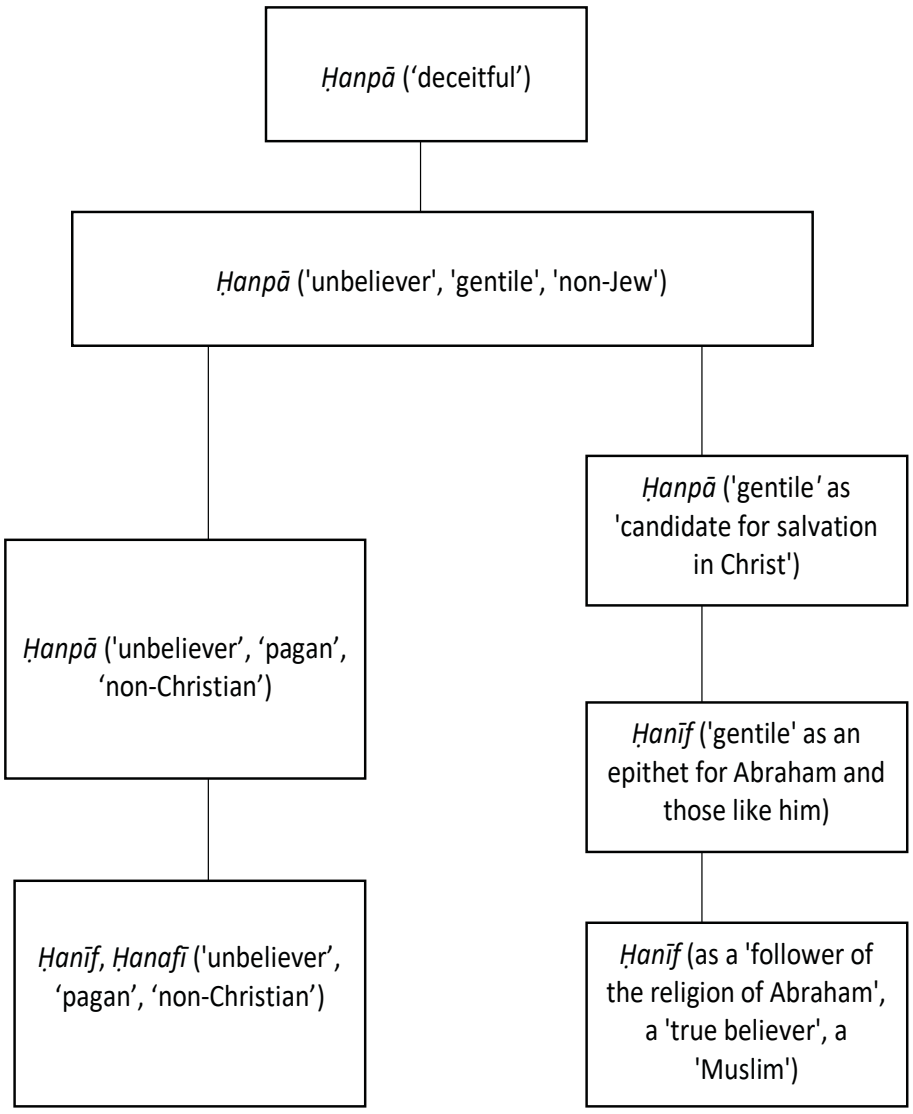
[92] Ibid. For de Blois' diagram on semantic shift, refer back to figure 1.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid, p. 23, citing Alphonse Mingana, trans., "Some Early Judeo-Christian Documents," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 4, no. 1 (1917).

Figure 1: François de Blois' hypothesis on semantic change



Blois, François de. "Nasrānī (Ναζωραιος) and Hanīf (εθνικος): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)* 65, no. 1 (2002): p. 24

The last scholar to have published on the question of *Ḥanīfiyya* is Mun'im Sirry. In his article, like de Blois, he also seeks to explore to what extent there can be a reconciliation between the seemingly contradictory usages of the Qur'ānic *Ḥanīf* and the Syriac *Ḥanpā*.[95] He determines that the meaning in the Qur'ān is relatively stable: the Islamic scripture mainly "portrayed *Ḥanīfiyya* as an independent religious movement, apart from Judaism and Christianity."[96] Although "much of the discussion of the Qur'ānic *Ḥanīf* is based on the assumption that it means the opposite of its Syriac cognate,"[97] Sirry thus explains that "there is considerable evidence both from Muslim texts and from external sources that the pre-Islamic *Ḥunafāʾ* in Arabia were not directly connected with the institutionally organized Jewish and Christian religions. Hence, the Jews and Christians would have seen them as heretics. [From an Islamic perspective] those who were heretic in the eyes of the Jews and Christians were true monotheists."[98] Through this conclusion, the author introduces a central piece to the puzzle of the semantic distortion. Although his theory is solely based on speculation, Sirry postulates that the two contradictory meanings of ḤNP derivatives cannot be reconciled unless the meaning of *Ḥanpā* in Syriac has evolved to designate heresy or other concepts which do not strictly indicate elements of paganism. His suggestion is then that when the term is used in a polemical way, the "connotation of *Ḥanīf* corresponds to each other's perspective."[99] The question of perspective is important for my study. Unfortunately, Sirry does not elaborate on these remarks through research in late antique primary sources.

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[95] Mun'im Sirry, "The Early Development of the Qur'ānic Ḥanīf," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 56, nº 2 (Autumn 2011), p. 345.
[96] Ibid., pp. 350-351.
[97] Ibid., p. 346.
[98] Ibid., p. 354.
[99] Ibid.

CHAPTER II

Sources, Methods and Approach

Building a Renewed Hypothesis on the Semantic Shift

A century-long deliberation has brought together an inventory of sources and a multitude of hypotheses on the meaning of ḤNP in Arabic and other Northwest Semitic languages, on the possible nature of *Ḥanīfiyya* and on the manners through which a semantic shift from 'paganism' to 'monotheism' might have occurred. The scholars who have taken up the task of resolving this late antique riddle have also explored a wide array of primary sources. From Ḥadīth to Syriac literature, to early and late medieval Arabic and Islamic texts, the repertoire of sources from which a historian can drag his information about the Semitic root has expanded way beyond the Qur'ānic and Biblical meanings. The two last authors which I have presented in Chapter I, namely Mun'im Sirry and François de Blois, have both tried to synthesize, beyond disciplinary boundaries, this considerable amount of information. Sirry advanced the idea that semantic change should have occurred during a series of controversies between orthodox Christians or Jews and other heterodox Abrahamic monotheists, where the latter group adopted and diverted the meaning of the derogatory term originally used against them by their orthodox detractors. François de Blois has established a schema (reproduced in figure 1) where, drawing on historical linguistics, he tries to elaborate a diachronic etymology of ḤNP derivatives.[100] De Blois argues, rightly, that there is an instability in the meaning of the root ḤNP both in pre-Islamic Syro-Aramaic sources and in the post-Islamic sources. In pre-Islamic Syro-Aramaic and Hebrew sources, he established that the word meant both pagan and 'non-Jew' (gentile). In Arabic, he noticed that it could designate both an upright person and an apostate. Then, he hypothesized a pre-Islamic split between the two related meanings of the word. By the time of the Qur'ān, de

[100] De Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραιος) and Ḥanīf (ἐθνικος)," p. 24.

Blois thinks that *Ḥanīf* designated, in Arabian context, a non-Jew who is nonetheless a monotheist.

These two attempts to explain the semantic shift have opened the door to a synthetic yet comprehensive historical demonstration on semantic change which reconciles Islamic sources with non-Islamic and pre-Islamic material.

The deficiency of Mun'im Sirry's approach is in the fact that it falls short from a systematic and long-term historical explanation of the semantic change. On the other side, de Blois' approach ignores many pertinent pre-Islamic sources, as well as the eventful histories of Christianity and Judaism in the third-to-seventh centuries and their impact on conceptions of traditional religions. During such a critical period, orthodoxy and heterodoxy formed within these two Biblical traditions. The delimitation of an official faith has pushed many believers, who only partially adhered to the dominant doctrines, to the realm of disbelievers and apostates. Sirry and de Blois did not consider such developments in a long-term historical model which takes into account the impact that this formation of Christian and Jewish orthodoxies had on conceptual and linguistic history. A systematic and long-term approach is, therefore, what is lacking to their explanations on the determinants of this particular semantic change.

In this Chapter, I explain how I will integrate Sirry's 'perspectives hypothesis' and de Blois's linguistic and historical approach into one systematic model on semantic change. I will therefore present the sources, method and theoretical-epistemological stance that I will employ during the construction of my hypothesis on the semantic reversal of ḤNP derivatives (Chapter III).

1. Primary sources

Since my goal in this thesis is to trace and explain the semantic shift in the period of late antiquity, I will use a range of sources where the Semitic root ḤNP is used. I divide the sources into two categories: first, a corpus of non-Islamic fourth-to-eighth century literature and, secondly, a corpus of Islamic sources. The first set of sources consists of documents originally written in offshoots of Aramaic. They are mainly Christian texts written in Syriac and produced both in the pre-Islamic and in the early Islamic eras. In addition, I use the pre-Islamic Jewish Talmudic commentary *Bereshit Rabbah*, which was written in Palestinian Judeo-Aramaic, a language that belongs to the same linguistic family as Syriac. The second corpus contains the early Islamic sources that were written in Arabic. In addition to these two corpora, I will make references to the Hebrew Bible and other sources of secondary importance.

Since situating these sources on a time frame is a first step towards building a chronology of the meanings of the Semitic root ḤNP, in this section, I will present a brief material history of the main sources that I will use.

The texts from the pre-Islamic period are:

a) Poetry of Mar Ephraim the Syrian

Mar Ephraim was born in the city of Nisibis, Roman Mesopotamia in 306 C.E., and died in 373 in Edessa. A deacon, *littérateur* and prolific poet, he is the most prominent figure in fourth-century Syriac Christianity. His prominence and his defense of orthodox belief made him a Saint in the Jacobite Orthodox tradition and a Doctor of the Holy Roman Catholic Church.[101] His poetry is mainly theological, but he is also known for his polemical writings against the early Christian heresies of Marcion (died in 160 C.E.), Bardaisan (d. 222) and Mani (d. circa 274-276).

[101] Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* (Dubuque, IA: Cistercian Publications, 1992), “Introduction”. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Saint Ephraem Syrus”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Edinburgh, 20 juillet 1998).

Ephraim's heresiography of Bardaisan, extant in an English-Syriac bilingual edition translated by Duncan Jones in 1904, is of central importance in my analysis.[102]

b) Documents written by Philoxenus of Mabbogh

The first text is a letter from Philoxenus to Abū Ya'fūr Ibn 'Alqama, king of the Lakhmids, which was edited and translated by Paul Harb in 1967 and published in *Paroles de l'Orient*.[103] The second text by Philoxenus, entitled "the Creed of Philoxenus," contains anathemata against the perceived heresies of the Council of Chalcedon (451). The document was given its title by its translator and editor, British scholar Wallis Budge.[104]

As for Philoxenus (original name: *Aksēnāyā*), he was born of Christian parents in Beth Garmaï, in Northeastern Mesopotamia, between 450 and 475. He later migrated to Edessa, the capital of Oriental Christianity, at a time when Nestorianism was gaining ground in the Syriac Church.[105] Living in the heart of the "Christological controversy," Philoxenus was a major Antiochian orthodox disputant of Chalcedonian and Nestorian doctrines. Following four years of exile, he became the Bishop of Mabbogh: a religious position that he held from 485 (or 488) until he was removed from his religious office by followers of Nestorian theology in 518 or 519. The Nestorians chased and murdered him in Northern Anatolia in 523.[106]

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[102] Duncan Jones, trans., "A Homily of St Ephrem," *Journal of Theological Studies* 5 (January 1, 1904): pp. 546–552.
[103] Paul Harb, "Lettre de Philoxène de Mabboug Au Phylarque Abu Yafur de Hirta de Betnaman: Selon Le Manuscrit N° 115 Du Fonds Patriarcal de Sarfet," *Melto: Paroles de l'Orient* 3, no. 1–2 (1967): 183–222.
[104] Wallis E. A. Budge, trans., *The Discourses of Philoxenus, Bishop of Mabbôgh, AD.485-519: Edited from Syriac Manuscripts of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries in the British Museum with an English Translation*, Volume II: Introduction, Translation, Etc. (London: Asher and Co., 1894).
[105] Wallis E. A. Budge, trans., *The Discourses of Philoxenus*, p. XVII.
[106] Ibid., pp. XIX-XXV.

c) The Peshitta *version of the New Testament*

The *Peshitta* is the first complete version and the official canon of the Syriac churches. This corpus is the Syriac equivalent of the Latin *Vulgate*: a translated compilation of the Judeo-Christian canons. Like all canonical Bibles, the Syriac Corpus is divided into two parts. The *Peshitta* of the Old Testament is thought to be a second-century translation of the Hebrew Bible.[107] On the other hand, the *Peshitta* of the New Testament has been constituted in two steps: first, by the addition, by Bishop Rabbula of Edessa (d. 435), of fifth-century Syriac Gospels and other constitutive parts of the Christian canons to the *Peshitta* of the Old Testament.[108] Rabbula's New Testament *Peshitta* contained all the canonical books except: 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude and the *Apokalypsis*. These books, which were not compiled by Rabbula, would be attached to his compilation following their translation from Greek by the above-cited Philoxenus of Mabbogh, who completed this work in 508 C.E.[109] Although a full and unified Syriac canon was already extant by the end of the sixth century, it is to be noted that this Syriac canon came to be known by the name *Peshitta* in the ninth century.[110] The version of the *Peshitta* which I cite is a Syriac-Arabic interlinear edition published in 2010 by the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Orientales de l'Université Antonine in Beirut, Lebanon.[111]

