

AN EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENT FOR ISLAMIC THEISM

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Abstract. In this paper, I argue that Islamic theism is best explained by the hypothesis of Divine Commission (HDC), whereby Muhammad is viewed as being divinely commissioned to serve the overall salvific purposes of God. To this end, I present three observation reports relating to Islamic theism and evaluate HDC against an alternative hypothesis, the hypothesis of Non-Commission (NC) whereby Muhammad is not viewed as being divinely commissioned. I argue that the probability of the observation reports is greater on the assumption that HDC is true than on the assumption that NC is true. Accordingly, this gives us reason to prefer HDC as a better explanation of Islamic theism.

I. INTRODUCTION

I will argue in this paper that there is *prima facie* support for the truth of Islamic theism. We may understand Islamic theism, in its most basic form, as requiring assent to the claim that Muhammad was a messenger of God (*rasul Allah*).¹ According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad's purported experience of divine inspiration began with dreams 'which came true like bright day light.' The dreams were followed by an encounter with an angel during a period of meditation in the hills surrounding Mecca. It is during this encounter that Muhammad was instructed to recite the following words, "Read in the name of your Lord, who has created (all that exists) has created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous."² These words, or verses, are now part of the Quran, and are considered to be the very first words revealed by God to Muhammad. He would, again, according to tradition, continue to have experiences of revelation for a period of twenty three years and the content of these experiences are to be found in the Quran.³

Muhammad's initial response, to that first experience of revelation, was one of fear, fear that something may happen to him. Muslim tradition depicts Muhammad as being fearful and in doubt, he is portrayed as being in a position of weakness and seeking comfort in his wife Khadija. She assures him that God is to be trusted, that God would not disgrace him.⁴ The decision to trust is pivotal in the life of Muhammad, and as it happens the issue of trust is also a concern in contemporary discussions of divine revelation. For example, Rolfe King, in his discussion of Genesis, notes that:

God is effectively asking [Adam and Eve] to trust him that he is truthful and that his intentions towards them are good, albeit that there seems no way they could check his intentions independently of his testimony ... [T]his ... involves a decision to trust, over and above the evidence, that this person is God.

1 I take God to be omnipotent, omniscient, all loving and morally perfect. For a deeper discussion of concepts of God within the Islamic tradition, see my 2016 paper, Zain Ali, "Concepts of God in Islam", *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 12.

2 Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Millat Book Centre, 1980), 43–45.

3 Most modern scholarship explicitly accepts a correlation between the unfolding of the Quranic text and the prophetic career of Muhammad, for further discussion see Carl W. Ernst, *How to Read the Quran: A New Guide, with Select Translations* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2011), 34–35.

4 According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad rushed home saying: 'Cover me! Cover me!; They covered him till his fear was over and after that he told her everything that had happened and said; I fear that something may happen to me; Khadija replied, Never! By Allah, Allah will never disgrace you.' See, Lings, *Muhammad*, 43–45.

If they choose not to do so, then it becomes unclear if there is any way God could overcome the obstacles that then would exist to revealing himself to them.⁵

The efficacy of divine inspiration and revelation, it would seem, begin with the recipient's inclination to trust in God. As King notes, there are obstacles to divine disclosure, as there may be features, "having to do with the created order that may either block or hinder a form of divine disclosure, or [have] in some way to be overcome for God to disclose himself."⁶ Muhammad's encounter with the angel and the prescient nature of his dreams may have seemed extraordinary and perhaps even miraculous to him.⁷ Yet, despite these experiences, he also experienced uncertainty and it is Khadija who helps him overcome the obstacle of fear, by encouraging him to trust in God and to welcome divine inspiration and revelation.⁸

For the purposes of this paper, we can understand revelation as God's activity "to bring it about that humans come into a personal relationship with God, one that involves freely chosen love as well as worship and obedience."⁹ The concept of inspiration has been understood in a number of ways, for instance, from a Christian standpoint it can be understood as, "the influence of the Holy Spirit on the writing of the Bible which ensures that the words of its various texts are appropriate both for the role which they play in Scripture and for the overall salvific purpose of Scripture itself."¹⁰ Significantly, these definitions assume God as wanting to be in personal relationship with human persons. This assumption seems to flow naturally from the view that God is love, or at least all loving. The very nature of love, which involves wanting to share and welcome, disposes itself to seeking out loving relationships. Given that humans understand and value love, experience and respond to love, and can form loving relationships, it is not surprising that an all-loving God would seek personal relationships with human persons (thru revelation and inspiration).¹¹ Divine love for humans can then be understood as God's desiring the good of each human person and desiring union with them.¹²

Our brief reflections on love, revelation and inspiration also proves to be useful as it provides a basis for articulating a key feature of this paper, namely; the hypothesis of Divine Commission (HDC). In light of the definitions outlined above, HDC can be understood as: *the direct influence of God on the life of Muhammad such that the role he plays in history serves the overall salvific purposes of God — i.e., to bring it about that humans come into a personal loving relationship with God and that humans come to have proper relationships with each other.*¹³ According to HDC, Muhammad was commissioned by God to serve the overall salvific purposes of God.

For the remainder of this paper, I propose to evaluate two hypotheses; the first is HDC, which I have outlined above. As an alternative to HDC, I consider, what may be termed, the hypothesis of Non-

5 Rolfe King, *Obstacles to Divine Revelation: God and the Reorientation of Human Reason* (Continuum, 2008), 57.

6 King, *Obstacles to Divine Revelation*, 133.

7 *Ibid.*, 184–188, for a counter-argument to Hume on miracles.

