



LOOKING FOR THE GOD HUBAL

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When we look at the the later Islamic narratives of everyday life in Mecca in the days when a certain prophetic figure named Muhammad allegedly lived, for which there is no historical evidence, we would at first sight seem to be well-informed, there is a rich documentation. A closer look at these references, however, shows that they date some 150 to two centuries after the events they purport to narrate, and what they relate is often quite fantastic, in light of what we know about the ancient Arabs and the ancient Semitic world in general. An interesting case in point is the deity who is said to have been chiefly worshipped at the Meccan Kaaba in the sixth-century, namely, Hubal.

The *Book of Idols (Kitāb al-Aṣnām)* by the Iraqi Islamic savant, [Hiṣām ibn Muhammad ibn as-Sā'ib al-Kalbī](#) (see, in general, [Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*](#)), who flourished during the eighth-ninth centuries, notes, "From what I have heard, [the idol of] Hubal was made of red carnelian, having human form, but with a broken right Hand. The Quraish had received him in this condition, but had since made him a [replacement] hand of gold. He was inside the Kaaba."

Here, as is often the case with Islamic traditions, there are many, often contradictory narrations. Al-Kalbī's contemporary, the Baghdad judge [Muḥammad b. 'Umar b. Wāqid al-Wāqidī](#) thought that the graven image stood in front of the entrance to the Kaaba, next to the door. The latter furthermore relates that in front of his statue seven arrows were placed for the purpose of belomancy, performed by a *ṣāḥib al-qidāh* ("Arrow Lord") - possibly a biblical motif, cf. e.g. I Sam 20; Ezek 21,26 and Hab 3,11: two are said to have been employed to establish the legitimacy of a child's descent in case of doubt, one for necromancy, one for questions concerning marriage, and three whose function could no longer be inferred by the author.

In the well-known hagiography (*Sīra*) of Muhammad, attributed to [Ibn Hiṣām](#), it is noted that Muhammad's grandfather ['Abd al-Muttalib](#) almost sacrificed his son ['Abdallāh](#) in a narrative reminiscent of the sacrifice of Isaac in Gen 22, after an oath had been taken (cf. Jephthah in Judges 11) — according to Islamic exegesis (Sura 37,106f. refers hereto), we also find an explanation as to why Muhammad was referred to as *Ibn adh-dhabīḥaini*, "the son of the twice sacrificed," i.e., his father and his alleged ancestor Ishmael.

Muhammad on the other hand, who was already fatherless at birth, was brought to the Kaaba by his grandfather for a paternity test by means of arrows, according to the *Riwaya* of [Yūnus ibn Bukayr](#) of the 9th-century; according to [at-Tabarī](#) in the 10th century, the infant was brought to the idol Hubal in the

Kaaba (*fa-adkha-ahu 'ala Hubal fi jawfi l-Ka'ba*), while the idol is not mentioned by Ibn Hišhām (*fa-dakhala bihi l-Ka'ba*). Either the latter interpolated his source ([Ibn Ishaq's](#)), or Hubal was introduced into the tradition secondarily.

By all accounts, the latter possibility would seem to be more likely, especially since later Islamic traditions tend to provide more, albeit quite peculiar and downright odd information.

In yet other traditions, we learn that Hubal cohabited with (the idols of) 360 other deities, apparently one for every day of the then current solar year (the current Islamic lunar calendar was only introduced later). This is somewhat surprising, since usually only one deity, a duad or, on occasion, a triad inhabited one and the same shrine. Allegedly then the Kaaba collapsed when Muhammed recited Q17,82.

Other accounts make even less sense: e.g. the 'blue-eyed' historian of the city of Mecca, [Abū L-Walīd Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Azraqī](#), who purportedly lived during the 7th century, claims that the standard sacrifice for Hubal was a hecatomb of camels. How this should have been done in a small building like the Kaaba or on a smallish stone (fixed in a wall) remains, as is customary in such accounts, unmentioned.

