

Qur'anic Mushrikūn Between Monotheism and Idolatry

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Abstract

This article critically examines the two central claims made by G.R. Hawting in *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*. Hawting argues that the Qur'anic term *mushrik* (polytheist) has been misinterpreted in classical Islamic tradition and is entirely understood as referring to "idol worship." He contends that the Qur'an actually critiques defective monotheistic practices with this term, using *mushrik* as a polemical device. Based on this, Hawting questions the origins of the Qur'an, asserting that its addressees were not "polytheistic," and thus it is impossible for the Qur'an to have originated from the pagan Arabs of the Hijaz. In this context, Hawting suggests that the Qur'an was influenced by the broader religious environment of the late antiquity and emerged in the Fertile Crescent, a region where various religious groups accused each other of being *mushrik*.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive critique of these two central claims by Hawting. This chapter begins by examining the concept of *mushrik* in the Qur'an and its interpretation within Islamic tradition, focusing on how classical exegesis framed this term within historical and theological contexts. Following this, the article discusses the religious and cultural milieu of pre-Islamic Arabia, drawing on archeological and epigraphic evidence to articulate Hawting's hypothesis. The article reveals that pre-Islamic Arab society was not entirely polytheistic. Rather, this society had a belief system that recognized Allah as the supreme creator, relying on intermediaries to approach Him. Furthermore, the article shows that contrary to Hawting's argument, classical Muslim scholars have recognized this aspect significantly. According to the conclusions reached, while Hawting's critique of the literal interpretation of *mushrik* is reasonable and valid, his other claims based on this conclusion are not scientifically grounded and reflect the baggage of revisionist Orientalism.

Keywords: Tafsir, Qur'anic Studies, Idolatry, Monotheism, Mushrikūn, G.R. Hawting, Jāhiliyya.

Putperestlik ve Tektanrıcılık Arasında Kur'an'ın Müşrikler Kavramı

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Öz

Bu makale, G.R. Hawting'in *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* adlı eserinde ileri sürdüğü iki temel iddiayı eleştirel bir şekilde incelemektedir. Hawting, Kur'an'daki *müşrik* teriminin, klasik İslam geleneğinde yanlış yorumlandığını ve bütünüyle "putperestlik" olarak anlaşıldığını savunur. Ona göre Kur'an bu ifade ile aslında kusurlu tek tanrıcılık uygulamalarını eleştirir ve *müşrik* kelimesini bir polemik unsur olarak kullanır. Buradan hareketle Kur'an'ın kökenlerini sorgulamaya girişen Hawting, ikinci temel iddia olarak Kur'an metninin muhataplarının "çok tanrıcı" olmadıklarını, dolayısıyla onun pagan Arapların yaşadığı Hicaz'dan neşet etmiş olmasının imkânsız olduğunu savunur. Bu çerçevede Hawting Kur'an'ın geç antikçağın daha geniş dini bağlamından etkilendiğini ve çeşitli dini grupların birbirlerini *müşrik* olmakla suçladığı verimli hilal bölgesinde ortaya çıktığını öne sürer.

Hawting'in bu iki temel iddiasıyla ilgili kapsamlı bir eleştiri sunmayı hedefleyen bu makale, öncelikle Kur'an'daki *müşrik* kavramını ve bu kavramın İslam geleneğindeki yorumlanışını incelemekte, klasik tefsirin bu terimi tarihsel ve teolojik bağlamlarda nasıl yorumladığını ele almaktadır. Bunun akabinde makale, İslam öncesi Arap dünyasının dini ve kültürel ortamını arkeolojik ve epigrafik kanıtlarla değerlendirerek, Hawting'in hipotezini tartışmaktadır. Makale İslam öncesi Arap toplumunun tamamen çoktanrıcı olmadığını, aksine bu toplumun Allah'ı en yüce yaratıcı olarak kabul eden ve O'na ulaşmak için edinilmiş araçlara dayanan bir inanç sistemine sahip olduğunu ortaya koyar. Ayrıca makalede bu durumun Hawting'in öngördüğünün aksine, klasik İslam bilginleri tarafından da önemli ölçüde fark edilmiş olduğu tespit edilir. Ulaşılan sonuca göre Hawting'in *müşrik* teriminin harfi harfine yorumlanmasına yönelik eleştirisi makul ve geçerli olsa da onun bu sonuca dayanarak ulaştığı diğer iddia bilimsel olarak temellendirilememekte, aksine revizyonist oryantalizmin bagajını yansıtmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tefsir, Kur'an Araştırmaları, Putperestlik, Tektanrıcılık, G.R.Hawting, Cahiliye.

Introduction

The analysis of the Qur'ānic term *mushrikūn* and its historical, theological, and cultural implications has long been a focal point in both classical Islamic scholarship and contemporary academic research. Central to this discourse is the question of whether the Qur'ān's critique of *mushrikūn* reflects an engagement with outright polytheism or a more nuanced polemic against defective monotheistic practices. This study contributes to this ongoing discussion by critically examining G.R. Hawting's arguments in *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, which challenge traditional interpretations of *mushrikūn* and question the geographical origins of the Qur'ān.

Hawting's work introduces two significant claims: First, the Qur'ānic term *mushrikūn* has been misinterpreted in Islamic tradition as referring to idolaters, whereas the Qur'ān's critique is more accurately directed at monotheists engaged in practices inconsistent with true monotheism; and second, that the Qur'ān's origins may not lie in the Hijāz but rather reflect broader influences from the religious and cultural milieu of late antiquity. By engaging with these claims, this study aims to provide a nuanced critique that bridges insights from classical Islamic scholarship and modern academic perspectives.