8 King notes that, '... if one cannot obtain good grounds for belief in God... without a miracle then miracles at some point are necessary; they are necessary to setting up an initial revelatory context; after that perhaps they may not be needed.' (184) Muslim tradition attributes a number of miracles to Muhammad, although his encounter with the angel is pivotal (perhaps even miraculous for Muhammad) as it sets up an initial revelatory context, and his decision to trust paves the way for further divine disclosure.

9 Stephen T. Davis, "Revelation and Inspiration", in Thomas P. Flint and Michael Rea, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (OUP, 2009).

10 Stephen T. Davis, "Revelation and Inspiration". For a discussion of revelation and inspiration within the Islamic tradition, see Abdullah Saeed, "Rethinking 'Revelation' as a Precondition for Reinterpreting the Qur'an: A Qur'anic Perspective", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999), and Keith Ward, *Religion and revelation: A theology of revelation in the world's religions* (Clarendon Press, 1994), 174 -176.

11 Siniscalchi makes a similar argument from divine goodness; a perfectly good personal God would want to engage with human persons so as to address our deepest concerns and to assure us of our intrinsic dignity, and to show care for us. See, Glenn B. Siniscalchi, "The Probability of Certain Types of Divine Revelation", *The Heythrop Journal* 55, no.1 (2014).

12 For a defence of this view of love see Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in darkness: Narrative and the problem of suffering* (OUP, 2010), 83–151.

13 This aligns well with the dual commandments to love God and to love thy neighbour. These commandments are central to Islamic theism, see Miroslav Volf, et al. eds. *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on loving God and neighbour* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2010).

Commission (NC) the view that Muhammad was not divinely commissioned to serve the overall salvific purposes of God. NC is consistent with the following claims:

- (a) There is no God, thus there is no divine commission of Muhammad
- (b) There is a deity, but this deity does not engage with human beings
- (c) There is a personal God, but Muhammad was not commissioned to serve God's salvific purpose
- (d) Muhammad mistakenly understood his own personal experiences as a divine call to fulfil God's salvific purposes

NC entails that Muhammad was not commissioned by God, and thus not the locus of revelation and inspiration. I argue that three observation reports related to Islamic Theism, to be outlined shortly, are better explained by HDC than NC. To this end, I employ a framework of epistemic probability developed by Paul Draper.¹⁴ According to Draper, epistemic probability can be defined as follows, “relative to K, p is epistemically more probable than q, where K is an epistemic situation and p and q are propositions, just in case any fully rational person in K would have a higher degree of belief in p than in q.”¹⁵ The concept of epistemic probability is not necessarily a numerical type of probability, such as the probability of a coin toss coming up heads is 50 percent, rather we are interested in the probability of a claim *given what we know*.¹⁶ In other words, given what we know (K) we have better reason to believe (or expect) p than q.

Draper's analyses the relationship of hypothesis to evidence in terms of explanation, which he defines as follows:

... the claim that one hypothesis explains some observation report much better than another is equivalent in meaning, or at least bears a close conceptual connection, to the claim that the truth of that observation report is much less surprising on the first hypothesis than it is on the second.¹⁷

Draper also claims that comparisons of explanatory power support comparisons of probability. For instance, to claim that an observation report (O) is less surprising on hypothesis A than on hypothesis B, is equivalent to the claim that the probability of O is greater on the assumption that hypothesis A is true than on the assumption that hypothesis B is true.¹⁸ There are a number of concepts involved here and the following example will help clarify my approach.

Suppose, you have a friend named Zayd who likes drinking coffee, since he always orders coffee when you've met with him at a café or restaurant. You're not sure if Zayd drinks coffee at home (but you do not ask him directly); there are then two possibilities:

Hypothesis A — Zayd drinks coffee at home

Hypothesis B — Zayd does not drink coffee at home

The observation report (O) is — finding a packet of coffee beans and a coffee maker in Zayd's kitchen.

If you were to visit Zayd's home and see a packet of coffee beans and a coffee maker in his kitchen, you would have *prima facie* reason to prefer Hypothesis A as it explains O better than Hypothesis B. In other words, given what you know (K) you have better reason to believe (or expect) Hypothesis A than Hypothesis B. You do not need to know the numerical probabilities of Zayd drinking, or not drinking coffee at home to recognise that Hypothesis A better explains O than Hypothesis B. Finding the beans and coffee maker, would not be unexpected on Hypothesis A, thus O does not come as a surprise given A. Conversely, finding the beans and coffee maker would be unexpected on Hypotheses B, O would come

14 Paul Draper, “Pain and Pleasure: An evidential problem for theists”, *Noûs* 23 (1989). This framework draws its inspiration from David Hume, and was developed by Draper in order to articulate an evidential argument that challenges classical theism, also see Paul Draper, “Probabilistic arguments from evil”, *Religious Studies* 28, no. 3 (1992).

15 Draper, “Pain and Pleasure”, 309, note 2.

16 Chad Meister & James K. Dew eds. *God and evil: The case for god in a world filled with pain* (InterVarsity Press, 2013), 20.

