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The Motif of the Angel(s) of Death in Islamic Foundational Sources as an Element of Cultural Diffusion

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Abstract: The article harks back to the publication entitled "The Motif of the Angel(s) of Death in Islamic Foundational Sources" (*VV* 38/2 [2020]), which was devoted to the analysis of the eponymous theme in the foundational sources of Islam: the Quran and the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether the motif of angel(s) may have been borrowed from two monotheistic traditions that came before. The verification of the thesis that the motif of the angel(s) of death underwent diffusion was carried out in several steps. First, the motif was identified in the textual traditions of Judaism and early Christianity (i.e. sets of texts that were known and, in all likelihood, widespread in the Middle East during the formative period of Islam). As a result of the analysis, most of the themes recognised in the foundational texts of Islam were found. The next step was to identify possible routes of their transmission and percolation into the Islamic tradition and to determine the "ideological demand" for the motif of the angel(s) of death in the burgeoning Islam. Although Jewish and Christian imagery and beliefs about angels are an important (if not the primary) source of influence on Muslim angelology, there was most likely a two-way interaction between the monotheistic traditions, albeit to a limited extent.

Keywords: angels, death, cultural diffusion, Hebrew Bible, intertestamental literature, Talmud, Christian Apocrypha, Quran, sunna of the Prophet Muhammad

Diffusion is a concept used in the study of the dynamics of cultural developments. Generally speaking, cultural diffusion describes how various content types spread out between and penetrate cultures (or, every so often, particular social milieus within the same culture). While cultural diffusion is believed to be obvious and natural, the very presence of convergent cultural elements, whether material or immaterial, is not necessarily an outcome of diffusion and may well be a result of independent developments.[1] Therefore, a case-by-case diffusionist analysis is necessary, and

1 See e.g. Winthrop, *Dictionary of Concepts*, 83–84.

on its basis one can infer conclusions about the transmission of cultural elements through borrowing.[2]

Diffusion is made possible by intercultural exchange that occurs mostly through migration, trade, wars, etc. Mere exposure, direct or indirect, does not in itself warrant diffusion. Critical for absorbing cultural content is the cultural environment which it comes into and which attaches meanings and values to it. In other words, what prompts a borrowing is a similarity of the structural features of the donor and recipient cultures as well as a need for (and the utility of) a given element for the recipient culture. Finally, a reinterpretation of the borrowed cultural content within the recipient framework and its integration with the recipient tradition may be conducive to diffusion.[3]

In this article, diffusion is viewed in relation to a single eschatological theme present in groups of texts of the Jewish and early Christian traditions as well as of Islam. The article harks back to *The Motif of the Angel(s) of Death in Islamic Foundational Sources*,[4] a publication that examined the eponymous theme in the foundational sources of Islam: the Quran and the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. The detailed analysis of the Quran verses and *hadith*s was preceded by an overview of these sources (the rule of the *hadith*s selection was also provided) as well as by an introduction to the belief in angels in Islam.

The conclusions of the previous paper are a reference point for the present reflections on whether the motif of angels may have been borrowed from two monotheistic traditions that came before. As such, this article seeks to verify the claim that the theme of the angel(s) of death underwent diffusion. The verification will be done by: 1) identifying the theme in the Judaic and early Christian traditions, 2) identifying possible routes of transmission and percolation into the Islamic tradition, and 3) determining the "ideological demand" for the theme of the angels of death in the burgeoning Islam, and pointing to structural similarities between its vehicle cultures.

As in the previous paper, the research area has been limited to dynamic motifs by dealing solely with the angels accompanying the dying. Two contexts have been identified in Islamic foundational sources, in which a relationship between angels and death appears: political-military and eschatological. In the former, the angels inflict

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2 Nowicka, *Świat człowieka*, 83–85. It is important to be aware of the two extremes between which comparative studies, whether on ancient literatures or ancient religions, have generally been pursued. One of these has been the so-called parallelomania, which Samuel Sandmel ("Parallelomania," 1–13) diagnosed and called a disease in his 1961 speech given before the Society of Biblical Literature. The other extreme has been parallel-onoia, against which Howard Eilberg-Schwartz spoke (*The Savage in Judaism*, 87–102). This cyclical pattern of the occurrence of the extremes in comparative approaches must be taken with caution and discernment. For the study of possible parallelisms cannot be dispensed with, but neither can it be made the key issue in comparing different cultures.

3 Nowicka, *Świat człowieka*, 85; Ferraro – Andreatta, *Cultural Anthropology*, 41–42.

4 Prochwicz-Studnicka, "The Motif of the Angel(s) of Death," 565–578.

death on the enemy at battlefield. In the latter, there are two key moments: death and burial, when the angels take out the soul from the body to heaven so it is judged by God, and when they question the deceased in the grave.

Principally, diffusion does not involve individual elements but has effect, so to say, on an entire culture, which is an elaborate system: "the elements and complexes of a culture are functional in that each part tends to be related to the others in ways that contribute to the operation of the whole culture."[5] So is the case in the Islamic context. The paths of its development were influenced culturally by the monotheistic religions – Judaism and Christianity[6]; their influences are traceable on many planes, mainly law and theology, both in theory and daily devotional practice. It would be overly simplistic to say that Islam took over individual, foreign elements and that they existed independently in culture: the Jewish and Christian traditions were the foundation upon which Islam began to build its own, integrated vision of the world via reflection on the Quran and, down the road, on the sunna, and that vision differed from its Jewish and Christian counterparts.[7]

Another reservation that should be made concerns primary sources. This article identifies the angelic theme in the Judaic and early Christian traditions exploring their text sources. One difficulty that the study runs into has a dual nature and is posed particularly by Talmudic literature. Firstly, these writings do not form a systematic study of theological issues, not least a theology of death. Rabbinic reflections on *post-mortem* experiences appear in a variety of thematic contexts and literary forms,[8] and sources of the rabbinic knowledge of what happens during and after death remain unknown. Secondly, the mainstay of Talmudic literature is oral teaching. David Kraemer puts it this way:

> *Presumptively*, the "original" or earliest forms of any given teaching or tradition are unavailable to us. We simply have no way of knowing whether we have recovered such an early tradition. If a teaching is attributed to Rav or Samuel, of the mid-third century, we have no way of knowing the form of the original teaching nor the changes which affected

5 Matera, "Understanding Cultural Diversity," 31; see also Ferraro – Andreatta, *Cultural Anthropology*, 42.

6 There have been a few works (based on the concept of religious evolutionism) on the relationship between the origins of angelology in Islam and pre-Islamic paganism, but the conclusions of the authors have been rather rejected in the discourse, see Burge, *Angels in Islam*, 10–12.

7 The Muslim vision of the world of angels – despite its syncretic character – has its own distinctive feature. As the article concerns the motif of the angel(s) of death in the foundational sources of Islam, hence the development of this idea in Muslim angelology has been omitted. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that angelology, the core of which is the reflection of Muslim theologians, was extended by rich and varied folk beliefs. A good introduction to the topic can be found in the text of Sebastian Günther, "As the Angels Stretch Out Their Hands," 307–346, dedicated to the role of angels related with the end of an individual's life and the end of the world according to the eschatological manuals from the classical period of Islam.

8 See e.g. Avery-Peck, "Death and Afterlife," 244; Raphael, *The Jewish Views*, 136.

> it in the course of preservation and transmission from the third to the sixth century, when it was finally recorded in the Babylonian Talmud. All we can know with relative surety, because it is all we actually preserve, is the "snapshot" of the teaching at the time of its preservation in the final document.[9]

Likewise, in the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad: the transmission of the *hadith*s occurred orally for many years, and individual notes were only made as mnemonic aids. The sunna got its final shape only in the 9th century.[10] Although the mature and already full-blown Arab-Muslim culture of the day used script on a wide scale, it "continued to favour oral-aural forms of transmission of content, and thus the content-makers and the users of culture (of subcultures) belonged to the same community of memory by the internalisation of the texts which were developed. Memorisation and oral transmission constituted a deeply rooted tradition in the Arab community."[11]

It therefore appears impossible to pinpoint the source of the figures of angel(s) of death that Arab (early Arab-Muslim) culture was exposed to. To determine whether the motif was mediated by textual or oral tradition (in which it may have functioned in many variations) seems irrelevant. What is essential, however, is to identify the theme in Judaism and early Christianity, which will prompt further questions about how common and open to borrowings it was.

