Quranic Fire and Quranic Sins: The Eschatological Curses of Q 111 (Sūrat Al-Masad) and Q 85 (Sūrat Al-Burūǧ) In Their Late Antique Apocalyptic Context

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The Qur'ān frequently describes the hellfire that will punish sinners. Yet the Qur'ān rarely attributes 'fire' to persons in the present life. The major exceptions are (1) the Abū Lahab ("Father of Flame") who Q 111 condemns to hell; and (2) the "companions of the pit" of Q 85, who apparently killed martyrs with fire. Perhaps not coincidentally, Q 111 and 85 are also two of the most poorly-understood surahs. They are both very early; Theodor Nöldeke classified Q 111 as the third surah—following the prophetic commissions of Q 96 and 74—and Q 85 as the twenty-first surah. Q 111 and 85 are normally treated as minor quranic curiosities, with little bearing on the prophetic function. This paper argues, by contrast, that they were crucial to the early prophetic mission. Two analytical principles will be used to elucidate and recover the forceful logic that animates both surahs.

First, early quranic theology embodies a precise economy of salvation, in which future punishments and rewards are rigidly equivalent to a person's prior good or evil acts. Its individual eschatology is symmetric, in Iranian fashion—it contrasts heavenly feasts, clothing, and companions against hellish feasts, clothing, and companions. Many surahs exalt in how God will pair righteous men with pure females in paradise, the houris. Yet traditional exegesis breaks logical symmetry here. When Q 111 proclaims that the Father of Flame will soon enter hell *wa-mra'atuhū ḥammālata l-ḥaṭab*, meaning "and his woman (will be) the firewood carrier," the tradition does not interpret this woman to be a hellish counterpart of the houris, created to punish Abū Lahab. Instead she is asserted to be the *literal wife* of a Meccan man who was *literally named* 'Abū Lahab.' Against that view, I will argue that the individual eschatology of basal surahs parallels late-antique Zoroastrianism, in which male humans were believed to meet female embodiments of their own ethical state—good or evil—after death. Sinners would then be eternally tormented by their own sins. Exemplifying such an Iranian eschatological accounting, Q 111 proclaims that Abū Lahab will be punished by eternal joinder to the female embodiment of his own worldly sins. In a similar mode, Q 85 proclaims how its wicked men would be punished by their own actions. When the companions of the pit had martyred the believers trapped beneath them, they were heaping firewood beneath their own selves in hell.

Second, the earliest surahs were intensely anti-Sasanian, as I have argued in a recent book and several articles.[1] The warner began his career by proclaiming that God's final judgment had begun to manifest via angelic agency against Khusrow II, the Sasanian *šāhānšāh*. The Abū

[1] D. Beck, *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān: From Anonymous Apocalypse to Charismatic Prophet*, Vol. 2 in Apocalypticism: Cross-Disciplinary Explorations, eds. Carlos A. Segovia, Isaac W. Oliver, and Anders K. Petersen (New York: Peter Lang, 2018); id., "The Astral Messenger, the Lunar Revelation, the Solar Salvation: Dualist Cosmic Soteriology in the Early Qur'ān," forthcoming in Remapping *Emergent Islam: Texts, Social Settings, and Ideological Trajectories*, ed. Carlos A. Segovia (Amsterdam University Press, 2019); id., "Anti-Sasanian Apocalypse And The Early Qur'ān: Why Muḥammad Began His Career As A Prophet Who Genuinely Prophesied" [forthcoming].

Lahab of Q 111 was thus Khusrow II, the same tyrant whose anticipated divine punishment formed the core prophetic message that Q 108, 96, 74, and 68 relate. In turn, Q 85 refers to the Sasanian massacre of Jerusalem's Christians in 614 CE, which took place at the center of the *qiblah* (prayer direction) of Muḥammad and his early followers. Our most detailed contemporary account of Jerusalem's conquest—that by the Palestinian monk Strategios—centers on his narration of how the victorious Sasanian forces confined their Christian captives in a dry reservoir, whereupon thousands were killed by the heat exposure and crush:

> [The Sasanian leader] seized the remainder of the people and shut them up in the reservoir of Mamel, which lies outside the city at a distance of about two stades from the tower of David. And he ordered sentinels to guard those thus confined in the moat. O my brethren, who can estimate the hardships and privations which befell the Christians on that day? For the multitude of people suffocated one the other, and fathers and mothers perished together owing to the confinement of the place. Like sheep devoted to slaughter, so were the crowd of believers got ready for massacre. Death on every side declared itself, since the intense heat, like fire, consumed the multitude of people, as they trampled on one another in the press, and many perished without the sword.[2]

Q 85 constitutes a prophetic reaction to initial reports about this Sasanian atrocity, indicting and convicting the men of their crime. Just as they were guilty of forcing the holy city's believers to die from burning heat in a trench, so Q 85 promised that these men would burn while imprisoned in hell—their criminal actions had done this to their own future selves. Many of the surah's obdurate interpretive problems can be elegantly resolved in this context.

The article concludes with some observations on how, when, and why the dominance of such generalized anti-Sasanian themes in basal quranic oracles became displaced by Ḥiğāz-isolated ideology. I will suggest that displacement was facilitated by a systematic abstraction and reinterpretation of the prophet's earliest oracles—and argue that the prophet himself drove this shift from generalized regional apocalypse to a Ḥiğāz-centered prophetic campaign. But to begin the analysis, I will focus upon a neglected quranic soteriological principle: *rewards and punishments in the afterlife will exactly embody a human's prior actions*.

1. Marriage To Houris As A Heavenly Reward, Equal In Value To The Pre-Resurrection Deeds Of Righteous Men

Pious actions, by a process of reification, acquire a concrete form, that of the houris, a motif that appears regularly in traditionist eschatology, especially in the context of the Day of Judgment, where one's good deeds (ḥasanāt) and bad deeds (sayyi'āt) acquire a visible form and act as witnesses against those who committed them. – Christian Lange[3]

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[2] Strategios, *The Capture of Jerusalem by the Persians in 614 AD*, tr. Frederick C. Conybeare, *English Historical Review* 25 (1910): 502-517.

[3] Christian Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2016): 143.

The houris are perhaps the most striking point in which the quranic afterlife differs from the afterlives asserted by other monotheisms of late antiquity.[4] The Qur'ān declares that men will receive *kawā'iba 'atrāban* in heaven, "full-breasted (females) well-matched." (Q 78:33). These feminine rewards will be given *'aṭā'an ḥisāban*, as "a gift (according to) account" (Q 78:36), meaning that God rewards his servants in an amount commensurate to the value of their deeds. The most specific description of heavenly companions is in Q 56, which promises that the "foremost" believers will receive *ḥūrun 'īnun*, like protected pearls, as a reward for what they used to do, *ǧazā'an bi-mā kānū ya'malūn*[a] (Q 56:22-24). For the "companions of the right," God similarly proclaims in Q 56:35-38 that he has made females who are *'abkāra*[n] *'uruban 'atrāba*[n] *li-'aṣḥābi l-yamīn*[i]. Paret renders this as "Jungfrauen gemacht, heiss liebend und gleich-altrig," and Droge similarly translates it as "Surely We produced them specially, and made them virgins, amorous, (all) of the same-age."

Q 56:36-38 might be more precisely read, however, to declare that God made these maidens "new/youthful, amorous, and well-matched/for the companions of the right hand," paralleling Q 56:22-24.[5] Calling the houris *atrāban* conveys that they are 'closely matched,' certainly, but we want to know what they match, and why that matching is important. It is usually said that the houris are called *atrāban* because they are all the same age, which later tradition specifies as thirty-three. That would be superfluous for beings created *ex nihilo*, however, and it would be rather pointless for God to proclaim group age-parity as if it were a wondrous characteristic. Sometimes this term is taken to mean the houris will be the same age as the men, as with Sarwar's translation of 78:33, "maidens with pear-shaped breasts who are of equal age (to their spouses)." The Qur'ān uses *atrāban* just three times, in Q 78:33, 56:37, and 38:52, each describing the maidens that the righteous will receive in paradise. Other derivatives of the *t-r-b* root normally mean "dust" in quranic Arabic. The only exception is Q 86:7, *yaḫruǧu min bayni l-ṣulbi wa-l-tarā'ib*[i], meaning "which issues from between the loins and the ribs

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[4] The houris have long troubled the sensibilities of non-Islamic monotheisms. Because he envisions the Qur'ān as a sort of palimpsest constructed over orthodox Syriac Christian foundations, Luxenberg has infamously argued that quranic references to *ḥūr 'īn* were originally Syriacisms meaning 'white grapes.' See Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Quran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin: Schiler, 2007). That is impossible. The Qur'ān promises heavenly rewards that cannot be reconciled with clerical Christianity or rabbinical Judaism. Conceptualizing quranic heaven as if it were a 'corrupted' derivative of Ephremic paradise, whereby the theologian's paradisal metaphors were literalized via their popular repetition, overlooks the fact that Ephrem's paradisal imagery itself derives from Iranian paradisal imagery, desexualized into ascetic metaphor.

[5] Though usually rendered as "virgins," all newly-created beings must, tautologically, be sexually virgin. The three uses of the *b-k-r* root to describe maidens in Q 2:68, 56:36, and 66:5 can be read consistent with the nine other quranic uses of the *b-k-r* root, which all either mean "early" (Q 54:38) or "morning" (Q 3:41, 40:55, 19:11, 19:62, 25:5, 33:42, 48:9, and 76:25). Lane identifies the primary sense of *b-k-r* derivatives as the "beginning of the day," with various other derivations that center on the idea of a "beginning/new." (Lane 239c). Thus its derivatives identify the "first part" or "first born." The root's derivatives also identify a "youthful" camel, or one in a state of "youthful vigor," which can metaphorically describe humans. (Lane, 240b).