17 Draper, “Pain and Pleasure”, 333.

18 *Ibid.*

as a surprise given B. Since, O is less surprising on Hypothesis A than on Hypothesis B, Hypothesis A is more likely to be true than Hypothesis B.

The example above provides us with a *prima facie* reason to view one hypothesis as better explaining an observation report — i.e., *if an observation is less surprising on Hypothesis A than on Hypothesis B, then Hypothesis A better explains the observation.*

There is a need to exercise a degree of caution, since it is possible that other background information may alter our view. For instance, it may turn out that Zayd does not drink coffee at home because his coffee machine does not work. Accordingly, even if a hypothesis is better at explaining an observation report, we need to keep an open mind in the event that other information becomes available.

Given this framework, my overall argument can be summarised as follows:

(1) If O is less surprising on HDC than on NC, then HDC better explains O.

(2) O is less surprising on HDC than on NC.

(C) HDC better explains O.

In order for me to defend this argument, I have to argue that O is less surprising on HDC than on NC — i.e., the probability of O is greater on the hypothesis that HDC is true than on the hypothesis that NC is true.¹⁹ For the purposes of my argument I take O to consist of three observation reports:

(O1) The precipitation of a unified mass movement led by Muhammad

(O2) The enrichment and transformation of the Arabic language by the Quran

(O3) The sustained focus in the Quran on an exemplar of morality and love

My aim in the sections to follow will be to argue that each observation report is less surprising on HDC than on NC, thus O (the combination of all three observation reports) is less surprising on HDC than on NC.

II. EXPLAINING ISLAMIC THEISM

O1: The precipitation of a unified mass movement led by Muhammad.

According to Muslim tradition, there were, prior to the time of Muhammad, a number of on-going conflicts among the Arab tribes, although, over time, these conflicts had led to a degree of exhaustion.²⁰ Given this context we may cast Muhammad as being in the right place at the right time. However, this background information weighs against the expectation that Muhammad, or anyone would or could precipitate a unifying mass movement, or that any unifying movement would actualise at all, and this is because an attempt at unification had already been made.

There is an account dated to the mid-seventh-century that documents the rise of the Muslim community. The account, popularly attributed to Sebeos, Bishop of the Bagratunis of the seventh century,

¹⁹ An advantage of Drapers framework is its intuitive approach; we can articulate an argument without having to translate the evidence and associated hypotheses into numerical probabilities. We could also employ the Bayesian approach preferred by Richard Swinburne. For example, Swinburne has used the Bayesian approach to argue that it is 97% likely that Jesus was God incarnate and that he rose from the dead, however, critics contend that Swinburne's case may be better understood as describing Swinburne's own subjective probabilities. See Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (OUP, 2003), and see Richard Otte, Book Review: *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, Richard Swinburne (2003). *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-resurrection-of-god-incarnate/> (2003).

²⁰ Lings, *Muhammad*, 108.

describes an attempt to create an alliance between the Jews and Arabs of Arabia.²¹ The attempt fails since, according to Sebeos, the Arabs could not overcome their differences:

They [the Jews] set out into the desert and came to Arabia, among the children of Ishmael; they sought their help and explained that they were kinsmen according to the Bible. Although they (the Arabs) were willing to accept this close kinship, they (the Jews) nevertheless could not convince the mass of the people because their cults were different.²²

Sebeos then describes how the Arabs came to be unified.

At this time there was an Ishmaelite called Mahmet, a merchant; he presented himself to them as though at God's command, as a preacher, as the way of truth, and taught them to know the God of Abraham, for he was well informed and very well acquainted with the story of Moses. As the command came from on high, they all united under the authority of a single man, under a single law and, abandoning vain cults, returned to the living God who had revealed himself to their father Abraham ...²³

The account above describes the unsuccessful attempts at unifying the Arabs prior to the advent of Islam, and it documents the subsequent success of Muhammad in unifying the Arabs, and possibly the Jews, by fostering a common faith. We should be cautious with fully accepting the account provided above as it depicts Muhammad's success as being a relatively smooth process. However, according to Muslim tradition, Muhammad's success did not come easily, and this becomes evident in a document known as the Constitution of Medina. The Constitution was drafted soon after the early Muslim community departed Mecca, Muhammad's home town, for the northern city of Medina. The exodus to Medina was motivated by severe levels of hostility and persecution faced by Muhammad and his followers in Mecca. Muslim tradition has preserved the content of the Constitution and a number of scholars have affirmed the authenticity of this document.²⁴

The Constitution placed the early Muslim community on par with the other tribal groups in Medina, with Muhammad seen as a chief of the emigrants. This development is significant, especially when we keep in mind the treatment of Muhammad and his followers in Mecca. We should be cautious not to overstate the significance of the Constitution, as Montgomery Watt notes:

... his [Muhammad's] powers under the constitution are so slight that they cannot have been much less at the beginning of his residence in Medina. All that the Constitution explicitly states is that disputes are to be referred to Muhammad. In addition the phrase 'Muhammad the prophet' occurs in the preamble; and the appearance of the *Muhajirun* or the Emigrants on the same level as one of the Medinan clans implies that Muhammad as chief of the Emigrants was on level with the chiefs of the various clans. As Emigrants are mentioned first, perhaps Muhammad had a primacy of honour among the chiefs of the clans. He is very far, however, from being the autocratic ruler of Medina. He is merely one among a number of important men.²⁵

Given the role of Muhammad in the Constitution, there would be little expectation that he would become the ruling authority of Medina let alone Mecca. He was after all an outsider who sought refuge in Medina from persecution in Mecca. There is also internal evidence within the Muslim tradition which indicates that, prior to the arrival of Muhammad, Medina had its own, albeit nascent, political hierarchy despite a long history of tribal feuds.²⁶

Arguably, O1 would come as a surprise on the hypotheses of NC, since our background information weighs against the possibility of Muhammad successfully precipitating a unifying mass movement. The

21 For a further discussion of this source see Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it: a survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam* (Princeton, The Darwin Press, 1997).

