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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (2005), pp. 387-399

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of [School of Oriental and African Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20181949>

Accessed: 24/09/2012 11:00

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# How did the quranic pagans make a living?\*

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Among the better known essay questions set for students of Islamic subjects in the UK is the one asking for comments on the dictum that 'The Qur'an is the only reliable source for the rise of Islam'. Students typically respond with an account of the formation of the canonical text and a comment that however we envisage this process, the Quran is not a source rich in historical information. Few could disagree with that. Historians of the life and times of the Prophet use the Quran as explained in *tafsīr*, which supplies the names, dates, stories and other supplementary data that they need, and they unwittingly tend to do so even when they think they are using the Quran alone. But we may have reached the point of under-estimating the book as a source. Rich in historical evidence it may not be, but we are not in the habit of squeezing it for information either, presumably because the sheer abundance of the exegetical material seems to make it unnecessary. With so many works of *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth* and *sīra* to attend to, one comes to think of quranic statements as in the nature of mere captions for which the substance must be sought elsewhere. This is entirely in order for historians of readers' reactions to the book, but it evidently will not do for those interested in the society out of which the book emerged. In what follows I shall ignore the exegetical tradition in order to look at the Quran on its own, with a view to answering one simple question: how does it envisage the *mushrikūn* with whom it takes issue as making a living?

## I. Agriculture

In sura 36 the Prophet is told to warn a people whose fathers had not been warned and who were both heedless and unresponsive: admonished or otherwise, they would not believe; rather, they mocked the Messenger (36:6–10, 30). Among the signs with which the Messenger tries to persuade these obstinate people is that God revives dead land and brings forth grain (*ḥabban*) of which they eat, as well as gardens of date palms and grapes (*jannāt min nakhīl wa-a'nāb*), and that He causes springs (*al-'uyūn*) to gush forth in them so that they may eat of the fruit. 'It was not their hands which made it, so will they not give thanks?', he says (v. 33–5). The same point is made at 56:63 f.: 'Have you considered the soil you till? Do you yourselves sow it, or are We the sowers?'.<sup>1</sup> In these passages the unbelievers are agriculturalists who foolishly think that they are causing grain, date palms, grapes and the like to grow. They are suffering from the human propensity to arrogance, for in actual fact it is God who causes these things to appear.

One is mildly surprised by these passages, given that the Meccans, with whom the obstinate people are traditionally identified, are well known to every Islamicist as traders whose city was located in a barren spot. But they are only two out of many passages in the Quran which suggest that the Prophet's opponents were agriculturalists, whatever else they may have been in addition. God's revival of dead land is a prominent theme, both as a sign of His awesome power and as a proof of the resurrection, and the reference is overwhelmingly to cultivated plants, not to the flowers that appear in the desert in spring or other wild vegetation. God causes luxuriant gardens (*ḥadā'iq dhāt bahja*) to

\* I should like to thank Michael Cook for comments on this article.

<sup>1</sup> In translations from the Quran in this article, 'you' is always in the plural unless otherwise noted, and the translations are usually modified versions of Arberry or Yusuf Ali.

grow (27:60; cf. 80:30). He sends down rain, producing plants (*nabāt*) of all kinds, including greens (*khadir*), grain (*ḥabb*), date palms (*nakhl*), and gardens (*jannāt*) of grapes (*a'nāb*), olives (*al-zaytūn*) and pomegranates (*al-ruḥmān*) (6:99), or simply fruits of all kinds (7:57; cf. 14:32). Other passages mention grain and (other) plants (78:15), gardens, grain and date palms (50:9f.), date palms and grapes (16:67; 23:19), date palms, grain, grapes and olives (16:11), and grapes, dates, olives, fruits and fodder, all of which are 'goods for you and your cattle (*matā'an lakum wa-li-an'āmikum*)' (80:27–32). Here the unbelievers are not explicitly said to be growing such things themselves, however.

That they were agriculturalists is none the less clear from the fact that they had agricultural rituals of which the Messenger strongly disapproves. 'They assign to God, out of the harvest and cattle that He has multiplied, a portion saying, "This is for God"—so they assert—and this is for our associates. But the share of their associates does not reach God, whereas that which is for God reaches their associates' (6:136); 'And they say, this cattle and harvest are forbidden (*ḥijr*), nobody should eat it except whoever We wish, as they claim' (6:138). The ritual seems to consist in the consecration of the first fruits of agriculture and the first offspring of domestic animals to the divine, and it is one of the many passages showing that the *mushrikūn* believed in the same God as the Messenger.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, the portions dedicated to God and His 'associates' were left to be eaten by 'whoever God wished', perhaps meaning the poor and travellers. They were in any case forbidden to the owners of the first fruits/offspring themselves.

The Messenger responds partly by denying that God would receive any of it (all would go to the 'associates', i.e. the lesser divine beings, who are implicitly identified as demonic here) and partly by setting out how one should actually behave. He reiterates that it is God who is responsible for the growth of gardens, date palms (*al-nakhl*), seed produce (*zar'*) of various kinds, olives (*al-zaytūn*), and pomegranates (*al-ruḥmān*) and adds: 'eat of their fruits when they fructify and pay the due (*ḥaqqahu*) thereof on the day of their harvest, and do not be prodigal: God does not like the prodigal. And of cattle some are for burdens and others for meat. Eat of what God has provided you with and follow not in the footsteps of Satan' (6:141f.). Once again, it is clear that we are in an agricultural community. Both the infidels and the believers have fields, gardens and cattle; both harvest grain, olives and pomegranates, but they have different views on how God wishes the harvest to be handled.