[*l-tarā'ib*]." This context[6] expresses the close identity of one thing with its mirror-image counterpart, just as each vertebrate rib forms one of a mirrored pair. Consistent with that sense, Lane notes that *uruban 'atrāban* in Q 56:36 has been explained as meaning "[*s*]*howing love to their husbands; like,* or *equal unto them, or resembling them*: which is a good rendering, as there is no begetting or bearing of children."[7] Resemblance is indeed the more plausible sense here, and comports with the root's use to identify a female who becomes equal to another person.[8]

I therefore suggest that the three quranic uses of *atrāban* mean that God creates the houris as a reward that is *well-matched or equal to* the righteous men who will receive these gifts, just as each rib exactly matches its opposing rib. The Qur'ān repetitively insists that these maidens' value as heavenly rewards is equivalent to the virtuous deeds that earned them. They are in this sense a tangible female embodiment of the believer's righteous acts in his prior life. When it describes the heavenly rewards of the 'foremost,' Q 56:22-23 describes the houris' pure beauty, before Q 56:24 concludes that they are *ǧazā'an bi-mā kānū ya'malūn*[a], "a reward for what they used to do." For the 'companions of the right,' Q 56:36-37 declares that God made their female companions *'abkāran / 'uruban 'atrāban*, specifying qualities he gave these females, before Q 56:38 concludes that they were made this way *li-'aṣḥābi l-yamīni*, as suitable rewards for what the companions of the right had previously done. Q 78:36 calls them and other pleasures of heaven "a payment from your Lord, a gift, a reckoning!," in contrast to the tortures of hell, which Q 78:26-29 describes as "a fitting payment! Surely they were not expecting a reckoning when they called Our signs an utter lie. But We have counted up everything in a Book." The basic idea is a *divine accounting*. In antiquity, Near Eastern lords typically governed their subject populations through written account keeping, which was a specialized technology of political domination. The supreme Lord, by implication, likewise managed his accounts through his heavenly scribes, paying his human servants or punishing them in exacting accordance with their recorded quality of service.

Despite their fertile forms, the houris are thus as pure as the deeds of the righteous. They are described as "companions of modest gaze" (Q 38:52), who have not been touched by man or jinn (Q 55:56). They are *ḥūrun maqṣūrātun fī l-ḫiyāmi*, 'restrained' houris in the pavilions (Q 55:72). Importantly, male believers will permanently 'pair/marry' them, rather than just using them in arbitrary promiscuity. Q 44:54 and 52:20 proclaim that God *zawwaǧnāhum bi-ḥūrin 'īn*[in], meaning that he "will marry them [the righteous men] to houris." Out of the four quranic uses of the noun *ḥūr*,[9] two are in this context of God declaring that he will 'pair/marry' these houris to the resurrected men, an act that is identified with the *z-w-ǧ* root. The Qur'ān does not portray its houris as the unconstrained harems of later medieval fantasy. Each houri is instead a fitting reward that is 'paid' for the pre-death services of the faithful servant to whom God permanently pairs that houri at the resurrection.

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6 See Edward Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams & Norgate 1863) for a discussion at p. 301c.

7 Lane, 300c.

8 Lane, 300b.

9 Q 44:54, 52:20, 55:72, and 56:22.

Although such pairing with a heavenly female companion may seem odd to modern mindsets, it was not unusual in late antiquity, particularly within ideologies that can be classified as expressions of "Chaldean dualism."[10] The eschatology of Pahlavi Zoroastrianism proclaimed that after death men would encounter the feminine form of their own *daēnā*.[11] This *daēnā* mirrored each man's ethical state.[12] When a righteous man dies, he will thus meet his *daēnā* as "his own good acts will come to meet him in the form of a girl, more beautiful and fair than any girl in the world …" By contrast, when a wicked man dies, "a girl approaches, not like other girls. And the wicked man's soul says to that hideous girl: 'who are you, than whom I have never seen a girl more hideous and hateful?' And answering him she says: 'I am no girl, but I am your own acts, O hateful one of bad thought, bad word, bad act, bad inner self."[13] Late-antique Iranian eschatology thus insisted that sinners would encounter a hellish feminine embodiment of their own sinful actions. In the *Dādestān ī dēnīg*, the wicked soul encounters "its sin, in the frightful, polluted shape of a maiden who is an injurer, comes to meet it with the store of its sin."[14] The wicked soul is then dragged to hell, where it is tormented by demons and spirits that resemble and derive their power from the man's prior sins, both in their extent and their nature.[15]

Such eschatological pairings also surfaced in non-orthodox strains of early Christianity.[16] In Valentinian Christianity, each person was sacramentally united with their angelic counterpart. In the Gospel of Philip, this union was conceived as a male-female pairing, such that Jesus declares in the midst of the Eucharist: "You who have joined (hōtr) the perfect light with the holy spirit, unite (hotr) the angels with us also, as being the images (ikōn)." In Manichaeism, believers would encounter their light form after death, a feminine angelic entity who embodied

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[10] See John Reeves, "Manichaeans as ahl-al-Kitāb: A Study in Manichaean Scripturalism," in *Light Against Darkness: Dualism in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and the Contemporary World*, eds. A. Lange, E. Meyers, B. Reynolds II, and R. Styers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011): 250–65, 250–51.

[11] A term originally meaning 'vision/belief' in Avestan, which interestingly is also the source, through later Persian and Aramaic, of the quranic Arabic term *dīn*, meaning religion or profession of faith. See Johnny Cheung, "On the (Middle) Iranian borrowings in Qur'ānic (and pre-Islamic) Arabic," in *Arabic in Context: Celebrating 400 Years of Arabic at Leiden University*, ed. A. Al-Jallad (Leiden: Brill 2017).

[12] For example, the *Hadhokht Nask*, chapter 2, Y. 43, relates Ahura Mazda explaining to Zarathushtra what happens to the soul of a just man at death. See Mary Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (Chicago: Manchester University Press, 1984): 80.

[13] *Menog i Khrad*, Ch. 2:125–78, tr. Mary Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, 82–3.

[14] *Dādestān ī dēnīg*, Part I, Ch. 25, tr. E.W. West, in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 18 (Oxford University Press, 1882).

[15] Ibid., Ch. 33. For hell in Zoroastrianism, see http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hell-i.

[16] For joinder with an angelic counterpart in early Christian tradition, see Charles Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016): 107–144.

and perfected their ethical purity.[17] The idea of a heavenly joinder with a pure feminine counterpart form, who matched the virtue of the resurrected human being, was typically associated with dualist ideologies, in which every form has a counter-form, and a person's conduct in the current world determines the nature of the 'twin' they would join in the next.[18]

This erotic pairing found more muted expression in orthodox Christianity. Ephrem's influential depictions of paradise evidently borrowed their remarkable erotic imagery from Iranian sources. As Sergey Minov notes, "Another, more promising, avenue for understanding the genesis of Ephrem's erotic imagery of paradise opens up if we turn to the Iranian eschatological beliefs."[19] The female spirits (*daēnā*) that the Iranian believers meets in paradise are described as 'beautiful to look at' (*nēk pad didan*), 'well-formed' (*hu-kard*), 'well shaped' (*hu-rust*), and 'full of desire' (*kāmagōmand*).[20] Compare Arthur Jeffery's observation that "Western scholars are in general agreed that the conception of the Houries of Paradise is one borrowed from outside sources, and the prevalent opinion is that the borrowing was from Persia."[21] Jeffery concludes that "it does seem certain that the word *ḥūr* in its sense of whiteness, and used of fair-skinned damsels, came into use among the Northern Arabs as a borrowing from the Christian communities, and then Muhammad, under the influence of the Iranian hurūst, used it of the maidens of Paradise."[22] Johnny Cheung has recently endorsed Jeffery's etymological thesis, although he more precisely derives *ḥūr'īn* from Middle Persian **hūrōyīⁿ/ₘ* (meaning "of good growth" and etymologically related to *hūrust*), which was borrowed into Arabic as **ḥūrū'īn*, and then converted to the singular collective form **ḥūr'īn*.[23] The "white eyes" meaning was produced by re-analyzing this old Iranian loanword as an Arabic compound.

This is a relatively conventional picture of the quranic houris. It converges with how Shi'ism emphasizes the houris' equivalence to the believers' righteousness. But recognizing the houri's precise equivalence to the deeds of righteous men (in contrast to the wildly-asymmetrical harems of later lore) is crucial, because the precision and inerrancy of the Lord's ethical

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17 *Kephalaia*, Chapter 9, 41:10–25, I. Gardner tr. Within anti-sexual Manichaean theology, this joinder with a feminine light form effectuates a permanent angelicization, which perfects the resurrected believer into their divine form, rather than being a sexualized liaison.

18 See C. Stang, *Our Divine Double*. This Iranian-type symmetry is in many ways more logical than the idea that existing earthly marriages will continue forever in heaven, and it is arguably more appealing than the orthodox Christian idea that marriage will be replaced by eternal angelic virginity (as Jesus declares in Matthew 22:30).

19 See Sergey Minov, "Gazing at the Holy Mountain: Images of Paradise in Syriac Christian Tradition," in *The Cosmography of Paradise: The Other World from Ancient Mesopotamia to Medieval Europe*, ed. A. Scafi, (London: Warburg Institute, 2016), 137–62, 155–61.

20 Ibid.

21 Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Cairo: Oriental Institute, 1938): 117.

22 Ibid., 120.

23 J. Cheung, "On the (Middle) Iranian borrowings in Qur'ānic (and pre-Islamic) Arabic," in *Arabic in Context*. Interestingly, this means the description of the houris as *kawā'iba* in Q 78:33 could be considered an Arabic calque of the original Iranian *hūrōyīⁿ/ₘ*!

accounting system is fundamental to how the Qur'ān articulates the relationship between human conduct and the future rewards and punishments of human selves. Before I turn to the punishment side of the Lord's bookkeeping ledger, I note that many Iranian-style dualist themes of the earliest surahs were suppressed in the later quranic corpus. The houris were no exception. Christian Lange summarizes a chronological point that Nöldeke first observed:

> [T]he second Meccan period sees the gradual disappearance of the houris, who are last mentioned in Q 44:54. At the same time, from the second Meccan period, the earthly wives of believers are explicitly included among the inhabitants of paradise (43:70). Eventually, in the Medinan period, they become 'purified spouses.' (azwāj mutahhara, 2:25, 3:15, 4:57). In the third Meccan period (13:23, 40:8), the 'righteous' fathers and the children of the believers are brought in to complement the promise that families will enter paradise intact. The family-oriented picture that thus emerges also correspond to the fact that after the middle Meccan period the Quran offers no more descriptions of wine banquets in paradise.[24]

Later surahs diverged from the Iranian-style eschatological imagery that pervades more basal surahs. Heavenly continuations of existing worldly family structures encroached upon marriages to the visible embodiment of a man's[25] pre-resurrection deeds.

