BRILL

Numen 58 (2011) 188–206

NVMEN
brill.nl/nu

Remembering Muḥammad

Gabriel Said Reynolds
Department of Theology
University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame,
Indiana 46556, USA
greynolds@nd.edu

Abstract
In Islamic tradition Muḥammad is remembered as the proper name of the Prophet, even if various *ḥadīth* include *muḥammad* ("the praised-one") in a list of his honorary epithets. These traditions, however, led Aloys Sprenger to speculate in the nineteenth century that Muḥammad was not the Prophet's birth name at all, but rather a messianic title that he took in Medina in the hopes of winning Jewish support. Over the next several decades a lively debate took place over this question in German scholarship. In the present article I revisit this debate and then turn to more recent publications, especially those from the newly formed scholarly group Inarah, which argue on historical and theological grounds that the name Muḥammad is symbolic. Ultimately I contend that this matter is best addressed instead in the light of the Qurʾān's onomastica.

Keywords
Muḥammad, Qurʾān, Arabic, messianism, Jesus, Bible

Introduction

In his 1972 work *Umm al-qurā*, Fūʾād ʿAlī Riḍā reports that when the Prophet was seven days old his grandfather ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib invited a group of elders from the Quraysh to a banquet in honor of the boy's birth. The elders asked him why he chose to name the boy Muḥammad, a name not found among their ancestors. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib responded, "I desired for him to be praised (*maḥmūd*) by God in heaven and by God's people on earth" (Riḍā 1972:242).

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2011
DOI: 10.1163/156852711X562281

This story contrasts with the report of Ibn Hishām (d. 833) who implies that an angel of God named the boy Muḥammad:

> One of the things that people recount and claim (but God knows better) is that Āmina bt. Wahb, the mother of the Messenger of God — God's blessing and peace be upon him — recounted that when she conceived the messenger of God — God's blessing and peace be upon him — it was said to her: "You are pregnant with the master of this community. When he is born say 'I commit him to the protection of the One from the evil of the envious.' Then name him Muḥammad." (Ibn Hishām 1955:I, 157–8)

The nineteenth-century Austrian scholar Aloys Sprenger also differs with Ibn Hishām, but in a much more profound manner. In the first volume of his monumental work *Das Leben und die Lehre des Moḥammad*, Sprenger (1861–5:155–62, the addendum to the second chapter, entitled "Hiess der Prophet Moḥammad?") argues that Muḥammad was not the given name of the Muslim prophet at all, but rather a religious epithet that the Prophet himself adopted later in life.[1]

Sprenger's argument reflects his approach to the exegetical and historical literature of the Islamic tradition. He believed that the authors of this literature reshaped the history of Islam's origins for the sake of religious apology. They smoothed over the rough edges in Muḥammad's biography, creating the impression that Muḥammad's personal convictions were unwavering, when in fact they were constantly developing according to the exigencies of his place and time. In their redaction of the Prophet's biography, however, Muslim scholars did not manage to cover up completely the travails of the Prophet's life. With this conviction Sprenger rewrites Muḥammad's biography, relying above all on reports in Islamic literature which serve no clear apologetic purpose, and especially on reports which would seem to work against Muslim apology. Such reports, Sprenger believed, can only have been included because they really took place and were too well remembered by the community to be omitted entirely by the historian.

With this logic Sprenger passes over the report of Ibn Hishām on the naming of Muḥammad and turns instead to a tradition preserved in the standard later Sunni biography of the Prophet, the *sīra* of Nūr

---

1) On his argument see recently Gilliot 2007:77.

al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī (d. 1635) (Ḥalabī n.d.:I, 128). Therein we are told that the Prophet's grandfather ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib decided (the Prophet's father having already died) to name his grandson Qutham, having several years earlier lost a child by that name. However, an angel appeared to ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib in a dream and instructed him to name the boy Muḥammad instead (Sprenger 1861–5:I, 155).[2] Sprenger (1861–5:I, 156) comments, "This is admittedly an isolated report, but it is in such perfect contradiction to the spirit of the legend that there could hardly have been any reason to invent it." Of course, according to his hermeneutical principle the bit about the dream and the angel should not be accepted: "If the Prophet was originally named Qutham, I doubt only that his grandfather exchanged this name with Muḥammad as a consequence of a vision in a dream" (Sprenger 1861–5:I, 156).

Hence Sprenger turns to a *ḥadīth* reported on the authority of the companion Jubayr b. Muṭʿim (b. ʿAdī) in which the Prophet includes the name Muḥammad along with other symbolic epithets. In the version of this *ḥadīth* quoted by Ibn Saʿd (d. 845), Jubayr reports that the Prophet explained: "I am *muḥammad* ('the praised-one'), *aḥmad* ('the most-praised one'), *al-ḥāshir* ('the one who gathers the dead'), *al-māḥī* ('the one who erases'), *al-khātam* ('the seal'), and *al-ʿāqib* ('the final one')"[3] (Ibn Saʿd 1968:I, 103).

Variations of this *hadīth* are widespread in medieval Islamic literature.[4] Indeed in later sources the number of names given to the Muslim prophet in such *ḥadīth* generally increases. According to a tradition reported by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200) the Prophet had twenty-three

---

2) This tradition seems to be inspired by the tradition of the naming of John (Q 19.7; cf. Luke 1.13; 2.59–63).