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[107] Edward Lipinski, *Semitic Linguistics in Historical Perspective*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta (Louvain: Peeters Publishers, 2014), pp. 40-43.
[108] Ibid, pp. 60-62.
[109] Boulos Feghaly, *Al-Muḥīṭ al-Jāmi' fī l-Kitāb l-Muqaddas wa l-Sharq al-Qadīm*, 2nd ed. (Jounieh: Al-Maṭba'a l-Būlusiyya, 2009), p. 336 ; Wallis Budge, "Life of Philoxenus," in *The Discourses of Philoxenus* (...), p. XXIX.
[110] Sidney Griffith, "Christianity in Edessa and the Syriac-Speaking World: Mani, Bar Daysan and Ephraem; The Struggle for Allegiance on the Aramean Frontier," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies*, no. 2 (2002), p. 10.
[111] Boulos Feghaly and Maroun Abboud, eds., *Le Nouveau Testament Syriaque*, Sources Syriaques 4 (Beirut: Centre d'Études et de Recherches Orientales de l'Université Antonine, 2010).

d) The sixth-century Life of Barsauma

The *Life of Barsauma* is a hagiography that dates to the early sixth century. Originally written in Syriac, it has been partially transcribed and translated to French by François Nau.[112] A full transcription of the manuscript can be found online on the official website of the department of Syriac studies, Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch.[113] The *Life* is the eponymous story of this monk who was to become the Bishop of Nisibis in 460. He was persecuted by Chalcedonians because he was perceived as a heretic. For the end of the thesis, I will be using the accusations made against him by the Chalcedonians as reported in the Syriac document.

e) Bereshit Rabbah

This document is part of the *Midrashic* literature, which constitutes a large corpus of "interpretative enquiries" into the meaning of the Hebrew Bible.[114] This *Midrash* is a Jewish Palestinian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible as read and understood by late antique Rabbinic authorities. This means that it is an adaptation of old scriptures to the new context in which the Rabbinic community of Palestine was living.[115] The Midrashic literature began in the Rabbinical period and became a constituting part of Talmudic (modern) Judaism. *Bereshit Rabbah*, as its title suggests, is a verse-by-verse commentary of Genesis, the Hebrew cosmogony and the first book of the canonical Bible.[116] Most specialists find it hard to date the text but agree to situate its composition to the sixth century: an era which follows the compilation of the Palestinian

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[112] François Nau, "Résumé Des Monographies Syriaques: Barsauma," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 2, 19 (1914): 278–289.
[113] *Qiṣaṣ al-Qiddīsīn bi-l-Lugha al-Siryāniyya* (Department of Syriac Studies, Syriac Patriarchate of Antioche).
[114] Lou Hackett Silberman and Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky, "Talmud and Midrash", *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Edinburgh, 2011).
[115] Rabbi L. Epstein, *Midrash Rabbah*, ed. Maurice Simon, trans. Rabbi H. Friedman, 3rd éd. (Hertford: Stephen Austin and Sons, 1961), p. XXV.
[116] Ibid., p. XXVII.

Talmud.[117] Unlike all the other sources, I was unfortunately not able to consult the text of *Bereshit Rabbah* in the original version. Instead, I rely on a particular element that caught the attention of D.S. Margoliouth and was later investigated by Shlomo Pines.[118] This is the sole late antique Jewish source that I am using. It will be employed as supporting evidence to my observations which are based on Christian sources.

f) Post-Muḥammadan Syriac sources

Among the post-Islamic documents, I principally cite one Syriac Christian source: *The Chronicle of Zuqnin*. This Chronicle is pertinent, both for its description of earlier heresies and for its account on early Muslims.[119] This historical work was completed in the eighth century. It lists historical events from "the day of Creation" to the year 776 C.E. For references to *Zuqnin*, I consulted the original Syriac manuscript transcription made by Jean-Baptiste Chabot[120] which is displayed on the website of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.[121] I also relied on the English translation produced by Amir Harrak.[122]

The Arabic-Islamic texts are:

a) The Qur'ān

Before the Qur'ān, there were inscriptions in a few Arabian dialects such as Nabatean, Ancient North-Arabian and Safaitic.[123] The Qur'ān is, nonetheless, the first piece of Classical

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[117] Ibid., p. XXIX.
[118] Margoliouth, "On the Origin and Import (...)," p. 479: these Judeo-Aramaic elements, advanced by Margoliouth are elaborated by Shlomo Pines in "Jāhiliyya and 'Ilm," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990): pp. 174–94.
[119] Amir Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 2000).
[120] J.-B. Chabot, ed., *Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum Vulgo Dictum S.Syr. 43 and 53* (Paris: CSCO, 1927).
[121]The monks of Zuqnin, *Zuqnin Chronicle (776)* (BYU Maxwell Institute).
[122] Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin*.
[123] Lipinski, *Semitic Linguistics in Historical Perspective*, pp. 291, 295-296.

Arabic literature.[124] According to Islamic accounts, the Qur'ān was codified by Zayd Ibn Thābit (610-665), Muḥammad's (d. 632) personal scribe. The manuscript of Thābit's Qur'ān passed to caliph Abū Bakr (573-634) and then to caliph 'Uthmān Ibn 'Affān (577-656). Under 'Uthmān, Ibn Thābit's copy - later known to the academic community as the '*Uthmānic Codex* - was canonized and other versions of the Islamic scripture were said to be destroyed.[125] Nevertheless, variants of the Qur'ānic text were compiled. Two of these variants are important for my study. The first is from the *Codex of Ibn Mas'ūd* (d. 650) and the second appears in the *Codex of 'Ubay Ibn Kaʿb* (d. 649). Both of these codices were compiled by Abū Bakr Ibn Abī Dāwūd (d. 929) in his *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*.[126]

For references to the canonical version of the Qur'ān, I use the Arabic version that is found on "Quran.com." All quotations in English are borrowed from the "Sahih International" translation.[127] Whenever I modify the "Sahih International" translation, it is either in order to clarify and explain the text of the scripture (the meaning of which can sometimes only be grasped by reading the many surrounding verses), or to keep some words untranslated for purposes related to the general argument of the thesis. Quotations from the above-mentioned non-canonical Codices come from Arthur Jeffrey's 1937 edition of Ibn Abī Dāwūd's *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*.[128]

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[124] Nabeel Qureshi, "Spoken Scripture: Orality in the Texts and Codifications of Mark and the Qur'ān" (Duke University, 2012), p. 10.
[125] Lipinski, *Semitic Linguistics in Historical Perspective*, pp. 289-290.
[126] A. Rippin, "Al-Sijistānī," *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
[127] Including the Qur'ānic quotations which appear in the introduction and throughout the thesis.
[128] Arthur Jeffrey, ed., *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 1937).
Almost by accident, I came upon a thesis presented in 2012 by then-Master's candidate Joanna Bell at the Department of Near-Eastern Languages and Culture at Ohio State University (full reference in the Bibliography). In this thesis, it was pointed out that the *Codex of Ibn Mas'ūd* used "*Ḥanīfiyya*" in place of "*Islām*" in one verse of the Qur'ān. The author of this thesis did not mention the source for the codex in question, but by her identification of this occurrence, Bell had shaken the grounds on which the dominant theory on *Ḥanīfiyya* - being an anachronistic artifice of the Ḥadīth - stands. After some research, I was able to locate the reference in the *Codex of Ibn Mas'ūd*, as reported in Ibn Abī Dawūd al-Sījistānī's *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*. Going through Arthur Jeffrey's edition of *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, I identified an additional occurrence

b) The first biography of the prophet

The version that I am relying on is *Sīrat al-Nabī 'Alayhi l-Salām* by Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām's (d. 828 or 833) edition of the first biography of the prophet, originally transmitted from Muḥammad Ibn Isḥāq Ibn Yasār Ibn Khiyār Ibn Isḥāq (704-761 or 767) through the intermediary of his disciples. The *Sīra* is a central piece of early Arabic literature which traces the life and mission, encounters and companions of the prophet.[129] It is important for this thesis because it relays some pieces of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry. It also presents the life and times of pre-Islamic *Ḥanīfs* and constitutes the main account of these late sixth and early seventh-century Arabian monotheists. All references from the *Sīra* are drawn from the 1927 edition of Ibn Hishām's work, which was published by al-Azhar University in Cairo.[130]

c) Old poetry compilations: Kitāb al-Aghānī *and* Kitāb al-Shiʿr wa-al-Shuʿarāʾ

I also rely on the pre-Islamic poetry attributed to individuals who identified as *Ḥanīfs*. Both of these works, namely *Kitāb al-Shiʿr w al-Shuʿarāʾ*, collected by Ibn Qutayba (828-889)[131] and *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, which was compiled by Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (897-967),[132] were codified in the ninth and tenth centuries. They both contain poetry as well as historical and biographical information essential for any research involving Arabian *Ḥanīfs* and more generally Arabian monotheism in the pre-Islamic *Jāhiliyya* period. The historical distance between the poets' lives and works and the dates in which these poems were written down lead to doubts as to the authenticity of these documents. Despite some scholars' skepticism towards these

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of the concept of *Ḥanīfiyya* in another apocryphal Qur'ān, a reference Bell had missed for some reason. I will discuss these two references in due place.

[129] W. Raven, "Sīra," *EI2* (Leiden: BrillOnline).
[130] Muḥammad Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat Al-Nabī 'Alayhi Al-Salām* (Cairo: Al-Azhar University, 1927).
[131] Ibn Qutayba, *Al-Shi'r wa-al-Shu'arā,'* ed. A.M. Shākir (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif).
[132] Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb Al-Aghānī*, ed. Iḥsān 'abbās, 3rd edition (Beirut: Dār ṣādir, 2008).

documents, along the *Sīra*, they are the main entry points to an Arabic account of pre-Islamic Arabia. Despite the fact that the Qur'ān's material history makes it the oldest literary work in Arabic, pre-Islamic poetry as reported in tenth-century encyclopedias is unavoidable for a historical understanding of late *jāhiliyya*. They also unveil substantial historical information – which is more often than not corroborated by non-Arabic more contemporary sources[133] – on the relations between Central Arabian poets and the Christian kingdoms of the Lakhmids and Ghassanids, two Arabian vassal states which are well attested in non-Islamic sources.

In addition to these main texts, for supporting evidence, I cite post-Muḥammadan and ancient sources. Among the Islamic documents, I sometimes refer to sources such as Masʿūdī's (died in 956) *Kitāb al-Tanbīh wa'l-Ishrāf*. This historical work has been identified by François de Blois for its use of ḤNP derivatives in order to express elements of paganism, in line with Syro-Hebrew semantics and against the commonly acknowledged meaning in the Arabic-Islamic tradition.[134] Among the ancient sources that I refer back to is the Hebrew Bible, which was written between the eighth and fourth centuries B.C.E. It is the founding text of the monotheistic tradition as a whole and the most complete piece of antique Semitic literature. All references from the Hebrew Bible come from Boulos Feghaly and Antoine Aoukar's interlinear edition.[135] For translations of the Hebrew Bible, I compare the Hebrew original to Feghaly and Aoukar's Arabic translation and to the English "New International Version." Words that are pertinent for the ends of the general argument are transliterated from Hebrew. Supporting evidence for the semantic and conceptual change in Christian Semitic literature are also drawn from subsidiary

[133] Abdullah Udhari, "Jāhilī Poetry before Imru' Al-Qais" (Ph.D. dissertation, SOAS University of London, 1991), p. 4-7.
[134] De Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραιος) and Ḥanīf (ϵθνικος)," pp. 19-20.
[135] Boulos Feghaly and Antoine Aoukar, trans., *Ancien Testament Hébreu : Interlinéaire Hébreu-Arabe* (Beirut : Université Antonine, 2007)

sources such as a few pre-Islamic hagiographies and the sixth-century *Syriac Julian Romance*.[136] Finally, since the Syriac poet Mar Ephraim polemicized against Bardesanite philosophy, I use a Syriac-English bilingual edition of Bardaisan's *Book of the Laws of Countries* (*BLC*)[137] which is one of the first pieces of Christian literature.[138]

2. Epistemological approach to semantic change

In contemporary scholarship, semantic change is a subject mainly studied by the field of historical linguistics.[139] Most of the linguists who work in this field privilege inherently linguistic factors to explain semantic shifts.[140] Because it is focused on sentence structure, syntax, grammar and the origins of words, this approach to meaning change can be assimilated to the philological approach (the supporters of the 'Nöldeke hypothesis', or Christoph Luxenberg's account on ḤNP, for example) in Semitic and Islamic studies. This said, there are on the other hand some linguists who emphasize psychological factors as a substantial dynamic behind semantic change. Sylvia Pavel summarizes this approach as follows: "les modifications des sens des mots (l'extension, la restriction, la suppression ou la substitution) furent étudiés par la rhétorique classique en tant que opérations fondamentales de la pensée."[141] According to this approach, subjective evolutions in individual or group consciousness are the main cause behind semantic change.[142]

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[136] The full references are noted as they come up in Chapter III.
[137] Bardaisan, *The Book of the Laws of Countries or Dialogue on Fate of Bardaisan of Edessa*, trans. H. J. W. Drijvers, 2nd edition (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006).
[138] Jan Willem Drijvers and Bardaisan, *The Book of the Laws of Countries or Dialogue on Fate of Bardaisan of Edessa*, trans. H. J. W. Drijvers, 2nd edition (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), pp. V-X.
[139] Campbell, *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction*, pp. 254-281.
[140] Ibid., p. 269.
[141] Silvia Pavel, "Changement sémantique et terminologie", *Meta* 36, nº 1 (mars 1991), p. 42.
[142] Richard Bell, cited in Chapter I, posited that the meaning of *Ḥanīfiyya* had evolved in the mind of the prophet over the course of his lifetime. This approach adopted by Bell can be assimilated to the 'psychological' approach in historical linguistics.