2. The Food, Clothing, And Female Companions of Sinners in Early Quranic Hell

The hell of early surahs is depicted as a horrid inversion of quranic heaven. As Nicolai Sinai notes, there is a "contrastive juxtaposition of the saved and damned ... [m]any of the passages in question fall into two sections, one devoted to a description of the delights of paradise, the other devoted to the torments of hell."[26] Thus "descriptions of the fate of the saved and of the damned often mirror each other in specific details ... [s]cholars sometimes refer to such contrastive juxtapositions as 'diptychs.'"[27]

Quranic descriptions of paradise emphasize that righteous men will enjoy magnificent feasts, clothing, and female companions in heaven. Logically, one would expect sinning men to be punished by atrocious food, clothing, and female companions in hell. I will discuss each of those 'diptychs' in sequence, and argue that early surahs indeed follow this logic.

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[24] Christian Lange, "Revisiting Hell's Angels in the Quran," in *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions*, edited by C. Lange (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 74–99, 92.

[25] I write "man" here, because the Qur'ān (like late antique Zoroastrian scriptures) appears much less concerned with delineating how this system works for women. For a discussion of this asymmetry, see Karen Bauer, "The Male Is Not Like The Female (Q 3:36): The Question of Gender Egalitarianism in the Qur'ān," *Religious Compass* 3/4 (2009): 637-54.

[26] Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2017): 163.

[27] Ibid.

The Food of Quranic Hell

The food of quranic hell is tied to its *zaqqūm* tree. The Qur'ān asserts that "Surely the tree of al-Zaqqūm is the food of the sinner, like molten metal boiling in the belly, as hot (water) boils." (Q 44:43-46). The Qur'ān contrasts this hideous feast with how the righteous will be secure in paradisal gardens and springs, wearing clothes of silk and brocade, married to houris, and "will call for every (kind of) fruit, secure." (Q 44: 51-55). In Q 56:27-56, the believers are said to enjoy thornless trees, flowing water, and many fruits, along with beautiful female maidens. The sinners, however, "will indeed eat from the tree of Zaqqūm, and fill your bellies from it, and drink on (top of) it from boiling water." Q 37 explains that this *zaqqūm* tree emerges from the "root of Gehenna." (Q 37:64). The tree is the 'feast' of sinners. "Its fruits are like the heads of the satans, and they eat from it, and fill their bellies from it. Then on (top of) it they have a drink of boiling (water). Then their return is to the furnace." (Q 37:65-68). This hellish feast punishes the sinners for their prior unbelief. "Taste (it)! Surely you are the mighty, the honorable. Surely this is what you doubted about." (Q 44:50). Q 88:1-16 may be the earliest example of the heavenly feast against hellish labor contrast. It describes how sinners will be forced to labor, drink from a boiling spring, and have no food except dry thorns. They will be burned by fire. The righteous, on the other hand, will be in gardens.

Why is there a horrifying tree in hell, and why is it central to hell's geography? In dualist cosmologies, since there is a Tree of Life in heaven, there would naturally be a Tree of Death in hell. "The doctrine of the two principles is symbolized in Manichaeism by the image of the two trees, the tree of life and the tree of death."[28] The 'Tree of Death' symbolizes evil matter, and was prominently depicted in Manichaean literature and art. "It is as unlike the Tree of Life as a king is unlike a pig."[29] The merger of such tree-of-death dualist imagery with the idea that sinners must eat hellish counterparts to heaven's feasts is likely a quranic innovation.[30]

The Clothing of Quranic Hell

The Qur'ān's clothing imagery displays the same juxtaposition. In Syrian and Mesopotamian theologies of Late Antiquity, clothing metaphors were some of the most profound expressions of the human self. Thus "[p]erhaps the most frequent of all Ephrem's images is that of putting on and taking off clothing."[31] In *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*, I argue that God's summoning of his Arabian servant to his prophetic mission in Q 73:2 and 74:1 as one who "wraps" or "cloaks" himself should be understood as a reference to the addressee's assumption of a purified state by his devoted service to his deity, theologically analogous to the "Robe of Glory" that all

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[28] Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, "Manichaean Art on the Silk Road," in *Studies in Manichaean Literature and Art*, eds. M. Heuser, H-J Klimkeit (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 300–313.

[29] Samuel Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992): 13.

[30] Being the earliest quranic example of the paradise/hell contrast, Q 88 simply depicts the sinners as eating thorns—which evidently were not yet directly equated with the 'tree of hell.'

[31] Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, rev. ed. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publication, 1992): 25.

Christians assumed via the sacrament of ritual baptism.[32] This assumption of a purified state, emptied of worldly aims, permits God's angelicized servant to temporarily enter and leave paradisal land, like young Moses at the burning bush (cf. Q 95, where the 'secure land' that the divine speaker declares his addressee is authorized to enter is the foothills of paradise itself, not "Mecca"). In this respect, the summoned Arabian prophet has been guided to preliminarily assume his paradisal form, while still alive, just as Syrian Christian ascetics lived angelic lives that prefigured their future eschatological state, already partly dwelling in their Lord's paradise.

Like Syriac Christianity, the Qur'ān equates divine robes with heavenly purity. In Q 7:26 God proclaims that he sent down clothing for Adam and Eve after the Fall, but that *libasu al-taqwā* [robes of righteousness] are *ẖayrun* [best], being *min āyāti al-lāhi*, among the signs of God. When it comes to post-resurrection garb, however, the Qur'ān describes the believers' paradisal robes in unmistakably Iranian terms. Q 18:31 explains that believers will wear *ṯiyāban ẖuḍran min sundusin wa-istabraqin*, 'green robes of silk and heavy brocade,' a supremely Persian description of the believers' paradisal garb, with green heavenly clothing being characteristic of Zoroastrian paradise, in contrast to the white clothing that biblical traditions preferred.[33] *Istabraq*, meaning brocade, is likewise a defining example of a Persian loan word in quranic Arabic, along with *firdaws* itself, paradise (albeit the latter is an indirect loan).

Does this Persian-style heavenly clothing, which rewards/embodies the ethical purity of the righteous, have a punishing counterpart in hell? It does, although to my knowledge the Qur'ān explicitly proclaims this symmetry just once. "And you will see the sinners on that Day bound together in chains, their clothing (made) of pitch, and the Fire will cover their faces, so that God may repay everyone for what he has earned." (Q 14:49–51). The sinners of hell are clothed in pitch and fire, as a payment that matches their wicked prior actions (and which, in a profound sense, constitutes their own true self). Q 22:19 also briefly mentions the clothing that sinners will be forced to wear in hell, declaring that "clothes of fire have been cut for them."

The Female Companions of Quranic Hell

Finally, does the early Qur'ān continue its rigid diptych logic by suggesting that male sinners will be paired with punishing female companions in hell? Christian Lange has observed how Q 44:43-50 and 54:47-56 indicate that unspecified beings will force the sinners to eat and drink the torments of hell, thereby acting as an inversion of the houris in heaven:

> What seems clear is that the "hospitality" offered to those convened around zaqqūm betokens a "cynically inverted world," as Neuwirth puts it, a travesty of the promised banquet in paradise. This means that the beings who force-feed the

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32 D. Beck, *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*, 273-334.

33 Cf. Q 22:23, explaining that those who believe and do good deeds will be adorned in paradise with gold bracelets and pearls, and their clothes will be silk.

> unlucky creatures convened around the zaqqūm tree should be seen as the subterranean counterparts of the houris (ḥūr ʿīn, 44:54) in paradise.[34]

Are any of these hellish counterparts *female* like the houris, however?[35] Were they understood to match each sinner's sins, Zoroastrian style, just as houris match the virtuous deeds of righteous men? And will sinners be eternally 'married' or 'joined' to such counterparts? This issue is complicated by the fact that the Qur'ān presents a complex and heterogeneous picture of how the sinning self will encounter its eschatological counterparts. This picture is never very clearly defined, and it evolves over time. But I believe there is convincing evidence that early quranic eschatology encompassed such an opposing-gender punishment function.

Q 81:1–18 begins by invoking the Day of Judgment with a series of eschatological "when" clauses. Q 81:7 declares *wa-iḏā l-nufūsu zuwwiğat*, "and when the souls are paired/married." Paired/married with what? Traditionally, this is claimed to mean that the human soul will be 'paired' with its body at the resurrection. Yet the usage of the *z-w-ğ* root in Q 81:7 parallels God's proclamation in Q 44:54 and 52:20 that righteous men will be "married" to the houris, *zawwağnāhum bi-ḥūrin ʿīnin*. The oath of Q 81:7 may simply identify the same phenomenon. Resurrected human selves, *nufūsu*, would permanently join or 'marry' counterpart selves, opposite-sex beings who would precisely embody each man's ethical state.

Similarly, Q 75:2 swears "by the accusing self," *bi-l-nafsi l-lawāmati*, a famously mysterious entity. Q 75 emphasizes how God will recreate humans on the Day of resurrection, when they must face their fates. But there is a fascinating gender aspect to this confrontation. Q 75:9 declares that on this Day the feminine-gender sun will permanently join [*ğumiʿa*] the masculine-gender moon, as a macrocosmic syzygy.[36] Q 75:13-15 then insists that each human will be informed about his deeds. Q 75:14 declares "No! The human will be a clear proof against himself." A human's ethical self would not disappear at death. Rather that ethical self would confront its resurrected physical human counterpart on the Day.