The historical and cultural backdrop of pre-Islamic Arabia forms an essential foundation for this investigation. The 7th century Hijāz region, where the Qur'ān emerged, was characterized by a complex religious landscape, which included polytheistic Arab tribes, as well as Jewish and Christian communities. This environment shaped the Qur'ān's theological emphasis on *tawhīd* (the oneness of God) and its denunciation of *shirk* (associating partners with God). While the Quraysh and other groups acknowledged Allah as the supreme creator, their veneration of intermediary deities categorized them as *mushrikūn* in the Qur'ānic discourse. This critique is widely accepted in both Islamic tradition and modern scholarship; however, revisionist scholars like Hawting propose alternative frameworks that reinterpret these terms and their historical contexts.

Despite its controversial elements, Hawting's first claim—that the Qur'ān's critique of *mushrikūn* targets monotheists rather than literal idolaters—raises important questions about the interpretive layers of Islamic tradition. Classical exegetical works, such as those by al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) and al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), reflect a nuanced understanding of "*mushrikūn*," acknowledging both literal and metaphorical dimensions of *shirk*. Furthermore, the acknowledgment of Allah as the supreme deity in pre-Islamic *Talbiyah* chants underscores the need for a reassessment of the religious practices of pre-Islamic Arabian society. However, Hawting's second claim, namely that the Qur'ān's origins lay outside the Hijāz, warrants further investigation due to its reliance on speculative interpretations of late antique religious influences.

Hawting's work has generated a variety of responses within academic scholarships, ranging from cautious approval to pointed criticism. Fred M. Donner, for example, finds Hawting's re-reading of *mushrikūn* compelling, particularly the argument that the Qur'ān employs hyperbolic polemic common among monotheistic traditions. Nevertheless, Donner is skeptical of the speculative hypothesis that the Qur'ān emerged outside of Arabia, noting the absence of concrete historical or philological evidence to support this claim.¹ Yasin Dutton similarly acknowledges the interpretive value of rethinking *shirk* but finds Hawting's dismissal of the Hijaz as the Qur'ān's place of origin unconvincing, especially in light of textual, topographical, and archaeological evidence linking the Qur'ānic message to that specific geographical setting.²

Additional critiques by Walid Saleh, Sait Reçber, and Wilferd Madelung further expose the limitations of Hawting's methodological framework. Saleh challenges the sharp disjunction Hawting draws between the Qur'ān and Muslim tradition, emphasizing that such a separation undermines the coherence of his Wansbrough-inspired approach. Reçber, while appreciating Hawting's critique of traditional historiography, questions the evidentiary basis of his alternative reading of *shirk* and the oversimplification of pre-Islamic religious plurality. Madelung offers the most direct rebuttal, asserting that the Qur'ān clearly addresses the Quraysh and specific Arabian deities, which contradicts the idea that it emerged in a context wholly removed from Arab polytheism. Together, these evaluations reveal the dual nature of Hawting's contribution: while his reappraisal of Qur'ānic polemics provides valuable insights, his historical reconstructions remain speculative and inadequately supported.³

¹ Fred M. Donner, "G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 121/2 (2001): 336-338.

² Yasin Dutton, "Review of *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*, by G. R. Hawting," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12/2 (2001): 177-179.

³ See Walid Saleh, "G.R. Hawting. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*," *H-Mideast-Medieval, H-Net Reviews* (February 2005), 1-5; Reçber, "G.R. Hawting. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*," *The Muslim World* 93/2 (2003), 331-333; Wilferd Madelung, "Review of *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* by G. R. Hawting," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 11/2 (2001): 271-272.

This study employs a methodological approach that combines theological, linguistic, and rhetorical analyses of Qur'anic terms such as *mushrikūn* and *shirk*. It also draws upon paleographic findings, including Safaitic inscriptions, to provide historical insights into pre-Islamic Arabian religious practices. By integrating perspectives from classical Islamic scholarship and modern academic research, this study bridges the interpretative gap and offers a more comprehensive understanding of Qur'anic polemics. Moreover, the interplay between Islamic sources and Western academic perspectives forms the central axis of this study. This comparative approach highlights the nuanced relationship between the Qur'an's critique of intermediary practices and the religious milieu of late antiquity, aiming to contextualize theological discourse within a broader historical framework.

This research positions itself within the broader field of Qur'anic studies by addressing gaps in traditionalist and revisionist perspectives. While traditional scholarship has provided a wealth of interpretive tools, it often relies on literal readings of Qur'anic terminology. Conversely, despite their critical insights, revisionist approaches sometimes overstate the extent to which late antique influences have influenced the Qur'an. By integrating these perspectives, this study seeks to shed light on the complexity of the Qur'an's rhetorical strategies and their interaction with the religious practices of its time. Ultimately, the goal is to advance an evidence-based understanding of the Qur'anic critique of *mushrikūn* and its broader theological and historical significance.