A few researchers have been interested in broader social and historical factors to explain semantic change. This position is defended by prominent French linguist Antoine Meillet who notes that, rather than sufficient in itself, "le langage est [...] éminemment un fait social." In his book *Comment les mots changent de sens*, he makes observations that are pertinent to this thesis. He writes:

> "Mais dès l'abord il apparaît qu'on ne saurait expliquer les faits uniquement à l'aide de considérations physiologiques [meaning morphological and inherently linguistic] et psychologiques ; les procédés par lesquels se réalisent les faits de langue sont devenus en partie plus clairs, mais les causes qui les déterminent sont toujours également obscures [...]. Si le milieu dans lequel évolue le langage est un milieu social, si l'objet du langage est de permettre les relations sociales, si le langage n'est maintenu et conservé que par ces relations, si enfin les limites des langues tendent à coïncider avec celles des groupes sociaux, il est évident que les causes dont dépendent les faits linguistiques doivent être de nature sociale [...]."[143]

Meillet points to the fact that social change is the basis for semantic evolutions. He also notes that the change in meaning should be approached on a case-by-case basis. He concludes his article by declaring that "historical and social facts intermingle, act and react in order to transform the meanings of the words."[144]

The Syriac words *Ḥanpūtā* and *Ḥanpā* are important concepts that indicate features of 'paganism' in Christian Aramaic. The Arabic cognates of these words were 'born again' with Islam where they came to designate 'monotheism' and its followers. Given that Christianity and Islam are two monotheistic traditions with close links to Biblical narratives and history; and that notions of paganism and monotheism are key concepts within these traditions, we can therefore assume that the reversal from *Ḥanpā*-pagan to *Ḥanīf*-monotheist at a time when these traditions were forming is closely associated to the broad religious and historical developments in the

[143] Meillet, *Comment Les Mots Changent de Sens*.
[144] Ibid., "Conclusion", the French original reads as follows: "les faits historiques et les faits sociaux s'unissent, agissent et réagissent pour transformer le sens des mots."

Near-East. For this reason, I believe that the socio-historical approach to semantic change is essential to understanding the semantic shift in the Semitic root ḤNP. Therefore, the third theory, which was initiated by Antoine Meillet, will serve as a guideline to our assessment of semantic change.

3. Building a historical model

We have seen in the review of secondary literature (Chapter I) that no prior scholars have connected the evolution of the concept of paganism/idolatry to the formation of Judeo-Christian orthodoxies. The task that we are up to in the thesis is to design a historical and positivistic model that enables the assessment of conceptual and semantic evolution in the Semitic root ḤNP in conjunction with religious developments.

The methodological procedure that I will follow is systematic, historical and twofold. The first step in this methodological process purports to classify, according to a timeline, the different meanings that the Syriac and Arabic root ḤNP takes. Thus, we will have to understand how Saints Ephraim and Philoxenus, the *Peshitta*, *Bereshit Rabbah,* the variants of the Qur'ān (and so on) use ḤNP derivatives. I should note that the sources that I use, and to some extent, the events that I list on the timeline will constitute a sample, rather than a comprehensive account.

Evolutions and variations in the meaning of the Semitic root will be duly noted, analyzed, and classified on a timeline. Placing the variations on a timeline will enable us to trace variations in the uses of the word on a large timescale, which should help us understand the evolution of the meanings of ḤNP. But the task is not to determine variations on the strictly linguistic, etymological or philological levels. Therefore, in parallel, I will set a timeline of determining events in religious history. Putting the conceptions reflected by ḤNP derivatives in parallel with concomitant religious and societal events which marked the rise of the notions of orthodoxy and heresy in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Semitic world has the evident goal of drawing

correlations. This parallelism between semantics on one hand and historical and religious developments on the other hand should allow a new systematic interpretation of the semantic shift.

While most past accounts of the issue have been drawn from grammatical and philological conjectures or from historical source criticism, I believe that through a model that aligns meanings, concepts and events, we will be able to generate a theory which has the potential to relaunch the debate on the origins and nature of *Ḥanīfiyya*. The expected theory would reveal the historical and conceptual factors behind the transformation of the meaning of ḤNP-derivatives in the long duration history of Near-Eastern late antiquity.

In the twofold methodological process described above, the historical and religious developments in late antiquity are an ultimate explanatory factor of conceptual and semantic change. The explanatory factor is the 'independent variable,' which means that, even though this factor changes, its variation is not determined by the other studied factor (namely the variations in the meaning of ḤNP derivatives). In a cartesian coordinate system, the independent variable constitutes the horizontal axis usually known as 'x' or abscissa. On the other hand, the fluctuation in the meaning of ḤNP derivatives is the 'dependent variable.' The variation of the 'dependent variable' responds to variation in the 'independent variable.' In a coordinate system, the values of the 'dependent variable' are measured according to the axis of ordinates (the 'y' axis). This model will not be followed *à la lettre* but would rather serve as a guideline for the general argument of the thesis. Nevertheless, since it is helpful to synthesize this diachronic analysis of the semantic reversal, I will add, at the end of this thesis, a couple of charts (figures 2 and 3) which were inspired by this model.

CHAPTER III

The Conceptual History of Ḥanīfiyya

A Theory on Semantic Change

In the introduction, I said that I will bring forward a historical synthesis with the aim of explaining the process of conceptual and semantic change that occurred in the Semitic root ḤNP between the birth of Judeo-Christian orthodoxies and the coming of Islam. In the first Chapter, I unveiled past scholars' views on *Ḥanīfiyya* and established the state of knowledge on the question as a whole. In the second Chapter, I laid out my sources, approaches and methodology. The previous chapters have prepared the ground for the 'last straight line.' As we arrive to this final Chapter, time has come for me to advance my answer to the central question of this thesis: how does the change occur and what are the historical determinants of such a semantic and conceptual reversal in the root ḤNP?

The current Chapter is composed of two main parts, which correspond to two different eras in the history of ḤNP derivatives. The first part is the historical account of the Semitic root ḤNP prior to the advent of Arabic and Islamic civilizations. It is composed of sections 1 to 5. The second part concerns the semantic reversal *per se* and the early development of the early *Ḥanīfī* movement. It consists of sections 6 to 8.

1. Semantic continuity and conceptual change

A preliminary step in the analysis is to establish a historically continuous set of meanings associated to the Semitic root ḤNP, from ancient Judean literature, through Syriac Christian documents and up to Arabic-Islamic tenth-century writings. As we will see, it is within one of these continuous streams of meaning that the semantic change, which is the subject of the thesis, occurs. The definitions of the root ḤNP that I display in this section are those which are listed in lexicons. However, lexicons present them in an ahistorical manner. Since lexicon-based definitions have led the philological approach to a static understanding of the Semitic root ḤNP, I seek to historicize and nuance these meanings.

As we had mentioned earlier, the use of the root ḤNP can be traced back to the Iron Age of Near-Eastern civilizations. At that point, it meant deceit and villainy[145] In more recent times, the root frequently appeared in the eighth-to-fourth centuries B.C.E. Biblical Books of Genesis, Isaiah, Psalms, Jeremiah, Job and Numbers.[146] In the Hebrew Bible, the Semitic root is applied in two different circumstances and thus produces two related but different meanings. In the first instance, the root is employed to describe a state of the Earth following its pollution by unholy and sinful behaviors. For example, in the normative section of the Book of Numbers, 35:33, God commands: "do not *tḥanīpū* the Earth on which you are because blood is what *yḥanīp* the Earth." As we can deduct from the excerpt, the Sons of Israel should not spill innocent blood, otherwise, their land would become polluted, or cursed in the eyes of God. Another similar occurrence, Isaiah 24:5, shows that "the Earth is *Ḥanpah* (polluted) under its inhabitants, because they went over the Torah, passed through the Law and broken the Covenant of Eternity."

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[145] Refer back to the Introduction, pp. 13-14, especially note 23.
[146] The root possibly appeared in other parts of the Hebrew Bible too. The above-mentioned books are those where I was able to identify uses of ḤNP derivatives.

I did not come across similar uses of the Hebrew ḤNP-derivatives, as a corrupt or cursed state of the Earth, neither in Syriac nor in Arabic. However, the second instance in which the root is applied is continuously used in Biblical Hebrew, in Syriac and in some Medieval Arabic-Islamic historical works. This second example is characterized by the association of ḤNP derivatives with groups of people in order to indicate that they have behaviors and beliefs that are either non-conforming with religious teachings or fall outside the belief in the one God of Israel. For example, in order to explain the eighth-century B.C.E. conquest of the Near-East by the troops of Sennacherib, the Hebrew Bible declares that God has used this Assyrian emperor as a tool of divine providence against a "*Gōy Ḥanep*," a "pagan - or godless - nation."[147] In another example, it is declared that "the triumph of the wicked is short and the joy of the *Ḥanep* is [but] a moment."[148] Here, the Hebrew *Ḥanep* intercedes, either as an adjective or as a substantivized adjective for an individual or for a group of people who have deviated from the teachings of Judaic monotheism.

The Hebrew use of the root ḤNP for non-Jewish, impious and pagan individuals is comparable to what we can find, about ten centuries later, in the Syriac *Peshitta*. In Matthew 6:7, Jesus criticizes pagan rituals, saying to his followers: "when you pray, you should not be talkative like the *Ḥanpē* [the polytheists], who think that they will be heard for their many words."[149] We also know from 1 Peter 4:3 that those same *Ḥanpē*-pagans should be despised for their involvement "in indulgence, in drunkenness, in vileness," and "in serving the Satans."[150] We surely see, through these examples, a certain continuity in the basic meaning of ḤNP between Hebrew and Syriac, as they both designate features of ungodliness or paganism.

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[147] Isaiah 10:6.
[148] Job 20:5.
[149] Feghaly and Abboud, eds., *Le Nouveau Testament Syriaque*, p. 16.
[150] Ibid, p. 783.

The Hebrew application of ḤNP to non-Jews, impious individuals and pagan peoples is therefore perpetuated in Syriac. Nevertheless, while in those two languages, the root indicates deviancy from monotheistic teachings or belonging to pagan-polytheistic religions, there are still differences in the conception of what this root implies in each of the scriptures. In Hebrew, ḤNP derivatives are inherently pejorative. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, Job 17:18 states that "the righteous [...] should take action against the *Ḥanep* [meaning godless, pagan or impious individuals]." On the other hand, although the Syriac root bears the same basic meanings of impiety, paganism or non-Jewishness, unlike in Hebrew, the connotation of the Syriac root is not always negative. For example, the Gospel of Mark (7:24-30) tells the story of "that woman, a *Ḥanptā* from Phoenicia-Syria" whose daughter was actually saved by Jesus because she had true faith in him.[151] Here, *Ḥanptā* (singular feminine of *Ḥanpā*) intercedes as an adjective, not to condemn this woman, but to rather neutrally indicate pagan and non-Jewish ethnic origin. The way this adjective appears in the sentence shows that belonging to a *Ḥanpā* - non-Jewish and polytheistic - community is not, in itself, an impediment for salvation. And the way this miracle relates to other miracles of Jesus shows that being Jewish is not a prerequisite for a Christian salvation. Therefore, while in Biblical Hebrew, the common root designates both the pollution of inanimate objects and pagan humans that a righteous Jew should stand up against, in the Syriac New Testament, the root retains its meaning as pagan and non-Jewish, but not necessarily in order to denounce non-Jewishness. It could also intercede as a technical term to describe ethnic origin in an objective manner.

In short, with many centuries, two distinct languages and an immeasurable amount of historical change separating the two documents, notwithstanding the Syriac language dropping the application of the root as an expression of a corrupt state of the Earth, there are two

[151] Feghaly and Abboud, eds., *Le Nouveau Testament Syriaque*, p. 131.

observations to be made. First, there is a coherent semantic continuity, in the sense that ḤNP derivatives in both Hebrew and Syriac apply to individuals in order to describe features of ungodliness, non-Jewishness or polytheism. Second, there is a conceptual development within the Syriac offshoot of the same Semitic root. This conceptual alteration in Christian-Aramaic is reflected by the fact that the Christian view of paganism does not immediately imply evil. Instead, when ḤNP derivatives are used in Biblical Syriac, depending on the context, they are either *(a)* objectively referring to those who are ethnically non-Judeans, or *(b)* (like in Hebrew) denouncing, insulting or despising pagans. This dichotomy between *(a)* and *(b)* which we can observe in the Syriac Bible is also present in late antique non-Biblical Syriac documents. Here are a few examples to illustrate the dichotomy in the broader Syriac literature.

a) Objective reference to non-Jewish ethnicity in Syriac texts

Baba of Harran (*Bābā d-Ḥaran*) is a first-century B.C.E. priest in the temple of the Mesopotamian lunar deity Sīn. In scribal copies of his writings, as well as in the broader Syriac manuscript tradition, he has been described in as "*pīllosūpā Ḥanpā*," meaning the ethnically pagan - or simply non-Jewish - philosopher.[152] This occurrence is unambiguously a neutral description of ethnic origins, since Baba is considered, in the same Christian manuscript, a "*nabyā*-prophet" who was able to predict the coming of the Son of God.[153]

We can find a similar use of ḤNP-derivatives in a clause addressed to Christian converts from archaic polytheism which appears in the original Syriac translation of the proceedings of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea. The Council was convened in the year 325 following an invitation by the first Christian Roman Emperor Constantine (r. 307-337). It led to the establishment of the Nicene Creed and marked the beginning of orthodox Christianity which was

[152] Favlos Gabriel and Camille E. Boustany, eds., *Les Grands Auteurs des Premiers Siècles*, pp. 41, 44.
[153] Ibid, pp. 45, 49, 50.

defined by the belief in the Divine Trinity. The specific canon that I am pointing to is related to 'ethnically non-Jewish' converts to Christianity who wanted to become members of the clergy. This section of the Nicene manuscript reads as follows:

> "Second canon on those converted from *Ḥanpūtā* who are brought to ordination at the time of their baptism:
>
> As it happened to many, either out of necessity or in a human haste, in contradiction of the ecclesiastical canon, that people, who recently came from the *dūbarē Ḥanpāyē* (polytheistic customs or polytheistic ways of life) to the faith, being catechumens for a short time, immediately afterwards are brought to the spiritual font; and at the time of their baptism they are ordained bishop or priest — it is considered fair that from now on nothing of this kind should ever happen."[154]

Rather than explicitly and publicly insulting the *Ḥanpē*, this canon regulates priesthood to new converts from *Ḥanpūtā*-polytheism.