Now what is the gender of this accusing human self? The macrocosmic lunisolar syzygy of Q 75:9 hints at a corresponding microcosmic human syzygy. Consistent with that, Q 75:14 states *bali l-ʾinsānu ʿalā nafsihī baṣīra*^{tun}, meaning "rather the man (masculine) is towards his

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[34] Christian Lange, "Revisiting Hell's Angels in the Quran," in *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions*, ed. C. Lange (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 74–99, 84.

[35] Lange suggests that these punishing beings might be equated with the *zabāniyah* of Q 96. I disagree. The *zabāniyah* function as dualist sky guardians (akin to their equivalents in Gnosticism and Manichaeism) that prevent unauthorized ascents to heaven. Lange rightly renders *zabāniyah* as meaning the "repellers," following Rudi Paret, but because he focuses on their elaborations in medieval Islamic eschatology, he does not connect this derivation with their dualist-type function of guarding the heavens. As the Lord's servants, these 'repelling' beings will trap impure humans and jinn below in the impure material world (like the nineteen of Q 96) when it is enclosed by the final fire. Pure beings will escape this trap in the lower world by ascending a stage-by-stage path through the cosmic spheres to heaven (see Q 84:18-19).

[36] In Arabic, the word for sun is grammatically feminine, and the word for moon is grammatically masculine.

soul a witness (feminine)." Munther Younes has commented on how this verse *appears* to contain a startling grammatical error, insofar as *baṣīra* is a feminine indefinite noun, which Younes assumes could not possibly be correct here: "It is clear that there is a problem with the word *baṣīra* in v. 14. Its masculine counterpart *baṣīr* is quite common in the Qur'ān, with the clear and consistent meaning of "knowing, seeing" ... in v.14 of this *sūra*, it is understood as an adjective modifying the masculine noun *al-insān*. As it stands, such a construction is grammatically incorrect."[37] Speculating, Younes argues that Islamic tradition may have imposed this 'incorrect' feminine reading to avoid the embarrassment of what grammarians took to be an incorrect case ending in the original verse. If Q 75:14 has correct grammar, however, then this verse just proclaims that on the Day a resurrected man (masculine) shall be a witness (feminine) against his own soul. That function is quite similar to late-antique Zoroastrian eschatology, in which each deceased man will confront the feminine embodiment of his prior acts, his *daēnā*.

Related to these early quranic ideas is the 'accusing body' concept of Q 24:24, 36:65, and 41:20, a somewhat later quranic concept that depicts a person's physical body as something that will testify against them on the Day. This accusing body is described in literal, physicalist terms, and so we might expect it to have the same gender as its pre-death human. Even at the 'Medinan' stage, however, there remain indications that this confrontation would be immediately followed by pairing the human self with an opposite-sex partner, matched by ethical state. Q 24:24 asserts of certain slanderous people that "On the Day when their tongues, and their hands, and their feet will bear witness against them about what they have done." Q 24:25-26 then proclaims "On that Day God will pay them their just due in full, and they will know that God—he is the clear Truth. The bad women for the bad men, and the bad men for the bad women. And the good women for the good men, and the good men for the good women—those are (to be declared) innocent of what they say. For them (there is) forgiveness and generous provision." The accusing body is associated with the idea that males and females will be matched in accordance with their virtue on the Day, as God "pay[s] them their just due in full."

Similarly, Q 37 juxtaposes how God's servants will be matched to houris in heaven (Q 37:40-49) against how the sinners will be judged on the Day (Q 37:22-39). In that context, Q 37:22-23 proclaims "Gather those who have done evil, and *azwāğahum*, and what they used to serve instead of God, and guide them to the path of the Furnace." Interpreters have struggled with what to make of the sinners being forcibly gathered with *azwāğahum*, literally "their paired ones," variously glossing this as "their kinds" (Salih) "their wives" (Pickthall, Droge, Yusuf Ali, Arberry), "their associates" (Shakir), and "their companions (from the devils)" (Mohsin Khan). The "wives" gloss has three obvious problems.[38] First, it breaks the parallel with the following verses about houris. Second, these paired ones are being gathered alongside "what they used to serve instead of God." Third, and most important, why would every wife of a sinning man be

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[37] *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages*, eds. M. Azaiez, G. S. Reynolds, T. Tesei, H. Zafer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016): 403-404 (M. Younes comment).

[38] Conversely the "associates" gloss is completely superfluous here if it simply identifies the other human sinners.

condemned to hell? That would be incompatible with the rigid individualism of quranic eschatology, which is why Khan renders *azwāğahum* as "their companions from the devils."[39] Q 37 appears to be a medial version of the heaven/hell juxtaposition, in which the sinners are gathered together with their 'associates,' who accuse them and are eternally punished along with them—in contrast to God's pairing of his servants with their houris in heaven above.

To summarize, the Qur'ān consistently portrays each pleasure enjoyed by the righteous in heaven as having an equivalent punishment in hell. These rewards and punishments correspond precisely to a man's prior actions. The Qur'ān depicts God as creating the pleasures of heaven and the punishments of hell *ex nihilo*, rather than men bringing them along into the afterlife.[40] God thus creates wonderful housing, food, clothes, and female companions in quranic heaven, which are described with distinctly Iranian imagery. As inverted counterparts, the Qur'ān depicts God as creating hideous housing, food, clothes, and demonic companions, which will torment sinners in hell. Finally, the Qur'ān anticipates that male-female relations will continue after the resurrection, as eternal pairings that precisely match each man's ethical state. In the aggregate, early quranic eschatology appears to envision that God would join men to opposite-sex companions in the afterlife, as a fitting reward or punishment, rather than their contingent pre-death marriages continuing eternally (or male-female sexual relations ceasing entirely, in orthodox Christian fashion). With this background in place, I will now analyze the most explicit quranic example of a female companion in hell: Q 111.

3. Q 111—The Ur-Quranic Opponent And His Infernal Woman

Text of Q 111 – *Al-Masad* (The Fiber)	English Translation by A.J. Droge
1. tabbat yadā 'abī lahabin wa-tabb[a]	The hands of Abū Lahab have perished, and he has perished.
2. mā 'aġnā 'anhu māluhū wa-mā kasab[a]	His wealth and what he has earned were of no use to him.
3. sa-yaṣlā nāran ḏāta lahab[in]	He will burn in a flaming fire,
4. wa-mra'atuhū ḥammālata l-ḥaṭab[i]	and his wife (will be) the carrier of the firewood,
5. fī ğīdihā ḥablun min masad[in]	with a rope of fiber around her neck.

[39] The *Study Quran* gives a wide range of interpretations for *azwāğahum* in Q 37:22-23. Citing *tafsīr*, it notes that the term "could also mean those of their particular sect or creed or their comrades among the satans, to which reference is made in 43:36." Q 43:36 does correspond here, but it lacks Q 37's focus on opposite-sex pairings.

[40] Contrast the practice in antiquity of burying worldly goods (and for some lords even their servants, guards, and female companions) with a deceased human, with the hope that they would be able to enjoy these worldly possessions in their afterlife. The Qur'ān is clear that the only thing a human will bring with him is his bare 'accounts,' i.e. the record of his prior acts.

Q 111 is traditionally taken to be God's curse against Muḥammad's uncle, Abū Lahab, and his wife, Umm Jamil bint Harb. The prophet's uncle is said to have been called Abū Lahab, meaning "Father of Flame," because had reddish (i.e. 'bright/fiery') cheeks.[41] The surah is said to have been revealed after Muḥammad first summoned the Quraysh and told them he was a warner about a tremendous punishment.[42] Annoyed, his uncle allegedly protested "May your hands perish all day. Is this why you have summoned all of us here?" As to her sin, this uncle's wife was said to have once strewn thorns over the prophet's path. Q 111 was then revealed to the prophet, whereby God promised fiery punishment against these two Meccans.

Modern scholars have not quite known what to make of the Q 111 curse. Abū Lahab is the *only* contemporary personal name used in the Qur'ān until the Medinan surahs (where Muḥammad is mentioned just five times,[43] and Zayd just once). Why was this man so important to God? Why did God condemn the prophet's aunt to hell for an unspecified infraction? Why would Abū Lahab's name be unrelated to his sin and punishment, essentially arbitrary, when equating them would seem to be this recitation's principle point?

As explicated by traditional narratives, early quranic references to contemporaneous events and persons often involve God addressing relatively petty, enigmatic, and discontinuous subjects. Scholars generally explain this with a form of Arabian exceptionalism—the prophetic mission was still new. As the prophet's mission advanced, the revelations stopped focusing on inner-Meccan personal conflicts, and the surahs began displaying a more coherent monotheistic message. Some critical scholars, however, argue that these basal utterances may instead have been examples of generalized preaching, which Islamic tradition has secondarily elaborated with pseudo-historical stories about the prophet's Meccan life, generating extrinsic discontinuities. Exemplifying that de-historicizing approach, Gabriel Said Reynolds argues:

> The Qur'ān never identifies Abū Lahab, "Father of Flame," as a historical figure. The phrase might in fact be an allusion to anyone who is doomed to hell. ... Similarly the reference to his wife as a carrier of firewood (*ḥatab*) seems to be a rather artful play on the theme of damnation. The rich, sinful woman will not carry her wealth to the afterlife (Q 111.2) but rather be dragged (Q 111.5) by her

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[41] Abū Lahab appears to be unattested in antiquity as an Arabic name, apart from Q 111 and Islamic traditions about Muḥammad's uncle. However there is one attestation in pre-Islamic Safaitic epigraphy of the name "ben-lahab," meaning "son of flame." There is no way to tell why the man was given this name, but "ben-" names are not uncommon in Safaitic epigraphy, sometimes taking peculiar forms. Examples include ben-gadd (son of fortune), benoh (his son), benha''abd (son of the slave), benallāh (son of Allāh), bengamal (son of a camel), bendādoh (son of his uncle), benkalbat (son of a bitch), and bennagā'at (son of the evil eye). I owe all of these examples to Ahmad Al-Jallad.

