

Moses and the Holy Valley Ṭuwan: On the biblical and midrashic background of a qur'ānic scene

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Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible, Moses never enters the Holy Land, but when he arrives at the burning bush, near Mount Sinai, God nevertheless tells him that he is standing on holy ground. The Qur'ān retells the story of the burning bush in versions that deserve some attention due to certain elements that are not found in the original biblical version of the scene. These versions contain several expanded descriptions of the holiness of the ground on which Moses stood. Particularly intriguing is the clause: *al-wādī l-muqaddas ṭuwan* that appears in two Meccan sūras (Q 20:12; 79:16). It will be suggested that the form *ṭuwan* represents a folding-up metaphor already used in Jewish Midrash to describe a piece of ground that contains the folded-up sanctity of the entire Holy Land. Hence the term *ṭuwan* reveals a process by which the Qur'ān applied the sanctity of the Holy Land to Mount Sinai and its surroundings.

The same process will be demonstrated through the usage of the Arabic roots *b-r-k* and *q-d-s* which appear in several qur'ānic descriptions of the holy ground of the burning bush. More insight into the qur'ānic attitude towards Mount Sinai and its surroundings as a part of the Holy Land will be gained through some non-Islamic reports about the administrative condi-

tions in Palestine during the sixth century C.E. The qur'ānic elevation of the ground of the burning bush to the rank of the Holy Land implies that Moses' arrival at that place represented his own individual exodus that prefigured the collective Exodus of the Children of Israel. On a more general level, the conclusion will be that, in the Meccan sūras, the Qur'ān considers Mount Sinai and the Holy land at large an integral component within a global ritual system encompassing the Holy Land and Arabia. In the final part of this article, post-qur'ānic Islamic traditions which seem to have preserved some of the initial significance of the term *ṭuwan* will be surveyed.

The burning bush and Mount Sinai

In Exodus 3:5 of the Hebrew Bible, God says to Moses from within the burning bush:

Draw not nearer; put off your sandals from off your feet, for the place whereon you are standing is holy ground (*admat qodesh*).

The encounter of Moses and God at the burning bush takes place when Moses has come “to Horeb, the mountain of God” (Exodus 3:1). This is Mount Sinai. The Qur'ān, too, asserts the proximity of the burning bush to Mount Sinai. This is indicated in

Q 28:29, 46, where Moses perceives a fire “on the side of the Mountain” (*min jānib al-Ṭūr*). The same location of the burning bush is implied in Q 19:52:

We called out to him from the right-hand side of the Mountain (*min jānibi l-Ṭūri l-aymani*), and we brought him close to us in communion (*wa-qarrabnāhu najīyyan*).

Here two encounters are referred to, in the first of which God calls out to Moses “from the right-hand side of the Mountain (*al-Ṭūr*).” This is most probably the encounter at the burning bush. The right-hand side is a well-known metaphor of blessedness,¹ which indicates that the burning bush is located on the holiest side of the Mountain. As for the second encounter—when God brings Moses close to him in communion—this refers to the giving of the Torah; the location of this event is the same, as indicated in Q 20:80. This verse asserts that God made a covenant with the Children of Israel (i.e., gave them the Torah) “on the right-hand side of the Mountain (*al-Ṭūr*).”² The idea that the Torah was delivered on this particular side of the Mountain seems to reflect the talmudic notion that God gave it to Israel with his right hand.³ The general idea that the Torah was given near the Mountain seems to reflect a midrashic elaboration on Exodus 19:17, in which it is stated that the Children of Israel were summoned to receive the Torah at “the nether part (*taḥtīt*) of the Mount.”⁴

Arabic terminology of sanctity

The root b-r-k

As for the particular piece of ground on which Moses stood before the burning bush, the Qurʾān describes

its holiness in various ways that are not anticipated in the Hebrew Bible. All the descriptions appear in sūras which, much like the above passages, are listed as Meccan in the traditional Islamic chronology of revelation. Some versions use the root *b-r-k*. In Q 27:8 we read:

When he [Moses] came to it [the burning bush], a voice was uttered saying: Blessed (*būrīka*) is whoever is in the fire and whoever is around it; and glory be to God, the lord of the worlds.

In this passage the root *b-r-k* describes the effect of God’s presence within the burning bush on its surroundings. God is represented by a voice that is heard from within the bush. The holiness stemming from his presence spreads out from within the bush and sanctifies those who stand nearby on the same ground. Therefore Moses himself becomes blessed. God’s own blessedness is often expressed throughout the Qurʾān with derivatives of *b-r-k* (e.g., Q 7:54; 23:14), and the same root recurs in Q 28:30:

When he [Moses] came to it [the burning bush], a voice was uttered from the right-hand bank of the valley (*min shāṭiʾi l-wādī l-ayman*), in the blessed ground (*fi l-buqʿati l-mubāraka*), from the tree (*mina l-shajara*), saying: O Moses, I am Allāh the Lord of the worlds.

Here the bush is not only situated “[in] the blessed ground,” but on the right-hand bank of the valley itself. The sacredness of its location is therefore twofold.