Finally, I was able to situate this neutral usage in ethnographic accounts about Anatolian Turks, where Philoxenus described, more or less objectively, the Turkish *Ḥanpē*-pagan practice of circumcision.[155] He also noted that the "Christian persons among the Turks [...] dress like the *Tūrkyē Ḥanpē* - the pagan Turks."[156] These occurrences of ḤNP-as-ethnicity thus seem to appear in informative, descriptive and legal discourses.

b) Religious condemnation of polytheists

As we have seen from the above-mentioned examples, the root ḤNP is sometimes applied, in non-Biblical Syriac writings, to neutrally describe non-Jewish origins. But the same ḤNP derivatives have also been applied, from a religious standpoint, as an explicit condemnation

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[154] Natalia Smelova, "The Canons of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in the Manuscript IOM, RAS Syr. 3," *Written Manuscripts of the Orient*, no. 1 (2016): 35–63.
[155] Harb, "Lettre de Philoxène de Mabboug (...)." The original Syriac reads as follows: G*zīr basreh āi̲k d-Ḥanpē*," p. 216.
[156] Ibid. the Syriac text reads as follows: "*Holeyn 'ammē tūrkyē kristyanē [...] askīmhūn hokan ā̲ītawh̲ī d-tūrkyē Ḥanpē*," p. 217.

of polytheists who have done harm to Christians. For example, they have been applied to the Roman Emperors Maximinus I (r. 235-238 C.E.) and Diocletian (r. 284-305 C.E.) who ruled prior to Constantine the Great's conversion. Both Emperors have been known as major oppressors of early Christians: Maximinus allegedly killed his wife for her Christian faith,[157] and Diocletian led what became known as the Great Diocletianic persecutions.[158] Because they upheld Roman polytheism and persecuted the Christians in the Empire, as a form of reproval, they are called "*Maxīmīnōs Malkā Ḥanpā*"[159] and "*Dyōqlīṭīnōs Malkā Ḥanpā*,"[160] the heathen kings. A better example of the use of ḤNP derivatives in order to explicitly denounce paganism appears in a document from late antiquity, the *Syriac Julian Romance*. In this document, the Christians are warned against the polytheistic Roman ruler Julian (r. 361-363 C.E.), known as the Apostate. Julian is the last emperor to have tried to revert Rome back to polytheism in the aftermath of the conversion of Constantine in the year 312.[161] Against this Roman Emperor who is a well renowned revivalist of the Latin Pantheon, the *Syriac Romance* summons the Christians "not to be scared and not to be perturbed in this time of affliction [caused by] the new *Ḥanpūtā* of [Julian] the Tyrant."[162] Thus, as we can see from these two sets of examples, the basic Hebrew use of the root ḤNP against individuals is perpetuated in the Syriac literary tradition. But in the Syriac language, the function of the root is split in two. On one hand, it neutrally designates non-

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[157] Joannes Zonaras, Thomas Banchich, and Eugene Lane, *The History of Zonaras : From Alexander Severus to the Death of Theodosius the Great* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 80.
[158] Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (London: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 26, 55.
[159] Anonymous, "Hyperechius, Philotheus, Jacob, Paragros, Habib, Romanus, and Lollian (The Seven Martyrs of Samosata)," ed. Josephus Simonus Assemani (Bibliotheca Hagiographica Syriaca Electronica), accessed March 15, 2018, http://syriaca.org/work/320.
[160] Thomaïs (Pseudo-Thomas), "Febronia of Nisibis" (Bibliotheca Hagiographica Syriaca Electronica), Ms. London, British Library, Add. 14649, ff. 66v-78v., British Library, accessed March 15, 2018, http://syriaca.org/work/1956.
[161] E. Christian Kopff and Stewart Henry Perowne, "Julian the Apostate," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Edinburgh, July 20, 1998).
[162] Richard Gottheil, ed., *A Selection from the Syriac Julian Romance* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1906), p. 8. The Syriac text reads as follows: "*Ba-zban nesyūnēh lā hakīl tetzay'ūn aw-tetrahbūn men ṭabā d-Ḥanpūtā d-hanā ṭrūnā*."

Jewish ethnic origin, and on the other, it serves as a derogatory term applied from a religious standpoint against polytheists who have harmed the Christians.

The Syriac function of the root ḤNP as neutral indicator of pagan origins is present in the Arabic-Islamic literature of the early Islamic period. For example, the same Roman Emperor, Julian the Apostate, who is the subject of the above-mentioned *Syriac Julian Romance*, is called "*Lulyānus al-maʿrūf bi l-ḥanīfī*" by al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), in his *Kitāb al-Tanbīh wa-al-Ishrāf*.[163] While in Syriac, the *Ḥanpūtā* of Julian is a derogatory remark, the Muslim historian Masʿūdī uses this expression in order to simply inform the reader that this king was a polytheist rather than a Christian or a Jew. The French scholar François de Blois gives a few other occurrences of such usage in Arabic. For example, he notes that "the historian al-Yaʿqūbī (d. c. 905), in his précis of Old Testament history, speaks of [the anointed king of the Israelites] Saul who has done battle with the *Ḥunafāʾ*, who were, he explains, worshippers of the stars - *ʿabadat al-nujūm*."[164]

In the days of Masʿūdī and Yaʿqūbī, the Islamic concept of *Ḥanīfiyya*-as-monotheism was the dominant meaning of the root ḤNP. But, as we see, the semantics of the root ḤNP-as-paganism made its way into Classical Arabic literature. Since Masʿūdī and Yaʿqūbī were both historians who lived in Baghdad during the translation movement, their use of the word in a sense that is opposite to the common Islamic meaning (ḤNP-as-monotheism) is possibly the result of a calque (in other words a loan translation) from Syriac chronicles which they might have consulted in the Abbasid libraries while they were writing their historical works.

To sum up, in parallel to the later Islamic reversal of the root's meaning, ḤNP had one basic meaning that was used in a few different manners throughout more than fifteen centuries and three different literary languages.

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[163] de Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραιος) and Ḥanīf (ϵθνικος) (...)," p. 20.
[164] Ibid.

While the root implied an inherently negative connotation in Biblical Hebrew, Syriac authors have used it ambivalently, either to denounce, from a religious standpoint, some ungodly polytheists, or to neutrally describe those who were ethnically non-Jews and who therefore belonged to a polytheistic culture. In Arabic, the marginal use of ḤNP-as-paganism is arguably an informative and technical designation for polytheistic belonging. Thus, the observations in this first section show that on a linguistic level, there is a certain consistency in one particular meaning of the root. Notwithstanding whether the root ḤNP is applied to belittle or to describe, the basic meaning of non-Jewish, pagan or polytheist, well attested in dictionaries, has not radically changed. It has been consistently used in the Hebrew Bible, in Syriac literature and in particular cases – despite the mainstream Qur'ānic meaning, in Classical Arabic writings.

2. Semantic and conceptual developments in post-Nicene Syriac literature

Although the basic meaning (polytheist or pagan) was listed in Syriac dictionaries, lexicographers have nevertheless generally failed to point to the two distinct functions that the root takes.[165] These lexicographers have also missed an enlargement of the meaning of ḤNP derivatives. In the wake of Nicene Christianity, the root started being used in order to conflate heterodox beliefs and paganism. Counter to the claim of François de Blois,[166] this development occurs in the use of the root as a religious condemnation of pagans rather than in its function as a neutral indicator of ethnic origin.

In the religiously-charged context of the Council of Nicaea (325), the root ḤNP starts being applied, not only in its common function as a condemnation of archaic polytheists, but as a slur against other monotheists, particularly heterodox Christians.

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[165] Refer back to notes 24 and 25 in the present thesis.
[166] De Blois, p. 24. See appendix no. 1.

Although there might be earlier uses of the ḤNP derivatives in this new form, the first occurrence of that type that I was able to identify is situated in a poem authored by the Christian Saint Ephraim (*Mar Āpraym*, 306-373), in the fourth century. This piece of poetry was specifically written in order to target a relatively mysterious character known to us as Bardaisan (*Bar-Dayṣān*, c. 154-222). Against Bardaisan, Ephraim writes:

> "whoso hates himself, and would not circumscribe God, holds it great impiety that one should think himself overwise. And if he thinks he has said the last thing, he has reached *Ḥanpūtā*."[167]

In this case, the translator of the poem has followed the steps of lexicographers and translated *Ḥanpūtā* as "paganism."[168] But since the use of *Ḥanpūtā* in this context is particular, the translation into paganism is correct but imprecise.

One particular reason renders this accusation of "reaching *Ḥanpūtā*" exceptional: Bardaisan was a mysterious person, but he was certainly not a polytheist. Instead, this historical figure, although accused of *Ḥanpūtā*, was one of the first Christian writers in history. The only extant work attributed to him is an apologetic discourse where he explains important pillars of the Christian faith. In this work, the second-third century *Book of the Laws of Countries*, Bardaisan declares that "those who are in doubt as to God lack the fear of God which could liberate them from all sense of fear."[169] Like other early Christians, he was a monotheist[170] who thought that "man was created after the image of God [and that] he should lead his life divinely."[171] He read and quoted from the Old Testament.[172] Like most of his coreligionists, he also believed in the Angels and in the Day of Judgement.[173] While he adhered to these basic

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[167] Jones, trans., "A Homily of St Ephrem," p.552.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Bardaisan, *BLC*, p. 9.
[170] Ibid., p. 29. The excerpt reads as follows: "For he who has power over everything is One."
[171] Ibid., p. 13, 25.
[172] Ibid., p. 11.
[173] Ibid., p. 15.

tenets of Christianity, he was, like his accuser Ephraim, not embarrassed of calling himself a Christian, as he declared that "we all, wherever we may be, are called Christians after the one name of the Messiah."[174] Furthermore, far from being a 'traditional' *Ḥanpā*-polytheist, he had actually reverted from Chaldean polytheism. After his conversion to Christianity, he is said to have evangelized King Abgar VIII of Osroëne while he was a courtier in his palace in Edessa.[175] This piece of information is not to be neglected, since Osroëne was one of the first kingdoms to convert to Christianity, and its capital Edessa became, a few decades later, along with Antioch, a main hub of the vibrant Syrian Christian culture.[176] Thus, from the little we know about Bardaisan, he is an unmatched founder of Syrian Christianity. But, then, if Bardaisan is a central figure in the early Christian movement, why does Saint Ephraim, who is supposed to be his brother in faith, declare that he has "reached *Ḥanpūtā*?" And what does he mean by this odd accusation? The answer to these two questions is to be found in the history of the religion, of which, I will give a brief account.

During the Apostolic era, in other words, between the death of Jesus and the end of the first century, the Gospels spread through messengers from the regions of Jerusalem and Galilee towards Syrian Antioch,[177] Anatolia, Greece and Rome.[178] According to the New Testament, by the mid-first century, the apostle Paul of Tarsus was already planning to travel to Spain.[179] By the mid-to-late second century, Churches were founded in Alexandria and throughout North-Africa, "as the Christian school headed by Clement and then Origen bears witness."[180] Slightly before the epoch of Bardaisan, in the mid-second century, the Gospel was transmitted from

[174] Ibid., p. 60.
[175] Ibid., pp. VI-VII.
[176] Gabriel and Boustany, eds., *Les grands auteurs des premiers siècles*, p. 57.
[177] Acts 11:26
[178] Phil F. Esler, *The Early Christian World* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), p. 240.
[179] Romans 15:19-23
[180] Esler, *The Early Christian World*, p. 242.

Antioch to Northern Mesopotamia, and then rapidly reached Persia and India.[181] At that time, there were multiple beliefs within the nascent Christian movement.[182] Broadly, although second and third-century Christianity was centered around the figure of Jesus and the basics of his mission were more or less defined, there was not yet any centralized and orthodox doctrine within the Christian faith.[183] In this period, one main intellectual development was occurring: that of the separation of the early movement from the Jewish tradition. For example, Melito of Sardis (d. 180) re-wrote a Christian version of the Biblical Book of Exodus with the intention of Christianizing the Hebrew myth.[184]

During the historical process of the formation of a separate and self-contained Christian doctrine, along with the debate about the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, an important philosophical question rose within Christian circles: if God was inherently Good, "why did He not create [man] in such fashion as not to sin and become guilty?"[185] If the Creator was All Powerful, why is there Evil in the world and what is its cause? Marcion of Sinope (d. 160), who had placed himself in the most anti-Judean fringe of the early Christian movement, thought that the God of the Old Testament was both the Creator of the Universe and the ultimate Cause of Evil. He thus advanced that the God of Goodness, Jesus Christ, had come to abolish the Evil and vengeful God of the Hebrews.[186] Bardaisan also took part in this central debate within early Christianity. He refuted Marcion's argument and advanced his own reflection on the matter. Influenced by Platonic philosophy, he alluded, in his writings, that instead of the Jewish God, the Cause of Evil resided in the material world which existed outside the direct realm of the

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[181] Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, trans. Miranda G. Henry (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 8.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Esler, *The Early Christian World*, p. 234.
[185] Bardaisan, *BLC*, p. 11.
[186] Esler, *The Early Christian World*, p. 237.

"One God."[187] Unlike Marcion, Bardaisan did not reject the Judean heritage of Christianity and did not believe that there were two separate Gods.[188] He was, nevertheless, equated to Marcion in Ephraim's writings.