3) This section of Ibn Saʿd's work is dedicated entirely to the question of the Prophet's names. According to the following *ḥadīth*, related on the authority of Ḥudhayfa, the Prophet declared: "I am *muḥammad*, *aḥmad*, *al-ḥāshir*, *al-muqaffā* ("the one who is followed"), and *nabī al-raḥma* ("the prophet of mercy"). The next *ḥadīth*, on the authority of Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī, adds *nabī al-raḥma wa-l-tawba wa-l-malḥama* ("the prophet of mercy, repentance, and battle"). Five similar *ḥadīth*s follow. See Ibn Saʿd 1968:I, 103–5. Cf. the similar section in Ibn al-Jawzī 1386/1966:103–5.

4) See, e.g. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal 1895:IV, 80, 81, 84, 295, 404, 407; VI, 25; Bukhārī 1862–1908: "Manāqib," 17; "Tafsīr Sūra 61," 1; Muslim 1374–5/1955–6: "Faḍā'il," 124, 5. See further Wensinck 1936:I,470b.

names.[5] Among the names that Ibn al-Jawzī reports are *al-amīn* ("the reliable") — a name which Ibn Hishām (1955:I, 183) reports was given to the Prophet as a child due to his honesty — and *al-qutham* ("the generous"). Accordingly later scholars would propose that the Prophet's given name could have been Amīn or Qutham.[6]

For his part Sprenger does not search for the Prophet's birth name in this *ḥadīth*, but he does see it as an indication of the symbolic nature of the name Muḥammad (Sprenger 1861–5:I, 157). The symbolism of this name is likewise evident, he maintains, in another tradition preserved by Ibn Saʿd (and again widespread in other sources[7]) in which the Prophet proclaims to the believers:

> "O servants of God, look at how God turns away the insults and curses of the Quraysh." They asked, "O Messenger of God, how?" He replied: "They insult me as *mudhammam* ("blameworthy") and curse me as *mudhammam* ("blameworthy") but I am *muḥammad* ("praiseworthy"). (Ibn Saʿd 1968:I, 106)

In light of these traditions Sprenger turns to the Qurʾān, arguing that the Prophet's use of symbolic names is also evident therein. In Q 72:19, Sprenger contends, Muḥammad names himself ʿAbdallāh, while in Q 61:6, he has Jesus refer to him as Aḥmad. Sprenger suggests that with this latter verse Muḥammad was intentionally presenting himself as the Paraclete predicted in the Gospel of John, which (he speculates) Arab Christians at the time referred to with the term *aḥmad* (Sprenger 1861–5:I, 158–9).[8] As for the four occurrences of the name Muḥammad in

---

5) See Ibn al-Jawzī 1386/1966:103–5.

6) Henri Lammens proposes that Muḥammad was originally named Qutham, the name found in the tradition in Ḥalabī's *sīra* that forms the basis of Sprenger's theory. Qutham is also found in the onomastica of pre-Islamic Arabia (as with the Prophet's paternal cousin Qutham b. al-ʿAbbās). Lammens 1910:29–30 (English trans. 171–2). In the first *Encyclopaedia of Islam* Franz Buhl discusses the possibility that the Prophet was named Amīn at birth, in light as well of his mother's name Āmina. See Buhl 1913–34:III, 685–6.

7) Cf. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal 1313/1895:II, 244, 340, 369; Bukhārī 1862–1908: "Manāqib," 17; see further Wensinck 1936:II, 184b.

8) To this end Sprenger explains in a note that Arab Christians would not have used the Greek word Paraclete: "Wie wir einen Mann, welcher Gottlieb heisst, nicht Theophilus nennen." On this point Sprenger also refers to a tradition attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās in which the Prophet declares that his name in the Tawrāt is the same as it is

the Qurʾān (3:144; 33:40; 47:2; 48:29), Sprenger notes that they all occur in passages traditionally connected to the Medinan period of Muḥammad's life. Thus he concludes that, "The Prophet himself first adopted the name Muḥammad, and that after or just before the emigration" (Sprenger 1861–5:I, 156).

Sprenger proposes that the Prophet took the name Muḥammad as part of his desire to win the support of the Jews in Medina, a desire which is well attested in the Islamic sources themselves. He explains that the Arabic root *ḥ.m.d.*, associated in classical Arabic with the idea of "praise," is associated in certain Arabic dialects with the idea of "longing." Muḥammad therefore is "the one longed-for" or, in a Jewish context, the Messiah. Sprenger adds, recounting a conversation on this point with a friend of his in London, that the root *ḥ.m.d.* in Hebrew (usually associated with "delight") appears in passages in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Haggai 2.7) with a long tradition of messianic interpretation (Sprenger 1861–5:I, 147–8). Thus Sprenger argues that the Muslim prophet meant to capitalize on the messianism of the Jews in Medina (or, at the time, Yathrib) by calling himself Muḥammad (Sprenger 1861–5:I, 159–60). In other words, the Prophet took the name Aḥmad in the hope of winning Christian support, and Muḥammad in the hope of winning Jewish support[9] (Sprenger 1861–5:I, 161–2).

---

in the Qurʾān, while in the Injīl his name is Aḥmad. See Ḥalabī n.d.:I, 128 (although Ḥalabī [I, 51] reports elsewhere that the Prophet is named Aḥmad in both the Tawrāt and the Injīl). In a similar tradition found in Suyūṭī (d. 1505)'s *al-Khaṣāʾiṣ al-kubrā* the Prophet reports that his name in the Tawrāt is Aḥīd. See Suyūṭī 1405/1985:I, 132. For his part Ibn Hishām insists that the term for Paraclete (Gk παράκλητος) is *m.n.ḥ.m.n.ā*, which he describes as the Syriac term for Muḥammad. In fact *m.n.ḥ.m.n.ā* is close to the word that appears in the Christian Palestinian Aramaic lectionary for Paraclete. See Ibn Hishām1955:I, 233.