The Qurʾānic Meccan sūras use the root *b-r-k* for the Holy Land at large; this land was the blessed refuge of Abraham and Loth (Q 21:71), the blessed region given to the Children of Israel (Q 7:137), the blessed destination of the wind that carried Solomon (Q 21:81), as well as the blessed objective of traders coming from Sheba (Q 34:18).⁵ This root is also used to describe the blessed ground surrounding the “farthest mosque” to which God has taken Muḥammad during his night journey (Q 17:1).⁶ Therefore the employment of the same root for the place of the burning bush seems to imply that this ground was as blessed as the Holy Land itself. But the reason why the Qurʾān

¹ Cf. Isaac Hasson, “Left Hand and Right Hand,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/left-hand-and-right-hand-SIM_00258, accessed October 2013.

² Josef Horowitz (*Koranische Untersuchungen* [Berlin, 1926], 124–25) contends that here (Q 20:80), as well as in Q 19:52, the Qurʾān speaks of *al-Ṭūr al-ayman*, “The Mountain of Good Omen.” Thus also Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (repr. Hildesheim, 1961), 255. But the particle *ayman* relates to the side (*jānib*) of the mountain, not to the mountain itself.

³ *Babylonian Talmud*, Berachot, 62a. Cf. Deuteronomy 33:2 and Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, 256.

⁴ According to the *Babylonian Talmud* (Shabbat, 88a), God had raised the mountain above them before they received the Torah. That the Children of Israel were underneath the Mountain can be inferred from Deuteronomy 4:11; the Qurʾān also reflects an awareness of this: Q 2:63, 93; 4:154.

⁵ The root *b-r-k* is used only once for places in the Arabian sphere; see Q 3:96.

⁶ Cf. Uri Rubin, “Muhammad’s Night Journey (*isrāʾ*) to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā: Aspects of the Earliest Origins of the Islamic Sanctity of Jerusalem,” *al-Qantara* 29 (2008): 147–65; repr. in Uri Rubin, *Muhammad the Prophet and Arabia*, Variorum Collected Studies Series VII (London, 2011).

finds it necessary to imply such a notion remains to be answered.

The root q-d-s.

Another root which the Qurʾān uses, if less frequently, for the holiness of the ground of the burning bush is *q-d-s*. It only appears in the clause: *al-wādī l-muqaddas ṭuwan*. The clause recurs in two different Meccan sūras. In Q 20:12, the earlier of the two, God tells Moses: “. . . you are in *al-wādī l-muqaddas ṭuwan*.” In the somewhat later Meccan passage (Q 79:16),⁷ the same definition of the ground appears within a somewhat different setting. This passage says of Moses: “When his Lord called upon him in *al-wādī l-muqaddas ṭuwan*.” This version deviates slightly from the biblical structure of the scene, as the clause *al-wādī l-muqaddas ṭuwan* is not included in God’s direct address to Moses. Instead, it has become part of the external narrator’s description of the place in which the encounter occurs. Most significantly, the two versions differ in their respective focal points. In Q 20—the fuller version—the central axis is Moses’ election, whereas in Sūra 79 it is his prophetic mission. The idea of election is expressed in the former passage in God’s statement: “I have chosen you” (*wa-anā ikhtartuka*, Q 20:13). In the latter passage, the idea of the mission is expressed when God instructs Moses: “Go (*idhhab*) to Pharaoh” (Q 79:17).⁸

The description of the valley as *muqaddas* (“sanctified”) bears obvious resemblance to the word *qodesh* (“holiness”) which the Hebrew Bible uses for the ground on which Moses stood. The Qurʾān uses the root *q-d-s* very rarely in connection with sacred precincts, and apart from the burning bush, it occurs only once in connection with a place, namely, in the expression *al-arḍ al-muqaddasa*, “the Holy Land,” which Moses instructs the Israelites to conquer (Q 5:21). The usage of the same root for the ground of the burning bush, as well as for the entire Holy Land, is

⁷ On the other hand, Angelika Neuwirth has suggested to me in a personal communication that Sūra 79 may be considered *earlier* than Sūra 20 because the former seems an old oracular speech, a not-yet unfolded narrative. It actually presents a simple punishment story, focusing on Pharaoh rather than on Moses, in the vein of early Meccan sūras. On Sūra 79, see further Angelika Neuwirth’s *Der Koran. Band 1: Frühmekkanische Suren* (Berlin, 2011), 394–414, and *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein Europäischer Zugang* (Berlin, 2010), 653–58.

⁸ The two leitmotifs—election and mission—are fused together in Q 7:144: “He said: O Moses, surely I have chosen you (*iṣṭafaytuka*) above the people with my messages (*bi-risālātī*). . . .”

significant and seems to imply yet again that the two zones shared the same degree of holiness. In other words, the ground on which Moses stood was no different from the Holy Land itself. The holiness of these two zones originated in the presence of God, whose own holiness is described in the Qurʾān by the title *quddūs* (Q 59:23; 62:1).

The term *ṭuwan*

Although the clause *al-wādī l-muqaddas ṭuwan* evinces an obvious—though not necessarily direct—relationship to the Hebrew Bible version, one Qurʾānic word—*ṭuwan*⁹—stands out as having no biblical parallel. This brings us to the major theme of our study. Medieval Qurʾān exegetes as well as modern scholars have tried to elucidate the meaning of this word. Most of the latter have been under the impression that *ṭuwan* is the proper name of the valley.¹⁰ Devin J. Stewart has recently suggested that *ṭuwā* as a proper name might be “a distorted form of Ṭūr,” used for the sake of rhyme in passages that rhyme in *-ā*.¹¹ But Joseph Witztum has already noticed the weakest point in Stewart’s suggested emendation: if the form Ṭūr had to be adapted to the rhyme of the paragraph, Ṭūrā would have been sufficient.¹² James A. Bellamy suggested a different, but apparently no less speculative, solution, namely that *ṭuwan* reflects the name Gilgal,

⁹ Also *ṭuwā* (without *tanwīn*), but never *ṭuwwā*, as rendered in Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis* (London, 2002), 88, 101, 160 n. 25, 227 (index).