22 Robert G. Hoyland, "Sebeos the Jews and the Rise of Islam", in R.L. Nettle, ed., *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations* (Harwood, 1995), 89.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Julius Wellhausen and A. J. Wensinck, *Muhammad and the Jews of Medina* (Behn, 1982), 134–135; and see Patricia Crone, *Slaves on horses: the evolution of the Islamic polity* (CUP, 2003), 7.

25 Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad in Medina* (The Clarendon Press, 1956), 228.

26 Michael Lecker, "King Ibn Ubayy and the Qussas", in Herbert Berg (ed.), *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 29–72.

Arabs were, prior to Islam, divided from each other by their cults and clans, and had limited success in reaching a consensus of their own accord; it would be unexpected that one man, who represented a persecuted minority, would bridge these divides, while also initiating a change in the religion of the Arabs.

On the other hand, there would be an expectation given HDC, that a person commissioned by God would have the ability to influence hearts and minds, and help their community overcome competing religious and tribal affiliations — affiliations that posed significant obstacles to proper relationship with God and with each other. Given the origin and rapid growth of the Muslim community, Muhammad, one may argue, seems to have been the right person in the right place at the right time. Since this observation accords well with HDC, O1 does not come as a surprise. However, O1 comes as a surprise on NC.

O2: The enrichment and transformation of the Arabic language by the Quran.

The Quran has had a transformational effect on the Arabic language — it stimulated the development of Arabic into a literary language, deepened Arabic poetry and hermeneutics, and initiated a shift from an oral to a written culture. Presented below are three scholarly views that provide an insight into the nature of this transformation. The first view is from Rudi Paret, who observes the following:

It is instructive, however, to reflect on the general significance of the Qur'an for the emergence and development of Arabic literature. We may surmise at the outset that, just as the Arabs owed their nationhood and their world historical importance to Islam, so too the Arabic tongue owed its literary development to the Qur'an. No one, of course, will dispute that there were poems in Arabic before the Qur'an. This can be seen even from Muhammad's polemic against the poets ... the process of recording the old Arabic poetry in a written form had, it is claimed, ground to a halt, if indeed it had ever got seriously under way ... It was left to the Qur'an as the Holy Scripture revealed to the Arabs in their own language to provide the impetus for the development of an Arabic literary language.²⁷

According to William Graham and Navid Kermani:

The Quran has enriched Arabic poetry more than any other Arabic literary genre. Apart from frequent references to Quranic verses or images throughout Arabic or Persian literature, the Quran liberated Arabic poetry from the narrow framework of existing genres and inspired new approaches to language, imagery and the use of motifs. Conventional standards, and the theoretical analysis of language and literature, can both be traced to the hermeneutics of the Quran.²⁸

Alexander Knish notes the following:

... paradoxically, the necessity to understand and elucidate the Quran served as the major motivation to record and evaluate pre-Islamic poetry in written form, thereby facilitating the all-important switch from an oral to a written culture — from a culture of intuition and improvisation to one of study and contemplation.²⁹

The views just quoted help us appreciate the transformational impact of the Quran on the Arabic language. Importantly, this observation would not be a surprise on HDC; since, the enrichment of language, and the subsequent shift toward a literary and contemplative culture would help foster a deeper, more meaningful and lasting engagement with Muhammad's message.³⁰ If we also understand contemplation as, “a simple gaze on God and divine things preceding from love”, or as “a loving, simple and permanent attentiveness of the mind to divine things”, or perhaps as the gateway to wisdom, then the cultural shift initiated by the Quran is not unexpected on HDC.³¹

27 Rudi Paret, “The Quran — I”, in A. F. L. Beeston, *Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period* (CUP, 1983), 214.

28 William A. Graham and Navid Kermani, “Recitation and aesthetic reception”, in McAuliffe, Jane Dammen, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Quran* (CUP, 2006), 113.

29 Alexander Knish, “Multiple areas of Influence”, in McAuliffe, Jane Dammen, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Quran* (CUP, 2006), 226.

30 The Quran can also be seen as genuinely engaging with Jewish and Christian scripture and tradition, see Angelika Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry, and the Making of a Community: Reading the Quran as a Literary Text* (OUP, 2014).

31 Brian Lugioyo, *Martin Bucer's Doctrine of Justification: Reformation Theology and Early Modern Irenicism* (OUP, 2010), 61 and Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2005), 243.