Furthermore, as is often the case with pre-Islamic Arabian deities in Islamic traditions, Hubal, is not seen as an indigenous god. So in *The Book of Idols* (ed. Klinke-Rosenberger, pp. 33-37 Arabic), the arrival of various idols, among these Hubal, is associated with the journey '[Amr Ibn Luhayys](#) to Syria (note the similarity of this description with that of Naaman and Elisha in 2Kings 5).

According to al-Azraqī, Hubal is said to come from [Hit](#) in Mesopotamia; Ibn Hišhām on the other hand claims that he came from [Moab](#), in the country of [Balqā'](#). To what extent these statements can be seen as containing historical information remains uncertain, also because Islamic tradition attributes the building of the Kaaba to Abraham and must see to preserve a certain memory of his "true monotheism" from primeval times, which was then corrupted by external influences, as is the wont of foreigners.

It is striking that outside of these Islamic sources, Hubal seems to be unknown in the [Hejaz](#). He is not even found as a theophoric element in Arabian personal names. [Wellhausen](#) (*Reste arabischen Heidentums, 1897*), attempted to explain this conspicuous omission by asserting that Hubal was originally seen as the given name of God, i.e. Allah - just as Yahweh is the name of the Jewish God

(*ʿlōhīm*). This is not a convincing argument, merely a desperate guess conditioned by the lack of data.

However, for the time being, for the sake of argument, let us view the Islamic material as historically credible - if Hubal is to be viewed as a newly arrived divine resident foreigner, this could, to some extent, explain why he seems to have been largely unknown; also because, according to Islamic tradition, written history began only with the Koran after Mohammad's death.

If this were actually the case, however, one would expect that this god be attested elsewhere, in his alleged homeland(s), for example, namely, Mesopotamia, Palestine or Syria. In the onomasticon attested especially in ancient North-Arabic and later Aramaic inscriptions, we find a name *HBL* (variants *WHBL*, *'HBL*), which superficially at least would seem to be concordant with the Islamic findings related in the preceding.

However, this is not a theophoric element, but rather a verb which modifies such, i.e. *whb* + *'l* "God's gift" (cf. e.g. Deodatus, Nathaniel, etc.). In secondary literature, a Nabataean inscription from the Hegra (*Madā'in Sālih*), in contemporary northern Saudi Arabia, is often brought to bear (*Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* II, Paris, 1889), [No. 198](#).

Certainly corroboratory mention of this deity in a text written to the Arabic Nabataeans (who, however, customarily used an Aramaic dialect as their written language) would certainly lend Islamic tradition considerable substantiation. This inscription is a funerary text for two women, scil. *Kmkm* and her daughter *Kljbt*, dated roughly to the year 0 AD. As often the case with such inscriptions, curses are pronounced against those who may come later to desecrate the grave (lines 3-8):

*...wjl'n dwšr' wmwbtbt w'lt mn 'mnd wmnwtw wqjšh mn jzbn kpr' dnh 'w mn jzbn 'w jrhn 'w jntn jth 'w jnpq
mnh gt 'w šlw 'w mn jqbr bh 'jr kmkm wbrth w'hrhm wmn dj l' j'bd kdj 'l' ktjb p'jtj 'mh ldwšr' whblw wlmnwtw
šmdjn 5 ...*

*"And may [Dušara](#) ... his ??? ... and Allat of 'Amnad, and Manūthu, and Qaiša curse he who would sell this grave, or he who buys it, or he who taxes it or he who would give it away, or removes bodies or body parts, or buries herein another besides *Kmkm* or her daughter or their progeny. Whosoever acts contrary to that which is stated here, shall be cursed fivefold by *Dušara*, and *HBLW*, and *Manūthu*..."*

As was noted, this inscription is often cited as proof for the cult of a deity known as Hubal (cf. e.g. [CIS a.I.](#) "ex antiquis Arabum diis"). Two points mitigate this proposition:

1) As remarked by Euting in *CIS*, the dative preposition *l-* is missing ("*Euting dubitat an hic verus sit sensus, praepositione lante nomen deficiente; suspicatur ergo epitheton aliquod dei Dušara, sed vix probabile*"). The editor's doubts about Euting's postulate are actually untenable nowadays, since no further unquestionable evidence for this deity has been found during the last century, during which our knowledge of the language as well as the number of known published inscriptions has grown considerably.