Ephraim, thus, thought that despite their self-proclaimed Christianity, both Marcion and Bardaisan shared a dualistic vision that is contradictory with his understanding of real monotheism.[189] But Ephraim's accusation was not only motivated by his own understanding of Bardaisan's personal theology. This fourth-century deacon lived a century after Bardaisan, in a moment when Christianity was turning away from the broad and diverse movement described above and truly becoming the imperial religion of Rome.

By the early fourth century, the central question within Christianity had moved away from the relationship to Judaism, and the Cause of Evil was no longer a subject of controversy. What marked Ephraim's epoch was the question of the nature of Jesus Christ: whether he was born of a virgin, whether he was the Son of God, and if so, whether he was God incarnate. Although the debate about the Cause of Evil was no longer important, the writings of such figures as Marcion and Bardaisan were problematic according to the new imperial theology.

Not only were these early authors conflicting with the nascent orthodoxy, but their influence had engendered sects within Christianity which threatened Roman interests. Since the early third century, the Bardesanite movement within the Syrian Christian Church had become overwhelmingly powerful. Based in Edessa, it spread to the Mesopotamian Elchasaite communities where a highly influential Christian prophet named Mani was born in 216.[190] Even

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[187] Gabriel and Boustany, eds., *Les Grands Auteurs des Premiers Siècles*, p. 58.
[188] Bardaisan, *BLC*, p. 15.
[189] Gabriel and Boustany, eds., *Les Grands Auteurs des Premiers Siècles*, p. 55-57.
[190] Gabriel and Boustany, eds., *Les Grands Auteurs des Premiers Siècles*, p. 56-58.

before Mani's death (c. 274-276), his movement had already turned into Roman Christianity's main religious challenger.

Ephraim was well aware of these developments. He had read and witnessed the influence of Marcion and Bardaisan on the Manichean schism which had become, in his days, a great threat to the unity of the Church.[191] About these three heterodox Christian figures, the Syrian deacon writes:

> "Let them be interrogated about their times, about who is older than his associate. Would Mani seize primogeniture? Bardaisan is prior to him. Would Bardaisan claim to be older? His age is younger than the earlier ones. Marcion was the first thorn, the first-born of the thicket of sin, the tare that was the first to spring up. May the Just One trample his growth."[192]

Ephraim was well versed in the literature and society of his epoch. He was aware of the heterodox movements within the Church, he knew the biographies of heterodox theologians and had a clear idea about the genealogies of their Christian doctrines. He was also a very zealous supporter of Trinitarian Christianity. As Sidney Griffith describes him, he was "the major voice in support of Roman ecclesiastical orthodoxy" on the Eastern frontiers of the Empire.[193] Therefore, his accusation of *Ḥanpūtā* against Bardaisan is not only a personal opinion on the philosopher's writings, it is also the reflection and one of the first emanations of nascent Trinitarianism against the heretics who deviated from the teachings of the Roman orthodox Church. In such context, Ephraim obviously knew that Bardaisan was no polytheist in the archaic sense of the term. He was Christian, yet deviant from true faith. Because Bardaisan was not a real Trinitarian Christian as defined by the Nicene Creed, he deserved an accusation of *Ḥanpūtā*.

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[191] Sidney Griffith, "Christianity in Edessa and the Syriac-Speaking World: Mani, Bar Daysan and Ephraem; The Struggle for Allegiance on the Aramean Frontier," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies*, no. 2 (2002), p.13.
[192] Ibid, p.10.
[193] Ibid., pp. 9, 11-12.

But this time, *Ḥanpūtā* was neither a condemnation of archaic polytheism, nor a neutral indication of non-Jewish ethnic origin. It was the polemic and conceptual conflation of heresy and paganism in the minds of orthodox believers.

3. **Ḥanpūtā** *as heresy during the era of Christological controversies*

The tendency to fuse paganism and heresy under ḤNP-derivatives was perpetuated in the later orthodox literature. The Council of Nicaea defined Christianity as the belief in the Holy Trinity. That of Constantinople, held in 381, refined the Nicene creed in such way as to irremediably exclude the originally Christian sects of the Manicheans and the Bardesanites from the Church. But despite the fact that the orthodox theologians agreed on the basic tenets of the Trinitarian doctrine, there were still major dissensions among those followers of Nicene Christianity. The Nicene creed stated that "Jesus Christ [is] the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father." But how can Christ be both human and Divine, how can he and the Father be One? The different theologians' attempts to render coherent the Nicene principles generated a major strife within the nascent orthodox Church.[194]

Many orthodox theologians took part in that debate, and their intellectual efforts produced a number of contradictory doctrines, the details of which I will spare the reader.[195] However, one should recall that in the years following the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, the "Christological controversy" had started. This controversy produced a

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[194] Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, p. 22.

[195] In short, Nestorians were diaphysites. They believed that Jesus had two completely separate natures, one of which is divine and the other is human. The followers of the canons established in the Council of Chalcedon were also diaphysites, but they stated that Jesus had two distinct natures (divine and human) within the same essence. Monophysites, on the on the other hand, defended the position according to which human and divine natures were consubstantial. This doctrine had been established during the Council of Ephesus (431). It was abolished in Chalcedon but was retained as the official doctrine by the Eastern orthodox Churches.

struggle within the Trinitarian Church over orthodoxy. These series of events produced an enlargement of the conception of paganism and heresy which is palpable in the meanings and uses of ḤNP derivatives. With Ephraim, ḤNP-derivatives had already been conflated in a way that confines polytheists and non-Trinitarian Christians to the same label. As we will see, the "Christological controversy" will cause ḤNP derivatives to be applied to almost anyone - even Trinitarians - who did not adhere to someone else's Christological doctrine.

One of the main Trinitarian theologians who was involved in the Christological debates was Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople from 429 until his impeachment and exile to Egypt in 431. His theology had such impact on Syrian Christianity that the influential Patriarchate of Ctesiphon adopted his theories as official Church doctrine in the sixth century.[196] In the mid-fifth century, as a result of Byzantine politics and the major Christological rifts, Roman influence declined in the Syriac Church. Therefore, in an attempt to settle the Christological controversy for good, the orthodox Emperor Marcian convened the Council of Chalcedon in the Fall of 451.[197] Instead of easing the tensions within Oriental Christianity, this Council had the adverse effect of exacerbating the schisms. The Nestorians saw in that Council an officialization of the Roman doctrine that they despised. By contrast, many anti-Nestorian Trinitarians who were, up to the mid-fifth century, still aligned with the Empire, saw in the Council two grave problems. First, despite the explicit anathematization of Nestorius that occurred in Chalcedon, they perceived the doctrine established by this Council as an officialization of Nestorian Christology. Secondly, they perceived the whole Council as resulting in the empowerment of the Diocese of Rome at the expense of the Eastern Dioceses of the Empire. The rising tensions that followed the Council of Chalcedon led to an aggravation of the

[196] Still extant today as the Chaldean Catholic Church (entered in full communion with Rome between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), and the Assyrian Church of the East (which holds an independent status).
[197] John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium* (New York: Knopf, 1989), p. 155.

polemics between the different Christian denominations, especially in the Near-East. The ideologically charged era which lasted dozens of decades following the Council of Chalcedon was also marked by great violence, assassinations and inter-Christian fighting.

Philoxenus of Mabbogh was at the center of the Christological controversy. Between 480 and his assassination at the hand of the Nestorians in 523, this Christian theologian emerged as a fearless defender of Antiochian Christology which was critical of both Chalcedonians and Nestorians. His correspondence with Abū Yaʿfūr Ibn ʿAlqama, phylarch of the Lakhmids, presents his views on the then-undergoing Christological controversy. In a prior letter, this Arabian king who had Christian leanings had asked Philoxenus to brief him on the state of affairs in the religious milieu of Byzantium and the Near-East. In his answer, Philoxenus accords a substantial section to describe the state of the Diocese of Ctesiphon, which had started to lean towards Nestorianism by the late fifth and early sixth century.

Philoxenus described his contemporary, Patriarch Acacius of Ctesiphon (*Āqaq*, r.485-496) as "impious" (*ʿawlā*) because he instituted the "first Nestorian Catholicosate" of the Church of the East.[198] More remarkably, Philoxenus traced back the origins of Ctesiphon's separation from the Syrian Church to the times of Patriarch Papa Bar Aggai (*Pāpā*), the Bishop of Ctesiphon from 315 to 327. In defiance to the other bishops of Christendom, Papa had proclaimed himself Catholicos - a Universal church leader - and reformed the Mesopotamian Church in such way as to transform it into an autocephalous entity, in other words, an institution that is liturgically and doctrinally independent from the other Syriac-speaking Churches. About this early fourth-century Catholicos, Philoxenus writes: "there existed a certain Papa in Ctesiphon who [similarly to Acacius] was also weak and for his fear of the sword turned into a

[198] Harb, "Lettre de Philoxène de Mabboug (...)," p. 211.

Ḥanpā and deviated from the truth."[199] Since Papa is not known to have converted to any polytheistic cult, it is surely for his reforms, which were perceived as sectarianism or heresy by Philoxenus, that he was accused of becoming *Ḥanpā*. In the same line of argument, because it had become, in Philoxenus' eyes, the capital of a rogue and deviant Church, he declared Ctesiphon to be "the great city of the *Ḥanpē*."[200]

The uses of ḤNP-derivatives against Christians are an evolution from the traditional Syriac concept of *Ḥanpūtā*-as-paganism. While in the above-mentioned example, Philoxenus uses the derivatives against Nestorians and the Diocese of Ctesiphon, in another instance, he employs ḤNP against Chalcedonian Christianity, an offshoot of Trinitarian Christianity which is anti-Nestorian and loyal to the Byzantine Empire.

In his "Creed," after having "anathematized the Council of Chalcedon - because it excommunicated Nestorius although agreeing with him and with his doctrines - [and after having anathematized Pope] Leo the *rashī'ā* [wicked],"[201] Philoxenus ends his text explaining that "the *rashī'ā* [wicked] Synod of Chalcedon met in the days of Marcian, *Malkā Ḥanpā*, in the year [451]."[202] Although the formula *Malkā Ḥanpā* has been used to belittle Roman Emperors who persecuted Christians in the name of archaic polytheism, it is to be noted that Marcian was unequivocally a Christian, whose main intention behind sponsoring the Council of Chalcedon was to reunify the Imperial Church following the rebellion of Nestorius.[203] His labeling as *Malkā Ḥanpā* is thus both a provocation and an additional proof of the enlargement of the conception of

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[199] Ibid, p. 212. The Syriac text reads as follows : "*W-āīt ḥwā ḥad Papā ba-qṭīspūn d-āp hū dawyā men deḥltā d-saypā aḥnep w-saṭā men shrarā*."
[200] Ibid, 215. The Syriac text reads as follows: "*qṭīspūn mdīntā rabtā hī d-Ḥanpē*."
[201] Budge, trans., *The Discourses of Philoxenus, Bishop of Mabbôgh (...)*, p. XXXIV
[202] Ibid, p. XXXVI. The Syriac version, found in the same book, p. XCIX, reads as follows: "*ētkanash dèyn sūndos rashī'tā d-kalqedōniā b-yawmaī Marqīnōs malkā Ḥanpā b-shant shba'māā wa-shtīn wa-tlaṯ*"
[203] Norwich, *Byzantium*, pp. 155-156.

paganism in such way as to include any perceived heresy or deviation from one's own understanding of orthodoxy.

Philoxenus is surely not the only one to have used the ḤNP-derivatives in this fashion. The hagiographic *Life of Barsauma*, allegedly written by his disciple Samuel,[204] relays the life of this historical character. Barsauma (*Barṣawmā*, d. 491) was originally a monk who, in the later part of his life, was appointed Metropolis of Nisibis. Although he was critical of Nestorians, he had affinities with them which caused Chalcedonian loyalists to persecute him. Convinced that the Council of Chalcedon was deviant from his own conception of orthodoxy, like Philoxenus, he became critical of the Byzantine Emperor Marcian. His sixth-century biography presents an episode relaying his conflict with some Bishops who were aligned with Byzantium. Due to his growing influence and in order to put a halt to his rise to Church leadership, these Chalcedonian Churchmen conspired against him before the Roman Emperor. Their accusations were reported in the hagiography as follows:

> "[From the Chalcedonian Bishops to the Roman Emperor Marcian]: *Barṣawmā* is an insurgent and a *Ḥanpā* who rebelled against your powerful dominion and cursed the faithfulness of your reign. He threatened the throne of your glory. [He is] in all times superciliously [questioning] the legitimacy of the Imperial authority and desecrating the Faith that you have instituted. He is teaching *Ḥanpūtā* in all places, has gathered around him thousands of thieves [...] and has expanded his reign over many countries within your Empire."[205]

Like Emperor Marcian and Bishop Papa Bar Aggai, Barsauma was neither a polytheist, nor was he teaching paganism. Instead, he was unequivocally a Christian monk and a Saint in the Church

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[204] William Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Library*, vol. 3 (London: Longmans and co., 1872), p. 1143.

[205] Nau, "Résumé Des Monographies Syriaques: Barsauma," p.284.
The Syriac original, which has been partially translated by Nau and completed by me, reads as follows: "*Barṣawmā marūdā w-Ḥanpā d-marad 'al shūlṭanēk 'azīzā w-myaṣḥē l-malkūtēk ba-shrarā w-gzam 'al kūrsyā d-āīqarak kol 'edon w-metrawrab 'al āūḥdanā d-shūlṭanā w-magdap 'al haymanūtā d-āḥīd āṇt w-malep Ḥanpūtā b-kol dūkā w-kanash leh ālpē sagyè d-lesṭayē* [...] *w-ēḥad l-ātrawūtē rawrbē d-malkūtak*."

of the East. He was nonetheless associated with the label *Ḥanpā* by Christian rivals. While Philoxenus accused both Nestorians and Chalcedonians of *Ḥanpūtā*, the Nestorian-leaning Barsauma was accused of the same label by the Chalcedonians.

