A NOTE ON MUSLIM NAME-GIVING
ACCORDING TO THE DAY OF THE WEEK

In their great work on Arab proper names Caetani and Gabrieli deal among many
other matters with the question of how the Arabs chose the names of their new-born
children, and in discussing this draw upon the writings of Ibn Durayd, al-Ǧābih and
others, to show that among the criteria for choosing names were the following:

(a) That the name be connected with the victory and triumph of the bearer, e.g.
Ǧālib, Munāzil, Muqātil, etc. or should be that of a puissant animal, able to impose
its will, e.g. Asad, Layṭ, Ḍīb (Onomasticon Arabicum, § 45);
(b) That the name should indicate the prosperity or security of the bearer, e.g. Sālim,
Ṣagār, Mudrik, etc. (ibid.);
(c) That the name should show hardiness and ability to fend off attack, e.g. Ṭālḥah,
Qāṭādah, Harīṣah (names of plants with spines or thorns), Fīhr, Ṣāṭir (names of
stones), etc. (ibid.);
(d) That the name should be that of the first animal the father of a new-born baby
encountered after leaving the tent where his wife had given birth, e.g. Ṭa'lab,
Ḍābb, Ḥābu', or possibly the first bird, e.g. Gūrāb, Ṣūrad (ibid.);
(e) That the name should include the name of a deity, e.g. 'Abd al-'Uzzā, Taym
al-Lāt, Zayd Manāt (ibid., §§ 45-47).

In Islamic times theophoric names, based on the pre-Islamic pattern, became
widespread (but of course with suppression of the names of pagan deities); thus we
have the names 'Abd al-Gābbār, 'Abd al-Mu'izz, 'Abd al-Salām, etc. (ibid., § 51).

Snouck Hurgronje noted that in Mecca parents when choosing a baby’s name
often consulted one of the 'ulamā', who would either recommend the name of a famous
personage, or would resort to istiḥārah, i.e. the carrying out of certain religious rites
before going to sleep, and then being guided by the divine inspiration revealed in
a dream.

More recently Tawfiq Fahd, in La Divination Arabe, has discussed the omens
drawn from personal names by the Arabs and how belief in these omens affected the
giving of names to a newly born child.

None of these authorities however mention the day of the week on which a baby
is born as being one possible criterion for the choice of the baby’s name. Nevertheless
a note in Leeds Arabic MS 344 does appear to show that this was sometimes used in
Islamic times as the criterion for choosing a child’s name.

1. Leone CAETANI and Giuseppe GABRIELI, Onomasticon Arabicum, vol. I (Rome,
1915).
4. E. W. LANE, Modern Egyptians (London, 1953), p. 53, states that it was at one
time a common custom in Egypt to consult an astrologer in bestowing a name on a
new baby, and for the parents to be guided by his choice of name, but he does not
mention the particular procedure discussed here.

Arabica, Tome XXIV, Fascicule 3
Leeds MS 344 contains a copy of the well-known work of Şafi’i jurisprudence by al-Nawawi (died 676/1278), Minhāj al-Talibin wa-‘Idādat al-Mufīn. This manuscript contains numerous readers’ notes (fols. 1r-4v) on a variety of legal topics, and among these is one which reads as follows (fol. 3r):

(Questioned is the legality and the proper name of each day’s children, and God Most High be pleased with all of them. Indeed those born on a Sunday should bear the name Ibrāhim, Sulaymān, Ayyūb, Dāwūd, Mūsā; the woman should bear the name Ḥalīmah, Ḥabībah, Zaynab. The man who is born on a Monday should bear the name Muḥammad, Aḥmad, Maḥmūd, Qāsim; the woman should bear the name Fāṭīmah, Aḥmīnā, Ḥamīdah. The man who is born on a Tuesday should bear the name Iṣmā‘il, Iṣṭāq, Ya‘qūb, Sam‘ān; the woman should bear the name Ḥadīgh, ‘Azīzah, ‘Affih. The man who is born on a Wednesday should bear the name ‘Alī, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, Ṣāliḥ; the woman should bear the name ‘A‘īšah, ‘Rābi‘ah. The man who is born on a Thursday should bear the name ʿAbd Allāh, ʿAbd al-Rahmān, ʿAbd al-Walḥāb, Abū Bakr, ʿUmar; the woman should bear the name Kutlūm, Ḥabībah. The man who is born on a Friday should bear the name ʿAbd Allāh, ʿAbd al-Rahmān, ʿAbd al-Walḥāb, Abū Bakr, ʿUmar; the woman should bear the name Kutlūm, Ḥabībah. The man who is born on a Saturday should bear the name ʿAbd Allāh, ʿAbd al-Rahmān, ʿAbd al-Walḥāb, Abū Bakr, ʿUmar; the woman should bear the name Maryam, Sarīfah, Latīfah. Concludes.

All the masculine names mentioned here fall into distinct groups: ‘Sunday’ names are those of major Old Testament figures; ‘Monday’ names are names of the Prophet Muḥammad; ‘Tuesday’ names are names of direct descendants of Abraham; ‘Wednesday’ names are those of the fourth Caliph ‘Alī and his two sons, together with that of the Arabian prophet Šāliḥ; ‘Thursday’ names consist mainly of names of Companions of the Prophet; ‘Friday’ names are those of a further three Old Testament figures; while ‘Saturday’ names are theophoric names formed with ‘Abd.

The feminine names are less clearly grouped, except for the two Old Testament names under Friday, which clearly go with the masculine ones for the same day.

1 For a full description of this MS and its contents, see R. Y. EBIED and M. J. L. YOUNG, Some Arabic Legal Manuscripts in the Leeds Collection, in the forthcoming Festschrift Oriental Studies Presented to Benedikt S.J. Isserlin.