We should also keep in mind examples of remarkable literary works and achievements in other languages, for instance Shakespeare for English and Martin Luther for German. The cases of Shakespeare and Luther, are instructive, as they show us that great literary achievements need not presuppose divine agency. What we need to keep in mind, however, is that Shakespeare and Luther had the benefit of a literary education, and they lived in cultures with an established literary heritage. However, our background knowledge of seventh century Arabia suggests the primacy of an oral culture and a very limited level of literacy.³² It would be surprising if Muhammad had received an education, or had more than a rudimentary level of literacy. This view is supported, to a significant degree by Muslim tradition, which depicts him as having a limited level of literacy and relying heavily on scribes to record his instructions.³³ Given the primacy of oral culture in seventh century Arabia and the limited level of literacy, we would not have expected, on the hypothesis of NC, the ability of a single work to transform Arabic into a literary language. Furthermore, the background information relating to O1 would also make O2 less likely on NC; to recall, Arabs, priori to Islam were not unified because of their religious and tribal differences — this also weighs against the expectation that a single religiously themed work would transform Arabic into a literary language. Accordingly, O2 is a surprise on NC, but is less surprising on HDC.

O3: The sustained focus in the Quran on an exemplar of morality and love.

Chapter twelve of the Quran narrates the life story of the Jewish patriarch Joseph. This chapter, or *Sura*, is unique for two reasons: first, it is the only chapter in the Quran where the life story of a single individual is told from beginning to end; second, the Quran refers to the story of Joseph as being among the best and most beautiful of stories to be told.³⁴ While the story of Joseph has been the subject of a number of studies, for the purposes of my argument, it is the moral character of the Quranic Joseph that is of prime concern.

Joseph's moral character, as conveyed in the Quran, exemplifies traits that we currently associate with moral exemplars. According to studies carried out by Anne Colby and William Damon there are five characteristics of moral exemplars, these are:

- (1) a sustained commitment to moral ideals or principles that include a generalized respect for humanity, or a sustained evidence of moral virtue.
- (2) a disposition to act in accord with one's moral ideals or ethical principles, implying also a consistency between one's actions and intentions and between the means and ends of one's actions.
- (3) a willingness to risk one's self-interest for the sake of one's moral values.
- (4) a tendency to be inspiring to others and thereby to move them to moral action.

³² Peter Stein, "Literacy in Pre-Islamic Arabia: An Analysis of the Epigraphic Evidence", in Neuwirth, Angelika, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, eds. *The Quran in context: historical and literary investigations into the Quranic milieu* (Brill, 2009), 273.

³³ A good example, within Muslim tradition, suggestive of Muhammad's limited literacy is the drafting of the treaty of Hudaibiya between the Muslim community in Medina and the Meccan ruling elite. According to Muslim tradition, the Meccans refused to allow references to Muhammad as the messenger of God within the text of treaty: '*The polytheists said to him [Muhammad]: 'If we knew that thou art the Messenger of Allah, we would follow you. But write: Muhammad bin 'Abdullah.' So he [Muhammad] told 'Ali to strike out these words. 'Ali said: No, by Allah, I will not strike them out. The Messenger of Allah said: Show me their place (on the parchment). So he ('Ali) showed him their place and he [Muhammad] struck them out; and 'Ali wrote: Ibn 'Abdullah (son of Abdullah).'* Muhammad crossed out the phrase messenger of God, but he had to ask Ali, his close friend and cousin, to point out the phrase within the text. This episode is likely to be authentic as it proves embarrassing to Muhammad — he has to deal with Ali not obeying him, then he has to ask for the location of the offending phrase, and then has to strike out the claim so central to his self-understanding. This would also have been embarrassing for the Meccan elite, who would go on to accept Islam and eventually become the core drivers of the community, their initial rejection of Muhammad is here preserved for all of posterity. These reasons suggest the episode as quoted above is very likely authentic.

³⁴ For a comparative study of the Joseph story in the Bible and the Quran see MAS Abdel Haleem, "The story of Joseph in the Qur'an and the old testament", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 1, no. 2, (1990) and Ayaz Afsar, "Plot Motifs in Joseph/ Yūsuf Story: A Comparative Study of Biblical and Qur'anic Narrative", *Islamic Studies* 45, no. 2, (2006).

- (5) a sense of realistic humility about one's own importance relative to the world at large, implying a relative lack of concern for one's own ego.³⁵

As the Quranic narrative follows Joseph through various trials he can be seen to exemplify the five characteristics outlined above. Joseph is committed to Abrahamic monotheism, as a servant in the royal house, he has ample opportunity to betray his master, but he resists temptation in accord with his values. He could have conspired against his master to satisfy his own interests, instead he resists and is unjustly placed in prison, yet, there is no bitterness in him; rather we see him preaching his faith to fellow inmates. The inmates testify that Joseph is both kind (*muhsin*) and truthful (*saqid*).³⁶ When released from prison, Joseph does not seek revenge; rather, he seeks acknowledgment of his innocence and reconciliation with those who have wronged him. His innocence is eventually vindicated; he is reconciled with the royal household and with his brothers who had initially sought to dispose of him. He goes further: he prays for God's forgiveness on behalf of those who have wronged him, and develops a scheme that helps avert a severe famine. The story concludes with a prayer, in which Joseph acknowledges God's generosity; he also prays that he be included among those who are righteous. There is no sense of entitlement in Joseph's words, instead we observe gratitude and humility.

Joseph, in the Quran, exemplifies the five traits associated with being a moral exemplar. This is significant especially when we recall the unique nature of the Quranic chapter on Joseph. There are other biblical figures that appear within the Quran, but no other figure has a chapter devoted to them. The Quran, as noted above, refers to the life of Joseph as among the best or most beautiful of stories (*ahsan al hadith*). Given the exemplarily nature of Joseph's character, the focus on this narrative seems justified, and it comes as no surprise, on HDC, that the Quran would include a sustained, and well sign-posted, narrative that points us toward a person who can rightly be seen as a moral exemplar, especially given recent developments in moral psychology.