A related meaning had developed within function *(b)* of the Syriac root ḤNP:[206] during late antiquity, in particular contexts related to debates on religion, *Ḥanpā*'s function as a condemnation was no longer restricted to polytheistic tyrants. It was being applied against rival Christians as well.

One should finally note that the above-cited examples are not only instructive on the specific enlargement in the meaning of ḤNP derivatives. The first text is a correspondence and the third reports oral uses of the root. These facts allude to the high possibility that this root and its derivatives were of widespread use in conversations and oral debates in late antiquity. In addition, the assassination of Philoxenus by rival Christians and the real-life conspiracy against Barsauma indicate that the religious debates during the Christological controversy did not only occur in texts and polemical writings. They also took the form of physical confrontations and street fights in the different cities of the Near-East. Additionally, the above-cited excerpts indicate the gravity of being accused of *Ḥanpūtā*. Philoxenus was scandalized by the *Ḥanpūtā* of Chalcedon. "Teaching *Ḥanpūtā,*" the accusation leveled against Barsauma,[207] was a capital crime in this religiously charged context.

[206] Reminder: *a)* Neutral indicator of ethnic origin ; *b)* Slur or condemnation commonly used against polytheists.
[207] Nau, "Résumé Des Monographies Syriaques: Barsauma," p.284.

4. Hebrew ḤNP*-derivatives according to Aramaic-speaking rabbis*

While Christianity was deprived of the concepts of orthodoxy and heterodoxy until the fourth century C.E., during the same epoch, Judaism was going through an identity crisis. These religious redefinitions were happening simultaneously. They were also accompanied by the rapid expansion of various monotheistic communities and Biblical narratives in the Near-East and Arabia. The Southern Arabian Jewish kingdom of Himyar, the Northern Arabian Christian Ghassanids and Lakhmids and other entities held variant forms of monotheistic beliefs in late antique Syria and Arabia.[208] In parallel to the proliferation of new monotheistic communities, the Roman province of Palestine and Persian-ruled Babylon remained centers of a relatively traditional Judaism. In these communities occurred, up to the sixth century, a long religious reform leading to the institution of rabbinic Judaism. The formation of rabbinic Judaism as a new orthodoxy was marked by the codification of the Talmuds of Palestine and Babylon in the sixth-century.[209] This new orthodoxy was naturally accompanied by the exclusion of groups who were perceived as heretical. In Judeo-Aramaic, those heretics were called *Mīn* in the singular form, and *Mīnīm* in the plural form. These terms are defined by the modern lexicographer of Judeo-Aramaic, Marcus Jastrow, as meaning "sectarians [or] infidels."[210]

Genesis Rabbah is an orthodox exegetical text which was canonized by the rabbis of the Palestinian Talmudic tradition. This canonical document has been written in order to interpret the Book of Genesis. Since it was written by late antique Jewish scholars who, like their Christian counterparts, were dealing with a crisis within monotheistic Biblical religions, parts of this document were therefore meant to update the outdated narratives of the Bible in order to render them meaningful for the Jewish communities of the fifth and sixth centuries. Given this context,

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[208] Rodinson, *Mahomet*, pp. 25-28.
[209] Ibid, pp. 28-30.
[210] Marcus Jastrow, "Mīn," *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushlami, and the Midrashic Literature* (London: Luzac and co., 1903), p.776.

we should emphasize that there is no reference to the *Mīnīm* in the Hebrew Bible. The first reason is that *Mīnīm* is a Judeo-Aramaic word and the Bible was written in the Hebrew language, which had been extinct for a considerable time. The second reason is the context-specific nature of the *Mīnīm*, who are heterodox Jews or Jewish-Christians of an age that is subsequent to the period during which the Bible was written. For these reasons, although ḤNP-derivatives of the Hebrew Bible generally designate pollution and impiety,[211] *Genesis Rabbah* indicates that "wherever *Ḥanūpā* occurs in the scripture, the text refers to the *Mīnīm*."[212] This section has been originally identified by Margoliouth but was more deeply investigated at a later period by Shlomo Pines. Pines explains that the rabbis who wrote this commentary in the sixth century have meant to indicate to their contemporaries that they should understand the Biblical Hebrew ḤNP-derivatives as referring to the heretics they were encountering in their daily lives during late antiquity. This implied that in the Palestinian orthodox Jewish community, the Biblical ḤNP-derivatives were understood as divinely inspired condemnations of the heresies that these late antique orthodox Jews were facing.[213]

The analysis of a single Jewish source is in itself conjectural and the understanding of the root ḤNP in Judeo-Aramaic should be more widely explored. But there is no ambiguity as to what this rabbinic reference means. In addition, when this analysis of Jewish sources is placed in the context of the formation of Judeo-Christian orthodoxies, and when it is put in light of the Christian Syriac literature of the same period, it serves as a corroboration for the semantic and conceptual development that I have explained in the preceding sections.

As it has become clear from the survey of pre-Islamic Syro-Aramaic literature, there is little doubt that (at least) one offshoot of the root ḤNP has semantically and conceptually

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[211] Refer back to Chapter III, section 1 of the present thesis.
[212] Pines, "Jāhiliyya and 'Ilm," pp. 190-191.
[213] Ibid., p. 192.

evolved. While the basic meaning of paganism and non-Jewish ethnic identity was still in use, in discourses that sought to condemn deviant religious beliefs, the original meaning of the Semitic root was conflated in such a way as to contain coreligionists who did not fully adhere to one's doctrine. Thus, the Christian philosopher Bardaisan was accused of *Ḥanpūtā* by the Trinitarian Saint Ephraim, the Nestorians were denounced as preachers of *Ḥanpūtā* by Chalcedonians, both Chalcedonians and Nestorians were called *Ḥanpē* by Antiochians and the rabbinic authorities argued that the *Ḥaneps* of the Hebrew Bible were in fact the heretics of late antiquity. Since all these accusations were exchanged among monotheists within similar Biblical traditions, they constitute evidence as to the fact that what was originally a polemic function of the root ḤNP- polytheism evolved in such way as to conceptually amalgamate polytheism with heterodoxy.

5. A note on monotheism and syncretism in the Near-East and Arabia

Up to the seventh century, many more offshoots of monotheism than those mentioned above had risen in Syria and in Arabia. For instance, archaeological evidence shows that a single God emerged as the "Creator of the Universe and the Lord of Heavens and Earth" in fifth-century Southern Arabian communities.[214] His name - *Raḥmanan* - echoes in a surprising manner *al-Raḥmān*, one of the Qur'ānic names of Allah. In addition to the *Raḥmānists*, pre-Islamic Byzantine and Syriac sources as well as Arabic-Islamic histories inform us that the Southern Arabian Kings Abkarīb Asʿad (r. c. 450-500) and Yūssuf Dhū Nuwwās (r. c. 520-530) (who was possibly Abkarīb's son) converted to some Jewish sect.[215] While Abkarīb led campaigns against Byzantine loyalists in Northern Arabia, a Christian monk and traveler reported that Dhū Nuwwās abolished the heathen cult of his predecessor (who was possibly his elder brother) and obliterated

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[214]Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs : From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 147.

[215] H. Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1894), pp. 62-63.
Rodinson, *Mahomet*, pp. 49-55, indicates that they were not 'properly' orthodox Jews.

the Christian city of Najran in South-Western Arabia.[216] From both pre-Islamic and post-Islamic sources, we know about the Ghassanids of Galilee and the Lakhmids of Hira. They were two vassal kingdoms of surrounding empires in a permanent state of war. Despite their enmity, they were both Arabian and Christian.

From the Apostolic era and through late antiquity, there had been a large religious and intellectual transition towards monotheistic beliefs in the Near-East and Arabia. This phenomenon was accompanied by structural changes in social and political relations, as well as in cultural exchanges that surpassed local identities, traditional religions and language barriers. The incertitude caused by such great transformations was counterbalanced by the rise of religious institutions. But their inner and outer struggles for the determination of single and stable doctrines resulted in the birth of several orthodoxies and the alienation of many non-conforming groups.

Were the followers of the supreme God *Raḥmanan* declared *Ḥanpē* by various Syrian orthodox authorities? Or were the inhabitants of Hira denounced for their *Ḥanpūtā* by their Syrian rivals who were aligned with Byzantium? Although this does not seem inconceivable, there is no evidence to prove or disprove any such suppositions. However, what is rather certain, is that while *Ḥanpē* and its cognates were being collectively and polemically exchanged between monotheists, there is conclusive evidence - but no comprehensive account - of a proliferation of various strands of Biblical monotheism in Syro-Mesopotamia and in the Arabian Peninsula.

[216] Rodinson, *Mahomet*, p. 49.

6. The first generation of Ḥanīfs: the semantic reversal

In the continuity of the previous sections of Chapter III, this section of the semantic reversal is made by historical assessment of semantic and conceptual change. This section is nevertheless more hypothetical in nature: for unlike the previous sections which treated of the transition from 'polytheism' to 'heresy,' this section lacks written sources. Indeed, the semantic change from 'heresy' to 'monotheism,' which is elaborated in this part is, to the extent of my knowledge, not directly pointed to in Syriac or Arabic literatures.

This section is a historical commentary on the context surrounding the lives of Waraqa Ibn Nawfal and Zayd Ibn ʿAmr. These two individuals are members - but not the only members - of the first generation of Arabian *Ḥanīfs*. They are characterized by being about two generations - approximately ten to fifteen years - older than the prophet, which implies that they died prior to the Hijra (around 622) and the rise to prominence of Muḥammad.

Waraqa Ibn Nawfal is a veteran poet, a *Ḥanīf*, and the son of the paternal uncle of Khadīja, the first wife of Muḥammad. In his early life, along with three other Qurayshites, he decided not to attend an annual pagan festivity that involved honoring idols.[217] This group of four monotheists decided to "disperse in the countries seeking *al-Ḥanīfiyya Dīn Ibrāhīm*."[218] Ibn Nawfal found true faith in Syria, where he learned the "Books of God" - an undefined set of Biblical literature - and then converted to Christianity.[219] Later in his life, he returned to Mecca.[220] According to Islamic tradition, at the end of his life, Khadīja would share with him the

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[217] Robinson, C.F. "Waraqa Ibn Nawfal." *EI2*. Leiden: BrillOnline.

[218] Muḥammad Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat al-Nabī 'alayhi al-Salām* (Cairo: Al-Azhar University, 1927), p. 134. The Arabic original reads as follows: "*Wa-hum Waraqa Bnu Nawfal [...] wa-'Ubayd Allāh Bnu Jaḥsh [...] wa-'Uthmān Bnu al-Ḥawrīth [...] wa-Zayd Bnu 'Amrū [...] fa-qāl ba'ḍuhum li-ba'ḍ ta'allamū w-Allāh mā qawmakum 'alā shay' laqad akhṭa'ū [...] yā qawm iltamisū li-anfusikum fa-innakum w-Allāh mā antum 'alā shay' fa-tafarraqū fī l-buldān yaltamisūn al-Ḥanīfiyya dīn Ibrāhīm*."

[219] Ibid. The Arabic original reads as follows: "*fa'ammā Waraqa Ibn Nawfal fa-istaḥkam bi'l-naṣrāniyya*."

[220] Robinson, "Waraqa Ibn Nawfal."

earliest Qur'ānic verses as they were received by the prophet.[221] He died a Christian, between 610 and 615, most probably before Muḥammad's first public calls to join Islam.[222]

Zayd Ibn ʿAmr is a companion of Waraqa Ibn Nawfal and one the four Qurayshites who dispersed in the lands in search of this new belief called *Ḥanīfiyya*.[223] Like Waraqa, he went to the region of Damascus where he met a Jewish rabbi and a Christian priest. When he asked them what religion he should be following, both of them seemingly advised him to stay away of their own beliefs. When he insisted, they told him to be "*Ḥanīfan*."[224] He was killed on his way back from Syria to the Hijaz, sometime between 610 and 620.[225]

Although they are among the earliest examples of *Ḥanīfs* ever recorded, Waraqa and Zayd were definitely not the first Arabs to have travelled to Syria and Mesopotamia. *Kitāb al-Shiʿr w al-Shuʿarā,'* which mentions these first generation *Ḥanīfs,* talks about many other pre-*Ḥanīf* monotheistic poets from inner Arabia who travelled during *jāhiliyya* and lived among Christians or Jews in Syria and Mesopotamia. For example, a couple of decades after Philoxenus and the Lakhmid King Ibn ʿAlqama exchanged letters, in the mid-sixth century, the poet Imru' al-Qays of the Kinda tribe resided in this same Christian Arabian kingdom.[226] Similarly, poets of a slightly later period, such as al-Nābigha al-Dhubiyānī (d. c. 604)[227] and Abd-Allāh Ibn Qays al-Juʿdī (date unknown), were also friends and courtiers of the Lakhmid kings before the vibrant kingdom was decimated at the hands of the Persian troops in the early seventh century (c.604).[228] Ḥassān Ibn Thābit (d. c. 625) was a Central Arabia courtier at their rival's Ghassanid court. Inner Arabian ties to Syrian and Arabian, Christian and Jewish Near-Eastern communities were

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[221] Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb Al-Aghānī* III, p. 82.
[222] Robinson, "Waraqa Ibn Nawfal."
[223] Muḥammad Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat al-Nabī 'alayhi al-Salām*, p. 134.
[224] Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb Al-Aghānī* III, p. 86.
[225] Ibid. It is said that he heard of Muḥammad's preaches, which indicates that he might have died after Waraqa Ibn Nawfal.
[226] Ibn Qutayba, *Al-Shi'r w Al-Shu'arā*', pp. 105-136.
[227] Ibid, pp. 68, 158-159.
[228] Ibid, pp. 289-29.

therefore well established many decades (and possibly many centuries) before the four Qurayshi *Ḥanīfs* travelled "seeking *Ḥanīfiyya*." While the exchanges between Arabs of inner Arabia and Syro-Arabs in the Near-East existed, one could speculate upon two main questions that deserve two closely linked but separate answers.