1. The Identification of the Motif in the Context of the Textual Traditions of Judaism and Early Christianity[12]

1.1. Defeating the Enemies in the Battlefield

The idea of defeating the enemy on the battlefield with the help of angels is linked to the Medinan period (622–632) in the life of the Prophet Muhammad, when he became a community organiser, politician and military commander. The young Islamic community (*umma*) was born in the context of tribal disputes and feuds, as well as armed struggle. In Quranic allusions to the latter and in the *hadiths*, angels appear as their active participants.[13]

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9 Kraemer, *Meanings of Death*, 8.

10 See Prochwicz-Studnicka, "The Motif of the Angel(s) of Death," 566–567.

11 Prochwicz-Studnicka, "The Accuracy of the Literacy Theory Claims," 73.

12 Due to the adopted research objective, the identification of convergent angelological contexts in the texts of the Judaic and early Christian traditions is not exhaustive; through a cursory analysis we want to indicate (in chronological order) the presence of the motif in particular sets of texts.

13 Prochwicz-Studnicka, "The Motif of the Angel(s) of Death," 569–570.

In the biblical texts, the motif of the participation of angels[14] in armed conflicts can also be discerned, both in early and late texts.[15]

The earlier texts do not yet have an angelology as extensive as the texts written from about the 3rd century BC, especially those representing intertestamental literature.[16] It is only in later texts that references to the appearance of angels occur, some of them beginning to bear their names, and finally the functions they perform are expanded and specified.

The relationship between angels and death in the context of the armed struggle *hic et nunc* fits into one of the three basic functional categories of angels – the messengers of God, that is, in interaction with humans – next to revelation and theophanic assistance as the other two roles.[17] For, in the relationship with humans, the function of angels was not limited only to the transmission of commands and messages, in other words, the will of God expressed verbally. Angels also undertook certain actions of a physical nature, including military.

Military functions are performed by the Angel of Yahweh (מלאך יהוה). In his dealings with humans – besides being an escort, a punisher, an intercessor, a saviour, a destroyer – he appears in the role of a warrior defeating people's enemies.[18] This is the case, for example, in the Second Book of Kings. It was introduced to describe an event contextualised historically as the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrian forces around 701 BC. The biblical text on the siege of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 18:13b–19:37)[19] consists of two parts, the first of which is believed to come from the annals (18:13b-16) and the second from the prophetic narrative (18:17–19:37).[20] In this prophetic part, the motif of the Angel of Yahweh appears to defeat the Assyrian enemies in order to defend the holy city: "And that night the angel of the LORD went forth, and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies" (2 Kgs 19:35).

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14 The Hebrew מלאך is based on the Semitic verbal stem *l'k* – "to depute, to send a messenger." The verb itself is not attested in Hebrew (but in the languages of the Southwestern group – Arabic and Ethiopic). Instead, it existed in Ugaritic and probably meant "to send a messenger with a message" (*DUL*, 482–483, *TDOT* VIII, 309–311).

15 According to James L. Kugel (*In Potiphar's House*, 247–270), an exegetical motif can influence the emergence or development of another one. These motifs usually arise when a text is difficult, unclear, and especially when a difficult word or phrase appears. It is also common for such exegetical motifs to be transferred from one biblical place to another. This results in the merging and harmonisation of motifs and of individual elements which belong to them.

16 In Christian biblical studies, the term intertestamental literature encompasses those texts that were written in the last centuries BCE and in the 1st century AD, were religious in nature, often referred to biblical texts, but were not included in either the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint, nor did they enter the New Testament canon. Meanwhile, from the perspective of research on Jewish literature, one points to apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, see for more detail Pilarczyk, *Literatura żydowska*, 130, 138, 168.

17 Everson, *Angels in the Targums*, 14.

18 Everson, *Angels in the Targums*, 23.

19 For the biblical quotations, *The Revised Standard Version* (RSV) will be used.

20 Cogan – Tadmor, *II Kings*, 240.

An almost identical text about the siege of Jerusalem is found in Isaiah (Isa 36:1–37:38), and verse 36 (Isa 37:36) is exactly the same as in 2 Kings. Herodotus, referring in his *Histories* to the expedition of the Assyrian ruler, points to an event connected with a plague which was thought to have afflicted the Assyrian camp and caused the death of the soldiers and the abandonment of the further siege of the city. He mistakenly indicates the name of the ruler and calls him the king of the Assyrians and Arabs.[21] In Herodotus' text, Alexander Rofé sees an echo of the expedition to Jerusalem and suggests that it is a testimony to the development, known in the Second Temple literature, of the motif of the Angel of the Lord taking action and his defeat of Sennacherib's army. According to him, this motif may have reached Egypt through Jewish emigrants (*The Histories*, Book II is about Egypt).[22]

The arrival of Alexander of Macedon's armies in the Middle East in the 2nd half of the 4th century BC fundamentally changed the political system of the ancient world. After his death in 323 BC, the Seleucids took control of much of the collapsed Persian Empire, while the Ptolemies took command of Egypt and, throughout the third century BC, the territories of Syria, Lebanon and Israel. From the perspective of Judaism, the Ptolemies were seen as tolerant rulers and even favourable to it. This is reflected in the tradition associated with the translation of the Torah into Greek. The Seleucid occupation of the territories of Israel and their policy of severe Hellenisation[23] led to opposition and resistance, which took the form of an armed uprising led by the Maccabees.[24] It lasted from 167 to 164 BC during the reign of the Seleucid, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–163).

The events of the Jewish uprising led by the Maccabees are recalled in parts of the Books of Maccabees.[25] The literary interpretation of the Maccabean uprising efforts alluded to the idea of God and his angels defeating the Assyrian armies (e.g. 2 Macc 15:22-23). The texts expressed the belief that also during the battles between the Maccabean and Seleucid armies, angels were able to influence the outcome of earthly battles (e.g. 2 Macc 11:6-8).

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21 Herodotus, *The Histories* II, 141, [after:] Cogan – Tadmor, *II Kings*, 250.

22 Rofé, *Israelite Belief in Angels*, 217, [after:] Cogan – Tadmor, *II Kings*, 251.

23 Bright, *Historia Izraela*, 428–435; Noth, *The History of Israel*, 359–367.

24 Bright, *Historia Izraela*, 442–443; Grant, *Dzieje dawnego Izraela*, 241.

25 The books of Maccabees, both canonical and apocryphal, were known and widespread in Christianity, also in Syriac Christianity, which especially had contact with the Arabs over several centuries. Since 2 Maccabees is most likely an epitome of a much larger work, its dating is also problematic. It is assumed that the epitome was written by a Jewish author between 125–63 BC, Attridge, "Historiography," 177, 181. *4 Maccabees*, like 2 Maccabees, was also written in Greek. The author is unknown; it is supposed that it may have been written in Alexandria or Antioch, between 40 AD and the 1st half of the 2nd century, Gilbert, "Wisdom Literature," 316, 318.