Sprenger was undoubtedly influenced on this point by the theory of Luigi Marracci (1698:I, 27), that Muḥammad mistook Greek παράκλητος for περικλυτός ("the praised one"), for which reason the Qurʾān (Q 61.6) has Jesus predict the coming of *aḥmad*. On this argument Nöldeke (1970:10, n. 1 [from page 9]) wonders how in the world Muḥammad would have known Greek.

9) That the birth name of the Muslim Prophet is unknown should not come as a surprise, Sprenger (1861–5:I, 161–2) asserts, in light of the case of Abū Bakr. The Muslim sources themselves are unsure whether he was originally named Abū Bakr, ʿAṭīq, or ʿAbdallāh.

In support of this argument Sprenger mentions that the name Muḥammad is hardly found in the onomastica of the pre-Islamic (*jāhilī*) Arabs recorded in Islamic literature (Sprenger 1861–5:I, 161). It was on this point that Ernest Renan challenged Sprenger's theory. In a brief note written soon after the publication of the first volume of *Das Leben und die Lehre des Moḥammad* Renan counters that the pre-Islamic Arabic use of the name Muḥammad is testified to by a second century Greek inscription in Palmyra[10] with the name θαιμοαμεδου, presumably the genitive form of θαιμοάμεδος (Renan 1860:6). Renan interpreted this name as a transliteration of Arabic *taym Muḥammad* or *taym Aḥmad*. Sprenger, in an addendum to the first volume of *Das Leben*, countered that μοαμεδος might represent instead *muʿammad* ("The Baptized One"), reflecting a Christian origin of the inscription[11] (Sprenger 1861–5:I, 581).

Renan was not the only one to respond to Sprenger's theory, which made a significant impression on German-speaking scholars in the late nineteenth century. Both Hartwig Hirschfeld (1878:70–7) and Gustav Rösch (1892:432–40) wrote in support of Sprenger's principal argument, while developing their own explanations thereof.[12] Nöldeke (1909 [1970]) felt compelled to refute both Sprenger and Hirschfeld in the second edition of *Geschichte des Qorans 1* (*Über den Ursprung des Qorans*). Against Sprenger he raises the following arguments: one, in historical records such as the treaty of Ḥudaybiyya, the Constitu-

---

10) See Böckh 1828–77:# 4500; cf. Ledrain 1886:55.

11) Even if this inscription did reflect the name Muḥammad, Sprenger adds, it would simply add one further example to the pre-Islamic instances of the name which Sprenger himself acknowledges in his original argument.

12) Hirschfeld (1902:24) notes that there is more evidence for the pre-Islamic use of the name Aḥmad, and thus more reason to assume that this was the Prophet's given name, and Muḥammad a variation thereof. In a later work Hirschfeld proposes that the Prophet took the epithet Muḥammad towards the end of his of life when he grew concerned with his religious legacy.

Rösch accepts the standard notion that the Muslim Prophet was named Muḥammad at birth. In the pagan context, Rösch contends, the name Muḥammad referred not to its bearer but rather to a patron god (in this case, he suggests, the moon-god Hubal, who is associated with Mecca in Islamic accounts) and it is in this sense that the future Prophet's father — or more likely, his grandfather — gave him the name. However, by Rösch's estimation the Prophet intentionally associated his originally pagan name with the Jewish messianic understanding of the root *ḥ.m.d.* in the Hebrew Bible.

tion of Medina, correspondence with Arab tribes, and the Qurʾān itself, the Prophet's name appears as Muḥammad; second, Muḥammad never appears with a definite article, as one would expect with an Arabic epithet; third, Jewish tradition does not use the idiom "the one longed-for" as an epithet for the Messiah; and four, Muḥammad was a name used by Arabs in pre-Islamic Arabia (Nöldeke 1909 [1970]:I, 9 n. 1). As for Sprenger's notion that in Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew Bible the root *ḥ.m.d.* has messianic connotations, Nöldeke describes it as "aus der Luft gegriffen [taken out of thin air]" (Nöldeke 1909 [1970]:I, 10 n. 1).

For his part Nöldeke presents his own theory on the name Muḥammad in a later remark about a Nabatean inscription. The inscription contains the phrase *ʿAlīʾīl*, which would seem to mean "the God [El] is exalted." Nöldeke speculates that the name ʿAlī could be an abbreviation of this phrase, and that Muḥammad could have originated as an abbreviation of the phrase *muḥammadʾīl*, "God is praiseworthy."[13]

Although he seems not to have known of Nöldeke's theory, Hubert Grimme (1928) would later propose a similar argument on the basis of an Old North Arabian (Safaitic) inscription with the name *m.s.b.ḥ.-il*. The common Semitic root *s.b.ḥ.* is generally parallel to classical Arabic *ḥ.m.d.* Thus the name *muḥammad-īl* ("God is praiseworthy") is semantically identical to that in the inscription. In a later work, Grimme (1929) claims to have found an inscription with *muḥammad-īl* itself.

However, Grimme's argument would be harshly criticized in a 1932 article by August Fischer.[14] In Fischer's view Grimme's strategy of referring a question of classical Arabic to a Safaitic inscription is fundamentally wrongheaded. Fischer insists that in classical Arabic the second form of *ḥ.m.d.* (of which *muḥammad* is the passive participle) is not used to praise God (which is instead the common use of the first form), but people[15] (Fischer 1932:10). Moreover, if the Safaitic people

---

13) Nöldeke's remark is in Euting 1885:67. Fischer 1932:3 also refers to this remark.