The pagans also had other rituals to do with cattle. There were animals on which it was forbidden to ride and others over which they would not mention the name of God (i.e. when they slaughtered them); apparently, slaughter was normally hallowed (6:138). There was also a custom of reserving the unborn young of some animals for the men of the community, forbidding their wives to eat of them unless the young were stillborn, in which case they would share them (6:139). Apparently, it was pairs of animals that were set aside in one or all of these rituals, for the Messenger responds by listing pairs of sheep (*al-da'n*), goats (*al-ma'iz*), camels (*al-ibl*) and cows/oxen (*al-baqar*), sarcastically asking exactly what it is that God is supposed to have forbidden: two males or two females, or the unborn young of two females? And were the unbelievers present when God ordered such a thing? All this, he says, is something they have falsely attributed to God in order to lead people astray

<sup>2</sup> See W. M. Watt, 'Belief in a "High God" in Pre-Islamic Mecca', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16, 1971; G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* (Cambridge, 1999).

(6:143f.). Once again, he responds by setting out the truth: nothing is forbidden unless it is carrion, blood, pork, or meat hallowed to other than God (6:145). Elsewhere, he tells a warning parable culminating in the same rules (16:112–16).

Here, then, we see that it was not just camels that the infidels kept, but also sheep, goats, cows and oxen. 'He has created cattle for you. In them is warmth (*dif*<sup>3</sup>) and benefits and you eat of them', as sura 16:5 says; 'and there is beauty in them for you, when you bring them home to rest (in the evening) and when you drive them forth abroad to pasture (in the morning) (*wa-lakum fihā jamāl hīna turihūna wa-hīna tasrahūna*)' (16:5). The reference here is to the flocks that one can still see being driven to and from villages on a daily basis in the Middle East, and the remark that their owners found them beautiful is particularly suggestive: we are in a rural community in terms of values too. When the owners are said to derive warmth from their cattle, the reference is to the goods made 'of their wool, fur, and hair' listed among the benefits of cattle in another passage (in which they are not however described as their owners) (16:80). On the day of judgement mountains will be 'like carded wool' (101:5).<sup>3</sup> People are told not to break their covenants with God and thus behave like a woman who unravels the thread she has spun<sup>4</sup> (16:91f.), while the infidels are reminded that cattle provide them with food and drink, and that they ride on them (23:21; 36:71–3, where they are explicitly described as owning them). They also had horses, mules and donkeys, on all of which they rode (16:8).

That we are in an agricultural community is confirmed by two parables. One is about a group of people who own a garden and decide to collect its fruit the next morning; they resolve to do so without saying 'God willing', however, and the garden is ruined during the night (*tāfa 'alayhā tā'if min rabbikā*); ignorant of this, they set out the next morning, determined to prevent poor people from getting into the garden first, and when they find it ruined, they turn to God in repentance, expressing the hope that He will give them a better garden than this (i.e. in the next world, 68:17–33).<sup>5</sup> The moral, as so often, is that humans must learn to recognize their own impotence vis-à-vis God, who here manifests His power through some destructive force of nature. The second parable, which is much longer, concerns two men, who prove to be a believer and an unbeliever (18:32–44). God gave two gardens to one of them (not, as one expects, a garden to each, though this was probably how an earlier version was told). The gardens were of grapes, each garden was surrounded by date palms (*nakhil*), and there was a field (*zar'*) and a canal (*nahr*) in between. Both gardens produced abundant produce. We are not told what the other man received, but he clearly was not doing as well, for the owner of the two gardens boasted to him of his superior wealth and power. The wealthy man also wronged himself by going into his garden (now in the singular), saying, 'I do not think that this will ever perish, nor do I think that the hour is coming (*qā'ima*); and if I am really to be returned to my Lord, I will surely find something better there in exchange'. The poor man responded by asking him whether he did not believe in God, who had created him from a sperm-drop, though the wealthy man had not denied God's existence: here as so often, *kufir* seems to lie not in unbelief, but rather in failure to take account of God in one's thought and action. The wealthy man had apparently compounded his

<sup>3</sup> Thus Yusuf Ali (Arberry has 'like plucked wool-tufts').

<sup>4</sup> Or like the woman who unravelled the thread she span (a reading suggestive of Penelope).

<sup>5</sup> The parable is taken to refer to firstfruits in J. Benthall, 'Firstfruits in the Quran', in A. I. Baumgarten (ed.), *Sacrifice in Religious Experience* (Leiden 2002) (following Décobert). He does not discuss 6:136.

arrogance with *shirk*, however, for the poor man continued by affirming that, 'He is God, my Lord and I do not associate anyone with my Lord'. The poor man also told the wealthy man that the latter should have said, 'as God will, there is no power except in God', when he went into his garden thinking that it would never perish, and that although he was not himself well endowed with wealth and sons, the Lord might give him something better than this garden (i.e. in the next world). The poor man added that God might also send a thunderbolt against the wealthy man's garden, turning it into mere sand, or He might make the water run off underground so that he would never be able to find it again; and God apparently did just that, for the continuation tells us that the rich man's fruits were destroyed (*uḥīta*), and that he went around wringing his hands and wailing, 'If only I had not associated anyone with my Lord'. There was nobody to help him apart from God Himself, the only source of protection.

This is a portrait of the archetypal *mushrik*. Here, as elsewhere in the Quran, he is a man well endowed with wealth and sons (68:14; cf. 8:28, 18:46; 57:20) who believes in God, but ascribes partners to Him, only to find out that the supposed partners cannot or will not help him against God (e.g. 16:27; 26:92ff.; 28:62ff. 46:5). Here as elsewhere, too, he denies that the day of judgement is about to come anytime soon or at all (e.g. 17:51; 25:11; 34:3; 45:32) and has his doubts about the resurrection. Often, the *mushrikūn* reject the idea of bodily resurrection out of hand (e.g. 13:5; 17:49–52, 98; 22:5; 36:78), or perhaps even the afterlife (e.g. 6:29, 150; 34:8); at the very least they did not fear any reckoning (*ḥisāb*) (78:27). Here there is no reference to the form that afterlife might take, and the idea of a return to God is not positively ruled out, but the possibility of other-worldly punishment is denied. As so often, it is by arrogance that the *mushrik* wrongs himself:<sup>6</sup> he is too pleased with himself, too confident in his own all too human power, and too lacking in fear of God to listen to warnings when they come. 'He thinks that his wealth will make him last for ever', as 104:3 puts it. God duly inflicts disaster on him, destroying his garden in much the same way that He destroyed past nations. The Messenger repeatedly warns his infidel opponents that a similar disaster will soon overtake them too.