As Aleksander Michalak argues, the biblical account of 2 Maccabees actually depicts angels on the battlefield for the first time as "humanlike horse warriors" in direct confrontation with a human/human enemy[26]:

> (29) When the battle became fierce, there appeared to the enemy from heaven five resplendent men on horses with golden bridles, and they were leading the Jews. (30) Two of them took Maccabeus between them, and shielding him with their own armor and weapons, they kept him from being wounded. They showered arrows and thunderbolts on the enemy, so that, confused and blinded, they were thrown into disorder and cut to pieces. (31) Twenty thousand five hundred were slaughtered, besides six hundred cavalry (2 Macc 10:29-31).[27]

The image of armed angelic horsemen is also evoked in other episodes related to the "Greek" intervention and the attempt to seize the treasury of the temple in Jerusalem. The angelic horsemen, attacking the leaders of the plundering expedition of Apollonius and Helidorus, have splendid and shining armours, and the steed depicted is festively limbed:

> (23) […] and when Apollonius with his armed host marched in to seize the moneys, there appeared from heaven angels, riding upon horses, with lightning flashing from their arms, and cast great fear and trembling upon them[28] (4 Macc 2:23).
>
> (25) For there appeared to them a magnificently caparisoned horse, with a rider of frightening mien; it rushed furiously at Heliodorus and struck at him with its front hoofs. Its rider was seen to have armor and weapons of gold. (26) Two young men also appeared to him, remarkably strong, gloriously beautiful and splendidly dressed, who stood on either side of him and flogged him continuously, inflicting many blows on him (2 Macc 3:25-26).

The idea of angel(s) being involved militarily may be rooted in the vision of God's intervention in natural phenomena in a military context. This can be seen most notably in Exodus (Exod 14:31), when the Pharaoh's army is thrown into the sea.

In later extra-biblical texts, the angelological military context gained an eschatological dimension, and quite a few texts took on an apocalyptic character.[29] This is the case, for example, in the War Scroll,[30] where the motif of the fighting angels

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26 Michalak, *Angels as Warriors*, 200–201.

27 For the biblical quotations of 2 Macc, *The New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) has been used.

28 The reference is to Apollonius of Tarsus, friend of Seleucos IV Philopator (reigned 187–175).

29 That is, recognising in the present the end of times in which rampant evil must ultimately be defeated by God, Wassen, "Angels in the Dead Sea Scrolls," 508–509. *The War Scroll*, despite dealing with ultimate things, is not an apocalyptic text *par excellence*, see Rowlad, *The Open Heaven*, 38–42.

30 It is a Hebrew manuscript found in Qumran Cave 1. The text is believed to have been written in the late first century BC or early first century AD. The surviving text consists of 19 columns, Schultz, *Conquering the World*, 32 and 74–76.

is present. Angels are here assigned a victorious role in the end-time battle between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. Despite the interpretive difficulty in accurately identifying the "sons of light," they are – in a dualistic order – those righteous men who, allied with the angels, fight under the leadership of the Prince of Light (identified by most scholars with the archangel Michael) against the wicked ones.[31] "Sons of light" can see the angels (1QM 10.10–11), who mostly appear anonymously.

The four names of Michael, Gabriel, Sariel, Raphael are referred to in the text as inscriptions on the shields of the four "towers" (it is not certain whether this was the equivalent of the Roman defensive array, testudo).[32] In Yigael Yadin's interpretation[33] the presence of the names on the shields expressed the belief that the four angels were personally leading the four units in battle.

The fighting angels are depicted in the manner of a military formation, and the terms "army," "armies/host(s)" also appear in several places in the text (1QM 4.11, 12.1, 8). Although there is no mention of the angels' armament, it can be assumed that it is similar to that of the sons of light, as the angels are their heavenly counterparts.[34]

The concept of the angels of God fighting on the side of Israel against the enemies is in the War Scroll, as Yadin points out, is "based on the numerous Biblical passages [...]. Also the Maccabees frequently turned to God requesting Him to send His angels to their aid. The Pseudoepigrapha and midrashic literature contain many descriptions of angels intervening in fights on Israel's side."[35] In view of the above, even if familiarity with the War Scroll (as well as other scrolls) was limited, which is most likely the case, its depiction of the fighting angels testifies to the prevalence of the motif and its persistence in Second Temple literature.

To sum up, the Jewish tradition contains the motif of the angel(s) as a soldier/army inflicting death on the enemy on the battlefield. It is consistent with the motif appearing on the pages of the Quran and the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. In both traditions, angels act on behalf of the God to whom they belong. Especially in the early biblical texts, if angels (here the Angel of the Lord) enter into relationships with human beings, they are exclusively extensions of his will and absolutely obedient to him. This is also a clear feature of the heavenly warriors, fixed in the foundational texts of Islam, and its cause should probably be sought in the religious doctrine contained in the Quran, proclaiming the absolute indivisible oneness of God (in the Battle of the Ditch, during the defence of Medina, the angels only completed

31 On the discussion of whether the intervention of the archangel Michael was expected, see Michalak, *Angels as Warriors*, 165–170; and Yadin, *The Scroll of the War*, 235–236; Schultz, *Conquering the World*, 244.
32 Michalak, *Angels as Warriors*, 161–162.
33 Yadin, *The Scroll of the War*, 240.
34 Michalak, *Angels as Warriors*, 191.
35 Yadin, *The Scroll of the War*, 237.

the work of God, who himself entered the centre of events by intervening in natural phenomena). The angels take part in clashes with the enemies of Israel/the enemies of the Prophet Muhammad by forming countless hosts of soldiers. As a rule, they are nameless, sent singly or in groups, sometimes invisible, often anthropomorphised. In the latter case, they can appear in full equipment: ride mounts, wear the garb of a warrior, wield weapons. In battle, heavenly units may be commanded by archangels. Finally, although the victory won by Israel or the Prophet Muhammad was a consequence of God's action, seen in terms of his miraculous intervention, this does not mean that Israel or the Prophet Muhammad's followers were entirely passive parties.[36]

1.2. Seizing the Soul and Ascending with It Into Heaven

In the Quran, and especially in the texts of the tradition, the moment of human death is linked to the presence of angels. The leading figure seems to be the Angel of Death (*malak al-mawt*), whom tradition and later Muslim angelology calls 'Izrā'īl. The function assigned to him by God is to take the soul of a person and pass it on to angels – helpers. They guide the soul through the heavens to learn its temporary fate, and then lead the soul to the body resting in the grave. The soul of the unbeliever does not make the heavenly journey, but is carried to the grave.[37]

In the biblical texts, there is no isolated figure of the angel of death (Heb. מלאך מות). In the course of the long-term formation of the corpus of biblical texts, various concepts and ideas were subject to evolution. This also applies to the figure of angels,[38] including angels who can be described as "angels of death."

In the etiological narrative of the creation of the Dead Sea (Gen 19), angels contribute to the destruction of two cities and the death of the inhabitants (Gen 19:1.13.18–19.25). They are not called angels of death, but they are unmistakably associated with it.

The connection of God's divine messenger with death is discernible in the text on the killing of the first-born, which is contained in Exodus (Exod 12:23). The term המשחית appears there, indicating the destroyer, or in this case, the author of death.[39] He is not called an angel in this text, but the same term also appears in other texts, its meaning being clarified and linked to the figure of the angel.

36 See Miller, *The Divine Warrior*, 158–159.
37 See Prochwicz-Studnicka, "The Motif of the Angel(s) of Death," 570–573.
38 *ABD* I, 249.
39 Cf. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 183, n. 23.

In the Second Book of Samuel (2 Sam 24:15-17), this term occurs to express the idea of destruction, the realisation of which is the Angel of the Lord.[40] He kills the people as punishment for the census taken by King David. A text with similar overtones is found in the First Book of Chronicles (1 Chr 21:15-16). In this text the idea of destruction is expressed by the Hebrew phrase: מלאך המשית, i.e. a clear connection is indicated between the angel and destruction, which means death. In all these texts, angels contribute to people's deaths.

In the biblical text, in the Book of Proverbs, the phrase "the messengers of death" (Heb. מלאכי מות) is used once: "A king's wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it" (Prov 16:14). William McKane suggests that these are messengers who bring bad news.[41] While this phrase does not necessarily refer to the angels themselves, it is undoubtedly evidence of the formation of a particular idea and enriching the language with the indicated phrase.