14) Fischer 1932:5 remarks: "Wer mit dem klassisch-arabischen und den alt-arabischen Verhältnissen etwas genauer vertraut ist, der kann über diese ganze Argumentation nur den Kopf schütteln."

15) Thus he writes: "Insonderheit erscheinen für 'gepriesen' auf Gott bezüglich, immer nur *maḥmūd* oder *ḥamīd*, nirgends *muḥammad*."

used theophoric names and referred to God as *īl*, the Arabs of Muḥammad's context did not. They put the names of gods in genitive constructions (e.g. *ʿabd al-ʿuzzā*), and referred to the high god as *allāh* or *ilāʾ* (Fischer 1932:19). Finally the very construction *muḥammad-īl*, Fischer continues, breaks the rules of classical Arabic syntax, according to which the subject must come before the predicate. To this end he cites here Q 112:2: *allāhu al-ṣamadu* (Fischer 1932:19).

With Fischer's article the debate over the question of the name Muḥammad, a debate that continued for more than seventy years after the publication of the first volume of Sprenger's *Das Leben*, effectively came to a close.[16] For the rest of the twentieth century this question would be effectively ignored by the scholarly community.[17] Indeed today Sprenger's theory is simply unknown to the great majority of scholars and students. The notion that the Prophet's name was always Muḥammad is generally accepted without questioning.

So it appears that scholarly notions are highly dependent on the historical context of scholars and subject to the fashions and trends in academic publications. But this is not the only lesson that the scholarly history of this debate contains, for the question of the Prophet's name serves to illuminate the historical assumptions that scholars bring to their study of Islam.

For Sprenger, the case of the name Muḥammad is a typical example of the manner in which later Muslim scholars smoothed over the uneven story of the Prophet's life. Renan's response to Sprenger suggests that a larger hermeneutical point was at stake here. Indeed Renan seems to have been eager, even hasty, in his response. Sprenger himself admits that the name Muḥammad was used before Islam, and he names some such examples. So Renan's recourse to a Greek inscription which, he believed, proves that this name was used before Islam hardly disproves Sprenger's point.

But anyway the idea that Greek θαιμοαμεδου represents Arabic *taym muḥammad* is hardly obvious. Sprenger, as mentioned above,

---

16) In a later article Fischer discusses the use of the name Muḥammad in Islamic tradition. See Fischer 1944:307–39.

17) However, in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* Alfred Welch (following Buhl) notes Nöldeke's refutation of Sprenger on this matter. See EI2 1960–2006: s.v. "Muḥammad."

proposed that it might represent *taym muʿammad*. For his part Gustav Rösch reports (in a note written after his article on the name Muḥammad) that he consulted Nöldeke on the interpretation of the Palmyrene inscription. In Nöldeke's opinion, he explains, θαιμοαμεδου reflects not the name Muḥammad but rather *taym ʿamed*, meaning (in Aramaic) "[the god] Taym supports"[18] (Rösch 1892). All of this suggests that Renan read the Palmyrene inscription in the light of his own convictions about Islamic history. To Renan the Islamic biography of Muḥammad (unlike the Christian story of Jesus) was largely authentic. Islam "was born in the full light of history"[19] (Renan 1851:1065).

Fischer's approach to this question similarly reflects a certain confidence in the Islamic biography of Muḥammad. To Fischer, Grimme failed to account for Muḥammad's identity as a genuine Arab: "In his eagerness for discovery Grimme has disregarded the important fact that Muḥammad was not Safaitic. He belonged to the Quraysh and thus to the 'genuine Arabs' (*al-ʿarab*)" (Fischer 1932:19).

Now, Fischer was a master of Semitics generally and Arabic in particular and I have no standing to doubt his philological observations on classical Arabic. Yet it is worth pointing out that those observations rest on certain historical assumptions, namely that Muḥammad was a true Arab and that the language of the Qurʾān is classical Arabic. The Islamic sources, of course, insist on both of these points, but there is little evidence for them outside of those sources, sources written during the ʿAbbāsid empire in an environment of sectarian competition.

Yet even Sprenger, for all of his revisions of "Muḥammad's" biography, likewise depends on its basic framework. Sprenger's theory on the symbolic nature of the Muslim Prophet's name is essentially a reflection on the "true" nature of the Muslim Prophet's career. To Sprenger the turning point of that career is to be found in what the Muslim sources report of his conflict with the Jews of Medina. The Prophet's adoption of the name Muḥammad reflects his desire to win over the

---

18) This report appears in an addendum at the end of the issue of *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* with his article on Muḥammad. Rösch reports that he met Nöldeke on October 19, 1892. Rösch 1892:580.

19) Renan adds here: "One can say without exaggeration that the problem of the origins of Islam has definitely now been completely resolved." Reference and translation from Hoyland 2007:582.

Jews, and is thus a precursor to his split with them and his invention of an Arabian/Abrahamic religion (Sprenger 1861–5:III, 145–216). In other words, all of the scholars involved in the debate over the name Muḥammad in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century based their observations on the historical portrait of the Prophet in the Islamic sources.

In recent publications the notion that Muḥammad was not the Prophet's name has appeared again, but now among scholars who fundamentally mistrust those sources. The Israeli archaeologist Yehuda Nevo (whose work was completed by Judith Koren after his death) notes that the name Muḥammad is not to be found in the earliest Arabic/Islamic religious inscriptions. By his count it only appears with an Umayyad coin dated 71 AH (AD 690) and the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock dated 72 AH (AD 691) (Nevo and Koren 2003:247). The emergence of the name Muḥammad in such media, which are fundamentally meant for imperial propaganda, suggests the development of an official state cult. The anti-Christian nature of the Dome of the Rock inscriptions, moreover, suggests that Muḥammad (both the name and the person) was created to provide an Arab Prophet whose religion could rival that of Byzantine Christianity (Nevo and Koren 2003:263–7). In other words, not only the name Muḥammad is legendary. So too is the person.