1. The Qur'anic Mushrikūn in the Context of Jāhiliyya and Islamic Tradition

Hawting's first argument centers on a discrepancy between the Qur'an's portrayal of *mushrikūn* and its depiction in classical Islamic tradition. He contends that Islamic tradition took the Qur'an's terms too literally, constructing an image of the *Jāhiliyya period* and a concept of "polytheism" that aligns with this literal interpretation. According to Hawting, however, those whom the Qur'an labels as polytheists/*mushrikūn* were actually monotheists. The Qur'an's critique, he argues, was aimed at practices inconsistent with true monotheism, using the term "polytheists" not as a literal descriptor but as a critical label. He suggests that classical scholars overlooked this nuance and therefore concluded that the Qur'an's audience consisted of idol-worshipping polytheists. Ultimately, Hawting argues that this traditional portrayal lacks historical accuracy and functions more as a tafsīr, or interpretive layer, on the Qur'anic verses than as a direct historical record.⁴

Hawting's primary argument, which critiques the literal interpretation of the Qur'anic term *mushrikūn* as idolaters, holds significant merit but also invites further exploration. While Hawting effectively demonstrates that the Qur'an's critique may have targeted monotheists engaged in intermediary practices, his assertion that Islamic tradition consistently adopts a rigidly literal reading oversimplifies the interpretive landscape. Classical exegetical works, such as those by al-Māturīdī and al-Rāzī, reveal nuanced understandings of *mushrikūn*, acknowledging both literal and metaphorical dimensions of *shirk*. For instance, the acknowledgment of God as the supreme creator in pre-Islamic *Talbiyah* chants underscores that many Qurayshi Arabs did not view their idols as divine equals but as intercessors. Hawting's thesis, while groundbreaking, could benefit from a closer engagement with these layered interpretations within Islamic tradition. By reconciling Qur'anic polemics with the historical practices of its audience, this study argues that the Qur'an's critique of *shirk* should be viewed as a rhetorical device intended to reform distorted monotheistic practices rather than merely denouncing outright polytheism.

Following naturally from Hawting's first claim, his second assertion posits that the Qur'an could not have originated in the Hijāz (Mecca-Medina) region. While this claim lies outside the primary focus of my paper, I will examine it from several perspectives. Hawting assumes that the Meccan Arabs were isolated from the rich religious cultures of late antiquity, particularly those in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Palestine, implying that they were unfamiliar with the religious and monotheistic traditions that were widespread at the time.

Hawting's secondary claim, that the Qur'an did not originate in the Hijāz, is less convincing and raises several questions about the interplay between geography and religious discourse. His hypothesis rests on the assumption that Meccan society was isolated from the broader monotheistic traditions of late antiquity. However, historical and archeological evidence points to significant cultural and economic exchanges between Arabia and regions like the Levant and Mesopotamia, where Jewish and Christian traditions were prominent. The presence of terms and narratives in the Qur'an that resonate with late antique religious discourses does not necessitate an external origin but rather reflects the interconnectedness of the Hijāz with its neighboring regions. By emphasizing the dynamic nature of pre-Islamic Arabian society, this study

⁴ See Mun'im Sirry, *Controversies over Islamic Origins: An Introduction to Traditionalism and Revisionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), 81; Fred M. Donner, "G. R. Hawting. The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 121/2 (2001): 336-338.

counters Hawting's geographical hypothesis, arguing instead for a more integrated understanding of the Qur'ān's emergence within the complex religious landscape of the Hijāz.

From this premise, Hawting concludes that the Qur'ān could not have originated in the Mecca-Medina region. Additionally, he expressed distrust of Islamic sources, a separate issue worth discussing.⁵ In my view, if Hawting had adopted a more open perspective on these points, he might have concluded that the Meccan Arabs were not strictly idolaters but rather held beliefs closely aligned with monotheism. This perspective is precisely what I intend to explore and support in this paper. To do so, I first outline the arguments in Hawting's initial claim, refining and expanding upon them to develop my own theoretical framework. I will then address the major criticisms of Hawting's second claim, ultimately presenting an alternative theory.

Hawting's main argument highlights a notable difference between the concept of *mushrikūn* in the Qur'ān and its interpretation in Islamic tradition. He argues that the Qur'ān's use of the term *shirk* and other words derived from the same root is directed at an audience that holds a monotheistic belief system. Therefore, the Qur'ān's *mushrikūn* were, in fact, a monotheistic group. However, later Islamic tradition adopted an overly literal reading of the Qur'ān and constructed various pseudo-historical accounts to support this interpretation. Hawting's argument confronts traditional Islamic scholarship, which has long accepted the notion that the Qur'ān's critique addresses a society steeped in idol worship. This reading, he posits, may reflect later interpretive layers rather than early Meccan religious practices. Through close textual analysis, Hawting claims that Qur'ānic terminology around *mushrikūn* functions metaphorically, targeting a form of monotheism seen as corrupt. Hawting's work is recognized for challenging traditional assumptions, emphasizing that the real target of Qur'ānic criticism was monotheistic "associationism" rather than outright paganism.⁶ This stance, though controversial, opens avenues for exploring how *mushrikūn* might have been a critique of religious practices that Islam would later reform, rather than a reflection of literal idol worship.⁷

Hawting's argument could have been stronger had he avoided speculation about a Qur'ānic origin outside of the Hijāz. This focus allows for a more compelling exploration of *mushrikūn* as a critique of "imperfect" monotheism, fitting well within the rhetorical strategies of other monotheistic traditions. For instance, if the Qur'ān's invective against *shirk* was aimed at monotheists engaging in intermediary worship, this implies that those labeled as *mushrikūn* did not consider themselves as idolaters, which is in line with monotheistic polemics in the Jewish and Christian traditions.

Hawting's interpretation of *mushrikūn* as a polemical label rather than a literal descriptor aligns with the Qur'ān's broader rhetorical strategy but underestimates the diversity of its audience. The Qur'ānic polemics likely addressed a spectrum of beliefs, from outright idolatry to imperfect monotheism, reflecting the plurality of religious practices in pre-Islamic Arabia. For instance, the Qur'ān's critique of intermediary worship parallels intra-monotheistic disputes in Jewish and Christian traditions, where accusations of "idolatry" were often metaphorical. By framing *mushrikūn* as a critique of monotheists who compromised *tawhīd* through intermediary practices, the Qur'ān engages in a discourse not of exclusion but of correction.