A completely different role is assigned to the angels in the Gospel according to Luke. There, they are no longer the cause of death, but accompany the dying man. In the pericope of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-26), there is a scene during which a group of angels carry the dead Lazarus to Abraham's bosom: "The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:22). The term "angel of death" or "angels of death" does not appear in the pericope, but the connection between angels and death in this case is evident, although different in nature compared to the Old Testament texts cited earlier. Josef Ernst states that this parabola is an evocation of an extra-biblical motif, and adds that the phrase "angels carried into Abraham's bosom" harmonises with typical Hebrew phrase such as "joined to the fathers" (Gen 15:15; 47:30; Deut 31:16; Judg 2:10). He further adds that in the message contained in the parable, there is no in-depth teaching of an eschatological nature.[42]

The figure of an angel whose fixed and God-assigned function is the termination of humanity emerges in post-biblical times.[43] According to Leila Leah Bronner, under the influence of other cultures, above all the Greek one, in later texts a characteristic "was the addition of a concept of the immortality of the soul to the already-established belief in bodily resurrection."[44]

Two treatises of the Babylonian Talmud, *Chagigah* and *Avodah Zarah*, may serve as examples.[45] In the tractate *Chagigah* (I, 4b-5a), the character of the Angel of Death (Heb. מלאך המות) is introduced as follows:

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40 Cf. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 413: "It sounds as though he stayed the anger of the angel of the pestilence before the due time had come."

41 Cf. McKane, *Proverbs*, 488.

42 Ernst, *Das Evangelium*, 354–356.

43 Noy, "The Angel of Death," 148.

44 Bronner, *Journey to Heaven*, 43.

45 Tractates composed in Babylonian Talmud (*ca* 450–550 CE).

> When Rav Yosef reached this verse, he cried: "But there are those swept away without justice" (*Proverbs 13:23*). He said: Is there one who goes before his time *and dies for no reason? The Gemara answers:* Yes, like this *incident of* Rav Beivai bar Abaye, who would be frequented *by the company of* the Angel of Death *and would see how people died at the hands of this angel. The Angel of Death* said to his agent: Go *and* bring me, *i.e., kill,* Miriam *the* raiser, *i.e., braider,* of women's hair. He went, *but instead* brought him Miriam, *the* raiser of babies.[46]

Rav Beivai bar Abaye, whom the Angel of Death often visited, was recalled in the Gemara. The Angel tells him of the actions of the envoy to whom he himself gives orders to bring designated persons. Bringing to the Angel of Death means a prior death of the person brought. Rav Beivai bar Abaye presents an example of the messenger's mistake, when Miriam the hairdresser, instead of Miriam the babysitter, is brought to him. The actions of the Angel of Death are presented in a dialogical form.[47]

The tractate *Avodah Zarah* (I, 20b:2), on the other hand, cites an oral tradition concerning how the Angel of Death appears to a dying person and how he causes his death:

> They said (Hebr. אמרו) about the Angel of Death that he is entirely full of eyes. When a sick person is *about to* die, *the Angel of Death* stands above his head, with his sword drawn in his hand, and a drop of poison hanging on *the edge of the sword*. Once the sick person sees him, he trembles and thereby opens his mouth; and *the Angel of Death* throws *the drop of poison* into his mouth. From *this drop of poison the sick person* dies, from it he putrefies, from it his face becomes green.

The haggadah (narration) derived from the above-quoted passage is one of the most widespread depictions of the angel of death in popular Judaism.[48] In popular Jewish beliefs and folk legends, he is known as Azrail.

In an early post-biblical text (the turn of the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC), called the *Apocalypse of St. Paul*, there is a clear specification and presentation of angelic figures, who are assigned various functions related to a person's death. This text showing the role of angels is another evidence of the development of angelological thought, this time in the context of individual eschatology.

The *Apocalypse of Paul* (also called *Visio Pauli* or *Ammonitio Pauli*) is a particular example of a very widespread apocryphal text[49] that mentions angels present

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46 The writing in plain type is the text of the Talmud, and the italics are additions to the text for ease of reading and understanding.

47 This passage does not appear in all the editions and translations of the Talmud.

48 Noy, "The Angel of Death," 148–149; Schauss, *The Lifetime of a Jew*, 280–283.

49 Cf. Casey, "The Apocalypse," 1–32. According to Robert P. Casey, the primitive original of the *Apocalypse of Paul* was written, in Greek, between the years 240 and 250, probably in Egypt. The dating of this

at the death of humans. "The Apocalypse or Vision of Paul consists in the narrative of the ascension and voyage to the sky of the Apostle."[50] Paul assists in the death and judgment of souls, among other things, and the narrative is inspired by verses from 2 Corinthians 12:2–5. As Alessandro Bausi writes, it has been translated and we "know versions in the narrative of the ascension and voyage to the sky of the Apostle into the almost every language of the eastern and western Christianities."[51] It represents one of the earliest and most influential accounts of the journey to hell and predates the development of the idea of "purification from sin" as understood in the late Middle Ages. The Greek version of the *Apocalypse of Paul* was discovered in 1843 by Constantine Tischendorf, and he announced its discovery, along with arguments for its date, in 1851.[52] The number of translations of the text of the *Apocalypse of Paul* indicates how widespread it was in the Middle East, too.

The text of the *Apocalypse of Paul* is divided into paragraph sections, one of which includes paragraphs 11–18 called: *Deaths and judgements of the righteous and the wicked*. In the *Apocalypse* there is a specification among the angels and the presentation of the figures of angels, who are assigned various functions related to death.

The section indicated above is devoted to Paul, who "assists in the judgment of the three souls: the righteous, the sinner, and the sinner who tries to lie to God. In this part, the role of angels who look after people and tell God about their deeds is especially emphasized."[53]

The author or authors of the *Apocalypse of Paul* chose a guiding angel and Paul of Tarsus as the foreground "actors." The angel guides Paul and points out various heavenly figures and places where the dead, both righteous and sinners, are led. He also explains to him the role of the angels at the moment of death. In the fragment *Deaths and judgments of the righteous and the wicked* there are a number of motifs related to the role of angels at the moment of human death. These motives allude to their presence, their categorisation, and to their action. The text refers to the presence of

apocryphon, its recensions and translations are debated. The version of the apocryphon known today was later also written in Greek. The Coptic translation (Copt), two Syriac translations (Syr. 1, Nestorian and Syr. 2, Jacobite), a Latin translation (1 major recension and 12 secondary recensions) and a Slavonic translation (two major recensions) were based on these Greek texts. The four Armenian versions appear to be derived from the Syriac version. The Arabic version as well as the Georgian one have not been edited and examined so far. There is an Ethiopian version of the *Apocalypse* in which the Virgin Mary appears in place of Paul the Apostle as the recipient of the vision, known as the *Apocalypse of the Virgin*, Bausi, "A First Evaluation," 133–134. One of the Syriac versions, from an Urumiyeh ms., was translated into English by an American missionary in 1864, cf. Perkins, "The Revelation," 183–212. This translation, or the greater portion of it, was printed by Constantin von Tischendorf, along with his edition of the text, cf. Ricciotti, "Apocalypsis," 1–8.

50 Bausi, "A First Evaluation," 133.

51 Bausi, "A First Evaluation," 133.

52 Tischendorf, "Lüde III," 439–442.

53 Starowieyski, *Listy i apokalipsy*, 244.

angels at the death of pious and sinners, "they are led when they are deceased" (*ApPauli* 11.1).[54]

Two groups of angels accompany the dying. One of them is described: "and I saw angels without mercy, having no pity, [...] And I asked the angel saying: Sir, who are those? And the angel answered and said unto me: These are those who are destined to the souls of the impious in the hour of need" (*ApPauli* 11.3).

But then Paul sees another group of angels: "And I looked on high and I saw other angels [...] and I asked the angels saying: Who are these, Lord, in so great beauty and pity? And the angel answered and said unto me: These are the angels of justice who are sent to lead up the souls of the just, in the hour of need" (*ApPauli* 12.1).

Then Paul asks his guide:

> And said to the angel: I wished to see the souls of the just and of sinners, and to see in what manner they go out of the body. [...] and I looked carefully and saw a certain man about to die, and the angel said to me: This one whom thou seest is a just man. [...] and before he went out of the world the holy and the impious angels both attended: and I saw them all, but the impious found no place of habitation in him, but the holy took possession of his soul, guiding it till it went out of the body (*ApPauli* 14.1).