To this same effect Volker Popp, a scholar of numismatics, notes that the name Muḥammad appears first (pace Nevo) on two Arabic/Sasanian Persian coins minted in AH 66 (AD 685–6) and 67 (AD 687–7). The provenance of these coins suggests to Popp that the name Muḥammad in fact emerged from the context of the ancient Persian rivalry with Byzantium, manifested in the competition of the East Syrian ("Nestorian") Church with the imperial Byzantine Church. By Popp's reading Muḥammad was not originally the name of an Arabian Prophet but rather a title for Jesus. The term itself means not "the praised-one" (he insists that in classical Arabic the idea of praise is associated instead with the root *s.b.ḥ.*) but "the chosen-one" (Popp 2005:38). In other words, the title *muḥammad* was used originally in the context of ancient Christological debates (Popp 2005:60–5). Whereas the Byzantines viewed Christ in terms of Hellenic ontology, the Umayyads championed the Semitic notion of a servant messiah who was chosen by God in history.

The Christian theologian Karl-Heinz Ohlig agrees with Popp on this question, arguing that in the Qurʾān *muḥammad* is related to Greek ἐκλεκτός, "the chosen one" (cf. Luke 23.35) and refers to Jesus (Ohlig 2007:332–3). Ohlig applies his argument to Q 5:75: "*Muḥammad* was only a messenger. Messengers passed away before him." This verse, Ohlig insists, is essentially parallel to Q 3:144: "*Al-masīḥ*, the son of Mary, was only a messenger. Messengers passed away before him" (Ohlig 2007:361). In the first verse Jesus is referred to with the title *muḥammad* as he is referred to in the second verse with the title *al-masīḥ*.

Christoph Luxenberg, for his part, agrees that *muḥammad* applies to Jesus, even while he understands it according to the standard Arabic meaning related to "praise." Luxenberg contends that the Dome of the Rock inscription *muḥammadun ʿabdu llāhi wa-rasūluhu* reflects a notion of Jesus as the messianic servant. It should be read, "The servant and messenger of God [i.e. Jesus] is praiseworthy" (Luxenberg 2005:129–31). The Christological notion of Jesus as servant is similarly found in the Qurʾān, he insists, which has the infant Jesus begin his discourse in Q 19:30 with the phrase, *inni ʿabdu llāhi* ("I am the servant of God") [20] (Luxenberg 2005:131).

Thus with Nevo, Popp, Ohlig, and Luxenberg[21] the debate over the name Muḥammad is substantially different from that which followed the publication of Sprenger's *Das Leben und die Lehre des Moḥammad*. These scholars do not simply question whether the Muslim prophet was named Muḥammad. They question whether he existed at all.

Their approach reflects the influence of John Wansbrough. In *Quranic Studies* and *Sectarian Milieu* Wansbrough challenged the dominant methodology of scholarship on Quranic origins. By Wansbrough's account the Qurʾān, and Islam itself, emerged from a Judaeo-Christian context quite unlike the historical narrative of the Islamic

---

20) Thus Luxenberg argues that the phrase *muhammadun ʿAbdu Llāhi wa-rasūluhu* should be read parallel to the Christian Arabic liturgical proclamation (derived from Matthew 21.9, itself a quotation of Psalm 118.25–6), *mubārakun al-ātī bi-smi l-rabbi*, and applied to Jesus.

21) The articles of the latter three scholars on this topic all appear in the same series of German publications, including Groß & Ohlig 2008. This series is entitled *Inârah: Schriften zur frühen Islamgeschichte und zum Koran*.

sources. The stories of Muḥammad in pagan Mecca, of the Jews of Medina collaborating with the pagans of Mecca, the notion of a poetic-literary language (*al-ʿarabiyya*) in which the Qurʾān was written — all of this is the product of a salvation history shaped by apologetic concerns. Wansbrough's theory accordingly created intellectual room for later scholars — such as Nevo, Popp, Ohlig, and Luxenberg — to contemplate Islam's origins without relying on the master narrative of the Islamic sources.

Yet Wansbrough, who never speculated on the history of the Arabs and their religion before the appearance of Arabic literature in the ʿAbbāsid period, hardly meant to encourage the sort of historical speculation that appears in their work. When his own students Patricia Crone and Michael Cook developed a hypothetical alternative to the Muslim story Islam's origins in *Hagarism*, Wansbrough objected trenchantly.[22] By Wansbrough's reading the historical reconstruction of Islamic origins through non-Islamic sources — even if these sources are more ancient — is essentially no different from their reconstruction through the ʿAbbāsid-era Islamic sources. In both cases the scholar is working with literary material marked by polemics, literary *topoi*, and exegesis of earlier texts. The scholars who would write a new account of Islam's origins are not much different from the medieval Muslim scholars who wrote the old account. The old account is marked by Bedouins and paganism. The new account is marked by heterodox Christians and imperial religion. Both are imaginary.

The approach of Wansbrough suggests that the proper task of scholars of Islamic origins is instead to understand the goals, strategies and logic of the relevant texts. On the question of the name Muḥammad scholars should not read the occurrences of this name in the Qurʾān in light of the later historical narrative of Islamic sources (which, among other things, would make some verses "Meccan" and others "Medinan"). Instead scholars should investigate the role that this name plays in the text itself.