¹⁰ E.g., Arne A. Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden, 2004), 313. See also William M. Brinner, s.v. “Ṭuwā,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/tuwa-SIM_00434):

“. . . the most plausible tradition is that which maintains that *ṭuwā* is the name of a sacred place, the one that was entered by Moses.” For more on modern scholars holding that *ṭuwan* is a proper name, see Andrew Rippin, “The Search for Ṭuwā: Exegetical Method, Past and Present,” in *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where and to Whom? Studies on the Rise of Islam in memory of John Wansbrough*, ed. Basile Lourié, Carlos A. Segovia and Alessandro Bausi (Piscataway NJ, 2012): 415–17.

¹¹ Devin J. Stewart, “Notes on Medieval and Modern Emendations of the Qurʾān,” in *The Qurʾān in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London, 2008): 236–37. As noted by Rippin, “Search for Ṭuwā,” 416, Richard Bell already suggested the Ṭūr option. See also Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1: Frühmekkanische Suren*, 404.

¹² Joseph Witztum, review of Reynolds (ed.), *Qurʾān in its Historical Context*, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129 (2009): 328.

mentioned in Joshua 5:9, which—much like the verb *ṭawā*—bears the sense of rolling up something.¹³

As for myself, several years ago I suggested that *ṭuwan* may mean “of multiple sacredness.”¹⁴ I did not provide reasons for this assumption at the time, but in what follows I shall offer some arguments in support of this line of interpretation.

To begin with, if *ṭuwan* were a proper name, the order of the words would probably have been different: *bi-Ṭuwan al-wādī l-muqaddas*, “in Ṭuwan, the sacred valley.” This seems to be the standard qur’ānic style, as is also the case in Q 5:97: . . . *al-ka‘bata l-bayta l-ḥarāma* . . . , “[God appointed] the Ka‘ba, the sacred house. . .” As things stand, the particle *ṭuwan* is positioned in the most natural place of an accusative verbal noun (*maṣḍar*) modifying the adjective *al-muqaddas*. A glance at the classical Arabic lexicons reveals that the form *ṭuwan* (or *ṭiwan*, which means the same), is explained as referring to “a thing twice done [as though folded].”¹⁵ Accordingly, the clause *al-wādī l-muqaddas ṭuwan* would mean, “the valley that has been sanctified twice,” or more literally “the valley of the folded-up holiness.”

The suggestion that the qur’ānic *al-wādī l-muqaddas ṭuwan* may denote “the valley of the folded-up holiness” seems to be confirmed by pre-Islamic poetry.¹⁶ A verse by ‘Adī b. Zayd al-‘Ibādī (d. ca. 600 C.E.) reads:

*A-‘ādhbīla inna l-lawma fī ghayri kunhibī
‘alayya ṭuwan min ghayyiki l-mutaraddidī.*

O reprover, the blame is ill-timed;
It is folded-up around me due to your
recurrent harassment.

¹³ James A. Bellamy, “Textual Criticism of the Koran,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001): 1–6.

¹⁴ Uri Rubin, s.v. “Sacred Precincts,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/sacred-precincts-SIM_00363, accessed October 2013. And see also my Hebrew translation of the Qur’ān (Tel Aviv, 2005), 252, 504: *ba-‘emeq ha-qadosh mishne qodesh*.

¹⁵ Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v. *ṭ-w-y*, II, 1899 col. 2.

¹⁶ Concerning the evidence of poetry, Rippin (“Search for Ṭuwā,” 410) maintains that “Poetry is no more definitive or absolute in its application than is the application of grammatical rules. But, for the exegete, it is a tool, a mark of knowledge, and an assertion of the mastery of the subject.” Be that as it may, poetic verses do not seem to have been invented just to prove a certain exegetical opinion.

This verse is quoted in lexical and geographic sources,¹⁷ although in some versions *ṭuwan* is replaced by *thunan* or *thinan*, which means the same thing.¹⁸ The version with *ṭuwan*—or *ṭiwan*—is reiterated in several *tafsīr* sources as illustrating the interpretation of the qur’ānic *ṭuwan* in the sense of a thing done twice (*marratayni*),¹⁹ which in turn supports the idea that Moses stood on a ground of folded-up holiness. The idea of the folded-up holiness of the ground of the burning bush seems to have been designed to elevate the holiness of this ground to the rank of that of the Holy Land, thus being complementary to the role of the roots *q-d-s* and *b-r-k*, which, as seen above, imply the same relationship between the two zones.

Non-Islamic sources

The Talmud: Jacob and Moses

Moving away from the Islamic to the non-Islamic sources, one fails to find any helpful detail in the Aramaic and Syriac versions of Exodus 3:5 (Onkelos and the Peshitta), except perhaps for the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. Here the second part of Exodus 3:5 is rendered as follows:²⁰

[. . .] אתר קדיש הוא ועליו אנת עתיד לקבלא אורייתא
למלא יתה לבני ישראל]

. . . it is a holy place, and on it you [i.e., Moses] are about to receive the Torah, in order to teach it to the Children of Israel.