First question: where could have *Ḥanīfiyya* become a label for some sort of independent monotheism? Was it in Syria or in the Arabian Peninsula? Among Jews, Christians or 'non-Affiliated'-pre-existing Arabian monotheists?

As no historical proof can bring clear answers to the first question, the scarcity of historical sources confines us to formulate possible venues which are consistent with the previously accumulated historical account. If historically valuable at all, Zayd's encounter with the rabbi and the priest who advised him to live as a *Ḥanīf* brings us to think that the semantic shift (and therefore the labelling of a monotheistic sentiment as *Ḥanīfiyya*) might have occurred in non-sectarian (ecumenical) Jewish and Christian, multi-cultural Arabian and Aramean circles in Syria and Mesopotamia. Dissidents to the established orthodoxies exist in any given society. Since most of them were directly exposed to imperial wars and doctrinal-sectarian infighting, and since there is no reason to doubt that there were permanent conversations between the different monotheists of the Near-East, one may speculate that some local religious authorities could have been repulsed by sectarianism and indignant of the alienation that their faiths were going through because of the interplay of empires. This was probably a fertile ground for dissidence and the birth of a new faith or movement.

On the other hand, there is also a serious possibility that the specific advice of priests and rabbis to Zayd (to adopt *Ḥanīfiyya*) is a later apologetic exaggeration of Zayd's interaction with Judeo-Christian religious authorities. Perhaps it was an apologetic discourse that emerged after

the Muḥammadan mission, with the aim of telling Jewish or Christian detractors of the Muḥammadan movement something in the line of: "even your priests were tending towards *Ḥanīfiyya*." In such a situation, instead of its Near-Eastern origins, *Ḥanīfiyya* would be a set of ideas influenced by Syro-Mesopotamian context, but organic to the Arabian Peninsula. After all, Waraqa, Zayd and their two other companions left Mecca with *Ḥanīfiyya* in mind. Given the presence of monotheistic ideas in 'pre-*Ḥanīf*' inner Arabia and Southern Arabia, one should not be surprised of a development of such a notion in the Hijaz.

Second question: how is it possible that *Ḥanpūtā*, a word which reflects a conflation of 'polytheism' and 'heresy,' has become *Ḥanīfiyya*, a label for some monotheistic movement?

Like the first answer, the present demonstration is not textual. Because of the lack of historical sources relevant to this particular question, the conceptual reversal is only understandable by means of analogy. Thus, looking at similar historical cases of reversal would clarify this particular semantic reversal. Here are two well documented cases of semantic reversal which resonate with our case study:

The first instance is well attested in Biblical studies.[229] It concerns how the earliest followers of Jesus came to self-identify as Christians. First-century followers of Jesus Christ used to call themselves 'brothers.'[230] Nothing was too surprising, since Israelites had already employed the term 'brother' to designate fellow Israelites. For Christians, however, 'the brotherhood' was not restricted to Israelites. They were a recent movement and were preaching the message of 'the new brotherhood' to Jews and Gentiles alike. The New Testament tells us that the switch from 'brother' to 'Christian' occurred many years after Jesus' crucifixion (c. 30-35 C.E.), at the time when the disciples of Jesus reached Antioch (c. 55-65 C.E.). In Antioch, the

[229] William Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible,* ed. H.B. Hackett (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1890), pp. 329-330.
[230] *ἀδελφός* (adelfos) in Greek.

polytheists started referring to the newcomers by the name of their spiritual leader: 'followers of Christ', and 'Christians.'[231] The 'brothers' ended up adopting the name which Antiochene pagans used for them and started applying it to themselves.

The second example is drawn from the modern political history of the United States. Like *Ḥanpā* (and other derivatives), the term 'democrat' used to be a common slur before the Democratic party was founded in 1828. Prior to 1828, 'democrat' was thus often exchanged by rival political and ideological factions. For example, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) was accused by the Federalists of being a "democrat - meaning a panderer to the mob."[232] In 1806, Thomas Green Fessenden, a poet of the early Republic denounced the prototypical "democrat" as someone "whose life is one dishonest shuffle."[233] The general understanding of "democrat" as a synonym for opportunist and hypocrite faded in the few following decades, in a way that was inversely related to the rise of the American Democratic party as a stable and long-lasting political and ideological power.

Although odd in appearance, the semantic and conceptual reversal process which has affected the Semitic root ḤNP has parallels in other contexts. It follows the same pattern of semantic change common in all languages. This pattern of change could be observed when an entity ends up adopting a derogatory term used by its detractors. In a context where all kinds of - monotheistic and polytheistic groups were denounced for being *Ḥanpē*-heterodox or erring into *Ḥanpūtā*-heresy, the above-mentioned analogies show that the early *Ḥanīfs*' appropriation of the label, if not a historical fact, is certainly a very plausible explanation. The originally pejorative connotation of the term would have faded over time. Simultaneously, the originally negative term would have been customized, by those who have adopted it, in such way as to be equated

[231] Acts 11: 26, the excerpt reads as follows: "[...]The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."
[232] William Safire, *Safire's New Political Dictionary* (New York: Random house, 1993), p. 176.
[233] Ibid.

with pre-existing beliefs of this same group. For instance, prior to having been named *Ḥanīfiyya, Dīn Ibrāhīm* or the worship of the Kaʿba might have been tenets of the proto-*Ḥanīfī* group which would have been meddled to *Ḥanīfiyya* after the group adopted its new name.

7. Ḥanīfiyya *in prophetic and early caliphal times*

The same sources that I have used to date and suggest a first generation of *Ḥanīfs* mention a second generation. The second generation *Ḥanīfs* are best represented by - but not restricted to - Abā ʻĀmir al-Rāhib and Umayya Ibn Abī al-Ṣalt. These individuals are characterized by sharing with the prophet Muḥammad the proto-Islamic religion of *Ḥanīfiyya*, the same history and society. They were also about the same age as the prophet. Remarkably, they were also his opponents.

Abā ʿĀmir was still alive in 624 and possibly died after Muḥammad (d. c. 632). He was a *Ḥanīfī* monk (hence his title al-Rāhib) which indicates possible ascetic tendencies within the *Ḥanīfī* movement. Around the year 620, he quarreled with Muḥammad about the true meaning, and possibly about the central tenets, of *Ḥanīfiyya*.[234] In the aftermath of this quarrel, after a disagreement on the definition of *Ḥanīfiyya*, he rejected Muḥammad's prophethood and became an active member in a schismatic congregation. He is condemned in the Qur'ān as the leader of "those who took for themselves a mosque for causing harm, disbelief and division among the believers."[235] Uri Rubin claims that Abā ʿĀmir possibly entered in direct contact with the Byzantine army, seeking material and physical support in his fight against the prophet.[236]

Umayya Ibn Abī al-Ṣalt (died after 624) was also a rival of the prophet. While Abā ʿĀmir started a schismatic mosque, Umayya supported Abū Sufyān against the early followers of

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[234] Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat al-Nabī 'alayhi al-Salām*, pp. 356-357.
[235] Qur'ān, al-Tawba, 9:107. Several Islamic accounts seem to confirm this claim. For example, he is specifically pointed to as the instigator of the schismatic mosque in M.A.S. Abū al-Nayl, *Tafsīr Al-Imām Mujāhid Ibn Jabr Al-Mutawaffī Sanat 102 H.* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Ḥadītha, 1989), p. 274.
[236] Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and Kaʿba (...)," p. 268.

Muḥammad during the battle of Badr in 624.[237] He is remembered by the tradition for his feud with Muḥammad, but also for his poetry which was noticeably more religious and much more influenced by Biblical mythology than any other poetry of early seventh-century Arabia.[238] The Arabic tradition mentions him as having integrated into *jāhilī* Arabia many concepts, narratives and locutions from the Biblical Books and holy scriptures.[239] He died an anti-Muḥammadan *Ḥanīf* who rejected Islam. On his deathbed, he reportedly said: "I know that *Ḥanīfiyya* is the truth, but the doubt that I have inside me is in Muḥammad."[240] When this saying was reported to the prophet, Muḥammad commented, saying: "his poetry believed, yet his heart disbelieved."[241]

If these accounts are authentic, they testify to the continuance of the *Ḥanīfiyya* movement into the prophetic years. They also announce a series of schisms within the original belief. While these *Ḥanīfs* have possibly lived to the early 630s, there is an additional source which was greatly ignored by historians, that would potentially prove the survival of the *Ḥanīfī* movement up to the 650s and even later. Indeed, the Qur'ānic codices of Ibn Masʿūd (d. 650) and of ʿUbay Ibn Kaʿb (d. 649) expressly mention *Ḥanīfiyya* as a religion. For example, the *Codex of Ibn Masʿūd*, Āl ʿImrān, 3:19 replaces "*al-Islām*" by "*al-Ḥanīfiyya*", rendering the verse in question as follows: "that the religion for Allah is *al-Ḥanīfiyya*."[242] There are two variant readings of Sūrat al-Bayyina 98:2 according to Ibn Kaʿb. The first variant states that "the straightest religion is *al-Ḥanīfiyya*, *muslima* (submitted to the law of Allah) which does not associate other deities to him." The second variant in Ibn Kaʿb reiterates Ibn Masʿūd's version: "that the religion for Allah

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[237] Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* IV, p. 96-97.
[238] Ibn Qutayba, *Al-Shi'r w al-Shu'arā'*, p. 459.
[239] Ibid, 459-460.
[240] Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* IV, p. 103. "*A'lam anna al-Ḥanīfiyya ḥaqq wa-lakinna al-shakka bi-dākhilī fī Muḥammad.*"
[241] Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and Kaʿba (...)," p. 277, citing *Aghani*, III, 187: "*Āmana shi'ruhu wa-kafura qalbahu*."
[242] Jeffrey, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān*, p. 32.
The variation in Āl 'Imrān, 3:19, as reported by Jeffrey reads as follows: "*Inna al-dīn 'ind Allāh al-Ḥanīfiyya* [the canonical Qur'ān reads *'Islām'*] *wa mā ikhtalaf alladhīn ūwtū l-kitāb illā min ba'd mā jā'ahum al-'im baghyā baynahum wa-man yakfur bi-āyat Allāh fa-inna Allāh sarīʿ al-ḥisāb*."

is *al-Ḥanīfiyya*, it is neither Judaism nor Christianity."[243] When these two apocryphal variants of the Qur'ān are analyzed in light of the biographies of second generation *Ḥanīfs* (again, if the sources are authentic), they indicate not only dissensions in the community of early believers, but also the survival of *Ḥanīfiyya* as a real-life religious tendency or movement well into the second half of the seventh century. If well invested by researchers and rightly analyzed in light of contemporary events and biographies, these two observations could be fruitful contributions to the historical understanding of the Muḥammadan mission and seventh century Islam.

8. Final suggestions

In the seventh and eighth centuries, early Muslims were called a few different names by Syriac Christians. In addition to *Ṭayāyē* which is the traditional Syriac word for a nomadic Arab, early Muslims were known to the Syrians as *Mahgrayē*, which is the translation of *Muhājirūn*.[244] They were also called *Mashelmanē*, which, again, is a translation of the Arabic word *Muslimūn*.[245] Both *Mahgrayē* and *Mashelmanē* are labels that had been used by early Muslims and were later calqued into Syriac.

While the early Muslims were calling themselves *Muhājirūn* and *Muslimūn*, given the apocryphal codices and the accounts on second generation *Ḥanīfs*, one can also think that they (or at least some of them) were also referring to themselves as *Ḥunafāʾ* and followers of *Ḥanīfiyya*. Interestingly, within the same time frame and up until a later period, beside *Mahgrayē* and *Mashelmanē*, Syriac authors were using *Ḥanpē* as an early name for the Muslims. For

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[243] Ibid, p. 179.
Qur'ān, al-Bayyina, 98:1-2. Version 1: "[...] *wa-ra'at al-yahūdiyya wa-al-naṣrāniyya inna aqwama al-dīn al-Ḥanīfiyya muslima ghayr mushrika wa-man ya'mal ṣāliḥan fa-lan yukfarahu.*"

Version 2: "[...] *wa-ra'at al-yahūdiyya wa-al-naṣrāniyya inna al-dīn 'ind Allāh al-Ḥanīfiyya ghayr al-yahūdiyya wa lā al-naṣrāniyya wa-man ya'mal khayran fa-lan yukfarahu.*"

[244] Fred McGraw Donner, *Muḥammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 260.
[245]Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christianity and Early Muslim World*.

example, the chroniclers of Zuqnin described the early conversion of a Christian monk to Islam as a "conversion to *Ḥanpūtā*."[246] At a later period, when the Umayyad Empire was already established, they wrote: "when the error of *Ḥanpūtā* prevailed in the country and the darkness and obscurity of the devil gathered over the entire camp of the believers, we became a mockery and laughing-stock to all the *Ḥanpē*."[247] While in other circumstances, *Ḥanpūtā* was still generically applied against polytheists and monotheists of all kinds, in some specific circumstances, there is no doubt as to its Syriac application as a synonym of Islam.

There is little doubt about the Syro-Aramaic origin of the word *Ḥanīfiyya*. However, given the possibility than *Ḥanīfiyya* was a religious tendency in seventh century Arabia, and given that Syriac-speaking individuals were in permanent contact with Central Arabians, I shall close this thesis with a question: when *Ḥanpē* and *Ḥanpūtā* occur in seventh and eighth century Syriac texts that are specifically describing Muslims, is it possible that these instances of ḤNP derivatives are - like *Mahgrayē* and *Mashelmanē* - Syriacized calques of the Arabic names *Ḥunafāʾ* and *Ḥanīfiyya*? Is it possible that Syrians have heard early Muslims call themselves *Ḥunafāʾ* which made them associate this word to the already extent Syriac word *Ḥanpē*-heretic?