This interpretation enhances our understanding of the term as a rhetorical tool intended to reform religious practices rather than constructing a binary opposition between monotheists and polytheists. This interpretation calls for a reconsideration of the classical *Jāhiliyya* narrative, presenting *shirk* as a critique of intermediary practices rather than outright polytheism.⁸ As Fred Donner aptly noted, Hawting's first argument does not necessarily require his second. Of the two possible conclusions resulting from Hawting's first argument, his second argument is weaker. If we accept that the *mushrikūn* criticized in the Qur'ān actually held a monotheistic belief, albeit one seen as flawed by the Qur'ān, it is not immediately clear why these individuals could not have been the first to encounter Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. Such a claim could only be made if we adhere to the assumptions of revisionists like Wansbrough (d. 2002) and Crone (d. 2015), who are less cautious in their approach. Otherwise, it seems more reasonable to consider the

⁵ Hawting explicitly states that he continues the line of Goldziher and even Wansbrough, asserting that the Jāhiliya portrait drawn by the Islamic tradition lacks historical value and only reflects the perception of Jāhiliya in the minds of Muslims. See G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8.

⁶ Gordon D. Newby, "G. R. Hawting. The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History," *The American Historical Review* 108/2 (2003), 610; Francis Robinson, "G. R. Hawting. The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 64/2 (2001), 270

⁷ M. Sait Reçber, "G.R. Hawting. The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History," *The Muslim World* 93/2 (2003), 331-333.

⁸ See Walid Saleh, "G.R. Hawting. The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History," *H-Mideast-Medieval, H-Net Reviews* (February 2005), 1-5; Reçber, "G.R. Hawting. The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History," *The Muslim World* 93/2 (2003), 331-333.

other option—that the Arabs who first encountered the Qur’ān actually held a belief system that was quite close to monotheism.⁹

Donner highlights that while Hawting implies an extra-Arabian origin for the Qur’ān, he stops short of providing a clear alternative setting, which weakens this part of his thesis. Donner argues that if Hawting’s main claim is that *mushrikūn* refers to deficient monotheists rather than idolaters, then it might be simpler to consider that the Hijāz itself had a complex monotheistic environment, thus negating the need to propose a non-Arabian origin.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Hawting’s first argument holds considerable merit. It would be implausible to repeatedly accuse a group of *shirk* if they already openly self-identify themselves as *mushrikūn*. The Qur’ān’s use of the term “mushrik” to carry weight as a critique implies that those addressed did not view themselves as *mushrikūn*. In such a case, describing them as *mushrikūn* would serve as a form of critique, making it meaningful. Otherwise, we would have to assume that the Qur’ān is attempting to criticize its audience by highlighting a characteristic that they themselves already accept, which is clearly unreasonable from a literary standpoint. This critique, therefore, necessitates the re-conceptualization of the *mushrikūn* as monotheists whose practices deviate from the ideal monotheistic doctrine.

2. The Qur’ānic Origins Debate: Evaluating Hawting’s Geographical Hypothesis

The classical account of the Islamic tradition toward the Qur’ān has long been met with skepticism in Western academia, a skepticism that, to some extent, has legitimate grounds. However, certain scholars have taken this skepticism to an extreme, dismissing the entire tradition outright. This shows that the cultural memory of a society operates purely through the lens of conspiracy theories. While the century and a half between the emergence of Islam and the production of the earliest Islamic texts calls for a cautious approach in evaluating these sources, to extend this caution to the point of deeming the entire Islamic tradition as producing “fabricated” texts is an unreasonable stance. While the revisionist school has offered important contributions to Qur’ānic studies, it is essential to critically engage with and move past their more speculative and inadequately supported claims.

This revisionist discourse, which asserts that the Qur’ān was shaped by Muslim scholars and only took its current form toward the end of the second century AH, continues to uphold the same fundamental stance, even as new figures like Stephen J. Shoemaker has revised the text, claiming that the Qur’ān reached its present form during the reign of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān.¹¹ In fact, Shoemaker, in addition to the claims previously expressed by Wansbrough, proposes, based on various pieces of evidence and speculation- that the Qur’ānic text does not originate from the Hijāz region. On the other hand, while some German scholars, such as Angelika Neuwirth, agree with the revisionists regarding the unreliability of all written sources in the Islamic tradition, they believe the Qur’ān should be excluded from this generalization, which distinguishes them from the revisionists. In this context, Neuwirth claims reading the Qur’ān not as part of Islamic tradition but as a text belonging to the religious and cultural milieu of late antiquity.

The divergence of views between revisionists and traditionalists regarding the origins of the Qur’ān, as Herbert Berg expresses, reflects the clash of two distinct worldviews and paradigms, making it nearly impossible to find a middle ground in the near future.¹² Nevertheless, it is not entirely out of the question that over generations, both schools might evaluate and reconsider their claims from an opposing perspective. For instance, it can be said that Patricia Crone partially revised her stance, which she adopted in “*Meccan Trade*” and “*Hagarism*,” in several of her later articles.¹³ In this framework, Hawting’s stance is generally closer to the revisionist approach. However, by considering the Qur’ān itself as a source of historical knowledge, he diverges from the revisionist school and, in Walid Saleh’s words, aligns more closely with the “German School of Qur’ānic Studies” from which he methodologically seeks to distinguish himself—an outcome he likely wishes to avoid.¹⁴

⁹ See. Fred M. Donner, “G. R. Hawting. The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121/2 (2001), 336-338.