Given our background knowledge of pre-Islamic Arabia, we can identify key moral and cultural themes³⁷ of the times; namely, self glorification, love, wine³⁸, generosity³⁹, courage, resolve, steadfastness,⁴⁰ patience and revenge.⁴¹ The Quran can be seen to transform these values, for example, in his study of patience (*sabr*) in pre-Islamic poetry and the Quran, Helmer Ringgren observes:

... vengeance was a sacred duty for the pagan Arab, to abstain from revenge was a crime. But now [in light of the Quran] it is a highly commendable deed to endure patiently an injury inflicted and to leave the vengeance to God.⁴²

The story of Joseph exemplifies the transformation of existing values within a narrative, where patience, reconciliation and forgiveness are valued over and above vengeance. Moreover, we can also discern a number of forms of love within the story of Joseph: the deeply selfish love of his brothers, the seducers love that is tinged with lust, the patient love of his heartbroken father, the King's pragmatic love for truth, and lastly Joseph's love which desires the good of each person in the narrative and his reunion through reconciliation. Joseph's outlook dovetails with the view of divine love outline at the beginning of this paper. The values and the outlook on love are not surprising on HDC as it helps illuminate the proper nature of loving rela-

35 Anne Colby and William Damon, *Some Do Care* (Simon and Schuster, 2010), 315.

36 See Mustansir Mir, "The Qur'anic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters", *The Muslim World* 76, no. 1, (1986) and Mustansir Mir, "Irony in the Quran: A Study of the Story of Joseph", in Issa J Boullata, ed. *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Quran* (Curzon, 2000).

37 For a discussion of pre-Islamic poetry and its authenticity see James T. Monroe, "Oral composition in pre-Islamic poetry", *Journal of Arabic Literature* 3, (1972).

38 Francis Robinson ed. *The Cambridge illustrated history of the Islamic world* (CUP, 1996), 215.

39 Jonathan AC. Brown, "The social context of pre-Islamic poetry: poetic imagery and social reality in the Muallaqat", *Arab Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 3, (2003).

40 Stefan Sperl and C. Shackleton, *Qasida poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa: Eulogy's bounty, meaning's abundance an anthology. vol.2* (Brill, 1996), 7.

41 Helmer Ringgren, "The Concept of *Sabr* in Pre-Islamic Poetry and in the Quran", *Islamic Culture* 26, (1952).

42 *Ibid.*, 89.

tionships — this is essential, as loving relationships are central to the overall slavific plan. The Quran, then, challenged the mores of seventh century Arabia, while also challenging its audience with a figure such as Joseph who has the qualities of a moral exemplar. This goes beyond our expectations on NC, where at best we would expect Muhammad to endorse the moral norms of seventh century Arabia.

Perhaps, it would be consistent with NC for Muhammad to have challenged the moral norms of his times, but this would not lead toward the expectation that Muhammad would provide a sustained, well sign-posted narrative that would, in time, reveal an exemplar of morality and love. Accordingly, we may argue, that O3 would come as a surprise on NC, and as less of a surprise on HDC.

If my arguments, relating to the three observation reports, are accepted, we then have good reasons to view each of the three reports as less surprising on HDC than on NC. In other words, the probability of each observation is greater on the assumption that HDC is true than on the assumption that NC is true. Accordingly, this entails that the probability of O (all three observations taken together) is greater on the assumption that HDC is true than on the assumption that NC is true. This conclusion, if accepted, provides us with a reason to prefer HDC as an explanation of O — i.e., affirming the claim that Muhammad was commissioned by God. This in turn provides *prima facie* support for the truth of Islamic theism.

I appreciate that the argument I have offered is open to a wide variety of objections, and in the section to follow I outline some of these objections and possible responses to them.

III. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

1. In relation to O1 we might ask why divine commission need be invoked here as more probable than not? Consider, for example, the utterly unexpected victories of Alexander the Great against the Persians. Given the military strength of the Persian army, a victory of the Macedonians was unpredictable and very unlikely, and yet we favour naturalistic explanations for these events. Could we not also do the same with Muhammad, while his achievements are unexpected, there is a natural explanation, one that is perhaps obscured by the passage of time.

Five points can be made in response to this objection. First, there is good reason to consider HDC, and this is due to the fact that it relates to a truth claim by a major world religion. Our discussion thus far can be seen as an attempt to critically evaluate a claim that is central to Islamic theism, namely; that Muhammad was commissioned by God. Second, I am not committed to the claim that HDC is required simply because O1 is not clearly explicable on current naturalistic hypotheses. I am simply claiming that O1 is comparatively more likely given HDC than NC. Third, I concede that the passing of time affects our ability to properly explain historical events, and this is why I have emphasised the *prima facie* nature of my argument. I allow for the possibility that other observation reports may emerge and significantly influence the case for HDC. Fourth, perhaps we could agree that, like Alexander the Great, Muhammad was a great strategist and powerful leader; nevertheless, there is reason to think O1 would still come as a surprise on NC. This is because Muhammad experienced significant resistance to his message of monotheism. It would have been strategically easier for him not to have challenged the religious and tribal status quo, rather, he could have worked with the tribal elites to achieve a unified vision. Fifth, even if we were to concede that there is a natural explanation for O1, this would not weigh against or preclude HDC. HDC can accommodate natural explanations, as God may very well work in concert with natural causes to actualise core salvific goals. Accordingly, we may still claim, that Muhammad, was the right person, in the right place at the right time, and this would not be unexpected on HDC.⁴³