These two groups of angels make a kind of preliminary judgment on the dying person. This is expressed in the phrase: "the impious found no place of habitation in him" (*ApPauli* 14.1). On this judgement depends which group of angels deals with the deceased.

The unmerciful angels are also called ungodly, and the righteous angels are called saints. It is up to the dying person to decide who will take care of him. Both groups of angels stand by the deceased at the hour of their death. The angels lead the souls of the dead before God, to the first judgment.[55]

It is stated that the soul leaves the world: "And I said to the angel: I wished to see the souls of the just and of sinners going out of the world" (13.1), and, it leaves the body: "I wished to see the souls of the just and of sinners, and to see in what manner they go out of the body" (14.1).

Evil angels are shown as pulling the soul out of the sinner's body: "the malign angels cursed it; and when they had drawn it out of the body" (15.3), then the soul is brought into judgment: And when they had led it forth, the customary angel preceded it" (16.1), and "again I saw, and behold a soul which was led forward by two angels" (17.1).

At the hour of the death of the pious and the ungodly (sinners), two groups of angels go to the dying person, on the one hand, they are angels of righteousness, also

54 Rutherford, *Vision of Paul*, 151–166.
55 *IDB* I, 132.

known as saints, and on the other hand, the merciless angels, described as ungodly and evil. The former accompany the pious and faithful at the time of death, while the latter accompany the ungodly. The text indicates that both come to the dying person at the hour of his death. However, it depends on the life attitude of the dying person which group of angels will care for him.

Souls come before God (*ApPauli* 14.7; 16.4; 17.1). The righteous soul is ushered into the joys of Paradise (*ApPauli* 14.8); the soul of the ungodly is given over to Tartarus and cast into darkness (*ApPauli* 16.6), as is the soul of the criminal and the liar (18.2). Souls will only return to the bodies on the day of resurrection (*ApPauli* 14.4).

In summary, the Hebrew Bible as well as the Gospels do not introduce a distinct figure of the Angel of Death although the connection between the angel(s) present in the texts and death is very clear. These intuitions gain a mature form only in post-biblical texts, exemplified by the Talmud and the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Paul*. The Talmud draws the figure of the Angel of Death whose role, as in the foundation texts of Islam, is the termination of human life by drawing the soul out of the body.

The Angel of Death is referred to in Judaic (mainly folk) tradition as Azrail, and in the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad as ʻIzrāʾīl (ʻAzrāʾīl). As Stephen R. Burge established, "the form of the name suggests a Jewish borrowing, and this is confirmed by archaeological evidence, namely five Aramaic incantation texts, found in Jewish settlements in Mesopotamia and the Levant from the seventh century CE, pre-dating the emergence of Islam."[56] The Aramaic texts mention only the angels' names, so it is impossible to determine whether the name belonged to an angel whose function was linked to human death. At the same time, the name of the Angel of Death spread in the Jewish tradition only after the appearance of Islam, which may indicate a cross-cultural exchange. The same is true of the name of the angel of hell[57] – ʻEzrāʾēl – which appears in the Ethiopic version of the *Apocalypse of Peter*,[58] written probably only after the advent of Islam.[59]

The *Apocalypse of Paul*, on the other hand, brings in motifs almost parallel to those found in the foundational texts of Islam although it does not introduce the Angel of Death. The experience of the dying person as the soul is drawn out by groups of angels depends on whether that person was pious (just) or sinful (ungodly). In Islamic texts, the boundary lies between the believer and the unbeliever,

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56 Burge, *Angels in Islam*, 36; see also Burge "'ZR'L, The Angel of Death," 219.

57 The angel is mentioned five times in this NT apocrypha. He is responsible for showing those who have suffered during their lifetime through the guilt of others the punishment that their culprits are serving in hell.

58 Stephen P. Burge ("'ZR'L, The Angel of Death," 221) believes that the use of a name in the Ethiopic version of the Apocalypse may reflect "a concurrent Arab milieu, making use of a name that readers would recognize" (the only surviving Ethiopian manuscript dates to the 16th century).

59 *The Apocalypse of Peter* was written in Greek, in a Judeo-Christian milieu, most likely before 135, possibly in Egypt, cf. Starowieyski, *Listy i apokalipsy*, 225–227.

and for the latter the experience of death is extremely painful. The soul, after being extracted by the Angel of Death, is given to one of the groups of waiting angels. The motif of assigning the soul to the appropriate group of angels seems almost identical to the picture in Paul's *Apocalypse*. Therein, the pious soul is surrounded by the angels of righteousness, while the soul of the sinner is among the merciless angels. In the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, the faithful are given to the angels of mercy, and the unfaithful to the angels of punishment. In both textual traditions, the soul learns its temporary fate. In the case of Paul's *Apocalypse*, it confronts God, who addresses it directly; in the Islamic tradition this is not clear. Finally, in contrast to the *Apocalypse*, the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad speaks of souls returning to the bodies and remaining there until the final judgment.[60]

The tradition of the Prophet Muhammad seems to be depicted in more detail: the soul of the believer wrapped in the soft, fragrant fabric of paradise makes a journey with white-faced angels of mercy through the various heavenly circles, and then the angels escort the soul back to the grave. For the unbelieving soul wrapped in rough cloth by angels with black faces, the gates of paradise are closed. Paul's *Apocalypse* is devoid of such details, which is probably due to its literary construction. In keeping with the nature of the apocalyptic literary genre, it is Paul who is led through the circles of heaven, and it is to him that the fates of the souls of the just and the unjust are revealed.

1.3. Questioning in the Grave

A motif of two angels coming to the deceased person's grave right after his burial to probe the soundness of the fundamentals of his faith (God, religion and the Prophet Muhammad) runs throughout the Islamic tradition. If correct answers are given, the angels reward the soul with a view of heaven. If the answers are wrong, the soul is given punishment of the grave (*'aḏāb al-qabr*) – the angels give it a beating with iron rods. Both experiences between death and resurrection and Doomsday are anticipatory of the soul's eternal destiny. Knowing the answers to the interrogatory confirms as much the person's axiological stance in life as his belonging to the community (Islam). In the canonical *hadith* collections, the interrogating angels are called by their names just once. In several *hadiths* the trial is carried out by a single angel or the account is limited to the punishment of the grave (this punishment is hinted at in the Quran as well).[61]

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60 The confusion concerning the terms *rūḥ* and *nafs* (see Prochwicz-Studnicka, "The Motif of the Angel(s) of Death," 572) makes a clear interpretation difficult. According to the generally accepted view, God at the hour of his death takes away from man the *rūḥ* he put in him at birth, to give it back to him only at the resurrection, while leaving him with the *nafs*, Smith – Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding*, 36.

61 Prochwicz-Studnicka, "The Motif of the Angel(s) of Death," 573–574. The subsequent angelological tradition expanded the narration referring to angels, the way they looked and the grave trials. The trial motif

The punishment administered to a deceased person by an angel or angels in the grave in earlier monotheistic traditions (still before Islam) is not unambiguously identifiable. According to scholars, the theme is related to the development of Kabbalah,[62] and Simacha P. Raphael wrote that only "by the medieval period, the idea of *din ha-kever*, or ‹judgment of the grave›, had become normative within Judaism."[63] The idea of דין חבוט הקבר came up as a result of rabbinic debates on whether a deceased man, or more precisely a deceased's body deposited in the grave, experienced physical stimuli.[64] The majority of rabbis agreed that a corpse felt pain in the grave, at least for some time, and by that an individual was given an opportunity to expiate for the sins committed during his lifetime.[65] This belief emanates from Talmudic literature, for example: "Atonement is achieved when the deceased begins to see and experience a bit of the anguish of the grave" (*Sanhedrin*, VI, 47b:5).