¹⁰ Fred M. Donner, “G. R. Hawting. The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121/2 (2001), 336-338; Newby, “G. R. Hawting. The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History,” *The American Historical Review* 108/2 (2003), 610.

¹¹ Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, (California: University of California Press, 2022), 148-202.

¹² See Herbert Berg, “Competing Paradigms in the Study of Islamic Origins,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. Herbert Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 261.

¹³ See Patricia Crone, “The Qur’ānic Mushrikūn and the Resurrection,” *Bulletin of the School of the Oriental and African Studies* 75/3 (2012), 445-472.

¹⁴ See Walid Saleh, “G.R. Hawting. The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History,” *H-Mideast-Medieval, H-Net Reviews* (2005), 1-5. Note that Saleh is likely referring to Angelika Neuwirth with this term.

3. Transition to Monotheism in Pre-Islamic Arabia: Evidence and Analysis

The question of whether any form of monotheism existed in pre-Islamic Arabia, or how the concept of *shirk* was connected to idolatry, can be approached in two main ways: by analyzing Islamic sources or by examining paleographic studies and inscriptions from pre-Islamic Arabia. In this discussion, I attempt to present both perspectives.

Although many Qur'ānic verses are well-suited to providing insight into the nature of *shirk* beliefs in pre-Islamic Arabian society, I will not examine the topic through the Qur'ānic verses here, as it appears that Hawting has already addressed this point with sufficient care. While I have some objections to Hawting on certain detailed issues, they are not significant enough to affect the main theme of the topic. He is wrong in claiming that the Islamic tradition consistently adopts a strictly literal reading of the Qur'ān on this issue. Therefore, my main objection to Hawting concerns his judgment of Islamic traditions. He claims that the Islamic tradition interprets the Qur'ān entirely (and perhaps deliberately) in a literal way, leading to a constant interpretation of the Qur'ān's critique of *mushrikūn* as a critique of idolatry. Although it is difficult to say that Hawting is entirely wrong in this case, his argument does contain certain exaggerated aspects. These exaggerations are significant in supporting his second claim and will be critiqued here.

It is possible to trace in the Islamic tradition, even if only between the lines, a perspective on the nature of the religious and cultural world of pre-Islamic Arab society that Hawting would also approve of. Here, I will attempt to compile this perspective from classical Islamic sources. In this way, I evaluate the data found between the lines in Islamic sources regarding the belief system of pre-Islamic Arabian society. These data indicate that pre-Islamic Arab society adhered to a form of monotheism. I will then combine this information with findings from paleo-Arabic studies to achieve a broader interpretation.

3.1. Islamic Sources

Classical Islamic sources provide extensive details concerning the characteristics of the *shirk* beliefs held by pre-Islamic Arabs, offering a rich field for detailed scholarly inquiry. However, in this study, I will confine myself to illustrating, through selected examples, the remarkable insights classical Islamic scholars demonstrated in their understanding of pre-Islamic Arab polytheists' religious beliefs. The first example pertains to the general observations regarding the use of intermediaries by pre-Islamic Arabs to *draw closer to Allah* and to *attain the privilege of intercession in the sight of Allah*. This point illustrates that the Arabs of the Hijāz recognized "Allah" as the sole true God. However, they exalted, revered, and sanctified other beings as intermediaries, seeking to draw closer to Allah and secure a privileged status in His presence. The second focuses on the *Talbiyah* tradition, a distinctive polytheistic prayer practice that vividly reflects this phenomenon.

The Qur'ān explicitly states that some pre-Islamic Arab polytheists regarded certain entities as deities in the hope that they would bring them closer to Allah. [وَالَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ مَا نَعْبُدُهُمْ إِلَّا لِيُقَرِّبُونَا إِلَى اللَّهِ زُلْفَىٰ] (al-Zumar 39:3). In the context of the exegesis of this verse, the following statements by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) demonstrate that classical Islamic scholars approached this issue with significant rigor and meticulousness:

The essence of the statement by the idol worshippers is as follows: The Supreme God (Allah) is far too exalted to be worshipped by humans. However, it is more appropriate for humans to engage in the worship of the eminent servants of Allah, such as the stars and celestial spirits. These entities, in turn, worship the Greatest God (Allah). This is the meaning of their statement: 'We do not worship them except to bring us closer to Allah in proximity.'¹⁵

Al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) had already articulated the same point much earlier, presenting it in a clearer and more detailed manner:

Then, the motives that led them to worship what they worshipped besides Allah can be summarized in two points: **First:** *They did not see themselves as worthy of worshipping the Almighty God or capable of fulfilling His service. Thus, they worshipped these entities, hoping that their worship of these beings would bring them closer to Allah and that these entities would act as intercessors on their behalf.* This idea stemmed from their observation of earthly kings, where not everyone has direct access to serve a king or the ability to stand before him and serve him. Instead, people would serve those connected to the king, those of high status and closeness to the king, in the hope that serving these intermediaries would bring them closer to the king when a need or request for intercession arose. This is similar to what is mentioned about Pharaoh, who made idols for his people to worship besides himself, as they believed not everyone among them was fit to serve him. This understanding was reflected in their argument against Moses when they said, "Will he forsake you and your gods?" (al-A'rāf 7/127). **Second:** They worshipped these idols because they saw their

¹⁵ Fakhr al-Dīn Muhammad b. Umar al-Rāzī, *Mafâtih al-ghayb* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1420/1999), 26/241.