To this end it is especially important, in my opinion, to observe the Qurʾān's use of epithets. It makes Jesus *al-masīḥ*, Pharaoh *dhū ʾl-awtād*

22) Wansbrough 1978:155–6.

(Q 38:12; 89:10), and Jonah *dhū ʾl-nūn* (21:87) or *ṣāḥib al-ḥūṭ* (68:48). In such cases the Qurʾān reports elsewhere the proper name of the protagonist. But in other cases, such as *dhū ʾl-qarnayn* (Q 18:83, 86, passim) and *al-ʿazīz* (Q 12:30, 51), the Qurʾān reports *only* the epithet. The penchant for epithets reveals something of the Qurʾān's literary nature, for texts which use epithets rely on the audience's ability to recognize them. The Qurʾān clearly expects its audience to recognize that "the two-horned" (*dhū ʾl-qarnayn*) is Alexander (who represented himself with iconography of the two-horned Egyptian god Ammon) (cf. Horovitz 1926:111–13), and "the powerful" (*al-ʿazīz*) is Potiphar (the "commander" of Pharaoh's guard; Genesis 39.1).

In all of these cases, however, the Qurʾanic epithet is accompanied, unlike *muḥammad*, by a definite article. This is precisely the point that Nöldeke raised in objection to Sprenger's argument. He wrote: "If the name were an epithet originally, then it would impossible to explain why it does not appear, even a single time, with the definite article" (Nöldeke [1970]:10 n. 1). And yet the Qurʾān apparently employs at least two epithets without a definite article.

The first is Ṣāliḥ (Q 7:73, 75; 11:61, passim), or "righteous," a term usually interpreted as the proper name of the prophet sent to a people called Thamūd. Most scholars include Ṣāliḥ among the Arabian prophets unknown to the Jews and Christians, but Abraham Geiger (1902:118) suggests that Ṣāliḥ (even if it resembles the name of Eber's father, Shelah; cf. Genesis 10.24; 11.12), is not a proper name at all: "In any case the word with its meaning 'a pious man' is so general that it cannot be understood here with any certainty to have been originally a proper name." Horovitz, noting that the Qurʾān elsewhere uses the adjective *ṣāliḥ* to describe those who are obedient to God (e.g. Q 2:130; 3:39, 46, 114 passim; Horovitz 1926:50) concludes that the name Ṣāliḥ "seems to have been Muḥammad's own creation"[23] (1926:123). Ṣāliḥ would thus seem to be an interesting parallel to the name Muḥammad.

---

[23] Cf. EI2 1960–2006: s.v. "Ṣāliḥ" by A. Rippin: "The name Ṣāliḥ itself may well be a formation from the time of Muḥammad himself, from the root *ṣ.l.ḥ.* with the connotation of 'to be pious, upright.'" For his part Speyer ([1931] 1961:119) proposes that the name Ṣāliḥ is an epithet for Melchizedek (cf. Genesis 14.18).

Now *muḥammad*, unlike *ṣāliḥ*, is hardly attested as an adjective in later Arabic literature, but this is presumably because it became unavoidably associated with the Prophet.[24] The name *muḥammad* is a perfectly good Arabic adjective, and would form a meaningful epithet for a holy figure. Arabic *muḥammad* is parallel to, if not a calque on, the Syriac passive participle *shbīḥ*/*shbīḥā*, an adjective consistently used in the Peshīṭtā and in Syriac Christian literature to describe the righteous.[25]

Similar to the case of Ṣāliḥ, but more transparent, is Ṭālūt, a name that appears in the Qurʾān on two occasions (Q 2:247, 249) as an epithet for king Saul. The name Ṭālūt matches Jālūt, the Qurʾānic version of Goliath's name (and is thus in line with the Qurʾān's affinity for rhyming pairs, e.g. Iblīs/Idrīs, Ismāʿīl/Isrāʾīl, Mūsā/ʿĪsā, Hārūn/Qārūn, Hārūt/Mārūt, Yājūj/Mājūj). It is also, being related to the Arabic root for "height" (*ṭ.w.l.*), an allusion to the stature of Saul, who was "head and shoulders" taller than his people (1 Samuel 10.23)[26] (Geiger 1902:179; Horovitz 1926:84, 123). The name Saul itself, it is worth noting, never appears in the Qurʾān.

As for Muḥammad, three of its four occurrences in the Qurʾān seem to provide no biographical material at all, and consequently no compelling reason to think of it as a proper name:

> Muḥammad is only a messenger. Messengers passed away before him. (Q 3:144)
>
> As for those who believed, acted virtuously and believed in what was brought down to Muḥammad, which is the truth from their Lord, He absolved them of their bad deeds and resolved their situation. (Q 47:2)
>
> Muḥammad is the messenger of God. Those who are with him are severe to the unbelievers but compassionate to each other. (Q 48:29)

---

24) It is attested in rare cases with the meaning "praised much" or "endowed with many praiseworthy qualities." See Lane 1863–93:640a. Its infrequent use as an adjective is reflected in the tradition at the opening of this paper, in which ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, explaining why he named his grandson Muḥammad, declares that he wants the boy to be *maḥmūd*.

25) See also the attestations in *TS*, 4025. Payne-Smith notes that the medieval Syriac lexicographers Bar ʿAlī (d. late 9th) and Bar Bahlūl (d. 963) translate *shbīḥ* with *ḥamīd* and *maḥmūd* (although not *muḥammad*, presumably due to its Islamic context). Cf. Manna [1900] 1975:762b.

26) On this point cf. Geiger [1833] 1902:179; Horowitz 1926:84, 123.