To recapitulate, the idea of "judgement of the grave," known in later traditions as חבוט הקבר ("the beating of the grave"), was not considerably elaborated in the Talmudic era, and its original form seems not to involve the presence of angels.[66]

In Islam, the idea of the trial of the grave carried out by angels might have evolved from the Quranic concept of an unidentifiable punishment meted out on sinners after death (6:93, 32:21, 52:47).[67] The Semitic *imaginarium* had to see some figure imposing punishment on sinners, whereas angels, being God's messengers and intermediaries between him and humanity, could fill this niche in a theologically unchallengeable way.

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with their presence was incorporated into the confessions of faith. The existence of Nakīr and Munkar (as well as the idea of punishment in the grave) was challenged mainly by the Kharijites (an early religious-political fraction of Islam) and majority of Mutazilites (a rationalist school within Islamic theology), Burge, *Angels in Islam*, 74, 253 (n. 34); Smith – Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding*, 47.

62 Here in the sense of mystic schools of Judaism, characteristic for the Middle Ages from the 12th century on, Deutsch, *The Jewish Black Continent*, 301; Raphael, *The Jewish Views*, 131–137; Schauss, *The Lifetime of a Jew*, 282–283.

63 Raphael, *The Jewish Views*, 131.

64 Still in the first centuries AD, rabbis shared a belief that a dead person's soul remains conscious, can move freely between heaven and earth, and lingers around the body for some time after death, Kraemer, *Meanings of Death*, 109; Schauss, *The Lifetime of a Jew*, 278–279.

65 This view was underpinned by the words of Rabbi Yitzhak (the fifth generation of tannaim): "Worms are as painful to the dead as a needle in the flesh of the living," *Berakhot*, III, 18b:5, *Shabbat*, I, 13b:7; see also Kraemer, *Meanings of Death*, 40, 135; Raphael, *The Jewish Views*, 107.

66 The medieval הקבר חבוט מסכת ("Tractate of the Beating of the Grave") ushers in the figure of the Angel of Death, who arrives at the grave and asks the deceased person for his or her name. If the soul cannot recall it, the deceased person is given a beating with a chain of fire or a stick of iron, Deutsch, *The Jewish Dark Continent*, 301; Raphael, *The Jewish Views*, 166–167; Schauss, *The Lifetime of a Jew*, 282.

67 See the diagram in Prochwicz-Studnicka, "The Motif of the Angel(s) of Death," 575.

Moreover, Arent Jan Wensink points out that the Karramites[68] identified the trialling angels, Munkar and Nakīr, with guardian/recording angels.[69] According to the Quran (13:10-11): "It makes no difference whether any of you speak secretly or aloud, whether you are hiding under cover of night or walking about in the day: each person has guardian angels before him and behind, watching over him by God's command." These are guards of human memory, so-called Noble Watching Scribes, who record a person's good and bad deeds every day. The majority of exegetes[70] saw those guardian/recording angels also in the "two receptors" (*mutalaqqiyān* – two receivers/two receptors) of verse 17 of Surah Al-Qāf: "We [i.e. God – B.P.-S.] are closer to him than his jugular vein – with two receptors set to record, one on his right side and one on his left: he does not utter a single word without an ever-present watcher" (50:16-18).[71] The contamination of the angelic functions in the Karramites' concept shows that in the formative period of Islam, the idea of the punishment of the grave could have overlapped with that of two recording angels present by a person's side.[72]

2. Indication of Possible Paths Leading to the Spread and Adoption of the Theme

Still several centuries before the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) became active, the Arabian Peninsula was located within the orbit of Judaist and Christian influences, which doubtless varied in intensity depending on the region.

It is roughly presumed that the first Jewish communities were formed by emigrants from Palestine on the Arabian Peninsula in Al-Hijaz, the cradle of Islam. They fled from persecution by Titus in 70 AD, and again after Bar Kochba's uprising was quelled in 135. Still, a family tomb dating from 42 AD has survived in Hegra, the builder of which described himself in an inscription as "a Jew."[73] It is unclear

68 The Karramites (Arab. Al-Karrāmiyya) were a Sunnite sect with followers mainly in the central and eastern parts of the Islamic world. After the death of its founder, Ibn Karrāma (d. 869), it split into a number of fractions. The Karramites were quashed by the Mongol invasion in the 13th century. The Karrāmiyya propagated stark ascetism, community life and preaching. In terms of law they neared the Hanafi school of law.

69 Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 165; see also MacDonald, "The Twilight," 57–58.

70 See Burge, *Angels in Islam*, 159–174.

71 The theme of angels as recorders of human deeds recurs many times in intertestamental literature, see Baynes, *The Heavenly Book Motif*, 96–105.

72 According to Günther ("As the Angels Stretch Out Their Hands," 328), the function of Munkar and Nakīr resembles to a certain degree the Zoroastrian concept of the angels Srōsh ("Obedience") and Ātar ("Fire"), who visit a person on the first night after his/her death. They are believed to help the soul cross the Bridge of Judgement, which is suspended between the world of the living and the dead.

73 Hoyland, *Arabia*, 146. The beginnings of the Jewish presence on the Arabian Peninsula are not very certain. Arab and Talmudic sources signpost to different traditions, putting the arrival of Jews on the timeline after the deluge, the time of Moses' battle against the Amalekites, the reign of King Solomon,

whether at the time Jews engaged in proselytic activity and to what degree Arab converts practiced Judaism.

At the time of Muhammad's prophetic activity, Jews mainly occupied the northern oases of Al-Hijaz, Taymā', Fadak and, more centrally, Khaybar and Jathrib. Jathrib (later Medina) was reportedly to have almost 50-percent Jewish population.[74] They mostly engaged in trade, crafts and banking, and they spoke Arabic. This was the language in which they communicated with Arabs although the Torah itself was not translated into Arabic. We do not know how deep their knowledge of religious writings or the Talmudic tradition was, yet they took care to preserve their religious autonomy, to comply with rules of law and to practice the rituals of the Jewish faith. This was the reason why the northern Arabs were familiar with a fair deal of the Jewish religious legacy.[75] Jewish communities left their stamp on Yemen in the south as well – here with considerable intellectual backing though. In the early 6th century, Judaism grew in significance under Dhu Nuwas, a Himyarite ruler who made it an established religion, and who launched persecutions of the Monophysites, a group that had settled there in the 5th century.[76]

Christianity began to penetrate the northern regions of the Arabian Peninsula from the 2nd half of the 1st century. In the 5th and 6th centuries, that part of the peninsula was highly Christianised, with a large number of bishoprics and with monastic life grafted onto the local soil after Egyptian models. The Arab tribes that migrated from the south to Syria and Iraq around the 3rd century created their kingdoms there, taking on the role of buffer states of Persia (the Lakhmids, mostly Nestorians) and Byzantium (the Ghassanids, mostly Monophysite Christians).[77]

Caravan traffic brought Christian ideas to the people of Al-Hijaz: a trade route ran along the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula from Southern Arabia to the Mediterranean world, triggering cultural exchange, including religious ideas. The trail crossed Mecca, where Muhammad himself had been a tradesman before he began preaching. Christians lived in Mecca and Medina leastwise from the end of the 6th century, yet it is not known whether their population was big enough to create a religious community.[78]

Until recently Christianisation was believed to have spread principally across the northern peripheries of the peninsula. More and more often, however, relatively

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the Destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar etc. Some scholars agree that Jews came to live on the peninsula not earlier than the biblical period, Maszkowski, *Obraz Jezusa*, 51–52.

74 Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran*, 12.