forefathers worship them and persisted in this practice until they died. They inferred from their forefathers' adherence to idol worship that Allah must have been pleased with this worship and had commanded it. They cited this reasoning when committing immoral acts, saying, "We found our fathers doing this, and Allah has commanded us to do it." (al-A'rāf 7/28). They also argued, "If Allah had willed, neither we nor our forefathers would have associated partners with Him." (al-An'ām 6/148) and "If Allah had willed, we would not have worshipped anything besides Him." (al-Naḥl 16/35). They deduced from Allah's lack of punishment of their forefathers for idol worship in this world, and their disbelief in the Hereafter that would otherwise deter them, that Allah was pleased with their actions and that their practices were in accordance with His command. However, Allah refuted their claims by saying, "Indeed, your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that over which they used to differ." (al-Naḥl 16/124).¹⁶

As can be clearly understood from this quotation, al-Māturīdī is clearly aware that the *shirk* belief of pre-Islamic Arabs was not complete idolatry but rather a belief system centered on adopting intermediaries to reach Allah. Similar expressions can be found in the texts of almost every commentator's writing. The statements of al-Rāzī and al-Māturīdī, as quoted here, sufficiently represent the classical Islamic tafsīr tradition and adequately substantiate the argument in this essay.

At this point, it is useful to briefly examine the *Talbiyah* prayers recited by pre-Islamic Arabs, particularly during the pilgrimage. Through these prayers, we can gain a clearer understanding of the nature of their belief systems. Although Hawting has mentioned the *Talbiyah* traditions of pre-Islamic Arabs, he does not seem to have fully appreciated their significance. When we examine these *Talbiyah*'s closely, we understand that the Arabs did not view their 'idols' as creator Gods, nor did they associate them as partners in this regard. It is easy to discern in these *Talbiyah*'s that various Arab tribes recognized Allah as the supreme and sole creator. As clearly expressed in the *Talbiyah*, Arab tribes specifically emphasized that beings identified as idols, such as *al-Lât*, *al-'Uzzâ*, *Manât*, and *Hubal*, belonged to God/Allah. The following examples demonstrate this with unmistakable clarity.

The *Talbiyah* of Quraysh is as follows:

لَيْبِكَ اللَّهُمَّ لَيْبِكَ. لَيْبِكَ لَا شَرِيكَ لَكَ. إِلَّا شَرِيكَ هُوَ لَكَ. تَمَلِّكُهُ وَمَا مَلَكَ أَبُو بَنَاتٍ فِي فَدَاكَ

Here I am, O God, here I am. Here I am, **You have no partner**. Except for a partner **who belongs to You; You own him and what he possesses**, as well as the father of the daughters in Fadak.

The *talbiyah* of Thaqīf was as follows:

لَيْبِكَ اللَّهُمَّ لَيْبِكَ. هَذِهِ تَقِيْفٌ قَدْ أَتَوْكَ وَخَلَّفُوا أَوْثَانَهُمْ وَعَظَمُوا. قَدْ عَظَّمُوا الْمَالَ وَقَدْ رَجَوْكَ. عَزَّاهُمْ وَاللَّاتُ فِي يَدِيكَ. دَانَتْ لَكَ الْأَصْنَامُ تَعْظِيمًا إِلَيْكَ. قَدْ أَدْعَنْتَ بِسَلْمِهَا إِلَيْكَ. فَاغْفِرْ لَهَا فَطَالَمَا غَفَرْتَ

Here I am, O God, here I am. This is Thaqīf that has come to You, leaving their idols behind, and honoring You. They have honored wealth and sought Your favor. **Their 'Uzzâ and al-Lât are in Your hands. The idols are submitted to You in reverence**. They have surrendered in peace to You. Therefore, forgive them (i.e., Thaqīf) for you have often forgiven.¹⁷

The *talbiyah* of Mudhij is as follows:

لَيْبِكَ رَبِّ الشَّعْرَى، وَرَبِّ اللَّاتِ وَالْعَزَى

O Lord of Sirius, and **Lord of al-Lât and al-'Uzzâ!** here I am, at Your command.¹⁸

These data indicate that pre-Islamic Arab *mushrikūn* were not strictly idolaters, as they believed in Allah as the only true God and were, in this sense, "monotheistic." These quotes also reveal that this notion is expressed between lines of Islamic tradition. According to Ibn Habib's statement, the pre-Islamic Arab tribes, when turning to all these "idols" and performing the *Talbiyah*, would begin with *Labbayk allahumma labbayk* (Here I am, O God, here I am, at Your Command.)¹⁹ In this context, the entities they referred to as "idols" (al-awthān wa-l-aṣnām) were likely objects revered to bring people closer to God, a practice found in many religious traditions. Indeed, it is known that in later institutionalized Islamic tradition, as well as in Christianity, Judaism, and other religious traditions, various persons and objects have been revered to a certain extent. Moreover, in such cases, it is common across almost all religious traditions for certain groups within a devout community to accuse others of being "polytheists," and Hawting indeed seems to have

¹⁶ Abū Mansūr Muhammad al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wilāt al-Qur'ān*, ed. Bekir Topaloğlu et al. (İstanbul: Dâr al-Mizân, 2008), 12/291-292.

¹⁷ Muhammad Ibn al-Mustanîr Ibn Ahmad Qutrub, *Al-Azmina wa Talbiyah al-Jāhiliyya*, ed. Hâtim Sâleh al-Dhâmin (Beirut: Muassasat al-Risâlah, 1405/1985), 39.