It is much more likely to interpret the word *HBLW* as a toponym, i.e. Dušara of *hblw* (cf. "Our Lady in/of/on/with ...") - cf. the place name *hbltt* in a Safaitic inscription (A. Jamme, [Miscellanées d'ancien arabe VII.](#), 28, [Fig. 6](#)).

2) The content of this inscription can by no means be described as unique, since a large part of the corpus of the Nabataean epigraphy consists of such texts; and moreover, there are several approximately contemporaneous texts from the same place (with comparable inscriptions). See [CIS II](#) No. 197, 199, 205, 209, 212) that mention Dušara and/or [Manûthu](#) among others, but never Hubal. The old rule applies here: *Unus testis, nullus testis*.

In the preceding, we clearly see a methodological problem of Islamology. Orientalists of earlier times, the decipherers and first editors of such inscriptions, often depended on Islamic traditions to interpret these newly discovered texts. These results in turn found their way into Islamic studies - a classical circular reasoning. If this were just any other (obscure) word, instead of *hblw*, nobody would think of lexicalising it as a deity.

How then is this deity Hubal, supposedly imported to Mecca, who seems to have been unknown even in his purported homeland, to be analysed? Perhaps an etymologisation of his name can help us further? Let us note briefly that among the older Semitic languages this root is only attested in Bible Hebrew, and in some later Aramaic dialects influenced (in part) by it, such as Syriac (*heblā* "Dust, Vanity"), Targumic Aramaic ("Breath, Vanity") and the Jewish-Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmud ("Breath, Steam, Haze") (> Arabic *habalt* "Fume, steam," perhaps why in some Islamic traditions Hubal was interpreted as a rain god).

The Hebrew root *HBL* (cf. the dictionaries) is usually seen as an onomatopoeic term for "breath, breath" as well as "wind", which then in Gen. 4 uses the name for Adam and Eve's second son, the shepherd Abel (Hebrew *Heḇel*), as well as for "nothingness" ("Man is like a breath [*la-heḇel*], his days are like a shadow scurrying by! -Psalm 144:4); or "vanity" ("O vanity of vanities! [*hăḇēl hăḇālīm*] says the preacher; O vanity of vanities! [*hăḇēl hăḇālīm*] Everything is vanity! [*hăḇel*] -Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Often, however, especially in the Deuteronomistic polemic against (supposed) idolatry, this lexeme takes on a technical theological meaning in the sense of "idol", "idolatry," because now only the orthodox view of the worship of Yahweh was acceptable in their eyes, everything else was considered vain vanity. We see this use of *Heḇel* or plural *Hăḇālīm*, e.g., in Deut 32:21; 1Kings 16:13,26; 2Kings 17:15; Jeremiah 2:5 ("What did your fathers find wrong with me, that they departed from me and followed vainglory and became vain? [*ha-heḇel waj-jehəbbālū*]); 8:19; 10:3,8; 14:22; Jonah 2:9(8); Psalm 31:7(6) (in the last two examples in parallelism with *šāw'* "emptiness, futility").

We also find this understanding in some renditions of the Septuagint, e.g., Deut 32:21; Jeremiah 14:22; 16:19, where the Hebrew term is translated with with "idol" (i.e. εἶδωλον, in classical Greek, originally a "phantom; figure, idea;" only in the later biblical tradition did it take on the meaning "idol") or μάταιος (actually "futile, vain," > "idol," under the influence of Hebrew), e.g., in Jeremiah 2:5 (cf. also Esther 4:17p [prayer of Esther], 3Maccabees 6:11; as well as this use in the NT, especially Acts 14:15).