[42] Ibn Kaṯīr's *tafsīr* exemplifies the traditional 'occasion of revelation' account of Q 111.

[43] Albeit once as Aḥmad, and two of the other four uses are arguably not proper names.

neck, as she carries instead firewood that will light the flames of her own punishment (Q 111.4).[44]

The strength of such de-historicizing approaches lies in the fact that later surahs often contain what look like generalized restatements of individualized critiques from earlier surahs. Q 68, for example, looks like an early effort to generalize the neo-Pharaoh invective of Q 96 and 74, extending that same condemnation to other equivalent sinners in the warner's community. The prophet's "hater" in Q 108 could be understood in a similar way. Yet such de-historicizing analysis fails to explain the specificity of the condemnation language used in the earliest surahs, and especially by the initial prophetic commissions of Q 96 and 74. These appear directed at a specific contemporary male human, who the recitations' original audiences would evidently recognize from even the most fleeting and abstract allusions—just as with Q 111.

For many reasons, Q 111 is usually taken to be an extremely early surah; Nöldeke placed it third in his chronology. Q 111:1 begins by declaring that Abū Lahab and his hands have perished. Quranic Arabic normally states curses in this optative format, which declares the speaker's desired result to be something *fait accompli* (in English we would say "may he perish" rather than "he has perished"). Q 111 is not inherently phrased as direct divine speech, meaning any human could have uttered Q 111 as his curse or assertion (just as Q 112, 113 and 114 are not inherently phrased as divine speech, and so are introduced with an imperative *qul*, "say"). If we were not informed about its putative context, Q 111 would appear to be a curse uttered against a man who has caused "flame," promising that this man will be eternally punished for his sin. But why was that curse so critical that it would constitute one of the prophet's first revealed proclamations to the Quraysh?

One of the most fundamental problems in quranic studies, whether acknowledged or not, consists of explaining why the earliest recitations—Q 96, 74, 111, and 108 are the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 5th surahs in Nöldeke's chronology, which I will use as a rough heuristic—all center on God's condemnation of a specific powerful male human, assuring the recitation's addressee that this hateful man will be destroyed. The two basal quranic depictions of the warner's prophetic commission, Q 96 and 74, do not involve a message of conversion. Instead, they center on God's delivery of protracted fiery condemnations against one man who wrongly believes himself independent from his Creator, oppresses the pious, and forbids prayer: Q 96:6-19[45] and 74:11-30. From a strictly chronological perspective, the Qur'ān does not begin with its prophet preaching monotheism to polytheists. It begins with God's promise that divine judgment is soon coming against an oppressive neo-Pharaoh type figure, who thinks he is god-like in his gifts and so has

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[44] Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 16.

[45] It is traditionally asserted that Q 96:9-19 was added to Q 96:1-5 at a later juncture. That just repeats the problem: If so, the basal five-verse module was kitted out with verses that portray the initial prophetic commission as being defined by proclaiming the doom coming to a single human opponent, which is difficult to reconcile with traditional claims about the ur-prophetic message. Nor, given that Q 74 portrays the initial prophetic commission in the same way, can treating Q 96:9-19 as a later addition to an archaic core module avoid this problem.

forgotten his dependence upon his Lord above, to whom he must return and account for his sins. The quranic warner, who is summoned via a burning-bush type commission, is depicted as a neo-Moses figure (Q 93-95). He warns about how God's decreed judgment had recently been sent down with his angelic forces for delivery against this arrogant neo-Pharaoh (this being the point of Q 97, where the *qadr* is the act of quantifying decree by which God sets the date for his judgment to manifest below, making it a determinate and inescapable reality, an act of saving divine will that is repeated for every prophetic cycle). That decreed judgment had already begun to visibly manifest as preliminary punishment signs delivered by angelic agency (Q 105, 54).

This is the archetypal prophetic function, familiar from millennia of Near-Eastern precedent (and continuing into our own modern era, particularly in anti-colonial contexts), in which a god's devotee proclaims to his community that he has been sent to deliver the god's message of doom that is coming to an oppressive tyrant (who is usually foreign, or, if domestic, putatively illegitimate). Yet we are assured, traditionally, that Muḥammad cannot have begun his career like such a classic prophet, perceiving and articulating himself in the mode of an overt neo-Moses repetition, because we 'know' that his early revelations were always strictly confined to internal Meccan concerns and ancient events, where no living neo-Pharaoh tyrant existed for him to condemn. Q 111, 108, 96, 74, and 68 are therefore asserted to reflect God's pronouncements on Muḥammad's inner-Meccan conflicts with various shadowy Quraysh figures, two of whom (Abū Lahab and Abū Jahl) bear pejorative *kunyah* names. This traditional view is, I contend, wrong—or much more precisely, its exegetical structures are secondary.

4. Q 111 As An Anti-Sasanian Eschatological Curse, Damning Khusrow II To Hell

By contrast, the prophecies and prophetic figures known to the social anthropologists usually have a different context. Many prophets have arisen during or in the aftermath of a colonial situation and can be grouped with 'protest' or 'millenarian' or 'nativistic' movements. Even when prophecy was a native phenomenon, the data of how it functioned were often collected in the colonial or postcolonial situation, in which the native element had been modified or adapted. There was seldom a king, though there may have been a native leader of some sort, even if not officially recognized by the colonial administration. – Lester L. Grabbe[46]

There is a far more logically-efficient way to resolve these basic interpretive problems. This requires considering the possibility that the prophet's basal recitations embodied a peripheral form of apocalyptic expectation that was still continuous with regional expectations generated by the final Byzantine-Sasanian war (602-628 CE). Muḥammad's mission may have begun in a Meccan context, then, but his initial proclamations of imminent judgment had vast cosmic scope, connected to broader regional developments. At a relatively early juncture, however, this peripheral prophetic mission was progressively *isolated* and *segregated* in a way that refocused on asserting the warner's authoritative charismatic guidance over his own local community–

[46] Lester Grabbe, "Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy from an Anthropological Perspective," in *Prophecy in its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, Martti Nissinen, ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000): 13-33, 15.

producing what I term the Ḥiğāz-isolating condensation of quranic horizons, a transition that accelerates rapidly and dogmatically at the end of the "early Meccan" compositional stage.

Rather than repeating my prior arguments on the subject at length here,[47] I will discuss the specific points that bear on Q 111 and 85. In an anti-Sasanian context, Q 111 would axiomatically be a curse directed against Khusrow II, the Sasanian *šāhānšāh* who was the most powerful man alive at this juncture. Khusrow II ruled over every region the Quraysh would have traded with, all of which had fallen under the inexorably expanding Sasanian dominion—Mesopotamia (the ancient Sasanian capital region), Yemen (conquered 570 CE), Al-Ḥīrah (Khusrow II abolished the Laḫmid dynasty and executed its last ruler al-Nuʿmān III in 602), Syria (conquered 613), Palestine (conquered in 614). In a Near East dominated by his regime, even the most oblique references to Khusrow II would be easily recognized by early quranic audiences, just as if I were to now step outside my home and loudly chant "He wants to build a wall / but he will surely fall," every English speaker in my vicinity would immediately recognize this as a proclamation of doom against Donald Trump. The vagueness of my terms would only underscore how my repetition of this irate proclamation *must* refer to the current American president (since, had I meant something more obscure and localized, I would have been obliged to be much more specific).[48] Likewise with the message of Q 111, as it would have been proclaimed in early 7th century Arabia.

Khusrow II would naturally be cursed as the "Father of Flame" because, beginning in the Arabian context of dissolving the Laḫmid dynasty in 602 CE and executing its last ruler, he launched an unparalleled campaign of Sasanian expansion through military conquest. The Persian king had been restored in 591 via a Byzantine military expedition that defeated the messianic usurper Bahrām-i Chūbīn and placed Khusrow II back on the Sasanian throne. By subsequently abusing God's restoration of him to that unique position, Khusrow II was perceived to have transgressed upon the natural limits of Sasanian rule (like his grandfather Khusrow I had before him). Writing in the mid 7th century, the Armenian historian Pseudo-Sebeos describes Khusrow II as "the Sasanian brigand Apruēz Khosrov, who consumed with fire the whole inner [land], disturbing the sea and the dry land, to bring destruction on the whole earth."[49] As Q 74:11

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[47] See, e.g., D. Beck, *The Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*; id., "The Astral Messenger, the Lunar Revelation, the Solar Salvation"; id., "Why Muḥammad Began His Career as a Prophet Who Genuinely Prophesied."

[48] My oracular curse would have been unintelligible if I had uttered it five years earlier—nobody in 2014 could have understood what this chant meant—and my oracular curse would not likely be understood if I proclaimed it ten years later, in 2029, when different issues will be afoot and different leaders in place. At that later juncture, it would then become possible to radically reinterpret the references of my abstract proclamation. Only within a relatively narrow temporal context would such an abstract curse be easily and directly grasped by my audience.

[49] Pseudo-Sebeos, Ch. 9, tr. R. W. Thomson in *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, 13.

declares, God had made the prophet's opponent *wahīd*, unique, granting this man extraordinary wealth.[50] Yet he shamelessly demanded more, and had set the entire Near East ablaze to get it.