¹⁷ E.g., Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, s.v. *ṭ.w.i.*; Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu‘jam al-buldān*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), IV, 45.

¹⁸ E.g., Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, s.v. *ṭ.w.i.* See also Abū ‘Ubayda Ma‘mar b. al-Muthannā, *Majāz al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muḥammad Fu‘ād Sezgin, 2 vols. (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risāla, 1981), II, 16 (on Q 20:12).

¹⁹ E.g., Abū ‘Ubayda, *Majāz*; II, 285 (on Q 79:16); al-Zajjāj, *Ma‘ānī l-Qur’ān wa-i‘rābuhu*, ed. ‘Abd al-Jalīl Shalabī, 5 vols. (Beirut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1988), V, 279 (on Q 79:16), here ascribed to Ṭarafa b. al-‘Abd; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 30 vols. (Cairo: Būlāq, 1323/1905, repr. Beirut, 1972), XVI, 110 (on Q 20:12); Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fī ‘ilm al-tafsīr*, 9 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī), 1984, V, 274 (on Q 20:12); al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, 20 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-‘Arabī, 1967), XIX, 201 (on Q 79:16); al-Ṭūsī, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan, *al-Tabayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ed. Aḥmad al-‘Āmilī, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), VII, 165 (on Q 20:12), X, 256 (on Q 79:16); al-Ṭabrisī, *Majma‘ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 30 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1957), XVI, 88 (on Q 20:12), XXX, 21 (on Q 79:16).

²⁰ E. G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance* (Hoboken, 1984), at Exodus 3:5.

This expanded paraphrase seems to reflect the idea that the holiness of the ground on which Moses stood was twofold; it stemmed from the appearance of God from within the burning bush as well as from the forthcoming deliverance of the Torah on the very same place, adjacent to Mount Sinai.

But the most significant contribution to our understanding of qurʿānic *ṭuwan* is provided in the talmudic and midrashic sources. Here the folding-up metaphor already appears in connection with holy precincts, in texts describing an encounter between God and a human being that occurs again on holy ground. This time the person is Jacob, not Moses. The encounter between Jacob and God is first recounted in Genesis 28:10–19 of the Hebrew Bible. Jacob has a dream in which he sees a ladder reaching from the earth up into heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it. Thereupon God stands beside him, saying (Genesis 28:13): “I am the lord, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac. The land whereon you lie, to you will I give it, and to your seed. . .”

As with Moses (Exodus 3:6), God’s address to Jacob consists of self-introduction followed by an allusion to the ground on which the encounter takes place. God promises Jacob that the ground on which he has slept will be given to him as well as to his seed.

But how could God promise the narrow piece of holy ground on which Jacob had lain to his entire seed? This takes us to the *Babylonian Talmud* in which the following solution is offered:²¹

Said R. Isaac: This teaches us that the holy one, blessed is he, folded up (*qippel*) the entire land of Israel and placed it beneath our forefather Jacob, [to indicate to him] that [the entire land] would be as easily conquered by his descendants [as a small piece of ground].

In other words, the narrow ground upon which Jacob had slept contained the entire Holy Land that God has “folded up” and placed underneath him. This talmudic perception, which is reiterated in an early Midrash (fifth or sixth century C.E.),²² helps us understand better the qurʿānic usage of the folding-up metaphor as represented in the word *ṭuwan*. Perhaps the Qurʿān describes the small ground, the valley, on which Moses stood, as *muqaddas ṭuwan* because it contained

the folded-up holiness of the entire Holy Land. That an idea originating in the story of Jacob should be imported into the scene of the burning bush is not unanticipated, because Jacob’s dream was already linked to Mount Sinai in an early Jewish Midrash. According to one of the allegorical interpretations offered in this Midrash, the dream was designed to show Jacob the forthcoming giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.²³ The ladder, according to this Midrash, represents the Mount, and the assertion that the ladder was “set up on the earth” (Genesis 28:12) is explained as an allusion to Exodus 19:17, where it is stated that the Children of Israel stood at “the nether part of the mount.” The same Midrash goes on to note that the pronouncement in Genesis 28:12 that the top of the ladder “reached to heaven” alludes to Deuteronomy 4:11, according to which “the mountain burned with fire unto the heart of heaven.” The same Midrash also notes that the ladder represents Sinai, meaning that the numerical value of the Hebrew letters of “ladder” (*s.l.m.*) and of Sinai (*s.i.n.i.*) is identical (i.e., 130).

Therefore it is not inconceivable that an idea concerning the ground on which Jacob slept at the foot of the ladder should be applied to the ground at the foot of Mount Sinai where the scene of the burning bush took place. Thus we have yet another example of the literary overlap of Jacob and Moses in Jewish and Islamic texts, as surveyed by Brannon Wheeler.²⁴

In fact, the folding-up metaphor recurs in direct connection with Moses in a medieval Jewish Midrash related on the authority of the talmudic sages (Ḥazal). It says that although God did not let Moses enter the Holy Land, he folded it up (*qippel*) for him so that he could see all its inhabitants, generation after generation, till the end of days.²⁵ This Midrash elaborates on Deuteronomy 34:1–3, in which Moses ascends Mount Nebo and God shows him the entire Holy Land, district by district.

Sinai and the Holy Land

Why does the Qurʿān describe the holiness of the ground of the burning bush with terms reserved for the Holy Land? A clue to a possible solution seems to be provided in the report of the historian Procopius of

²³ *Beresbit Rabbah* (Vilna) 68:12.