The archetypal *mushrik* is an agriculturalist, then. In line with this, the nations to whom earlier prophets were sent are also depicted as agriculturalists. Hūd told his people that God had given them cattle and sons, gardens and springs (26:133f.), promising them abundant rain if they would repent (11:52); Ṣāliḥ asked his people if they would remain secure in their gardens, springs, fields and date-palms with spathes almost breaking with the weight of the fruit (26:146–8). 'Have they not travelled in the land and seen how those before them ended up?', the Messenger asks, noting that the nations in question wronged themselves and came to a bad end even though 'they were more powerful than them; they tilled the land and developed it more than they have done' (*wa-athārū 'l-arḍ wa-'ammarūhā akthara mim mā 'ammarūhā*, 30:9 and, more briefly, 40:21). Saba' had two gardens and were told to 'eat of the sustenance [provided] by your Lord', but they turned away from God, so He sent a flood which destroyed their gardens (34:15f.). The people that Moses took out of Egypt were also agriculturalists: they left behind gardens, springs and fields (44:25f.; cf. 26:57–9).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (ed. J. D. McAuliffe), (Leiden, 2001–), s.v. 'arrogance' (Nasr Abu Zayd).

All the suras adduced so far are classified as Meccan, though there is disagreement about 6:141 ('eat of their fruits when they fructify and pay the due thereof on the day of their harvest').<sup>7</sup> The division of the suras into Meccan and Medinese comes from the tradition, of course, and no attention has been paid to it so far; but readers wondering if the many references to agriculture could date from after the Prophet's *hijra* to the agricultural oasis at Yathrib should know that as far as the tradition is concerned, the answer is 'no'.

We do, however, hear about agriculture in the suras identified as Medinese as well. Thus a parable likens those who spend in the path of God to a grain of corn that sprouts seven ears, each containing a hundred grains: in the same way, God grants manifold increase to whom He will (2:261). Or those who spend in God's path are like a garden on a hill which doubles its produce when it is hit by heavy rain and manages perfectly well with dew at other times (2:265), whereas those who spend to show off to human beings are like a rock covered by a thin layer of soil: heavy rain washes it away so that they can do nothing (2:264). What the infidels spend on this world is like a freezing wind that ruins the harvest of men who have wronged themselves (3:117). There are people who speak agreeably about this world, but actually aim to spread corruption and ruin harvests and offspring (*al-ḥarḥ wa'l-nasl*, 2:205). And who would want to have a garden of date-palms, grapes and fruits of all kinds with canals flowing underneath when he is stricken with old age and has weak offspring, only to have it destroyed by a whirlwind with a fire, the Messenger asks in a likeness that escapes me (2:266). All this is much as before, except that the canals in the last passage are running underneath the gardens (presumably in the form of *qanāts*), as they also do in Paradise, rather than between them (in the forms of springs and canals), as they do among the *mushrikūn*. The cow that the Israelites were commanded to sacrifice is envisaged as 'not broken in to plough the soil or water the cultivated land' (*lā dhalūl tuthīru 'l-arḍ wa-lā tasqī 'l-ḥarḥ*) (2:71), and the desirable things of this world still include cattle and cultivated land (*al-an'ām wa'l-ḥarḥ*) (3:14).

'Agriculture and vegetation figure prominently in the Quran, reflecting their significance in the environment in which the text was revealed', Waines remarks in an article anticipating most of what I have said so far.<sup>8</sup> So indeed they do. How are we to reconcile this with the traditional claim that the *mushrikūn* lived in a barren valley? 'The Qur'ān suggests less severe austerity', Waines observes. The entire area may have been more fertile than it looks thanks to sophisticated irrigation techniques, Heck adds: the remains of as many as nineteen dams or more are still extant in the Hijāz.<sup>9</sup> But leaving aside that these dams were largely or wholly built after the rise of Islam and that none of them seems to be in Mecca, we do not actually solve the problem by postulating that Mecca was fertile, for it is the Quran itself that describes the Abrahamic sanctuary as located in an uncultivated valley (*wādīn ghayr dhī zar'*) (14:37), just as it is the Quran itself that places the *mushrikūn* in a fertile setting.

This clearly poses the question of whether the Quran envisages the Abrahamic sanctuary as the residence of the *mushrikūn*. It is certainly not impossible, for it says that when Abraham settled offspring by the sanctuary,

<sup>7</sup> The problem was the relationship between the rule imposed in this verse and *zakāt*, imposed in Medina, not the depiction of the believers of agriculturalists. See for example Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Tehran, 1413), xiii, 213.

<sup>8</sup> D. Waines, 'Agriculture', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, 40.