In connection with setting the world ablaze with warfare, the Persian king was also (being the center of the imperial Zoroastrian cult) portrayed as worshiping unholy fire. In narrating the Sasanian conquest of Jerusalem in 614 CE, Strategios relates how Jerusalem's captured Christians were brought to the province of Babylon (where the Sasanian capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon was located), equating Khusrow II's sack of Jerusalem and enslavement of its Christians with the biblical Nebuchadnezzar's sack of Jerusalem and enslavement of its Jews:

> For when we reached Babylon, and they had informed the evil King of our arrival—one day previously he summoned his table-companions and princes, his magi, sorcerers, and diviners, for he imagined that our faith in the Cross was vain. And he said to us: 'Look ye, the might of the fire in which we put our trust, has given us the great city of the Christians, Jerusalem, and their Cross which they trust in and adore.'[51]

Exploiting the unholy fire motif, Christian rhetoric frequently indicted the Persians for "burning" cities and enslaving their populaces, even when (as with the Sasanian conquest of Jerusalem, which Christian accounts uniformly insisted had left the holy city ablaze) archaeology confirms that almost no burning of the city actually took place.[52]

Another fine example of anti-Sasanian rhetoric is Pseudo-Sebeos's narration of the fate of Khusrow I's field expedition in 576 CE. The Armenian historian's narrative combines three classic anti-Sasanian themes: Khusrow I is portrayed as (1) an invading Babylonian tyrant,[53] who (2) brings ungodly Persian fire, and (3) is accompanied by his monstrous war elephants. These

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[50] Q 74:13 also declares that God has given this man *banīna šuhūdan*, meaning "sons as witnesses" (*i.e.* they proclaim his greatness). This could refer to Khusrow II's five biological sons, but it more likely designates the king's subject vassals, who God characterizes as his 'sons' here by using a typical imperial domestic metaphor. The king's *waḥīd* position is derogated by this domestic metaphor, with God depicting his royal power as a contingent gift that differs little in its fundamental nature from the state of other powerful men. He was not *inherently* great. God had temporarily made him so, and could just as easily unmake him if he rebelled. Cf. Daniel 4.

[51] Antiochus Strategos, *The Capture of Jerusalem by the Persians in 614 AD*, tr. Frederick C. Conybeare, English Historical Review 25 (1910): 502-517, 511-12.

[52] See Gideon Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem (614 C.E.)—An Archaeological Assessment," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 357 (Feb. 2010): 35–48. The association between Persian warfare and Persian fire remains strong even today, as exemplified by the best-selling popular history of the Greco-Persian wars, Tom Holland, *Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West* (Anchor Books: 2005).

[53] Eustratius makes this neo-Nebuchadnezzar identification explicit in his account of this battle. "We all know about the incursion into our state by the godless Persians, when Khusro, the new Nebuchadnezzar, came to Sebastea and Melitene." Eustratius, V. Eutychii, 1719–32, tr. in Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars* (London: Routledge, 2002): 155.

three themes are invoked within a Maccabean narrative format, wherein the believers are threatened with destruction by the 'polytheist' royal forces (equated with their menacing elephants, as in 2 Maccabees and 3 Maccabees), until God's last-minute intervention saves them. In this neo-Maccabean mode, Pseudo-Sebeos revels in how God had punished Khusrow I when the king left Sasanian territory and personally invaded Anatolia:

> [T]he Persian king, called Khusro Anushirwan, came in person with a multitude of armed men and many elephants. … And he advanced and came to Melitene and camped opposite it. On the morning of the following day, with great speed they drew up, contingent facing contingent and line facing line, and they engaged one another in battle. The battle intensified over the face of the earth and the battle was fought fiercely. And the Lord delivered defeat to the Persian king and all his forces. They were crushed before the enemies by the edge of the sword and fled from their faces in extreme anxiety. Not knowing the roads of their flight, they went and threw themselves into the great river which is called Euphrates. The swollen river carried away the multitude of fugitives like a swarm of locusts, and not many were able to save themselves on that day. But the king escaped by a hair with a few others, taking refuge in the elephants and cavalry.[54]

As Pseudo-Sebeos continues, "The Fire was seized which the king used to take about with him continually for his assistance, which was considered greater than all fires, (and) which was called by them At'ash. It was drowned in the river with the *mobadhan mobadh* and a further multitude of the most senior people. At all times, God is blessed."[55]

The reader will note the obvious parallels between such neo-Maccabean polemics against the Sasanians and Q 105, the surah of the elephant, which, as I have argued, was originally an oracle asserting that a *visible repetition* of anti-Sasanian judgment had recently manifested. Just as God had punished Khusrow I's Anatolian transgression by annihilating his elephant-centered force in 576 CE, so the newest transgressions by his greedy grandson, Khusrow II, would inevitably meet the same fate. Q 105 thus reminds its addressee about how God's judgment had manifested against the 'Babylonian' forces of Khusrow II,[56] portraying a Sasanian defeat as an

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[54] Pseudo-Sebeos, 68.18–69.8/7–8, tr. in Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars* (London: Routledge, 2002)*:* 155–56.

[55] Ibid.

[56] This efficiently explains the *ṭayran abābīl* of Q 105:3. De Prémare once suggested that *abābīl* is an *afā'īl* form built on the *b-b-l* "Babylon" root, a "plural of a plural" like *aḥābīš* (meaning "lots of Ethiopians."). A. L. de Prémare, "Il Voulut Détruire Le Temple: L'attaque de la Ka'ba par les rois yéménites avant l'islam. Aḫbār et Histoire," *Journal Asiatique* 288.2 (2000): 261–367. Marijn van Putten has described how the derivation *babīlī* (Babylonian) > *abbāl* (Babylonians) > *abābīl* (tons of Babylonians) would parallel *ḥabāšī* (Ethopian) > *aḥbāš* (Ethiopians) > *aḥābīš* (tons of Ethiopians). Q 105 invokes the punishment imagery of Jubilees 11, in which swarms of demonic birds devastated Chaldea's polytheists. The companions of the elephant in Q 105 were thus ruined because the Lord had sent his Babylonian air force to punish the 'Chaldean' Sasanians by delivering his judgment. Q 105 tracks the typical Christian mode of analogizing contemporary Sasanian evils with biblical Babylonian evils.

omen that visibly proved God's final eschatological judgment was imminent.[57] This divination emerged after Khusrow II imprisoned and executed al-Nu'mān III in 602 CE, as part of his efforts to assert more direct control over the Sasanian empire's Arabophone periphery. That Arabian expansion precipitated the conflict with mobile Arab tribes that led to the battle of Ḏū Qār (attributed by modern historians to a date between 604-611 CE), [58] which was likely the initial Sasanian defeat that Q 105 conceptualizes like a neo-Maccabean repetition of prior Sasanian defeats, e.g. Khusrow I's Anatolian debacle in 576 CE.

The ur-quranic significance of Q 106, as a prayer for security on the trade routes by which Quraysh interacted with Arabophone populaces around al-Ḥīrah each year, is also obvious in this context. Quraysh trade was likely threatened by Khusrow II's abolition of the Laḫmid dynasty, along with Sasanian efforts to subordinate trade to royal interests—the over-greedy imperial center was encroaching on political and economic structures vital for the Arabophone periphery's survival. The warner's mission would have emerged in connection with Quraysh concerns about the disruption emerging around al-Ḥīrah, as divided northeastern Arab factions clashed over whether to fight or compromise with Khusrow II's expanding power.[59] For opposing factions, Khusrow II's new expansion campaign would naturally be perceived as a *repetition* of centuries of prior such Sasanian transgressions, and so would be condemned via adapting classic anti-Sasanian structures of perceived omens and divine retributions. In trading with the region, Quraysh would inevitably encounter the syncretic complex of militant anti-Chalcedonian and 'Chaldean dualist' ideas that circulated among mobile Arab factions around al-Ḥīrah,[60] beyond the domination of orthodox clerical and rabbinical authorities.[61] Anti-Sasanian eschatological ideas that were generated in this syncretic Iraqi context would be easily transmitted into the Arabophone periphery (including the Ḥiǧāz), carrying with them the types of 'Iranian' dualist themes and images that are so prominent in the earliest surahs.

For Q 111 to curse Khusrow II as the "Father of Flame," Abū Lahab, is thus congruent with (a) generalized 5th-7th century anti-Sasanian polemics; (b) the principle themes of other basal surahs; and (c) the initial prophetic commission that Q 96 and 74 depict. Q 111 excoriates

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[57] This is the point of the 'split moon' of Q 54:1-4, which is a later reflex of Q 105, portraying the same preliminary manifestation of divine salvation in an Arabian context as a visible 'lunar' omen of the impending final 'solar' salvation, the Day of Judgment. On this subject, see D. Beck, "The Astral Messenger, the Lunar Revelation, the Solar Salvation."

[58] For general background on this conflict, see http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/du-qar.

[59] See Fred Donner, "The Bakr b. Wāʾil Tribes and Politics in Northeastern Arabia on the Eve of Islam," *Stud. Isl.* 51 (1980): 5-38; see also Greg Fischer & Philip Wood, "Writing the History of the 'Persian Arabs': The Pre-Islamic Perspective on the 'Naṣrids' of al-Ḥīrah," *Iranian Studies* 49:2 (2016)247-290. Also cf. Q 68:8-9, centering on how "they" want the warner to compromise, which can hardly refer to polytheism here, but could designate his compromise over accepting the new reality of Sasanian regional domination.

[60] See Isabell Toral-Niehoff, "The 'Ibād of al-Ḥīra: An Arab Christian Community in Late Antique Iraq," in The *Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, eds. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai, M. Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 323–47.

[61] Quranic soteriology pointedly excludes any role for priestly sacrament or rabbinical law.

Khusrow II for the conflict that he, in his greed, had ignited across the Near East. This Sasanian vassal had arrogantly come to believe that he was *independent*, and so was not accountable to the Lord above who had given him his unique earthly position. In his tenth-century historical compilation, Movsēs Dashkurants'i describes where Khusrow II went wrong: "[I]n accordance with his desire, he had successfully imposed his will over all peoples and kingdoms, and had become so powerful and behaved so arrogantly and believed that he had derived his formidable and wonderful kingdom through his own deeds of valour, he did not comprehend that the Most High is lord of an earthly kingdom and He gives it to who he wishes."[62] This same Danielic critique[63]—accusing the Babylonian tyrant of forgetting his complete dependence upon his Creator, and of having contempt for the limits that God's revealed signs had delineated for Sasanian rule—is delivered by surahs like Q 96 and 74 against Khusrow II.