²⁴ Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*, 37–63.

²⁵ *Midrash Agada*, ed. Salomon Buber, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1894), vol. II, 181.

²¹ *Babylonian Talmud*, *Hullin*, 91b.

²² *Beresbit Rabbah* (Vilna) 69:4. Here God folds up the land “like a ledger” and puts it under Jacob’s head.

Caesarea (d. ca. 565 C.E.). In his *De Aedificiis* (V, 8:1) he says that Mount Sinai is situated in a desert, near the sea of Eritrea (= the Red Sea), in the Roman province *Palaestina Tertia*, formerly known as *Arabia*.²⁶ *Palaestina Tertia* (“Third Palestine”) was the third of the three provinces into which *Palaestina* had been divided, probably no later than the end of the fourth century C.E.²⁷ In the sixth century C.E., it contained the regions of southern Transjordan, the Negev and the central and southern regions of the Sinai Peninsula. Before the formation of *Palaestina Tertia*, these regions had been part of the province *Arabia*.²⁸ In view of Procopius’ report, one may surmise that the Qur’ān, too, shares the notion that Mount Sinai was somewhere in *Palaestina*, either in the Sinai Peninsula, or in southern Transjordan.²⁹

The notion that Mount Sinai was somewhere in *Palaestina* would explain the Qur’ānic employment of the vocabulary of the Holy Land for the description of the holiness of the burning bush and its surroundings. Accordingly, the Qur’ānic allusions to Mount Sinai and the burning bush seem to reflect yet another aspect of the role of the Holy Land in the Meccan sūras. In one of them (Q 17:1), Muḥammad himself experiences a spiritual journey from Mecca (“The Sacred Mosque”) to the Temple Mount (“the Farthest Mosque”), which indicates an effort to establish a combined axis of sanctity connecting Arabia and the Holy Land.³⁰ Mount Sinai was part of the same axis, as is indicated in Mec-

²⁶ Denis Roques, *Procopé de Césarée, Constructions de Justinien Ier (Peri ktismaton/De aedificiis): Introduction, traduction, commentaire, cartes et index*, publication posthume par Eugenio Amato et Jacques Schamp (Alessandria, 2011), 366. Cf. Yoram Tsafir, “The Transfer of the Negev, Sinai and Southern Transjordan from Arabia to Palaestina,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 36 (1986): 79; Philipp Mayerson, “Libanius and the Administration of Palestine,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 69 (1987): 257.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 257–60.

²⁸ Yoram Tsafir, “Why Were the Negev, Southern Trans-Jordan and Sinai Transferred from the Provincia Arabia to the Provincia Palaestina at the End of the Third Century C.E.?” *Cathedra* 30 (1983): 43–44 (in Hebrew).

²⁹ Already in Galatians 4:24–26, Paul declares that “Sinai is a mountain in Arabia”, apparently meaning southern Transjordan. Cf. N. T. Wright, “Paul, Arabia and Elijah (Galatians 1:17),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996): 686–87. See further, Yoram Tsafir, “Monks and Monasticism in Southern Sinai,” *Qadmoniot* 9 (1970): 3 (in Hebrew).

³⁰ Cf. Uri Rubin, “Between Arabia and the Holy Land: A Mecca-Jerusalem Axis of Sanctity,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 34 (2008): 345–62. [Reprinted in U. Rubin, *Muhammad the Prophet and Arabia*, no. XI.]

can verses of divine oaths in which this site is invoked alongside some Arabian sacred precincts. Once (Q 52:1–4) Mount Sinai is coupled with the “Much Frequented House” (*al-bayt al-ma‘mūr*)—probably the heavenly Ka‘ba—and once with “this secure land” (*al-balad al-amīn*), probably Mecca (Q 95:1–3). Moses’ arrival at the burning bush is therefore an Exodus to the Holy Land side of the axis, thus providing the biblical precedent for Muḥammad’s own journey to the same Holy Land. From the burning bush, Moses is supposed to return to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites on their own Exodus to the Holy Land.

Finally, it may be noted that *Palaestina Tertia*—or rather the southern region of Palestine—was originally called *Palaestina Salutaris* (“Blessed Palestine”),³¹ this term seems to have had its effect on the Qur’ānic usage of the root *b-r-k* which, as seen above, describes the blessedness of the Holy Land and the surroundings of Sinai. It is further noteworthy that only once does the Qur’ān employ the root *b-r-k* for a place outside of the Holy Land. This occurs in a Medinan passage (Q 3:96) asserting that the Ka‘ba was the “first house” ever to be placed upon earth, and that it was “blessed” (*mubārak*). But even here, the root is designed to shift to the Meccan sanctuary a virtue originally associated with a heavenly Jerusalem. In fact, the Medinan sūras evince a transition from a global ritual system to an Arabian-oriented one, with Abraham replacing Moses as its central figure. Accordingly, these sūras turn the Ka‘ba into an exclusive Abrahamic sanctuary that replaces the Holy Land as a pilgrimage destination (Q 22:27) and as the direction of prayer (Q 2:144–50). All this, however, deserves a separate study.

Post-Qur’ānic sources

The form ṭuwan as “twice [sanctified]”

From the Qur’ān and its midrashic antecedents we move on to the post-Qur’ānic Islamic sources. We do so in order to find out how Muslims of the first Islamic era read the Qur’ān, and to what extent their reading of the scene of the burning bush reflected their own notions, which might have been projected back into the Qur’ān.