75 Rodinson, *Muḥammad*, 60–61.

76 Kościelniak, *XX wieków*, 114–118.

77 Kościelniak, *XX wieków*, 79, 82, 85–87, 91.

78 For more see Osman, "Pre-Islamic Arab Converts," 67–80. The Arab chronicler Al-Azraki (9th c.) said that over that period, there were pictures of Jesus and Mary among the images of deities at the Kaaba. Griffith, "Christians and Christianity," 309.

powerful influences of Christianity in the central Al-Hijaz area are pointed up,[79] confirmed by studies on biblical influences in the Quran (often via apocryphal thought).[80] Importantly, divisions within the Church must have made contradictory Christological ideas reach the peninsula (Nestorian, Monophysite and Chalcedonian). Present in various religious groups and sects active on areas abutting the desert, gnosis additionally complicated Christianity's plight. Having more limited contact with the religious centres, the Christians living in Al-Hijaz were surely more prone to heresy.[81]

There is a range of hypotheses concerning the inception of Islam that reject the dogmatic versions based on Muslim sources. And while these have the status of hypotheses, at least two should be brought up here as they shed additional light on the possible presence of a monotheistic community in central parts of the Arabian Peninsula before the Prophet Muhammad's first proclamations.[82]

According to Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, a local cult developed among the Arab people in the region of the Negev desert from around the 5th century, centred around Abraham as the founder of the faith and a paragon (Abrahamism). It was subsequently incorporated into Islam, feeding its dogmatics.[83] In this hypothesis, the adherents of Abrahamism are identifiable with the Quranic *hanif* (*inter alia* 2:135; 3:67, 95; 4:124; 16:120; 98:5) – confessors of the faith in one God in pre-Islamic Arabia who did not see themselves as Judaists or Christians. Abrahamism apparently succumbed to the overwhelming Judeo-Christianity (as an external element that reached Negev areas at the turn of the 6th and 7th centuries, possibly coming from Mesopotamia or northern Syria) and receded towards the interior of the Arabian Peninsula beyond the Negev in the 7th century.[84]

Over the same period, during the recent Byzantine–Sasanian War (602–628), the Jews of Edessa, who supported the Persian Sasanians, had to seek refuge from religious persecutions by Emperor Heraclius (610–641).[85] It is supposed that they headed to the northern regions of the Arabian Peninsula where they came across the then-active Arab Prophet Muhammad, with whom they formed an alliance invoking the common ancestor Abraham (the Jews claimed descent from Isaac, the son of Abraham's lawfully wed wife Sara, and Arabs – from Ishmael of the slave Hagar) and rights in the Promised Land. The alliance is believed to have led to the creation

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79 Kościelniak, *XX wieków*, 103; Kościelniak, "Chrześcijańskie piśmiennictwo," 330, 338.

80 For more see Kościelniak, *XX wieków*, 132. Cf. Christopher Luxenberg's hypothesis (*Die syro-aramaeische Lesart des Koran*) about the Quran as a summary of biblical texts adjusted to the Arab mindset (Arabic *qurʾān* ← Syr. *qeryānā* – lectionary).

81 Kościelniak, *XX wieków*, 103. Before Muhamad, Arabia was often referred to as a seedbed of sects. Maszkowski, *Obraz Jezusa*, 58.

82 These hypotheses were posited based on archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic sources as well as chronicles of the neighbouring nations.

83 Nevo – Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, 195, Grodzki, *Panteon sceptyków*, 218.

84 Nevo – Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, 190–191; Grodzki, *Panteon sceptyków*, 219–221.

85 Crone – Cook, *Hagarism*, 6–7; Grodzki, *Panteon sceptyków*, 182.

of the initially anti-Christian Judeo-Hagarism.[86] The proponents of this hypothesis explain:

> Their fusion was already explicit in the earliest form of the doctrine which was to become Islam. The preaching of Muhammad integrated a religious truth borrowed from the Judaic tradition with a religious articulation of the ethnic identity of his Arab followers. […] Their barbarian identity was expressed in terms sufficiently Biblical to be intelligible and defensible in the religious language of the world they had conquered. At the same time, the organic link between their truth and their identity remained. The structure of Hagarene doctrine thus rendered it capable of long-term survival, and the consolidation of the conquest society ensured that it did survive.[87]

No matter what the true origins of Islam were, still in the antiquity the Arabian Peninsula was an organism that would not close itself off from external influences, and the Arab religious community was not alien to other peoples of the Near East. While original and unrepeatable, the culture born in that sandy land was an organic part of Near Eastern cultures. Trade, missionary activities, migrations and politics in particular prompted a ceaseless flow of religious, social and intellectual traditions between the people of Al-Hijaz, Syria and Mesopotamia. The history of the first centuries of Islam was an integral part of the history of Near Eastern monotheisms.[88]

Around the mid-7th century, contacts, particularly between Arabs and Christians, intensified. The Arabs conquered and subjugated large areas where Christianity had been present for good several centuries (the oldest conquests included Syria, Palestine, eastern Mesopotamia and Egypt). In Islam's formative period, Muslims represented a minority in the caliphate.[89] Christian-Muslim interactions were cemented by the fact that the imperial administration initially hired Christians, many of whom were educated, conversant with state administrative procedures and learnt fast to speak Arabic.[90]

In the age of the Umayyad rule (661–750), that is still before the sunna took a full-fledged form, various faith-related issues were put to debate: every now and then Muslims disputed with Christians at the caliphian court in Damascus, in

86 Crone – Cook, *Hagarism*, 120; Grodzki, *Panteon sceptyków*, 183.
87 Crone – Cook, *Hagarism*, 77.
88 Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution*, 25–26.
89 For example, according to Richard Bulliet (*Conversion to Islam*, 44) and his estimates, Muslims represented 8% of the population of Iran in 750, when the Abbasids took over control of the country.
90 Mackensen, "Arabic Books and Libraries," 352. See e.g. the figure of St. John of Damascus (d. ca 749), and before him, his father and grandfather, who held high offices in the the caliph's administration in Damascus.

an intellectually open and inquisitive atmosphere,[91] even though Muslims were not generally interested in studying Christian (or other) ideas, and their knowledge of Christian doctrine served only the pragmatic purpose of demonstrating the superiority of Islam. David Thomas wrote:

> There was at least for a time a vogue for debates between faith representatives, analyses of rival doctrines, and easy cross-fertilisation of ideas. In this atmosphere, followers of the faiths learnt a great deal about and from one another. Many inquisitive Muslims, for example, became thoroughly acquainted not only with the major Christian doctrines but also with Christian origins and history, and with the many sectarian teachings that orthodoxy had condemned as heresy.[92]

Apart from Damascus, Basra and Baghdad were centers of animated debate, and Christian theology and philosophy (Orthodox, Monophysitist, Nestorian and Gnostic) are traceable in the teachings of the Muslim thinkers.[93]

Narratives derived from the Bible and around were known not only from translations.[94] Large narrative resources originating in the Judaic and Christian traditions were handed down by oral tradition, and their Semitic character made them easily transferable onto the Arab, sometimes Muslim, ground. They penetrated into Arab-Muslim folk lore and the Quranic-related discourse (e.g. commentaries for the Quran),[95] including the sunna, which was in the making just then. The process occurred spontaneously for the most part. Ruth S. Mackensen writes that, for example, Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 686–8), the Prophet's cousin, believed to have authored the first commentary to the Quran as well as the Prophet's companion Abū Hurayra (d. 678–9), a much-quoted traditionalist, "…fabricated so many tales to suit their several purposes that even their contemporaries could not have failed to recognize them as little better than audacious, though pious, liars. […] Ibn ʿAbbās like many others, drew on Jewish and Christian traditions and scriptures, although gathered secondhand."[96] The content would thus be assimilated mainly for Islamic theological needs: to highlight the truths of the creed and stimulate devotion.

The process is exemplified by the figure of the *qāṣṣ* (plural *quṣṣāṣ*), a public preacher teaching in streets, markets and even mosques outside prayer hours.

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91 The disputes were not only religious. The Umayyad caliphs were familiar with a considerable amount of historical and legendary lore of the ancient peoples, see e.g. Mackensen, "Arabic Books and Libraries," 340–342.

92 Thomas, "The Bible and the *Kalām*," 175.

93 Mackensen, "Arabic Books and Libraries," 352; Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the* Kalām, 60–64.

94 In Muhammad's time and the first years of Islam, the Bible as well as Bible-related texts reached the Arabs through Syriac translations, Kościelniak, *Tradycja*, 303.