<sup>9</sup> G. W. Heck, ' "Arabia without spices": an alternate hypothesis', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123, 2003, 566.

he asked God to feed them with fruit (14:37): maybe the assumption here is that agriculture emerged later. Alternatively, does the Quran envisage the Abrahamic sanctuary as deserted except for a small family of custodians maintained by pilgrims and other visitors, implying that the agricultural community of the *mushrikūn* was located somewhere else? That too is possible. In fact, both possibilities seem to have suggested themselves to the earliest readers of the Quran, for there are traditions in which Mecca is unusually fertile, this being how it was under Ketura, Jurhum, the Amalekites and Quṣayy (but not apparently in the time of the Prophet),<sup>10</sup> and there are others in which it is a desert sanctuary until Mu'āwiya started digging and building there, provoking a storm of protest: he had no right to plant gardens in a place that God Himself had described as devoid of cultivation; Mecca ought to remain a place with wide unbuilt spaces, accessible to everyone, a place where the pilgrims would pitch their tents as they had in the past, not one of towns and fortified mansions (*mada'in wa-quṣūr*).<sup>11</sup> But the Quran also says that God had established a safe sanctuary (*ḥaraman āminan*) while people around the unbelievers were being snatched away (29:67), and when people refuse guidance on the grounds that they would be snatched away from their land if they followed it, the retort is, 'Have we not established for them a secure sanctuary (*ḥaraman āminan*) to which every kind of fruit is brought as a provision from Us?' (28:57). This could be taken to suggest that the unbelievers did live in their sanctuary, but also that they did so without developing it agriculturally: the fruits came from outside.<sup>12</sup> This was the solution for which the tradition settled. It was in response to Abraham's prayer that God instituted the two trading journeys with which He freed Quraysh from hunger and fear, according to some;<sup>13</sup> or it was in response to Abraham's prayer that He moved Tā'if from Syria to Arabia, as we are also told;<sup>14</sup> the fruits came from the neighbouring towns and villages, as many say;<sup>15</sup> indeed, it was by making the neighbouring towns and villages carry provisions to Mecca that God enabled Quraysh to stop going on their two trading journeys, as adherents of the view that Meccan trade came to an end some time before the rise of Islam was declared.<sup>16</sup>

How, then, do the exegetes handle the verses in which the polytheists are implicitly or explicitly described as agriculturalists? Oddly, they seem to ignore the problem. It is indeed only if one's interest is in the historical context of the revelation that the oddity of the examples employed to persuade the infidels stands out: to any other reader, the book will come across as adducing universally intelligible points of eternal validity. But the early exegetes did take an interest in the historical context. It is also true that the exegetical literature is

<sup>10</sup> See the sources cited in P. Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Oxford and Princeton, 1987), 198, n. 134.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Kalbi in al-Bakrī, *Mu'jam mā ista'jam*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Leipzig, 1858), 58; M. J. Kister, 'Some reports concerning Mecca from Jāhiliyya to Islam', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 15, 1972, 86ff. both cited in Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 197f. (where *quṣūr* is translated palaces). For Mu'āwiya's agricultural development of the region, see also below, n. 17.

<sup>12</sup> The alternative reading would be that they had simply sought refuge at the sanctuary during some crisis when they risked being 'snatched away' from the land on which they normally lived and worked.

<sup>13</sup> Mentioned in al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf* (Beirut, 1947), iv, 803, *ad* 106:4, where the two journeys are mentioned (without being described as having anything to do with trade, cf. below, n. 28).

<sup>14</sup> Thus for example al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān* (Beirut, 1988), viii, 235, *ad* 14:37; cf. also M. J. Kister, 'Some reports concerning Tā'if', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, i, 1979, n. 77.

<sup>15</sup> Thus for example Ṭabarī, al-Māwardī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī *ad* 14:37.

<sup>16</sup> Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, ed. 'A. M. Shihāta (Cairo, 1979), iv, 861f., *ad* sura 106; al-Kalbi in Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq* (Hyderabad, 1964), 262f.; cf. Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 205ff.

vast, so that it is impossible to pronounce with confidence on what is or is not in it, especially when so many quranic verses are involved. It is difficult to believe that the problem went unnoticed. But an examination of a fair sample of the exegetical literature on the most blatantly problematic passages, those presenting the infidels as cultivators of olives, yielded a blank.

The answer one would have expected the exegetes to come up with is that the passages concerning agriculture refer to places outside Mecca, and above all to Ṭāʾif, where the Meccans owned gardens. What other solution could there be? It works up to a point, too; for date palms, pomegranates and grapes all fit in effortlessly at Ṭāʾif. Grain and olives are more of a problem, however. After the conquests, when Muʿāwiya and other wealthy Qurashīs began a massive agricultural development of the Ḥijāz, grain came to be harvested there on a major scale,<sup>17</sup> and it could perhaps be argued that some was grown there before the rise of Islam as well. But the tradition invariably associates grain with Syria.<sup>18</sup> After the conquests there may, for all we know, have been attempts at olive cultivation in the Ḥijāz, too;<sup>19</sup> but if there were, they did not succeed, for obvious reasons: in its cultivated form, the olive (*Olea europaeana*) is a tree adapted to Mediterranean conditions. It does grow wild in the montane woodlands and shrublands of Arabia, including the Ṭāʾif region, but it does so as part of vegetation linking Arabia with Africa rather than the Mediterranean, in the form of the subspecies *africana*.<sup>20</sup> The cultivated olive has the disadvantage, from an Arabian point of view, of requiring winter chill in order

<sup>17</sup> For Muʿāwiya digging wells and canals and planting gardens in Mecca (reportedly as the first to do so), see Kister, 'Some reports', 89f.; cf. also his dam at Ṭāʾif (G. C. Miles, 'Early Islamic inscriptions near Ṭāʾif in the Ḥijāz', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 7, 1948) and the dams mentioned in Heck, 'Arabia without spices', 566. For Muʿāwiya's agricultural enterprises in Medina in the Ḥijāz and the tensions they provoked, see M. J. Kister, 'The Battle of the Ḥarra: some socio-economic aspects', in M. Rosen-Ayalon (ed.), *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet* (Jerusalem, 1977), 38ff., and above, n. 11; for other Qurashīs, see Heck, 'Arabia without spices', 565, who inadvertently assumes their activities to be pre-Islamic. Heck also adduces the indisputably pre-Islamic Abū Ṭālib as an example of a class of entrepreneur who were 'sufficiently wealthy that no external investment capital was necessary to underwrite their productive ventures', claiming that he was 'among the Makkani wheat growers who sold their own produce', and that 'in addition to being a major grain broker, Abū Ṭālib was a perfume merchant' ('Arabia without Spices', 561, 571). For all this he refers the reader to Ibn Qutayba, who merely says that 'Abū Ṭālib sold perfume, or perhaps/sometimes (*rubbamā*) he sold wheat (*al-burr*)'. (Ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʿārif*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Leiden, 1850), 283; ed. Th. 'Ukāsha (Cairo, 1969), 575; ed. M. I. 'A. al-Ṣāwī (Beirut, 1970), 249; in the parallel version given by Ibn Rusta, the *burr* is replaced by *lubān*, cf. Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 53n). Where does Heck find the information that he was a grain broker (as opposed to trader), that he was a major one, that he grew his own produce, or that he was wealthy enough to manage without external investment capital?