The only verse that apparently contains some biographical material is:

> Muḥammad was not the father of any of your men but rather the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets. God was knowing in all things. (Q 33:40)

This information in this verse would seem to be confirmed by the Islamic historical traditions which relate that Muḥammad had no son that survived into adulthood. (see Powers 2009, esp. chapter 4). According to Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), Muḥammad had three sons by Khadīja: Qāsim, Ṭayyib and Ṭāhir; and one son from Māriya (his Egyptian concubine): Ibrāhīm. All four of these sons, tellingly, are said to have died as children. They did not grow up to be men (Ibn Kathīr 2004:III, 459, on Q 33:39–40).

But what if these traditions are themselves haggadic exegesis? What if the reports of the Prophet's sons who died in childhood are the product of storytellers who created a narrative context for this verse? If it is conceivable that scholars are mistaken about the very existence of Qāsim, Ṭayyib, Ṭāhir, and Ibrāhīm, could they not also be mistaken about the name Muḥammad? Indeed it seems to me that the Qurʾān's proclamation that Muḥammad is "not the father of any of your men" should be read in light of the rest of the verse: "but rather the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets." In other words, in this verse the Qurʾān means only to assert that Prophet's authority is divine, not human.

In fact, the Qurʾān shows little interest in the names of the people and places of its historical context. The Qurʾān names only two groups — the Byzantines (Q 30:1) and the Quraysh (Q 106:1) — and it gives no details on either one. It mentions Mecca once (Q 48:24; Q 3:96 notwithstanding), Badr once (Q 3:123), Ḥunayn once (Q 9:25), and the ruined city of Lot once (Q 37:137–8). Even then the Qurʾān does not identify Mecca as a city, but simply alludes to the "hollow" or the "heart" (*baṭn*) of *makka*. Similarly it does not identify Badr or Ḥunayn as the sites of battles. Moreover, many names that one might expect to find in the Qurʾān, in light of the traditional biography of the Prophet, are missing. The Qurʾān does not include the terms Yathrib, Uḥud, Ṭāʾif, Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Persia or the Red Sea.[27] More to the point,

[27] There are four references in the Qurʾān to *al-madīna* ("city"; Q 9:101, 120; 33:60; 63:8) although whether a specific city is intended is unclear.

it does not name the Prophet's wives Khadīja or ʿĀʾisha, his daughter Fāṭima, his uncle Abū Ṭālib, his cousin ʿAlī, or his companions Abū Bakr, ʿUmar and ʿUthmān. In this light it might be a surprise if the Qurʾān *did* include the name of its Prophet.

If what it includes is instead an epithet, then the Qurʾān would be participating in a *topos* of religious literature by which God's chosen ones receive a new name. In the Torah Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, and Jacob becomes Israel. In the New Testament Simon is named Peter (πέτρος, the "rock" on which Jesus will build his church) when he recognizes that Jesus is the Christ (Matthew 16.16–8; cf. John 1.42). Saul is referred to by his Roman name Paul (παῦλος, "small", perhaps because he is the last of the apostles) after his conversion (Acts 13.9). The case of Paul is particularly interesting, since in Christian literature he is generally referred to simply as the τὸ ἀπόστολος (i.e. "the messenger"; Syr. *shlīḥā*), just as the Qurʾān so often refers to its Prophet simply as *al-rasūl* ("the messenger").

The possibility that Muḥammad is just such a religious name is rendered more likely by Q 61:6:

> Jesus the son of Mary said, "O Israelites, I am the messenger of God to you, confirming the Tawrāt before me, and giving the good news of a messenger to come after me. His name is Aḥmad."

Thus the only time that the Qurʾān explicitly refers to the Prophet's name ("His name is…"), it calls him not Muḥammad but Aḥmad. Now it might be objected that Aḥmad is not a name but an adjective, meaning "more praiseworthy." This is indeed the understanding of Pickthall, who in his translation of Q 61:6, relates "whose name is the Praised One." But then that is precisely the point about the name Muḥammad. The evidence of the Qurʾanic text, in other words, is that both Muḥammad and Aḥmad are honorary epithets for its praiseworthy Prophet. The Muslim prophet's historical name is nowhere to be found.

In the collective memory of Islamic tradition Muḥammad is a name of both identity and of symbolism. The Prophet made real in the religious life of Muslims is identified by this name. The millions of faithful Muslims who have given this name to their children have done so only because they know it as the name of the last and greatest of God's messengers. Yet the traditions which insist that the name

Muḥammad is a name given to the Prophet by God, or only one of a series of names for the Prophet which illuminate his religious station, show that Muslims at the same time find symbolic value in this name.

The instinct of Western scholars has generally been, on the one hand, to accept the reports which make Muḥammad the historical name of the Prophet. On the other hand, they (Sprenger aside) qualify the reports that make Muḥammad only one of many symbolic names as expressions of Islamic piety. The present study, however, suggests that both sorts of reports are the product of Islamic cultural memory, by which the name Muḥammad is at once historical and symbolic.

This is, I grant, a provocative argument in the context of critical scholarship. On a religious level, however, it seems to me a rather insignificant one. The Prophet of Islamic tradition was named Muḥammad by his grandfather, if not by an angel, and for Muslims this is his true name.

References

Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. 1895. *Musnad*: Cairo: n.p.

Böckh, Augustus. 1828–77. *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*. Berlin: Reimeri.

Buhl, F. 1913–34. "Muḥammad." In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1st edition. Leiden: Brill, III, 685–6.

Bukhārī, al-. 1862–1908. *Ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. L. Krehl and T.W. Juynboll. Leiden: Brill.