⁴³ Perhaps one could argue that the probability of O is indeterminate with respect to HDC and NC. We could, nevertheless, defend the justifiability of a practical commitment to Islamic theism, see my 2013 book, Zain Ali, *Faith, Philosophy and the Reflective Muslim* (Palgrave Macmillan). There is also the option of being a ‘Skeptical Muslim’, see Imran Aijaz, *Islam: A Contemporary Philosophical Investigation* (Routledge, 2018).

2. *How much of the enrichment and transformation of the Arabic language by the Quran happened because many Arabs believed it to be Divine in origin (as opposed to it actually being Divine in origin)? The impact of the Quran on the Arabic language, then, is due simply to the belief that the Quran is divinely inspired. The development of the Arabic language can then be seen as being consistent with the fact that the Quran both (a) had intrinsic literary value and (b) the belief that it was divinely inspired. If so, then (b) is being used in the argument to support (a), and if this is the case, the case for O2 is an exercise in question begging.*

I note that HDC does not presuppose the divine inspiration of Quran, and it is not my intention, in this paper, to defend this view.⁴⁴ HDC is merely the claim that Muhammad was divinely commissioned. We can then set aside the charge of begging the question, importantly; we can also concede that believing the Quran to be divinely inspired does not guarantee that it actually is inspired. Similarly, believing the Quran to be the word of God would not necessarily lead toward the expectation that it would result in the enrichment and transformation of the Arabic language. In addition, appreciating the intrinsic literary value of the Quran need not presuppose believing the Quran to be divinely inspired. Consider the scholarly quotes provided above that explain the literary value of the Quran. For example, Graham and Kirmani note that, “the Quran liberated Arabic poetry from the narrow framework of existing genres and inspired new approaches to language, imagery and the use of motifs.”⁴⁵ This observation does not rely on believing the Quran to be inspired by God; rather, it points to the intrinsic literary features of the Quran to explain its impact on the Arabic language.

As acknowledged above, believing the Quran to be revelation, does not guarantee that its origin is divine, even so, there is a question as to why the Quran came to be viewed as being divinely inspired. A possible answer is discernible in A.J. Arberry’s observation that the Quran in Arabic is an, “inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy.”⁴⁶ Arberry’s observation echoes a more formal doctrine in Islamic theology known as the *I’jaz al-Quran* or the inimitability of the Quran. This doctrine holds that, “no human speech and particularly no Arabic speech can match the divine speech, of which the Quran consists in form and content.”⁴⁷ There is a deeper discussion to be had about the epistemic value of beliefs that arise from aesthetic experiences, although such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

3. *The person of Joseph may very well be a moral exemplar, what, though, of the morally problematic contents of the Qur’an as well as the character of Muhammad — who is the primary moral exemplar for Muslims? Isn’t it also possible that the Hebrew biblical story might have inspired the change of values for Muhammad himself?*

We may acknowledge that Muhammad’s encounter with the Jewish and Christian traditions may have initiated a change of heart and perspective. Muhammad’s encounter with Jews and Christians could very well have increased his awareness of Abrahamic monotheism, and also exposed him to a set of values beyond those of his community. Such transformational encounters would not be unexpected on HDC, as they may have been important steps in the process of divine commission.

44 If we were to argue that the Quran, as a whole, was the result of revelation and inspiration we would have to consider a number of other hypotheses (e.g.): (1) Muhammad did have some revelation from God but when he came to writing it down he added material derived from his human reflections, (2) the divine revelation has been misinterpreted or misunderstood by Muhammad, (3) there was a divine revelation but Muhammad had to phrase it in terms of human language, (4) Muhammad had some revelation, which he correctly understood, but had other experiences which he interpreted as being from God, but were not. Interestingly, all four hypotheses acknowledge Muhammad as the recipient of divine discourse. Also see Fleischacker (2011) who argues for the Torah as divine revelation, he contends that we can recognise a text as revelation if it satisfies our telic yearnings, — i.e., as an appropriate place in which to put hope — for something we can unequivocally yearn for, because if we achieved it, we could wholeheartedly love our lives.’ See, Samuel Fleischacker, *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World: A Defense of Revealed Religion* (OUP, 2011), 269.