Here we see how a word that actually means 'nothing at all' comes to mean something that is not and can not be. For the sake of clarity, in this specific biblical usage, the Hebrew term *Heḇel* (plural *Hăḇālīm*) does not indicate a deity (real or imagined), but it is rather a pejorative term to declare all divine beings except Yahweh, and all representations of gods (including Yahweh) to be 'null and void'.

From the point of view of Semitic etymology then, Hubal is not a god, but rather instead *Heḇel*, divine non-existence. Apparently we have landed in nothingness, having shown that Hubal is nihility (which might bemuse some Islamicists), he has literally evaporated in a biblical thunderstorm. Is it possible to bring this god back?

Theologians, in order to preserve their faith in the divine (in this case anyway) can be quite inventive. If on the one hand *hebraica Veritas* can be helpful in understanding Islamic tradition, then one can also use Arabic (once called the *Ancilla Fidei*, "servant of the faith" because she was considered to be useful in the study of the Hebrew vocabulary of the Old Testament) to interpret the Bible.

For example, the Canadian Old Testament scholar William Ewart Staples [attempted](#) to use the Hebrew term *Hebel* as a theological term to denote a "cult mystery" in Canaanite nature religion. Later, his Scandinavian colleague, Hans M. Barstad went even further and [claimed that the Hebrew word](#) actually implied a Canaanite rain god (cf. e.g. Zechariah 10:1-2 "Ask the Lord for rain in the springtime; it is the Lord who sends the thunderstorms. He gives showers of rain to all people, and plants of the field to everyone. The idols speak deceitfully, diviners see visions that lie; they tell dreams (*Hebel*) that are false, they give comfort in vain. Therefore the people wander like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd" - he rules of Hebrew grammar are willingly disregarded to inject an Islamic rain deity (see above) into this biblical verse (see [Bob Becking](#)). And thus yet another link is added to the previously mentioned circular argument.

In order though to make something out of nothing, to save what is salvageable, others have attempted to relate Hubal (the vocalisation is secondary and need not be viewed as original) to a supposed apotheosis of Abel (see, Hibil-Ziwa in the [Mandaic tradition](#)) - cf., e.g., T. Fahd, [Le panthéon de l'Arabie centrale à la veille de l'hégire](#). But this remains problematic and unconvincing (cf. Fawzi Zayadine, *Journal Asiatique* 257, 1969, 172) — this also applies to the proposal already suggested by [Edward Pockocke](#) in the 17th century, which is still occasionally used today, namely that Hubal is derived from Hebrew *hab-ba'al*, "the Baal".

In conclusion, despite the combined efforts made hitherto by Islamologists, Old Testament scholars and Orientalists, their efforts may best be summed up by a quotation from Ecclesiastes: "But when I looked around for all my works that my hands had done, and for the trouble I had taken to do them, behold, all was vanity and a haste for wind and nothing lasting under the sun!"

This god, as his name implies, could not have existed. On the other hand, it can probably not be a coincidence that a specific Deuteronomistic term of anti-polytheistic polemics is used by a later tradition (indirectly) dependent for a similar purpose.

The fact that much of what is biblical in later Islamic tradition (note the so-called *Isrā'īlīyāt*) was also adopted from Jews and Judaism is certainly not a new insight. Likewise, the Islamic polemic of Arab idolatry in the Hejaz during the so-called *ġāhilīya* ("period of ignorance") is largely ignorant itself, i.e., largely based on imaginary foundations, as the many anachronisms make clear.

One cannot escape the impression that when the Islamic historians and theologians wanted to report

about the bad old days of idolatry, realising that they had no first-hand information at all (also because the formation of Islam in Mecca and Medina is historically not viable), they were dependent on those who, as is well known, possessed knowledge of times distant, namely the Jews.

Apparently, Islamic historiographers borrowed a word to indicate the vanity of idols to denote the chief idol of their holy city in an imagined past - *Hubal* never was. Trying to find him is like chasing after the wind!

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The [image](#) shows a pre-Islamic anthropomorphic stele.