¹⁸ Ahmad b. Abî Ya'qûb b. Ja'far b. Wahb Al-Ya'qûbî, *Târîkh al-Ya'qûbî* (Najaf: Manshûrât Maktabah al-Haydariyyah, 1383/1964), 1/225.

¹⁹ Abū Ja'far Muhammad b. Habîb, *al-Muhabbar*, ed. Ilse Lichtenstädter (Haydarabad: Dâirat al-Ma'ârif al-'Uthmâniyya, 1361/1942), 311-315.

carefully noticed this point. Thus, when Hawting asserts that the *mushrikūn* criticized by the Qur'ān were not strictly idolaters, he is not introducing a new idea, as this understanding already exists within the Islamic tradition. Hawting's key insight, however, lies in recognizing that this perspective is only subtly expressed in Islamic texts, often implied rather than explicitly stated. In contrast, the dominant view - interpreting pre-Islamic Arab *mushrikūn* as pure idolaters and taking the Qur'ān's statements in a strictly literal sense - has been more widely accepted and influential.

3.2. Western Perspectives and Paleo-Arabic Studies on the Transition to Monotheism

The primary point underlying Hawting's second claim is the assumption that no written culture or religious thought structure existed in pre-Islamic Arab society. This assumption has been significantly refuted in recent paleo-Arabic studies. On the other hand, these studies also appear to document a transformation from polytheism to monotheism in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam. Accordingly, we now know that, although not as developed as the Fertile Crescent, pre-Islamic Arabia was not entirely primitive in terms of written and religious culture.

The religious landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia, particularly in the Hijāz region, presents a complex theological framework that resists being simply categorized as pagan polytheism. Scholars have increasingly recognized that the Arabs of this era adhered to a belief system centered around a singular, supreme deity, Allah, while also engaging with intermediary figures who played crucial roles in their spiritual practices. Patricia Crone illustrates this dynamic, noting that the Qur'anic pagans "called [the supreme deity] Allah, and both sides [Muhammad and his opponents] seem fully to have accepted that they were talking of the same deity." She further elaborates that their understanding of Allah was "surprisingly close to the Islamic concept," a point that highlights the monotheistic foundations of their belief system, despite their association with intermediary deities.²⁰ However, Crone also emphasized the apparent contradiction in their practices, observing that they "operated with a number of other deities in addition," who were often described as "gods who can create nothing but are themselves created."²¹ This framework parallels the later veneration of saints in Islam and Christianity, in which intermediary figures are believed to act as conduits to the supreme deity.²²

In support of this understanding, Ahmad Al-Jallad's analysis of Safaitic inscriptions offers further evidence of the dual structure of belief in pre-Islamic Arabia. He identifies rituals such as animal sacrifices and vows made to specific deities—practices that he interprets as expressions of localized reverence, rather than outright polytheism. He observes that "the gods were invoked for assistance in travel, protection, and life's uncertainties," but emphasizes that these deities' roles were circumscribed, thus underscoring their function as intermediaries rather than autonomous gods.²³ Importantly, Al-Jallad argues that these practices reveal a belief in divine hierarchy, where "a supreme deity governed the cosmos, while lesser deities addressed individual needs," thus highlighting the distinction between absolute and functional divinity.²⁴

Peter Webb addresses the sociocultural dimensions of these beliefs, explaining how pre-Islamic Arabs integrated their tribal identities with religious practices that recognized a high God alongside intermediary figures. He suggests that the notion of Arab religious practices being purely polytheistic is a construct of later Islamic historiography and argues that the pre-Islamic Arabs "venerated Allah as the supreme deity while maintaining customs that invoked regional gods for specific purposes."²⁵ Webb also points to the influence of external monotheistic traditions, such as Judaism and Christianity, in shaping the Arabs' conceptualization of Allah as a high God, further distinguishing their beliefs from classical paganism.²⁶

These scholarly perspectives collectively affirm that the pre-Islamic Arabian religious framework was not simply polytheistic but rather a nuanced form of proto-monotheism. At its core, this belief system centered around a supreme deity and approached through a network of intermediary figures fulfilling specific roles. This interpretation challenges traditional assumptions about pre-Islamic Arabian religion and calls for a reevaluation of its theological complexity within the broader context of late antique monotheistic traditions.

²⁰ Patricia Crone, "The Religion of the Quranic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities", *Arabia* 55 (2010), 151-200, 152-153.

²¹ Crone, "The Religion of the Quranic Pagans", 154.

²² Crone, "The Religion of the Quranic Pagans", 153.

²³ Ahmad Al-Jallad, *The Religion and Rituals of the Nomads of Pre-Islamic Arabia: A Reconstruction Based on the Safaitic Inscriptions*, (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2022), 60-63.

²⁴ Al-Jallad, *The Religion and Rituals*, 65.

²⁵ Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 24-26.

²⁶ Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 30-31.

The religious practices of the pre-Islamic Arabs cannot be reduced to mere polytheism, as they also recognized the presence of a supreme deity, commonly referred to as “Allah.” Joseph Henninger, in his analysis of pre-Islamic Bedouin religion, describes Allah as “the creator of the world, supreme and undisputed lord,” although Allah was largely relegated to the background in the practical and ritualistic life of the people.²⁷ Henninger further highlights that alongside this belief, the Bedouins also worshipped astral and atmospheric deities, ancestors, and spirits such as jinn, demonstrating a complex and layered religious system.