Anti-Sasanian context also explains why Q 111 curses the "hands" of Abū Lahab. This would refer to the king's political power, which encompassed the Sasanian forces, allies, and sympathizers that the *šāhānšāh* marshaled and ordered to implement his will. "Hands" were used to metaphorically describe Sasanian power[64] and its opposing western Christian power.[65] By contrast, the "hands" of a Quraysh uncle cannot be explained in this same way, leaving it unclear why God was so furious with Abū Lahab's "hands" in this initial revelation.

In sum, because he was the Father of Flame in this life, Khusrow II would be punished by burning in the next. His name did not describe his physical appearance. It identified both his sin and its attendant future punishment: The Sasanian king would be punished by an infernal version of his own crimes. The recitation's logical symmetry is perfect.

Restoring that symmetry brings us to the culminating point of my preceding discussion of early quranic eschatology. Khusrow II's "woman" in Q 111:4-5, *mra'atuhū* (the *'imra'at* meaning "wife" or "woman" in quranic Arabic, which originally vocalized the word here as

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62 Movsēs Dashkurants'i, II.10 (130.3–132.5), tr. in G. Greatrex & S. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, 201.

63 Cf. Daniel 4, where Nebuchadnezzar's decreed punishment exemplifies this theme.

64 At the height of his power, Khusrow II sent a letter to Heraclius in which the Sasanian king used majestic plural speech to berate his Byzantine counterpart. "Khosrau, greatest of Gods, and master of the earth, to Heraclius, his vile and insensate slave. Why do you still refuse to submit to our rule, and call yourself a king? Have I not destroyed the Greeks? You say that you trust in your God. Why has he not delivered out of my hand Caesarea, Jerusalem, and Alexandria? And shall I not also destroy Constantinople?" The king's "hands" were understood to define his dominion. For a discussion of this letter, see Charles Oman, *Periods of European History: Period I*, 476–918 (New York: Macmillan, 1893), 206–7. Note that quranic speech essentially adopts the same plural royal speech format, which it adapts to express a message that mankind's true Lord has sent, critiquing the foolish pretensions of his rebellious Sasanian vassal.

65 For example, Sophronius, the Chalcedonian patriarch of Jerusalem, laments in his poem on the city's fall to the Sasanians ""Christ, may you subdue the ill-starred children of God-hating Persia by the hands of the Christians." Sophronius, *On the Capture of Jerusalem*, Phil Booth tr. of *Sophronii Anacreontica*, ed. M. Gigante (Rome 1957): 102–7.

mrātuhū[66]), can be understood as the hideous female embodiment of the king's earthly sins, Zoroastrian-style, rather than as an actual earthly woman who God would punish for unspecified sins alongside her earthly husband. When Khusrow II burned and enslaved the pious populations of the Near East, he was ruining his own counterpart in hell, the female companion that God would permanently pair his resurrected self with. Being the infernal inversion of a pure houri, his woman will be a *horrid slave*, with a rope around her neck, who will be eternally condemned to *heap the firewood* that burns her male counterpart, Khusrow II. She is, in this sense, the king's own accusing self, burdened with his own sins. The wicked Sasanian ruler would receive a Sasanian punishment for his Sasanian sins—his Lord would subject him to an 'Iranian' eschatological fate, in which his sins are precisely embodied by the female attendant who will torment him eternally for his crimes.

Q 111 is then an exquisitely-precise eschatological curse, in which every element performs a necessary function. It formed a crucial part of the prophet's earliest mission. Given its lack of distinctive divine speech format, Q 111 may even have been pre-quranic, in the sense of being originally composed and proclaimed as *the absolute ordained truth*, without thereby asserting that its words were *God's speech rather than human speech*. Such an eschatological curse would be readily generated and disseminated within Arabophone debates over expanding Sasanian power and Khusrow II's transgressions.[67] If Q 111 was composed prior to reports about the initial Arab defeat of Khusrow II's forces at Ḏū Qār (604-11CE) , then it would be unlikely that Q 111 was originally asserted as divine speech, any more than Q 112, 113, 114, or 106 were. The re-conceptualization of such Arabic recitations as revealed divine speech would have been secondary, an adjunct of the warner's epiphanic later perception that God had guided and called him to deliver a reminder about the decreed imminence of the Lord's final judgment.

I will now turn to a parallel eschatological curse.

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[66] Quranic Arabic did not preserve the medial glottal stop indicated by hamzah, on which see Marijn van Putten, "Hamzah in the Quranic Consonantal Text," *Orientalia* 87:1 (2018): 93-120. Marijn has pointed me to one early manuscript, Saray Medina 1a, in which Q 111:4 spells *mrātuhū* defectively, without medial *alif* (as there was no consonantal glottal stop to indicate with hamzah, and the use of *alif* to indicate medial ā was optional in early quranic orthography).

[67] Quranic rhetoric attacks Khusrow II for his *illegitimacy*, insofar as he ascended the Sasanian throne via his complicity in the palace coup that first blinded and later murdered his own father, Hormozd IV. After taking the throne, Khusrow II almost immediately fled in terror from the approaching rebel forces of Bahrām-i Chūbīn. He was restored in 591 CE by a Byzantine expedition that crushed the rebel army. Criticizing his sinful ascension is the point of the "plotting" that Q 74:18-26 castigates, the sinful turning away from the blind man by the "one who considers himself independent" in Q 80:1-10, and the cruelty followed by illegitimacy of Q 68:13. Rather than relating esoteric and disconnected Meccan events, these references repeat a popular attack on Khusrow II's legitimacy, akin to how modern popular political discourse recycles and reuses modular attacks against rulers like Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin. For the coup against Hormozd IV, see http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bestam-o-bendoy. For how Khusrow II's complicity in the coup was decried as a stain that rendered his regime illegitimate, see Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008): 413.

5. Q 85 And The Problems With The Companions Of The Trench

Text of Q 85:1-9 – Al Burūǧ (The Towers)	English Translation by A.J. Droge
1. wa-l-samāʾi ḏāti l-burūǧ[i]	1. By the sky full of constellations,
2. wa-l-yawmi l-mawʿūd[i]	2. by the promised Day,
3. wa-šāhidin wa-mašhūd[in]	3. by a witness and what is witnessed!
4. qutila ʾaṣḥābu l-ʾuḫdūd[i]	4. May the companions of the Pit perish
5. l-nāri ḏāti l-waqūd[i]	5. the Fire full of fuel—
6. ʾiḏ hum ʿalayhā quʿūd[un]	6. when they are sitting over it,
7. wa-hum ʿalā mā yafʿalūna bi-l-muʾminīna šuhūd[un]	7. and they (themselves) are witnesses of what they have done to the believers.
8. wa-mā naqamū minhum ʾillā ʾan yuʾminū bi-llāhi l-ʿazīzi l-ḥamīdi	8. They took vengeance on them only because they believed in God, the Mighty, the Praiseworthy,
9. allaḏī lahū mulku l-samāwāti wa-l-ʾarḍi wa-llāhu ʿalā kulli šayʾin šahīdun	9. the One who—to Him (belongs) the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. God is a witness over everything.

Q 85 is one of the most difficult texts in the Qur'ān. Although the recitation's meaning was presumably obvious for its original audiences, Islamic tradition did not agree about what historical event this surah refers to. Ibn Kaṯīr and Ṭabarī, for example, relate competing theories. As the *Study Quran* explains, "[m]any stories attempt to identify the *inhabitants of the pit.*"

The lead theory has usually been that Q 85 narrates when followers of Ḏū Nuwās (in his own South Arabian, Yūsuf As'ar Yaṯ'ar), the Jewish king of pre-Islamic Ḥimyar, massacred South Arabian Christians in a fiery trench. That this king massacred Najrān's Christians is beyond doubt. The massacre took place in 523 CE, and it motivated the subsequent Axumite conquest of South Arabia. As Hagith Sivan notes in reviewing an edited volume on the subject: "The events of 522-523 received extraordinary coverage. We have sources in Syriac, Greek, Geez, Sabean, Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Hebrew, Aramaic, some with Chalcedonian bias, others reflecting the view of miaphysites, yet more with a Nestorian twist. Virtually all the sources display one striking feature in common, namely anti-Judaism."[68]

The intense coverage of these events is part of the problem. Our many sources relating this massacre do not generally involve a fiery trench, much less center on it. Of the Christian sources, only the *Acta S. Arethae* involves any reference to a fiery pit. Paragraphs 21 and 22 of the *Acta* tell how a woman was seized by the king's troops while she was watching the execution of Ḥāriṯ, the leader of Naǧrān's Christians. The woman's small son ran to the king and tried to secure his mother's release. The king, oddly, proposed to adopt this boy, but he bit the king's leg.

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[68] Hagith Sivan, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (2011.05.47), reviewing Joëlle Beaucamp, Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet, Christian Julien Robin (ed.), *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux Ve et VIe siècles: regards croisés sur les sources: [actes du colloque de november 2008]. Monographies, 32* (Paris: Association des amis du Centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance 2010).

Having freed himself, the boy hurled himself into a pit of fire where his mother had been cast. In translating and commenting on *The Book of the Ḥimyarites*, Axl Moberg notes that this *Acta* story "is the only instance, in the Christian traditions of the persecution in Najrān, of a pit filled with fire, that could be brought into relation with the famous *uḫdūd* of Sura LXXXV, 4 in the Koran."[69] Christian sources generally describe the Najrān martyrs as being killed in the open, or burned in a church, whereupon their dead bodies were cast into graves outside the city. They were not killed in a trench. Casting doubt on Q 85's connection to the Najrān martyrdom, Moberg notes that "a pit filled with fire is no very prominent feature in the narrative of the Acta, and perhaps had no place at all in the Book of the Himyarites. Furthermore, the Arabic word *uḫdūd* scarcely is, from an etymological point of view, the exact word that one would have expected for a pit or hollow. It implies a long trench, a furrow, and I freely confess that I should like to find out how to use it in this sense even in the passage in question."[70] Mobel notes here that Ṭabarī relates two other potential contexts for Q 85, one being in Persia, and another being the biblical prophet Daniel.