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 98, 104, 139–41, 150, 160. It is also from Syria that the grain comes in all the examples adduced by Heck, 'Arabia without spices', 573 (as regards that of 'Abdallāh b. Judʿān, for which he does not specify the place of origin, see Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 104). Heck none the less proposes that the Meccans could both import and export such things (having produced them at Ṭāʾif and elsewhere), depending on 'the basic functioning of free market economics', adducing the trading patterns between modern Michigan and Wisconsin as an example ('Arabia without spices', 573). But leaving aside that we never see the Meccans export such things, they were not participants in a modern capitalist economy based on rapid distribution of information and goods, low transport costs, and a population purchasing its goods (foodstuffs included) in the open market.

<sup>19</sup> Much agricultural experimentation in the wake of the conquests is presupposed by the crop diffusion studied by A. M. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> S. A. Ghazanfar and M. Fisher (eds), *Vegetation of the Arabian Peninsula* (Dordrecht, 1990), 69, 91–3, 130; more briefly also A. G. Miller and T. Cope, *Flora of the Arabian Peninsula and Socotra*, vol. i (Edinburgh, 1996), 20f., 26. This is clearly the plant known to the Arabs as 'utum or 'mountain olive' (*zaytūn jabalī*), which grew in the Sharāt and (in a taller form) in Oman; it had black fruits like grapes which were not edible, or it did not fruit, and it was used medicinally, as well as for toothpicks (Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dīnawarī, *Kitāb al-nabāt*, s-y, ed. M. Ḥamidallāh (Cairo, 1973), nos. 574, 686, s.vv. 'shaḥs' and 'utum'. Compare the distribution in Ghazanfar and Fisher, *Vegetation*, 91–3, 130, with a reference to medicinal use at p. 250).



to flower and fruit.<sup>21</sup> It could not have produced much of a crop in either Mecca or Medina,<sup>22</sup> and though Tāʾif looks more promising, it is in the northern oasis of Jawf (formerly Dūmat al-Jandal) that olive cultivation is reported to have succeeded in modern times.<sup>23</sup> The sources for Arabia on the eve of Islam invariably describe olives as coming from Syria.<sup>24</sup> When the Quran tries to persuade the infidels with examples involving grain and olive cultivation, we would thus have to assume that the reference is to villages in Syria that the Meccans passed through on their business journeys and/or to estates they had acquired there and on which they grew such crops themselves.

Taking the passages in question to refer to Tāʾif and Syria does not entirely solve the problem, however. For one thing, there remains the question of how an uncultivated valley with a single spring could sustain the sheep, goats, cows, oxen, camels, mules, donkeys and horses with which the pagans are credited in the Quran, or how pasture could be found for them outside Mecca on a daily basis. For another thing, there is something contrived about this reading. A preacher will normally try to get through to people by speaking to them about the things that matter most to them, and the tradition is quite clear that whatever else the pre-Islamic Quraysh may have been up to, they were first and foremost traders. One would not try to convert stockbrokers in Manhattan by playing on their fears for their subsidiary ventures or invoking the marvels of products they had seen on their business journeys; rather, one would speak to them of stock market crashes, depression, unemployment, financial ruin, and the ultimate worthlessness of a life devoted to the pursuit of wealth. *Mutatis mutandis*, this is clearly what the quranic preacher is doing too. He is addressing himself to people whose livelihoods were in their gardens and fields, and he is doing so with a wealth of local detail showing that he is at home in this milieu himself: there were gardens with trellises (for grapevines) and gardens without them (*maʾrūshāt wa-ghayr maʾrūshāt*, 6:141); palms might be single-stemmed or double-stemmed (13:4);<sup>25</sup> neighbouring tracts, grape gardens, palm trees, and fields might all be watered by a single water source (13:4); gardens were sometimes, perhaps typically, surrounded by palm trees and separated by sown fields and canals (18: 32f.); and of all the disasters that could befall a plot, the ultimate nightmare was that the water should disappear

<sup>21</sup> Two weeks at temperatures below 14° C (57° F) are required in order to induce some flowering in most cultivars (B. Schaffer and P. C. Andersen (eds), *Handbook of Environmental Physiology of Fruit Crops* (Boca Raton, FL, 1994), i, 171), but colder temperatures are required for worthwhile crops. FAO speaks of a dormancy period of about two months with average temperatures lower than 10° C (50 F) ([www.fao.org/ag/agl/aglw/cropwater/olive.stm](http://www.fao.org/ag/agl/aglw/cropwater/olive.stm)); a Californian company defines the best winter temperatures as lying around -2.8 to -3.9° C (25 to 27° F), while rarely falling below -6.1 C (21 F). Areas with regular winter temperatures as high as 12.2° C (54° F), rarely frosting or reaching -2.2° (28° F), are described as unsuitable or marginal for commercial olive groves ('Peaceful valley farm supply' at [www.groworganic.com/d/d3\\_205.html](http://www.groworganic.com/d/d3_205.html)).