Similarly, Hamilton A.R. Gibb (d. 1971) observed that in Mecca, Allah was the supreme god, transcending local deities. Gibb notes that such beliefs were not solely shaped by Jewish or Christian traditions but likely had deeper, indigenous Arabian roots.²⁸ Jan Retsö further explores the religious landscape in pre-Islamic Arabia, stressing that tribal and regional deities often served as intermediaries, yet there remained a consistent acknowledgment of a “supreme god” who created and governed the universe. Retsö characterized this framework as indicative of a more nuanced religious structure than mere idolatry.²⁹ Additionally, David D. Grafton highlights the influence of monotheistic traditions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, among certain Arab tribes. Grafton refers to South Arabian inscriptions that mention “al-Rahman” (the Merciful) as a supreme deity, linking this to the broader regional shift toward monotheism during late antiquity.³⁰

These observations collectively underscore the fact that pre-Islamic Arabian religious practices were not strictly polytheistic. Instead, they represented a blend of localized polytheistic practices and a broader, more universal recognition of a high god, bridging indigenous traditions with external monotheistic influences.

Conclusions

This study critically addresses two central claims made by G.R. Hawting regarding the Qur’ānic term *mushrikūn* and the geographical origins of the Qur’ān. Hawting’s first claim—that the Qur’ān’s critique of *mushrikūn* reflects a polemical engagement with flawed monotheism rather than literal polytheism—offers a valuable perspective that challenges traditional interpretations. By contextualizing the Qur’ānic critique within the broader framework of intra-monotheistic polemics, this study has demonstrated that the term *mushrikūn* serves as a rhetorical device aimed at reforming intermediary practices rather than denouncing outright idolatry. This reinterpretation underscores the nuanced relationship between the Qur’ānic discourse and theological landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia, where monotheistic beliefs coexisted with practices deemed inconsistent with *tawhīd*. However, Hawting’s second claim—that the Qur’ān may not have originated in the Hijāz—raises significant methodological and evidentiary concerns. The historical and archeological evidence presented in this study points to the cultural and religious interconnectedness of Mecca and its neighboring regions, challenging the notion of the Hijāz as an isolated environment. By situating the Qur’ān within the dynamic religious and cultural exchanges of late antiquity, this study reaffirms the plausibility of its emergence within the Hijāz while also acknowledging the broader influences that shaped its discourse.

The findings of this study underscore the complexity of pre-Islamic Arabian religious practices, challenging simplistic categorizations of polytheism and monotheism. By analyzing Safaitic inscriptions and *Talbiyah* chants, it is evident that many pre-Islamic Arabian tribes acknowledged Allah as the supreme deity while engaging in intermediary practices. This supports the argument that Qur’ānic critiques were intended to reform distorted monotheistic practices rather than address outright idolatry. Furthermore, this study highlights the dynamic cultural and theological exchanges between the Hijāz and the broader late antique world, which shaped the Qur’ān’s rhetorical strategies and theological discourse.

Ultimately, this paper highlights the importance of critically reassessing traditional and revisionist narratives to arrive at a more balanced understanding of the Qur’ān’s historical and theological context. Hawting’s work, despite its limitations, opens up avenues for further research into the rhetorical strategies and polemical engagements of the Qur’ān. By bridging insights from Islamic tradition and modern scholarship, this study contributes to a deeper appreciation of the Qur’ānic engagement with monotheism and its enduring legacy in shaping Islamic thought.

To complement the conclusions presented, the following remarks aim to situate this study within the broader field of Qur’ānic scholarship. This study underscores the need for a nuanced approach to the study

²⁷ Hamilton A.R. Gibb, “Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia”, in *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, ed. F.E. Peters (London-New York: Routledge, 2017), 121

²⁸ Gibb, “Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia”, 118-119.

²⁹ Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London-New York: Routledge, 2003), 600

³⁰ David. D. Grafton, “The identity and witness of Arab pre-Islamic Arab Christianity: The Arabic language and the Bible,” *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 70/1 (2014), 4.

of the Qur'ānic terminology and its historical context. By critically engaging with G. R. Hawting's arguments, it becomes evident that the interpretation of terms such as *mushrikūn* requires a balance between textual analysis, theological inquiry, and historical contextualization. Traditional Islamic scholarship has provided a wealth of interpretive tools that, when revisited considering modern methodologies, can yield fresh perspectives on the Qur'ānic discourse.

The findings of this paper also call for a re-evaluation of how pre-Islamic Arabian religious practices are framed within both Islamic tradition and modern academic scholarship. The depiction of the *Jāhiliyya* period as a binary contrast to Islam oversimplifies the complexity of religious and cultural practices in the region. Instead, this study shows that pre-Islamic Arabian society was not a monolithic entity but rather a mosaic of monotheistic and intermediary practices that were critiqued, rather than entirely rejected, by the Qur'ān. Furthermore, this paper highlights the significance of interdisciplinary approaches in the Qur'ānic studies. The integration of textual, archeological, and comparative religious methodologies enriches our understanding of the Qur'ān's engagement with its audience and rhetorical strategies. Future research could build on this foundation by exploring the connections between the Qur'ān and the broader religious landscape of late antiquity, with particular attention to its parallels with Jewish and Christian polemics.

Lastly, this study contributes to ongoing debates in the Qur'ānic studies by advocating for a middle ground between traditionalist and revisionist perspectives. While revisionist scholarship has challenged established narratives, its more speculative claims often risk detachment from the historical and cultural realities of the Qur'ān's emergence. Conversely, traditionalist approaches, albeit rich in detail, can benefit from the critical lens of modern academic inquiry. Bridging these two perspectives offers the potential for a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the Qur'ānic text.

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