95 For more on the subject in the context of New Testament borrowings see Kościelniak, *Tradycja*, especially 300–310.

96 Mackensen, "Arabic Books and Libraries," 351.

Gathering a group of listeners, the *qāṣṣ* recited the Quran publicly, was often a prayer leader, explaining Quranic stories.[97] Down the line, however, among the public preachers who served as instruments of official religious and political propaganda, popular independent commoner story-tellers began to appear more and more often. Condemned by religious authorities but widely popular with society, they drew on legends, histories and anecdotes from the Jewish and Christian and pre-Islamic traditions for edification and amusement, having processed and presented them according to their personal interpretations and current social demands.[98]

3. Ideological Demand

There is a number of more or less far-out concepts of the origins of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad and his activity. They reject the "orthodox" version of the early history of Islam built on late Islamic sources (8th–9th centuries and later) as unreliable. Due to insufficient sources external to the Islamic tradition and independent of it (non-Arab historiosophic writings and archaeological findings), several, if not more, alternative theories of the beginnings of Islam exist in the western Arabistic discourse, which apply various methods of academic criticism. A range of hypotheses point to links between the Arabs with an indeterminate monotheism, to the above-mentioned Abrahamism and Judeo-Christian roots of Islam, to Judeo-Hagarism, to similarities between certain elements of the Islamic theology and rabbinic Judaism, and to claims whereby Islam did not form until its social and political structure was established.

On the other hand, "the orthodox version" of the inception of Islam highlights the presence of nature (*fiṭra*[99]) in man, thanks to which he carries in himself a pure idea of absolute Truth.[100] The religious and cultural circumstances under which he grows up determine his confession. In other words, every man is born Muslim, and other denominations move him away from the true, authentic religion, putting to sleep his real nature, on which God leaves his stamp. God spoke to man through his messengers and prophets still before Muhammad: Noe, Abraham, Moses and Jesus arrived with God's messages in the same spirit. Both the Torah and the Gospel have their source in the divine Revelation but the Jews and the Christian falsified

97 Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution*, 39.

98 Mackensen, "Arabic Books and Libraries," 347.

99 Arabic *fiṭra* – "nature," "constitution," "natural, native, innate or original disposition" and "the faculty of knowing God with which He has created mankind," hence "religion of Islam," Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, *s.v.*

100 Nearly all canonical collections of the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad contain a *hadith* stating that every child is born with the *fiṭra,* i.e. in accordance with its nature in God's plan, Kahteran, "Fitra," 211.

their writings and by that walked away from the true religion. Muhammad did not therefore come to create a new religion but to restore the eternal divine order. He is the Seal of the Prophets (*khatam an-nabiyyīn*), who finally put the missions for the whole humanity to an end.[101]

Regardless of the true origins of Islam,[102] there seems to have been a demonstrable need for an ideological framework of a monotheistic concept. There are following premises for that:

- The Arabian Peninsula was an integral part of the Near East, and monotheistic ideas had been alive for generations in many of its regions;
- The doctrinal status of monotheisms in the Arabian Peninsula must have been complex in the 7th century, just as it was in the Near East;
- Muhammad must have had some knowledge of monotheisms existing in the Arabia Peninsula and the neighbouring regions not only because their followers were present amid the Arab tribes but also because he himself was a trader travelling with camel trains for many years;
- Muhammad preached the idea of one God; faith in one God was a metaphysical groundwork for all his teachings, regardless of the supposed politics, alliances, social or religious identification.

A number of concepts, including eschatological ones, present in the doctrines of the early monotheisms (and on the fringes thereof) were not so much attractive as they were natural for the new religious ideology to adopt in consequence of its development under the current social and cultural circumstances.

Muhammad and his supporters built their vision of the world on the elements of tradition by the side of which they had grown up. The next generations, living outside the Arabian Peninsula, were in sustained contact with those traditions. On the account of its structural similarities to the Semitic Arab culture and the ensuing similarity of imagery, the Near-Eastern melting pot of Judaism, early Christianity[103] and Judeo-Christianity facilitated conceptual borrowings. Contacts occurred not only through written media but also via oral tradition.

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101 For more see Prochwicz-Studnicka, "U źródeł narcyzmu grupowego," 143–149.

102 These visions belong to two different orders: one refers to history, the other is specific to faith.

103 Early Christianity, particularly in the Near East, was at least partly Semitic. The Christian liturgy was modelled on Semitic traditions, and with time rich Semitic theological tradition in the Syriac language was created. Semitic (that is Syriac) patristics was one of the three dominating patristic schools, the other two being Greek and Latin. "Semitic" Christianity (branched out into Syriac Christians and Eastern Syriac Christians) was geographically, linguistically, doctrinally and culturally akin to the Judaism of the age of the Babylonian Amoraites. Both the Jews and the Syriacs used the same text of the Tanach, which was translated to Syriac possibly in Judeo-Christian circles. Mrozek, "Chrześcijaństwo syryjskie," 125–126.

Summary

This article sought to verify the claim that the figures of the angel(s) of death were diffused in Islamic foundation sources by borrowings from earlier monotheistic traditions. The first step was to examine the theme of the angel(s) of death in the written traditions of Judaism and early Christianity. In the Quran, it appeared in three contexts: death on battlefield, death as the moment the soul leaving the body, and events in the grave. Analyses concern collections of texts that are fundamental to Judaism and Christianity and which spread widely in the formative period of Islam: the Hebrew Bible, selected intertestamental literature, early Christian apocrypha, and Talmudic literature. One limitation for conclusions was doubtless the fact that authentic oral tradition cannot be referenced directly, and is reflected only scantly in the texts under analysis. Therefore, the absence of the motif in the Jewish or Christian tradition does not exclude its presence is the Semitic narrative repository of the era.

The next step after the identification of the motif was to identify intercultural contacts from the time before Muhammad became active as a prophet in the Arabian Peninsula through the first two centuries of Islam's formation. The article pointed out to possible ways the angelic figures were taken over by or penetrated into Islamic tradition, emphasising not only the duration of contacts (sustained contact) but also its multidimensionality, where intellectual exchange occurred not only in elite circles but also at the level of building popular devotion.

"Ideological demand" was recognised as another argument supporting the claim of diffusion (for material elements it corresponds to "advantage of use"). The presence of such demand seemed rife, especially given the structural similarity of the cultures discussed.

Jewish and Christian imagery and beliefs relating to angels were an important, if not principal, source for the development of Islamic angelology. Certain images are common for all the three Abrahamic faiths. Despite its independent identity, Islamic angelology has a demonstrably syncretic character.[104] In the context of the present discussion of diffusion of the figure of the angel(s) of death, the fact that the theme could not be borrowed in isolation from other elements is not immaterial.

One should note that this was not a one-sided appropriation of the motif. There was likely a two-way interaction between the monotheistic traditions. One indication might be the very name of the Angel of Death – based on *'zr'l*. What remains open to debate is the influence of the interrogation by the angels in the grave on the later Kabbalah tradition.

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104 Burge, *Angels in Islam*, 179–180; Günther, "As the Angels Stretch Out Their Hands," 340.

Another issue is how the motif evolved internally, within its tradition.[105] In Islam, the development had its roots in the Quran: reflection on the often perfunctory and illegible Quranic message the angels carried both caused angelology to unfold in theological writings and, still before, led to expanding and elaborating the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, until it was finally consolidated in the canonical collections in the 9th century.

This conclusion is key from the perspective of the subject of this article: when borrowed, content is transformed according to the system that absorbs it. To put it differently, reinterpretations of the motif that are present in Islam's specific religious and cultural terms round out the discussion of whether the process of diffusion took place.[106]

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105 See the diagram showing the presumable development of the concept of examination and punishment of the dead in their graves in Prochwicz-Studnicka, "The Motif of the Angel(s) of Death," 575.

106 Nowicka, *Świat człowieka*, 85; Ferraro – Andreatta, *Cultural Anthropology*, 41.

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