<sup>22</sup> The lowest temperatures recorded in Mecca and Medina during the eleven years of 1985-95 were 10° C (50° F) and 3° C (37° F) respectively. (The maximum temperatures were 49.5° (121° F) and 47.5° (118° F), with a mean of 30.8° (87° F) and 27.9° (82° F) respectively.) See the chart in Ghazanfar and Fisher, *Vegetation*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> The lowest temperatures in Tāʾif and Jawf (Jouf) in the period mentioned in the previous note were -1.2° C (30° F) and -7.0° (19° F) respectively. (The highest were 39.5° (103° F) and 46.0° (117° F), with means of 22.9° (73° F) and 21.2° (70° F) respectively.) For olives at Jouf, see 'Saudi Arabia Map' at [www.scf.usc.edu/~muzain/itp\\_104/project/introduction.htm](http://www.scf.usc.edu/~muzain/itp_104/project/introduction.htm). supplementary result. Unfortunately, A. M. Migahid, *Flora of Saudi Arabia*, ii (Riyadh, 1989), 74, who identifies *Olea europæana* as cultivated, only gives the distribution for the wild variety.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 104, 139; Heck, 'Arabia without Spices', 573 (casting Meccans carrying oil from Syria by camel caravan as an early version of the "mobile oil corporation"). The olive is also associated with Syria in al-Dinawari, *The Book of Plants*, a-z, ed. B. Lewin, Uppsala and Wiesbaden (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift) 1953, no. 466, s.v. 'zaytūn'.

<sup>25</sup> As so often with technical terms, different explanations and translations are offered. The main point here is their technical nature.

underground and cease to be recoverable (18:41). There was a rich vocabulary to do with the date palm, as well as terms for clover, leaves or stalks of grain, stubble, gardens with thickly planted trees (*jannāt alfāf*) (78:16), and more besides.<sup>26</sup>

## II. *Travels by land and sea*

Agriculture was not the only economic activity pursued by the *mushrikūn*, however. They also travelled by both land and sea, possibly for trade. There is an obscure reference to a 'journey (*rihla*) in winter and journey in summer' in 106:2, and an equally obscure reference to people who wronged themselves by asking God for longer intervals between their journeys (*rabbānā bā'id bayna asfārinā*, 34:19). Whether these journeys were made by land or sea one cannot tell. But one of the benefits derived from cattle was that 'they carry your heavy loads to a land that you would not (otherwise) reach except with great distress' (16:7). It is also journeys by land that spring to mind when we are told that God provided the 'houses of the skins of cattle that you find light on the day you journey and the day you alight' (16:80), though the unbelievers presumably slept in tents when they arrived at their destination by sea as well; and the Quran often asks the infidels whether they have not gone around in the land (*a-wa-lam yasīrū fī'l-ard*) and seen the remains of past nations, or it tells them to do so (16:36; 27:69; 30:9, 42; 40:82; 47:10; cf. 22:46).

References to sailing and the sea are both numerous and vivid (suggesting that the Prophet had been to sea, as has been remarked before).<sup>27</sup> The people addressed rode not just on cattle, but also on ships (23:22; 40:80; 43:12), and they were guided by the stars in darkness on both land and sea (6:97; cf. also 10:22). God sent the winds 'so that the ship may sail at His command and so that you may seek of His bounty' (30:46), they are reminded. 'You (sg.) see the ships going through it so that you (pl.) may seek of His bounty' (16:14; 35:12); 'it is He who makes the ship sail on the sea so that you may seek of His bounty' (17:66), as variant versions say (cf. also 22:65; 31:31). When the people addressed were caught in storms at sea they would call upon God alone, but they would ascribe partners to Him when they reached dry land (10:22f.; 29:65; 31:32); and the infidels are compared to men on journeys by land and sea alike in a sura classified as Medinese: their deeds are like the mirage in the desert that a man parched with thirst mistakes for water, or like shadows on a dark ocean with waves piling on top of waves and clouds like shadows piling on top of each other so that one can scarcely see a hand in front of one's eyes (24:39f.).

Some of these journeys could have been commercial in nature. 'Seeking of God's bounty' (i.e. seeking a living) certainly seems to be an expression for trading in some passages (cf. 2:198; 62:10, discussed below). But contrary to the impression frequently conveyed by the secondary literature, the Quran does not connect any of these journeys with trade.<sup>28</sup> Some of the moving about in the land should probably be connected with pasturing, and the journeys by sea sometimes seem to be for fishing. Thus one passage says that 'He made the

<sup>26</sup> Waines, 'Agriculture', 41f.

<sup>27</sup> C. C. Torrey, *The Commercial-Theological Terms in the Koran* (Leiden, 1892, 2n); and, probing more deeply, W. W. Barthold, 'Der Koran und das Meer', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 1929.

<sup>28</sup> Torrey claims that sura 106 'might well be the words of a tradesman to his fellows, calling on them to recognize the goodness of Allah in prospering their winter and summer caravans' (*Terms*, 2), and Heck also holds that 'the Qur'ān speaks of annual trading caravans to Yemen and Syria' ('Arabia without spices', 572). But this is simply exegetical interpretation of 106:2, and only one out of many (Cf. Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 205ff.).

sea subservient to you so that the ship may sail in it by His command and so that you may seek of His bounty' (45:12), and a variant spells this out as 'It is He who has made the sea subservient to you so that you may eat of it tender (or fresh) meat (*li-ta'kulū minhu laḥman ṭariyyan*) and so that you may extract from it ornaments that you wear' (16:14). We should envisage the *mushrikūn* as fish-eaters, then, and as decorating themselves with sea-shells, or perhaps (as the exegetes suggest) with pearls. Elsewhere the community is described as using both sweet water and salt water products: 'The two seas are not equal, the one sweet, good to taste (*furāt*), and pleasant to drink, the other salty and bitter. Yet from each you (pl.) eat tender (or fresh) meat, and you extract ornaments for you to wear; and you (sg.) see the ship ploughing through it so that you (pl.) may seek the bounty of God' (35:12). It is a startling idea that the Meccans should have been fishermen, let alone that they should have eaten fresh-water fish, even though one would imagine that it was cured. Which river or lake could be intended in this passage? There is a parable about fishermen in the Quran. 'Ask them about the town which was close by the sea when they violated the Sabbath', it starts (7:163). But one would take this story to be about Jews, and perhaps addressed to them as well, though the sura is classified as Meccan.