The post-Qur’ānic texts that seem closer than others to the internal Qur’ānic context of the scene are those which perceive the words *al-muqaddas ṭuwan* in the

³¹ Mayerson, “Libanius and the Administration of Palestine”: 256–57.

sense of “twice sanctified.” This idea is expressed in traditions on the authority of ‘Ikrima (Medinan d. 105/723) and Mujāhid (d. 104/722). These scholars are reported to have said that Moses was instructed to take off his sandals so that “the palm of your two bare feet may touch the hallowed ground and its blessing may reach you, because it has been sanctified twice.”³² Or, as put by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728): “God only wanted him to touch the blessing of the ground directly with his two feet; it was sanctified twice.”³³

These interpretations are based on a literary perception of *ṭuwan* as a verbal noun, though made without an awareness of the talmudic and midrashic function of the folding-up metaphor. The history of this metaphor in the Islamic sources did not continue beyond the Qur’ān.

The form ṭuwan as a proper name

In other interpretations, the function of *ṭuwan* has been transformed from a verbal noun into the proper name of the sanctified valley. This exegetical transformation could take place because the final *alif maqṣūra* makes the accusative form of *ṭuwan* look the same as the nominative and the genitive. Therefore the phrase *bi-l-wādī l-muqaddasi ṭuwan* could easily be read as “in the sanctified valley, [in] Ṭuwan.” This development is demonstrated, to begin with, in the words of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767). He says in his *Tafsīr* that *ṭuwan* is the name of the valley.³⁴ The same view was related on the authority of Mujāhid,³⁵ as well as of Sa‘īd b. Jubayr (Kūfan d. 95/713–14),³⁶ and of

their master, Ibn ‘Abbās.³⁷ Other exegetes adopted the same opinion, including al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923).³⁸

Several geographical reports locate the place named Ṭuwan within al-Shām (= Syria/Palestine), thus retaining the Roman administrative inclusion of Mount Sinai within *Palaestina Tertia*. Accordingly, al-Jawharī (d. ca. 393/1003) says that Ṭuwan is the name of a place in al-Shām.³⁹ Al-Bakrī (d. 487/1094), too, reports that Ṭuwan is the name of a valley in al-Shām, at the foot of al-Ṭūr (*fī aṣli l-Ṭūr*), i.e., Mount Sinai.⁴⁰ He adds that this valley is the one mentioned in the Qur’ān.⁴¹ Similarly, Yāqūt (d. 626/1229) states that Ṭuwan is a place in al-Shām near al-Ṭūr (*‘inda l-Ṭūr*),⁴² adding that Ṭūr Sīnā’ (*var.* Saynā’) is a mountain in al-Shām.⁴³ In fact, the name Ṭuwan did not remain confined to a valley. Al-Bakrī states that some authorities held that Ṭuwan was a mountain (*jabal*) in al-Shām.⁴⁴ This view was also reported by Ibn Sīda (d. 458/1066),⁴⁵ and seems to have implied that Ṭuwan had become synonymous with al-Ṭūr.⁴⁶

Other traditions locate the place named Ṭuwan in the Ḥijāz. Al-Farrā’ (d. 207/823) quotes in his Qur’ān commentary the opinion that the Qur’ānic *ṭuwan* is

³⁷ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, XVI, 111 (on Q 20:12); Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr*, VII, 2417 (no. 13394).

³⁸ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, XVI, 111 (on Q 20:12). See also Zajjāj, *Ma‘ānī l-Qur’ān*, III, 351 (on Q 20:12), V, 279 (on Q 79:16); Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān*, VI, 240 (on Q 20:12); al-Wāhidī, *al-Wasīṭ fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-majīd*. Ed. ‘Adil Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd et al. 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1994), III, 202 (on Q 20:12).

³⁹ See Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, s.v. *ṭ.w.ī.*, vol. IV, 2730 col. 2 (from al-Jawharī). See also Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-buldān*, IV, 45 (s.v. *ṭuwan*). Cf. Rippin, “Search for Ṭuwā,” 401.

⁴⁰ al-Bakrī, *Mu‘jam mā ‘sta‘jama min asmā’ al-bilād wa-l-mawāḍi‘*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā. 2 vols. (Cairo, 1951, repr. Beirut, ‘Ālam al-Kutub, n.d.), II, 896.

⁴¹ The Qur’ān indeed says that the burning bush was situated on the side of al-Ṭūr (Q 28:29, 46), or on its right-hand side (Q 19:52). In the same place, God gave the Torah to the Children of Israel (Q 20:80).

⁴² Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-buldān*, IV, 45 (s.v. “Ṭuwan”). See also al-Rāzi, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 32 vols. (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.), XXXI, 38 (on Q 79:16).

⁴³ Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-buldān*, IV, 48 (s.v. Ṭūr Sīnā’). See also Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, s.v. *ṭ.w.ī.* vol. IV, 2718 col. 2.

⁴⁴ Bakrī, *Mu‘jam mā ‘sta‘jama*, II, 896.

⁴⁵ See Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, s.v. *ṭ.w.ī.*, vol. IV, 2730 col. 2.

⁴⁶ To this may be added a tradition of Ibn Zayd (Medinan d. 182/798) which says that the significance of Ṭuwan is like that of al-Ṭūr (*wa-huwa naḥwa l-Ṭūr*) (Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, XVI, 111 (on Q 20:12). Cf. Rippin, “Search for Ṭuwā,” 401.