Euting, J. 1885. *Nabatäische Inschriften aus Arabien*. Berlin: Reimer.

Fischer, A. 1932. "Muhammad und Ahmad, die Namen des arabischen Propheten." *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, phil.-hist. Klasse* 84: 3–27.

———. 1944. "Vergöttlichung und Tabuisierung der Namen Muḥammad's bei den Muslimen," in R. Hartmann and H. Scheel, *Beiträge zur Arabistik, Semitistik und Islamwissenschaft*, Leipzig: Harrassowitz: 307–39.

Geiger, A. [1833] 1902. *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen*. Reprint, Leipzig: Kaufmann.

Gilliot, Claude. 2007. "Une reconstruction critique du Coran ou comment en finir avec les merveilles de la lampe d'Aladin." In *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'ān: The Question of a Historio-Critical Text of the Qur'ān*, ed. M. Kropp. Beirut: Ergon, 33–137.

Grimme, H. 1928. "Der Name Moḥammad," *Zeitschrift für Semitistik und verwandte Gebiete* 6: 24–6.

———. 1929. *Texte und Untersuchungen zur ṣafatenisch-arabischen Religion, mit einer Einführung in die ṣafatenische Epigraphik*. Paderborn: Schöningh.

Groß, M. & K. H. Ohlig, eds. 2008. *Schlaglichter: Die beiden ersten islamischen Jahrhunderte*. Berlin: Schiler.

Ḥalabī, ʿAlī b. Burhān al-Dīn al-. n.d. *al-Sīra al-Ḥalabiyya*. Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa.

Hirschfeld, H. 1878. *Jüdische Elemente im Koran*. Berlin: Schulze.

———. 1902. *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran*. London: Royal Asiatic Society.

Horovitz, J. 1926. *Koranische Untersuchungen*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Hoyland, Robert. 2007. "Writing the biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and solutions," *History Compass* 5: 581–602.

Ibn al-Jawzī. 1966. *Al-Wafāʾ bi-aḥwāl al-muṣṭafā*. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha.

Ibn Hishām. 1955. *Al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqā et al. Cairo: Ḥalabī.

Ibn Kathīr. 2004. *Tafsīr*, ed. Muḥammad Bayḍūn. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya.

Ibn Saʿd. 1968. *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubra*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir.

Lammens, Henri. 1910. "Qoran et tradition: Comment fut composée la vie de Mahomet," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 1:25–51. English trans. "The Koran and Tradition: How the Life of Muhammad was Composed." In *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. Ibn Warraq. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000, 169–87.

Lane, E. 1863–93. *An Arabic-English Lexicon*. London: Williams and Norgate.

Ledrain, E. 1886. *Dictionnaire des noms propres palmyreniens*. Paris: Leroux.

Luxenberg, C. 2005. "Die arabische Inschrift im Felsendom zu Jerusalem," in Ohlig and Puin (eds.) *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*. Berlin: Schiler, 124–47.

Manna, J. E. [1900] 1975. *Vocabulaire chaldéen-arabe*, reprint, edited by R. J. Bidawid. Beirut: Babel Center.

Marracci, Luigi. 1698. *Refutatio Alcorani in qua ad Mahumetanicae superstitionis radicem securis apponitur*. Padua: ex typographia seminarii.

Muslim. 1955–6. *Ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Muḥammad Fuʾād ʿAbd al-Bāqī. Cairo: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya.

Nevo, Y. & J. Koren, J. 2003. *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus.

Nöldeke, Theodor. 1909 [1970]. *Geschichte des Qorāns 1*. 2nd edition, Hildesheim: Olms.

Ohlig, K.-H. 2007. "Von muhammad Jesus zum Propheten der Araber: Die Historisierung eines christologischen Prädikats," in Ohlig (ed.) *Der frühe Islam: eine kritisch-historische Rekonstruktion anhand zeitgenössischer Quellen*. Berlin: Schiler, 327–76.

———. (ed.). 2007. *Der frühe Islam: eine kritisch-historische Rekonstruktion anhand zeitgenössischer Quellen*. Berlin: Schiler.

Ohlig, K.-H. & Puin G.-R., (eds.). 2005. *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*. Berlin: Schiler.

Popp, V. 2005. "Die frühe Islamgeschichte nach inschriftlichen und numismatischen Zeugnissen," In Ohlig and Puin (eds.) *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*. Berlin: Schiler, 16–123.

Powers, D. S. 2009. *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Renan, E. 1851. "Mahomet et les origines de l'Islamisme," *Revue des deux mondes* 12: 1064–1101.

———. 1860. "Discussion sur quelques points de la vie de Mahomet," *Revue Germanique* 12: 5–48.

Riḍā, Fū'ād ʿAlī. 1972. *Umm al-qurā. Makka al-mukarrama*. Beirut: Maktabat al-Maʿārif.

Rösch, F. 1892. "Die Namen des arabischen Propheten Muḥammed und Aḥmed," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 46: 432–40.

———. 1892. "Die Namen des arabischen Propheten Muḥammed und Aḥmed; Zu S. 432," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 46: 580.

Speyer, H. [1931] 1961. *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*. Reprint, Hildesheim: Olms.

Sprenger, Aloys. 1861–5. *Das Leben und die Lehre des Moḥammad*. Berlin: Nicolai'sche Verlagsbuchandlung.

Suyūṭī, al-. 1985. *Al-Khaṣā'iṣ al-kubrā*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya.

Wansbrough, J. 1978. Review of *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41: 155–6.

Wensinck, A. J. 1936. *Concordance de la tradition musulmane*. Leiden: Brill.