### III. Trade

The only explicit reference to trade in the Meccan suras comes in the form of exhortations against cheating with weights and measures. God had established the balance 'so that you should not transgress in weighing; weigh with justice and do not skimp in the balance' (55:7f.), one passage says, moving on from there to God's creation of the date palm, grain and sweet-smelling plants (*al-rayḥān*). 'Give full measure when you measure and weigh with a balance that is straight' (17:35); 'Fill up the measure and the balance with justice' (6:152). Shu'ayb is presented as saying much the same (7:85; 11:84f; 26:181), and those who exact full measure for themselves while giving less than due to others are fiercely denounced (83:1-9). One would take these exhortations to refer to internal exchanges rather than commerce with outsiders, let alone long-distance trade. There are similar denunciations of cheating with weights and measures in the Old Testament, where the setting is agrarian.

The overwhelmingly agrarian atmosphere of the Meccan suras is all the odder in that the Prophet's language is suffused with commercial metaphors from the start, especially in connection with reward and punishment.<sup>29</sup> Humans are envisaged as having an account with God, who enters their acts on the debit side or credit side in a book or ledger (*kitāb, imām*), which is both clear (*mubīn*) and meticulous: nothing is left out (10:61; 18:49; 21:94; 34:3; 36:12; 45:28f; 78:29; cf. *kitāb ḥafīz* at 50:4). Every soul is seen as pledged (*rahīna*) to God, i.e. as security for the debts it has accumulated (74:38, cf. 52:21),<sup>30</sup> and acts are also described as advances made to God (*aslafat, aslaftum*), who will redeem them on the day of judgement (10:30; 69:24). On the day of reckoning (*yawm al-ḥisāb*) every individual will be confronted with his own personal account book, or every nation will be confronted with its record (45:28f.). Righteous individuals will be given their books in the right hand, sinners in the left or from behind (in the unobtrusive manner used by

<sup>29</sup> For all this, see Torrey, *Terms*, 8ff.

<sup>30</sup> In 52:21 every man seems to be pledged (*rahīn*) in the sense of ensuring that God will repay him in full for his good deeds.

discrete creditors) (69:19, 25; 84:7f., 10f.; cf. also 56:8f.),<sup>31</sup> and all will be asked to read their records aloud (69:19; 17:13f.: *iqra' kitābaka*); literacy is taken for granted. In an alternative metaphor, souls will be weighed, and people whose acts are heavy will prosper while those whose deeds weigh light in the balance will be losers (23:102f.; 7:8f.; 101:5). Unlike the *mushriks*, God uses just scales (21:47) and gives full measure, whether of rewards or punishments: every soul will be paid its due.<sup>32</sup> These commonly used metaphors apart, one passage counsels against selling the compact of God for a small price (16:95; compare the expression used of the literal sale in the story of Joseph, 12:20), and another speaks of buying idle tales (31:6), but metaphors to do with buying and selling are much more common in the suras classified as Medinese.<sup>33</sup>

In principle, these metaphors could simply have formed part of the inherited religious language, for most of them are attested before the rise of Islam, in some cases even in Arabic poetry.<sup>34</sup> But their use in the Meccan suras is so consistent and vivid that one would assume them to reflect current conditions, or at the very least a recent commercial past.<sup>35</sup> The commercial transactions reflected in them could, however, have been largely or wholly internal.

#### IV. *The mushrik community: summary*

All in all, the quranic passages addressed to or concerned with *mushrikūn* take us to a mixed economy in which the cultivation of grain, grapes, olives and date palms was combined with the rearing of sheep, goats, camels, cows, oxen and other animals, and also with maritime activity, at least in part for fishing. The community was sufficiently differentiated for internal exchanges, and there may have been external trade as well, but not on a scale sufficiently important for the preacher to attempt to pull at the heartstrings of the *mushriks* via that subject. God is never described as punishing people by ruining trading ventures, allowing caravans to be plundered or burying them in sandstorms, and there are no parables about trade in the book. For all that, the metaphors testify to a well-developed system of keeping written accounts, suggesting a community of some sophistication for all its rural setting. A high level of literacy is presupposed.

#### V. *The community of believers*

We may now turn to the passages regulating the behaviour of the believers in a manner showing that they have come to form a community, if not necessarily a politically independent one. We have already encountered some of these passages: they implied that the believers were agriculturalists like the *mushriks*. This is not what all of them do, however. A fair number of them, almost all classified as Medinese, describe the believers as traders.

‘O you who believe, do not eat up your property with vanities among yourselves, but let there be trade (*tijāra*) by mutual consent’, 4:29 proclaims: trade was a good thing. For all that, the believers should remember that nothing could be more important than God and His Messenger: ‘Say: if your fathers,

<sup>31</sup> Hence the expression *aṣḥāb al-yanīn* in sura 74:39, where every soul is pledged ‘except for those of the right hand’.

<sup>32</sup> Torrey, *Terms*, 22f., 32f., with other metaphors to do with weighing at p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> When the day of judgement is called a day on which there is no *bay'* (14:31, again in the Medinese 2:254), the meaning seems to be that there will be no ransoming rather than there will be no buying and selling (Torrey, *Terms*, 42).

<sup>34</sup> Torrey, *Terms*, 9f.