45 Graham and Kermani, “Recitation and aesthetic reception”, 113.

46 A.J. Arberry, *The Holy Koran: An Introduction with Selections* (Routledge, 1953), 13.

47 Oliver Leaman ed. *The Qur’an: an Encyclopedia* (Routledge, 2006), 295.

We can also acknowledge that there are number of verses in the Quran that can be cited as having the potential to be morally problematic. Contemporary Muslim thinkers have adopted two broad strategies in dealing with such verses. First, attention is paid to the context of the verses, for example, the historical circumstances surrounding the verses in question, and how the verses were interpreted by the early Muslim community and by subsequent generations of Muslim thinkers. Second, attention is paid to exploring the etymology and linguistics of the verses in question. There are a number of scholarly studies that employ these two approaches, examples include studies that investigate the issues of patriarchy and war in the Quran.⁴⁸

This leads us to the second part of the objection, namely; the example of Muhammad. There are extensive records relating to the life of Muhammad within Muslim tradition. One may think that in light of these records it would be relatively easy to construct a biography in order to gain an insight into the character of Muhammad. However, matters are not so clear cut, within the academic study of Muslim tradition there are significant and on-going debates as to the authenticity of these records. Exploring these debates is beyond the scope of this paper; nevertheless, there is ongoing work to develop a contemporary biography of Muhammad that is based on a rigorous evaluation of the extensive source material.⁴⁹

The question of Muhammad being a moral exemplar remains an open question, at least from a historico-critical perspective. Although, if the argument offered in this paper is accepted, then the background information provided is enough to make a *prima facie* case for the truth of Islamic theism. Interestingly, viewing Muhammad as a moral exemplar is not always motivated by purely historical considerations. The view of Muhammad as an exemplar is also motivated by personal religious experiences; this is evident in the Sufi tradition of Islam, where exponents of the tradition speak of experiencing the person and light of Muhammad. Consider the following poems from Rumi that provide his reflections on the person of Muhammad:

When Muhammad's light came, unbelief put on its black clothes.
 When the period of the eternal kingdom came,
 The unbelievers hit the drum to prevent death.
 The whole face of the earth had become green.
 The heavens envied the earth and tore its sleeve.
 The moon had become split. The earth received life and became alive.

Last night, there was a big commotion among the stars because a
 peerless star had descended to the earth.
 If the face of Muhammad is reflected on a wall,
 the heart of the wall will become alive.
 The wall, through his blessed reflection,
 will have such great happiness that even the wall will be rescued
 from hypocrisy.

It was a shame for the wall to have two faces while the pious and the pure had only one.⁵⁰

The first poem describes the effects of Muhammad's light in deeply evocative terms, it is Muhammad's light that brings the earth to life and allows its greenery to come forth. The second poem does not mention light, but focuses on the face, or perhaps the person of Muhammad. The persona of Muhammad, as in the first poem, is linked to evocative terms such as happiness, piety and purity. We could view the verses from Rumi as examples of hyperbole, where it is the importance of Muhammad to the tradition of Islam that is being emphasised. This is not the only way to view these descriptions. The Sufi-mystic

48 See Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2002), and Asma Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (OUP, 2013).

49 For a discussion of the issues involved see Robert G. Hoyland, "Writing the biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and solutions", *History Compass* 5, no.2, (2007).

50 Sefik Can, *Fundamentals of Rumi's Thought: A Mevlevi Sufi Perspective* (Tughra Books, 2004).

tradition allows us to conceive of the light and person of Muhammad as realities that are capable of being experienced. Consider the following anecdote from Mirza Mazhar Jan-i janan (d.1781) a Sufi master:

I went to Hadrat Hajji Muhammad Afdal's [house] to receive divine grace and, when I requested this, he said to me, "From your spiritual perception you have progressed far on the Path and have achieved the station of revealed knowledge. I do not have this kind of knowledge and therefore I cannot assist you on the advanced spiritual path." So I did not [expect to] benefit from Hadrat, but during hadith lessons [i.e., lessons on anecdotes about the life of Muhammad] from the divinely emanating grace and energy of his blessed inner self I received divine energy and my connection to God was strengthened. During ... Afdal's hadith lesson I used to acquire the presence of the Prophets connection. Many lights and blessings used to manifest [themselves]. Essentially I used to be in companionship with God's messenger. During this time I experienced the Prophets [focused] divine energy and spiritual countenance. It was splendid from its perfect Prophetic connection, expansive, and full of light.⁵¹

This story is intriguing, in that Jan-i janan, a Sufi master, has a set of unexpected spiritual experiences as a student of Afdal. The experiences involve a deepening connection with God and also a connection with Muhammad, Jan-i janan felt as though he was in the company of Muhammad. As we reflect on Rumi's deeply evocative poetry and Jan-i janan's anecdote, two features are worthy of note: (1) the close association of Muhammad's light and persona with terms and ideas of moral and spiritual flourishing (e.g.) life, happiness, greenery, blessings, piety, purity, and the dissipation of non-belief and hypocrisy, and (2) the experience of witnessing the energy, light and person of Muhammad and the experience of having a connection to him.

A person who engages in the contemplative and meditative practices associated with Sufism may experience the prophetic light.⁵² Such an experience may lead to a moral and spiritual awakening that strengthens one's connection with God. These experiences may breathe life into one's relationship with God and deepen a sense of connection with others — such experiences would not be unexpected on HDC. As with the aesthetic experience of the Quran, there is a deeper discussion to be had about the epistemic value of religious experiences, although such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that there are three observation reports relating to Islamic theism that are better explained by HDC than NC. I considered each of the three observation reports and outlined reasons why each report would be less surprising on HDC than on NC. This allows us to claim that the probability of all three reports, taken together, is greater on the assumption that HDC is true than on the assumption that NC is true. This in turn can be seen to provide *prima facie* support for the truth of Islamic theism — that Muhammad was commissioned by God.⁵³

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51 Arthur F. Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Univ of South Carolina Press, 1998), 16–17.

52 Valerie J. Hoffman, "Annihilation in the Messenger of God: the development of a Sufi practice", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, no. 3, (1999).

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