³² al-Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān ‘an tafsīr āy al-Qur’ān*, ed. Abū Muḥammad b. ‘Ashūr and Naẓīr al-Sā‘idī, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2002), VI, 240 (on Q 20:12): *innamā qīla labu ikbla‘ na‘layka kay tamassa rābatu qadamayka l-arḍa l-ṭayyibata wa-yanālaka barakatuhā li-annahā quddīsat marratayni.*

³³ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, XVI, 109 (on Q 20:12): *innamā arāda allāhu an yubāshira bi-qadamayhi barakata l-arḍi, wa-kāna qad quddīsa marratayni.* See also Zajjāj, *Ma‘ānī l-Qur’ān*, III, 351 (on Q 20:12), V, 279 (on Q 79:16).

³⁴ Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāta, 5 vols. (Cairo: al-Hay’ā l-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li-l-Kitāb, 1979), III, 22–23 (on Q 20:12), IV, 576 (on Q 79:16).

³⁵ Mujāhid b. Jabr, *al-Tafsīr*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sūrātī, 2 vols. (Beirut: al-Manshūrāt al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.), II, 727 (on Q 79:16); Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, XVI, 111 (on Q 20:12), XXX, 25 (on Q 79:16).

³⁶ Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm*, ed. As‘ad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib, 10 vols. (Mecca-Riyad: Maktabat Nizār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 1997), VII, 2418 (no. 13398).

between Medina and Egypt.⁴⁷ The qurʾānic *ṭuwan* was associated with a specific site at the outskirts of Mecca named Dhū Ṭuwan.⁴⁸ Accordingly, a tradition attributed to ʿAbdallāh b. al-Zubayr relates that the leaders (*aʿimma*; printed: *umma*) of the Children of Israel used to go on pilgrimage to Mecca, and whenever they reached Dhū Ṭuwan, they took off their sandals out of veneration for the Meccan *ḥaram*.⁴⁹ The same tradition appears in the *Tafsīr* of ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827), in his comments on Q 20:12, with the name Ṭuwan replacing Dhū Ṭuwan.⁵⁰ On a more general level, a Muslim tradition names several holy mountains and sanctuaries in Arabia which were allegedly founded on splinters of Mount Sinai, which reached Arabia after the mountain had split out of awe of God.⁵¹ These interpretations seem to reflect a tendency—evinced already in the qurʾānic Medinan sūras—to transfer models of sanctity from the Holy Land to the Arabian sacred precincts, thus elevating the Ḥijāz to the rank of the Holy Land.⁵²

But even as a proper name, Ṭuwan never lost its basic verbal meaning. Qatāda (d. 117/735), for example, says that the valley was twice sanctified and that Ṭuwan was its name.⁵³ The same applies to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī: apart from the fact that he reportedly used to read the word *ṭuwan* as *ṭiwan* (with *kasra*)⁵⁴—in contrast to the majority of the Kūfan scholars who read it

⁴⁷ al-Farrāʿ, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad Yūsuf Najātī, Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Najjār, ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Ismāʿīl Shalabī. 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Surūr, n.d.), III, 232 (on Q 79:16). See also Ibn ʿAtīyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-ʿazīz*, 16 vols. (Rabat: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-shuʿūn al-Islāmiyya, 1975–91), XVI, 223 (on Q 79:16) (from Mundhir b. Saʿīd, d. 355/966).

⁴⁸ Cf. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*, 88, 160 n. 125.

⁴⁹ Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, online edition by al-Mawsūʿa al-Shāmīla, IV, 320 (no. 5); al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, in F. Wüstenfeld (ed.), *Die Chroniken der Stadt Mekka* (Göttingen, 1858, repr. Beirut, n.d., vol. I), 361; Shāmī, I, 245, 246.

⁵⁰ ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muṣṭafā Muslim Muḥammad, 3 vols. (Riyad: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1989), II, 16 (on Q 20:12).

⁵¹ M. J. Kister, “Sanctity Joint and Divided: On Holy Places in the Islamic Tradition,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 20 (1996): 20.

⁵² For this process, see also Uri Rubin, *Between Bible and Qurʾān: the Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 36–46.

⁵³ ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr*, II, 15 (on Q 20:12), 346 (on Q 79:16); Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, XVI, 110 (on Q 20:12), XXX, 25 (on Q 79:16).

⁵⁴ Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, XXX, 25 (on Q 79:16); Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr*, V, 274 (on Q 20:12); Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*

as *ṭuwan*⁵⁵—he is said to have explained that the valley’s name was derived from its being sanctified twice (. . . *bal summiya bi-dhālika li-anna l-wādiya quddisa marratayni*).⁵⁶ The same al-Ḥasan was credited with an interpretation to the effect that the valley was in Palestine (*Filasṭīn*), and that it was twice sanctified (*wādin bi-Filasṭīn quddisa marratayni*).⁵⁷ The name of Filasṭīn provides here a specific location of *ṭuwan* within the region of al-Shām.

In conclusion, the analysis of the post-qurʾānic *tafsīr* has shown that several exegetical traditions have preserved the meaning of *muqaddas ṭuwan* as “twice” [sanctified],” or “of a folded-up [holiness].” This means that the Islamic *tafsīr*, much as it reflects ideas of post-qurʾānic scholars, may nevertheless contain interpretations that are closer than others to the meaning of the Qurʾān when read on its own. These interpretations nevertheless do not reflect the function of the folding-up metaphor in connection with the Holy Land.