<sup>35</sup> Torrey, *Terms*, 13f.

sons, brothers, spouses and clan, the wealth you have gained, the commerce you fear may slacken (*amwāl iqtaraftumūhā wa-tijāra takhshawna kasādahā*), and the dwellings you like, (if all these things) are dearer to you than God and His messenger and striving in His cause, then wait until God brings His command (i.e. doom)' (9:24). The ideal believers were men 'whom neither commerce nor buying and selling (*al-tijāra wa'l-bay'*) can divert from the remembrance of God, the performance of prayer, and the giving of alms' (24:37). But this was more than could be said about most of them: 'O you who believe, when the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday, hasten to the remembrance of God and leave off buying and selling (*al-bay'*); that is best for you, if only you knew. When the prayer is finished, you may disperse in the earth seeking of God's bounty ... . But when they see some trade (*tijāra*) or amusement, they scatter running after it, leaving you (sg.) standing. Say: what is with God is better than any amusement or trade. God is the best of providers' (62:9–11). Elsewhere we hear of believers who were 'travelling in the land, seeking of God's bounty' (62:10), presumably as traders.<sup>36</sup> 'It will not be reckoned as a sin against you if you seek God's bounty', as we are told in a regulation of the pilgrimage (2:198): here too one would read the passage as referring to trade (which is also how the exegetes read it), since there cannot have been many other ways of making an income during the pilgrimage. Gold was sometimes deposited with the People of the Book: some would faithfully return a whole *qintār* entrusted to them, while others would refuse to return a *dīnār* unless one persisted, claiming not to have any moral obligations to gentiles (3:75).

We are thus left in no doubt that the believers were engaged in, indeed preoccupied with, trade. In line with this, there is a fair amount of regulation of commercial transactions. God had permitted buying and selling, but He had prohibited usury (2:275f.), and though the believers were entitled to their capital sums, they should be gentle with debtors and fear the day when every soul would be paid what it earned (2:279–81). When people borrowed money, it was recommended that they have a scribe record the agreement as dictated by the debtor or a representative of his and witnessed by two men, or by a man and two women; it was best for all commercial transactions to be written, unless they were completed on the spot, and all should be witnessed, whether written or not (2:282). But if the believers were travelling and could not find a scribe, a pledge would do (in lieu of a record). Things deposited on trust should be faithfully returned (2:283). Unlike the regulation of the harvest rituals and the injunctions regarding fair weights and measures, these rules are laid down without polemics against pagan ways of doing things.

There is also much commercial imagery in the Medinese suras, mostly to do with buying and selling rather than accounting.<sup>37</sup> Much of it is used against Jews and *mushrikūn*, who are said to sell God's signs or compact for a small price, or who are warned not to do so (2:41; 3:187; 5:44; 9:9; cf. the Meccan 16:95), or praised for not doing so (3:199), or who conceal revelation or make it up in order to sell it for a small price (2:79, 174), or who sell their faith or their souls for such a price (2:90, 102; 3:77), or buy this life with the next (2:86), while they and others buy error or falsehood with guidance, or unbelief at the price of faith (2:16; 3:177; 4:44; cf. also 5:106). By contrast, there are

<sup>36</sup> 73:20. This sura is Meccan, but as the reference to holy war shows, the end is addressed to members of a politically active community. The end also differs from the earlier part of the sura by not having any rhyme. All verse divisions of the Quran leave the entire passage as a single, strikingly long verse (cf. A. Spitaler, *Die Verszählung des Koran*, Munich, 1935, 66; I owe this reference to Michael Cook).

<sup>37</sup> The shift is noted by Torrey, *Terms*, 35.

people who sell their souls seeking God's pleasure (2:207), in particular those who give their lives and property to the cause: 'Let those fight in the path of God who sell the life of this world for the next' (4:74); 'God has purchased from the believers their selves and their property in return for Paradise. They fight in God's path, kill and are killed.... Rejoice in the bargain that you have concluded with Him' (9:111). Or again, 'O you who believe, shall I lead you to a commerce (*tijāra*) that will save you from a grievous penalty? That you believe in God and His Messenger and strive in the path of God with your property and your selves. That will be best for you, if only you knew' (61:10f). Devoting one's wealth and/or life to Him is now cast as a loan (*qard*) that God will repay several times over: 'The men and the women who pay alms, giving God a goodly loan, shall have it doubled for them and receive a generous reward' (57:18; 73:20<sup>38</sup>). 'Fight in the path of God and know that God is hearing and knowing. Who will give God a goodly loan, so that He may double it many times over?' (2:244f). 'Who will give God a goodly loan, so that He may double it?' (57:11, 64:17). 'Whatever you spend in God's path shall be repaid to you, you will not be wronged' (8:60). Believers who are sitting on the fence are described as doing bad business with God: having bought error with guidance, 'their commerce is profitless (*fa-mā rabīḥat tijāratuhum*)' (2:16). By contrast, 'Those who recite the book of God and perform prayer and spend of what We have provided them with, privately and publicly, they are hoping for a commerce that will never fail (*tijāratan lan tabūra*)' (35:29).<sup>39</sup>

## VI. Overall

The Quran is quite rich in information on the livelihoods of both *mushrikūn* and believers, but the result is puzzling. The book describes the two as living together in a community overwhelmingly based on agriculture while also depicting the believers as forming a community of their own in which trade was a prominent occupation. More crudely put, it describes the *mushrikūn* as agriculturalists and the believers as traders: the situation is the reverse of what one expects. It should not be too difficult to reconcile the picture of the believers' community given in the Quran with that of the Prophet's Medina presented in other sources, but its description of the community shared by *mushrikūn* and believers can hardly be said to be suggestive of Mecca as we know it from the tradition. Where do we go from there? I do not wish to burden this paper with conjecture, so I simply leave the reader with the question.

<sup>38</sup> For the date of 73:20, see above, note 36.

<sup>39</sup> Sura 35 is classified as Meccan, but this particular passage reflects a community of believers (without presupposing political independence).