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[246] Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin*, p. 249.
The Syriac text is found in Chabot, *Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum Vulgo Dictum S.Syr. 43 and 53*, p. 284.

[247] Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin*, p. 330.
Transliteration of the Syriac text in Chabot, *Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum Vulgo Dictum S.Syr. 43 and 53*, p. 393:
"*Kad deyn teshtalṭat ṭū'yay d-Ḥanpūtā 'al ār'ā w-qṭar ḥeshūkā w-'emṭanā d-ākelqarṣā 'al koleh gabā d-mhaymnè wa-hwayn mwīqā w-būzḥā l-kolhen Ḥanpē*."

CONCLUSION

Although this present study concedes the idea of a semantic reversal, unlike the earlier theories which have limited their efforts to static literary and linguistic criticism, it concentrates on historicizing conceptions and meanings. However, historicizing is a difficult task, especially when the ultimate goal is to reach an objective explanation of a certain phenomenon. Building a coherent account out of many fragmented details necessitated that I discard from the text much evidence that expressly supports the thesis. On the other hand, while writing, I also realized that at least some evidence is either missing or does not entirely fit the argument.

This said, I was also confronted by an additional 'test' related to the authenticity of the sources. Concretely, it often takes the shape of a dilemma in face of the conflicting accounts of two or more scholars concerning a certain manuscript. Was it really written by X authors? Or was it, as that other scholar claims, a pseudo-epigraph - in other words, a later attribution to a prominent author of an earlier period? A different author than the one expressly cited on a manuscript does not only pose the problem of the authorship of the work. If it has been authored decades or centuries later, it could entirely shatter the chronology on which a historical theory is being installed.

Because of the late codification of the Islamic tradition, the test of authenticity is exacerbated for anyone who decided to use the Ḥadīth literature as a vehicle of historical understanding of pre-Islamic and early Islamic times. I settled this problem by following through the coherent recommendations of Uri Rubin and by therefore recognizing, to a considerable extent, the authenticity of Arabic-Islamic accounts on early *Ḥanīfs*.

Finally, to sum up the historical path of the Semitic root which is the subject of the thesis, ḤNP derivatives first appeared in ancient Aramaic and Biblical Hebrew, where they originally

meant ‘pollution’ and ‘ungodliness.’ They made their way into Syriac, where they primarily designated features of ‘paganism.’ With the rise of orthodox Christianity and Judaism, one of the Syriac offshoots of ḤNP evolved from the common definition of ‘pagan’ and became reflexive of a conceptual and polemical amalgamation of ‘paganism’ and ‘heresy’ in the writings and in the discourses of many orthodox monotheists. In a context of debate on true faith and orthodoxy, *Ḥanpā* was a modest but constant intimidation tool, an accusation and an insult applied to anyone with whom there were doctrinal or religious disagreements.

This evolution in the semantics of ḤNP derivatives occurred over the few centuries that preceded its greatest transformation. Then, during a blurry era filled with uncertainty, beginning in the second half of the sixth century, from a Syriac slur for ‘heresy,’ it was adopted by Arabian heterodox monotheists. Through this reversal, ḤNP turned into an Arabic word with a new meaning for a new alternative faith group which rose in a few decades and became a direct precursor to Islam (see figures 2 and 3).

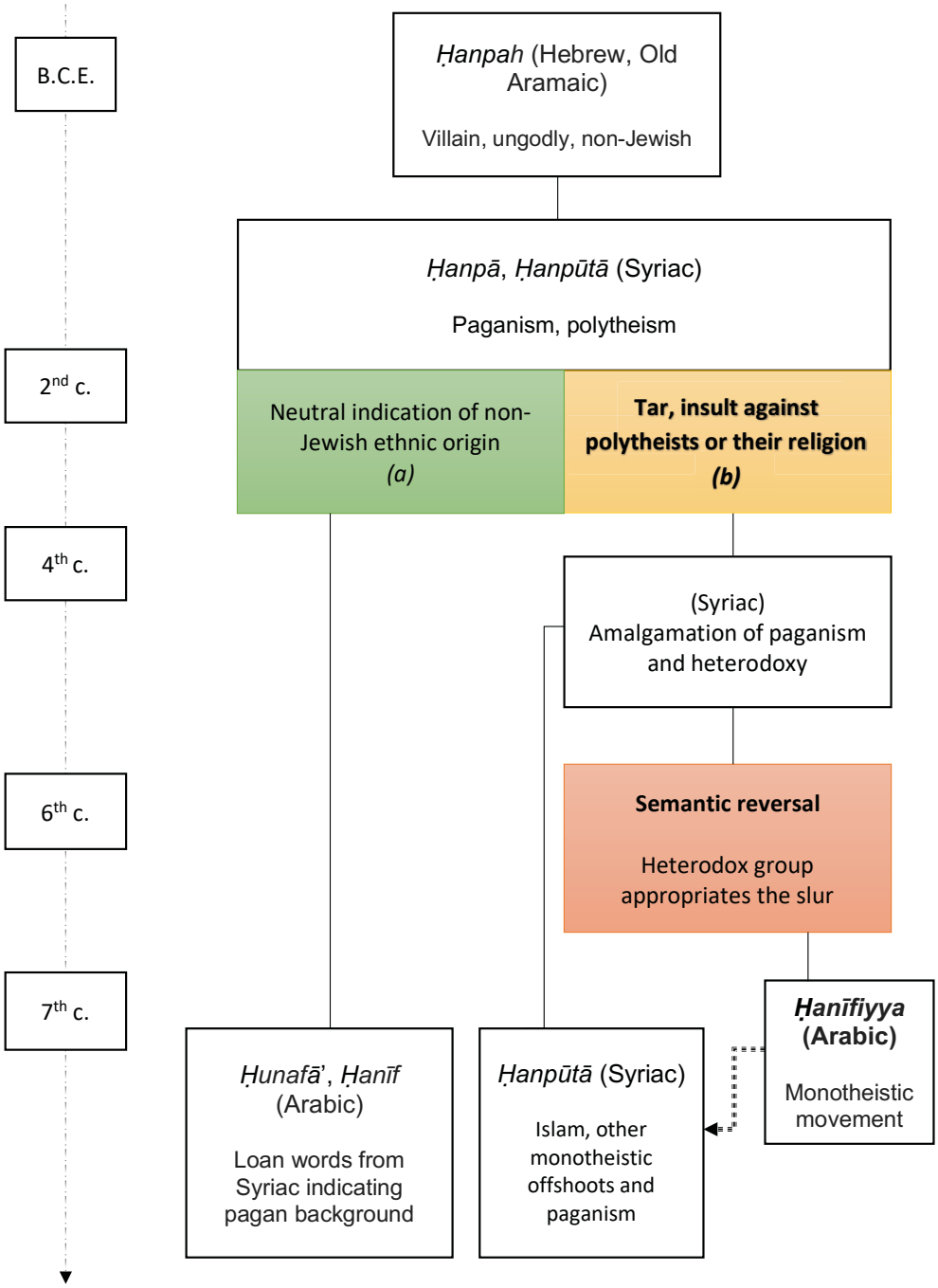
Despite the fact that the thesis is limited to the history of ḤNP up to the early Islamic era, the trajectory of transformation of this Semitic root is yet to be over. In search for explanations to the origin of the word, beginning with Ibn al-Nadīm’s *Fihrist* (tenth century), ḤNP starts being associated in Islamic scholarship to the city of Harran,[248] where the Bible situates the life and times of the patriarch Abraham.[249] Later, with the emergence of Islamic speculative philosophy, *Ḥanīfiyya* ceases to be referred to as a social movement. Its historiographic association to Abraham diminishes. Instead, as Frank Griffel suggests in a recent article, principally through interpretations of Sūrat al-Rūm, 30:30 (which reads: “Direct your face toward the religion,

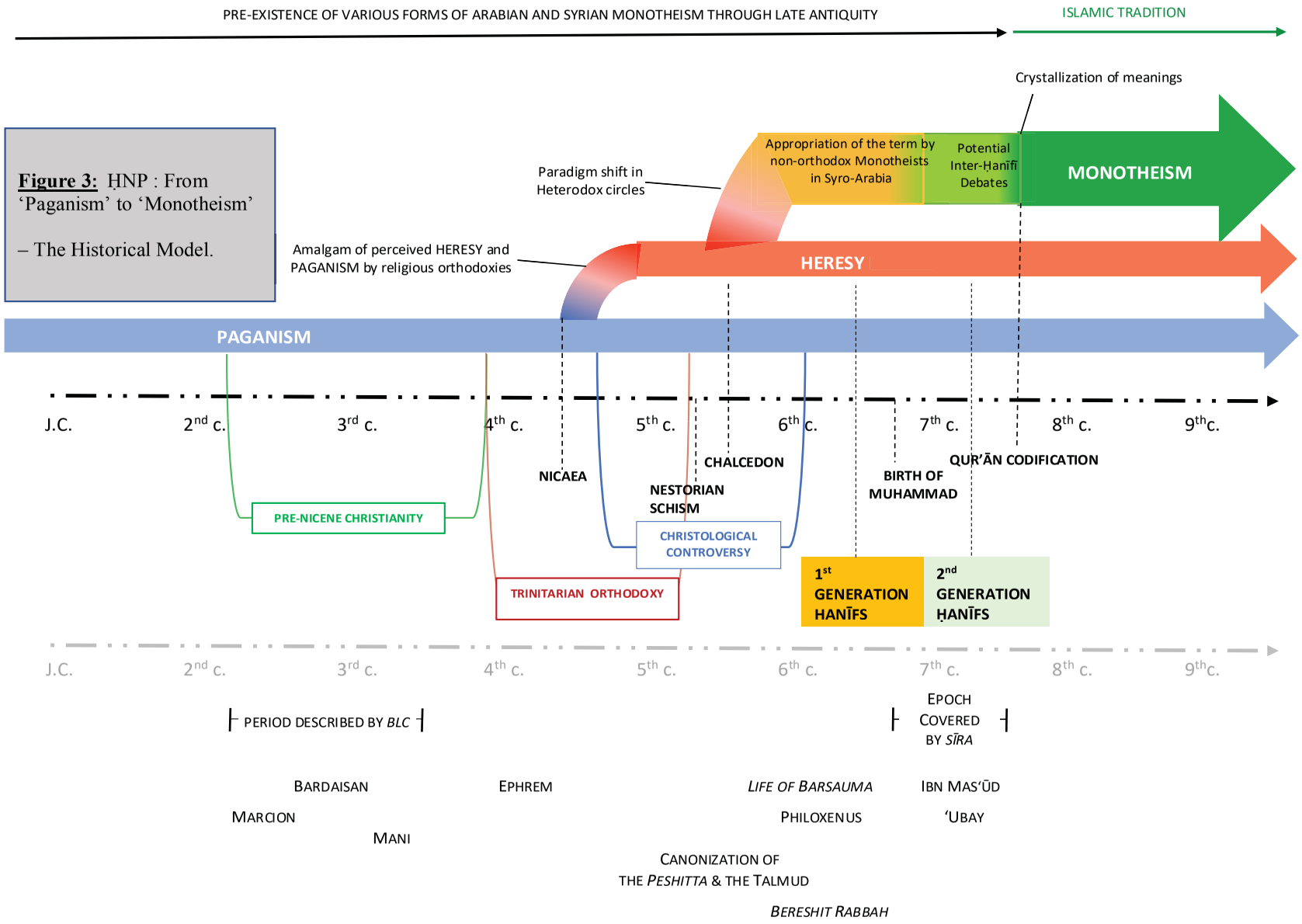
[248] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb Al-Fihrist*, p. 22.
[249] Genesis 11:31: “Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there.”

ḥanīfan, the *fiṭra* of Allah upon which He has created humankind [...])[250] *Ḥanīfiyya* gradually becomes the theological concept of "original disposition" or "original monotheism" which is, to this day, the main understanding of the word.[251]

[250] Qur'ān, Sūrat al-Rūm, 30:30:
"*Fa-aqim wajhaka li l-dīni ḥanīfan fiṭrata allāhi allatī faṭara al-nās 'alayhā* [...]."
[251] Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazali's Use of "Original Human Disposition" (*Fiṭra*) and Its Background in the Teachings of al-Fārābī and Avicenna", pp. 2, 4, 31.

Figure 2: Etymological assessment – an answer to de Blois' theory




PRE-EXISTENCE OF VARIOUS FORMS OF ARABIAN AND SYRIAN MONOTHEISM THROUGH LATE ANTIQUITY
ISLAMIC TRADITION
Crystallization of meanings
Figure 3: ḤNP : From 'Paganism' to 'Monotheism'
– The Historical Model.
Paradigm shift in Heterodox circles
Appropriation of the term by non-orthodox Monotheists in Syro-Arabia
Potential Inter-Ḥanīfī Debates
MONOTHEISM
Amalgam of perceived HERESY and PAGANISM by religious orthodoxies
HERESY
PAGANISM
J.C.
2nd c.
3rd c.
4th c.
5th c.
6th c.
7th c.
8th c.
9thc.
NICAEA
CHALCEDON
NESTORIAN SCHISM
BIRTH OF MUHAMMAD
QUR'ĀN CODIFICATION
PRE-NICENE CHRISTIANITY
CHRISTOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY
TRINITARIAN ORTHODOXY
1st GENERATION ḤANĪFS
2nd GENERATION ḤANĪFS
PERIOD DESCRIBED BY BLC
EPOCH COVERED BY SĪRA
BARDAISAN
EPHREM
LIFE OF BARSAUMA
IBN MAS'ŪD
MARCION
PHILOXENUS
'UBAY
MANI
CANONIZATION OF THE PESHITTA & THE TALMUD
BERESHIT RABBAH

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