Appendix: the etymologies of *ṭuwan*

The root *ṭ-w-y* carries a wide range of secondary meanings, for which reason the exegetes were able to provide a variety of etymologies for Ṭuwan as a proper name, as well as suggest variant readings representing *tafsīr* in disguise. Andrew Rippin⁵⁸ and Alba Fedeli⁵⁹ already discussed several of these etymologies, so they should not detain us here. One etymology, however, deserves further examination. According to this one,

fī l-tafsīr, ed. Zuhayr Jaʿīd. 10 vols. (Dār al-Fikr: Beirut, 1992), VII, 316 (on Q 20:12).

⁵⁵ Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, XVI, 111 (on Q 20:12), XXX, 25 (on Q 79:16); Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, VII, 316 (on Q 20:12).

⁵⁶ al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-ʿuyūn fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAbd al-Maḥsūd b. ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1992), III, 396. See also Ṭabrisī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, XV, 88.

⁵⁷ Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr*, VII, 2417 (no. 13396) (on Q 20:12). See also Māwardī, *Nukat*, VI, 197 (on Q 79:16).

⁵⁸ Rippin, “Search for Ṭuwā.”

⁵⁹ See Alba Fedeli, “Relevance of the Oldest Qurʾānic Manuscripts for the Readings mentioned by Commentaries: A Note on Sūra Ṭā-Hā,” in *Manuscripta Orientalia, International Journal for Oriental Manuscript Research* 15 (2009): 3–10. Unfortunately, Fedeli’s study is marred by some serious misinterpretations of the Arabic text, but this cannot be fully discussed here. It may only be noted that the clause *ṭāwī idhhab* does not say that *ṭāwī* means *idhhab* (ibid.: 7). It rather asserts that the variant *ṭāwī* has only been applied to *ṭuwan* in Q 79:16, where it is followed by the imperative *idhhab* (Q 79:17).

the name Ṭuwan originated in the imperative *ṭa'*, “tread on (the ground barefoot).” We first encounter this etymology in Mujāhid’s *Tafsīr*. Here Sa‘īd b. Jubayr is said to have stated:⁶⁰

Ṭuwan: yaqūlu: ṭa’i l-arda ḥāfiyan ka-mā tadkbulu l-Ka‘bata ḥāfiyan, ya‘nī min barakati l-wādī.

Ṭuwan: God says: tread on the ground barefoot in the same manner as you are used to entering the Ka‘ba⁶¹ barefoot, i.e., due to the sacredness of the valley.

Ibn Jubayr’s interpretation is repeated in al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr*,⁶² together with a more concise tradition of ‘Ikrima on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās, to the effect that *ṭuwan* means *ṭa’i l-wādiya*, “Tread on the valley.”

The odd point here is that the form *ṭa’* is the imperative of *waṭi‘a*, whereas the form *ṭuwan* is derived from the root *ṭ-w-y*. Therefore one wonders how the etymology of *ṭuwan* came to be connected with *ṭa’*. It seems that the vocal resemblance of *ṭuwan* and *ṭa’* has made such a conflation possible. To this may be

⁶⁰ Mujāhid, *tafsīr*, I, 394.

⁶¹ The Arabic *rasm* of the “ka‘ba” (كعبة) looks very much like the Arabic *rasm* of “his ankle” (كعبه), so that the two words may well interchange with each other. For a version of Ibn Jubayr’s tradition with “his ankle” instead of “the Ka‘ba,” see Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf wal-bayān*, VI, 240: *kaymā yadkbulu ka‘bahu min barakati l-wādī*. In this version, the idea is that Moses had to tread on the ground barefoot in order to let some of its holiness enter his body through his bare ankles.

⁶² Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, XVI, 111 (on Q 20:12).

added the fact that the order given to Moses to stand barefoot on the ground appears in a *sūra* that begins with the “mysterious” letters *ṭā’-ḥā’* (Q 20:1). Some exegetes have explained that these letters represented the imperative *ṭa’ḥā*, “tread on it,” i.e., tread on the ground with both feet at once; God gave this instruction to Muḥammad when the latter prayed standing on one foot at a time.⁶³ This interpretation takes advantage of the fact that the letters *ṭā’-ḥā’* precede a verse in which God assures Muḥammad that he is not meant to suffer (*li-tashqā*) (Q 20:2); therefore the imperative behind the form *ṭā’-ḥā’* can be explained as though designed to prevent the prophet from exerting himself too much in prayer. Eventually the perception of the letters *ṭā’-ḥā’*, in the sense of the imperative *ṭa’ḥā*, seems to have been back-projected on the etymology of *ṭuwan*, which thus acquired the meaning of the same imperative. After all, if God had chosen to give Muḥammad the order to tread on the ground with two feet, disguised as *ṭā’-ḥā’*, he could just as well have given Moses the same instruction disguised as *ṭuwan*. It is significant that while the interpretation of *ṭuwan* in the sense of *ṭa’*, “tread on,” is well represented in the commentaries on Q 20:12, it is only very rarely mentioned in connection with Q 79, in which the letters *ṭā’-ḥā’* do not appear.

⁶³ Zajjāj, *Ma‘ānī l-Qur‘ān*, III, 349 (*ay ṭa’i l-arda bi-qadamayka jamī‘an*). See also Ibn ‘Aṭīyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz*, XI, 62; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq al-tanzīl*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1977), II, 528.