Traditional exegesis of Q 85 has many other problems. The tradition was not able to resolve whether the 'companions of the pit' were *the believers had been killed in a fiery pit*, or rather *the oppressors who should be killed* for what they had done to the believers in a fiery pit.[71] The "companions of the trench," *aṣḥābu l-uḫ'dūdi*, were thus the perpetrators of this atrocity, or else they were its victims. In turn, the phrase *qutila aṣḥābu l-uḫ'dūdi* meant "slain were the companions of the pit" or else it meant "slain be the companions of the pit," with the perfect tense verb *qutila* either relating a prior event, or else being an optative future curse.

Q 85 has proven equally impenetrable for modern scholarship. *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary*, for example, presents comments on Q 85 by eleven critical scholars.[72] They do not agree on even relatively basic aspects of the surah's language, grammar, and references. As with Q 111, some scholars try to resolve this impasse with a de-historicizing approach, construing Q 85:1-9 as *generalized preaching* that was later either misinterpreted or altered to relate a specific historical event. Having once favored the Najrān hypothesis, Richard Bell later decided that it was untenable, and Q 85 instead refers to Gehenna (or perhaps to Quraysh who were slain at Badr). In this vein, Rudi Paret translates Q 85 into German as a sort of generalized preaching about hell,[73] which Christian Lange concludes is "rather plausible."[74]

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69 Axel Moberg, *The Book of the Himyarites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924): xxxii.

70 Ibid., xlvii.

71 Thus the *Study Quran*, a modern example of traditionist Islamic exegesis, renders Q 85:4 in English as 'May they perish, the inhabitants of the pit,' but annotates the verse as "Another reading is, 'Slain were the inhabitants of the pit.' " *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed H. Nasr et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 2015): 1497.

72 *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages*, eds. M. Azaiez, G. S. Reynolds, T. Tesei, H. Zafer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016): 405-411.

73 Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz von Rudi Paret*, 8th ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012): 505-6.

By far the most sophisticated de-historicizing analysis of Q 85 is that by Manfred Kropp, who interprets Q 85:1-9 as a missionary's eruption of fury at those who oppress the believers.[75] According to Kropp, "[a]fter 'purging' the concealed speakers and addressees the passage appears to be an enraged outburst of a frustrated missionary directed to his followers, but primarily to or against his opponents."[76] This expression of missionary rage was then secondarily transformed into a quranic recitation, and elaborated into divine speech format, generating the full Q 85. Ingenious as it is, Kropp's analysis requires a major reinterpretation of the surah's language. For example, he renders *l-uḫdūd* as "the glazing flame" by disambiguating the *rasm* as *uǧdūd*, a misread Aramaicism.

Such de-historicizing interpretations are most convincing insofar as they help explain the surah's *juridical language and imagery*. Q 85 reads like a searing indictment of men who maintain their innocence, which is difficult to reconcile with their role in a historical massacre. Ḏū Nuwās, for example, propagandized his Najrān massacre, and incited other Arabian rulers to follow suit. His responsibility is openly proclaimed by South Arabian state inscriptions like Ry 507 and Ja 1028. Like modern ISIS atrocities, the massacre's entire point was to generate intense public fear of its actors, who were eager to assert their responsibility. Historicizing exegesis of Q 85 struggles to explain the surah's juridical theme, because the bad actors in such stories do not deny what they had done, and could not plausibly claim innocence if they had wanted to.

Yet it remains equally difficult to avoid the conclusion that Q 85 addresses an *actual historical massacre* (hence Bell's speculation that it may refer to Badr). Major interpretive contortions are required to fully de-historicize the surah's references. The recitation appears to rage against a genuine martyrdom, rather than histrionically complaining about general oppression. Gerald Hawting rightly observes as follows: "Some sort of play on words involving the root Š-H-D seems to be taking place in this part of the sūra (vv. 3, 7 and 9), and one wonders if this is connected with the use of that root to convey the notion of martyrdom."[77] Q 85 indeed appears to equate the men's witnessing of their own actions, in connection with their martyring of the believers, with these men's guilt and inevitable punishment. How can these vexing interpretive conflicts be reconciled?

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74 C. Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions*, 62.

75 Manfred Kropp, "Koranische Texte als Sprechakte: am Beispiel der Sure 85," in *Vom Koran zum Islam*, Vol. 4, eds. M. Gross and Karl-Heinz Ohlig (Berlin: Schiler, 2008): 483–91; Manfred Kropp and Robert Kerr, "Exegetische Überlegungen zu Sure 85, 1-9," *Imprimatur* 2 (2018): 81-84.

76 M. Kropp, *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary*, p. 409.

77 G. Hawting, *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary*, p. 408.

6. The Martyrdom of Jerusalem's Christians in 614 CE, When The Sasanian Forces Trapped The Holy City's Believers In A Dry Reservoir, Killing Them *En Masse*

In the fateful year 614 the armies of the Sasanian king Khosroes II set up siege-towers outside Jerusalem, breached its walls, and invaded the city. The invasion was the most devastating event to befall the ancient and holy city since the Roman forces had brought an end to the rebellion of Bar Kokhba in 135 and expelled the Jewish population. – G.W. Bowersock[78]

The massacre of Jerusalem's Christians by Sasanian forces in 614 CE was the most significant mass martyrdom of the early 7th century. It took place at the center of the prayer direction (*qiblah*) that Muḥammad and his early followers are said to have prayed towards, multiple times each day, during the prophet's entire Meccan period (610-22). Even if one did not accept my arguments about the dominance of anti-Sasanian polemics in the earliest Meccan surahs, one must consider the prevalence of anti-Sasanian themes in the later 'Meccan' surahs. For example, Q 30:2-5 proclaims that the Romans had recently been defeated in a nearby land, but would soon prevail against their unspecified enemy. Q 17:1-10 relates a series of *Straflegenden*, starting with Moses and Noah[79] and ending in the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, with the message being that God would surely repel any further attempt by anonymous forces to "return" to Jerusalem; the surah portrays an anticipated divine repulsion of an attack on Jerusalem as the decreed culmination of all God's prior signs. The Alexander Legend employed in Q 18:83-102 is plainly related to anti-Sasanian propaganda, as scholars have demonstrated (albeit depicting the quranic version as a derivative of literary Byzantine propaganda, which I believe is an oversimplification).[80] Given such explicit anti-Sasanian themes in the later 'Meccan' compositions, there has never been good reason, from the perspective of critical

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[78] G. W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2017): 81.

[79] Q 17:1 is famed for relating Muḥammad's "night journey," but as I have previously argued Q 17:1-10 originally narrated a series of *Straflegenden* starting with Moses, proceeding through Noah, and culminating with the Roman destruction of the Second Temple and expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem. The text of Q 17:1 following its word *laylan* (the original verse's rhyming end word) is an interpolation that breaks Q 17's rhyme scheme. This interpolation added a miraculous journey to Jerusalem, and shifted the verse's reference from Moses to Muḥammad. That altered the original anti-Sasanian message so as to convert these verses into support for Muḥammad's prophetic authority, on which see Daniel Beck, "Muḥammad's Night Journey in its Palestinian Context—A Perfect Solution to a Forgotten Problem (Q 17:1), https://www.academia.edu/17318352/Mu%E1%B8%A5ammad_s_Night_Journey_in_its_Palestinian_Context_a_Perfect_Solution_to_a_Forgotten_Problem_Q_17_1_.

[80] See Tommaso Tesei, "The Chronological Problems in the Qur'ān: The Case of the Story of Ḏū l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83–102)," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 84 (2011): 457–66; Kevin van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qur'ān 18:83–102," in *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, ed. G. S. Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2008), 175–203.

analysis, to isolate the interpretation of Q 85 from Jerusalem's conquest in 614, which ignited apocalyptic expectations across the Near East.[81]

Fortunately we have a detailed contemporary eye-witness account of the Sasanian conquest. The Palestinian monk Strategios wrote his narrative of the city's downfall shortly after Heraclius restored the True Cross relic to the city in 630.[82] Although Strategios' account is filled with wild exaggerations, it exemplifies how Christians lamented what the Sasanians had done to the holy city and its populace. Reports about the brutal Sasanian siege of Jerusalem would have been parts of the oral propaganda matrix that circulated across the Near East in connection with the progression of the final Byzantine-Sasanian war, as Pro-Byzantine and Pro-Sasanian factions fought for support from contested territories and peoples. Roughly speaking, Nestorian Christians and Jews tended to be pro-Sasanian, Chalcedonian Christians were pro-Byzantine, and the anti-Chalcedonian (*i.e.* monophysite/miaphysite/Jacobite) periphery (which included almost all Christian Arabs) was divided—and so could at least theoretically be won over to either side. In relation to this region-spanning conflict, assurances of an imminent god-promised victory would be generated and disseminated by state authorities and decentralized factions alike, just as modern conflicts in Syria and Iraq generate enormous quantities of propaganda, with various factions (including foreign imperial powers) attempting to capitalize upon atrocities as fuel for defining and indicting their putative monstrous enemy.

For analyzing Q 85, the important point is that Strategios' account centers on narrating how the Sasanian forces and their militant Jewish allies had 'accidentally' killed thousands of the city's Christians by trapping them in a dry reservoir. Because this narrative is central to my analysis, and is fascinating in its own right, I will risk trying the reader's patience by quoting the full narrative in Conybeare's translation from the medieval Georgian text:[83]

> And who can relate what the evil foes committed and what horrors were to be seen in Jerusalem? However, my beloved brethren, listen to me with patience, because my heartache impels me to speak and forbids me to keep silent; and once having begun to describe this calamity, I am minded to recount to you the whole of it. For when the Persians had entered the city, and slain countless souls, and blood ran deep in all places, the enemy in consequence no longer had the strength to slay, and much Christian population remained that was unslain. So when the ferocity of the wrath of the Persians was appeased, then their leader, whom they

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[81] For general background on this event, see "The Persians in Jerusalem" in G.W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam*, 81-100.

[82] The Chalcedonian patriarch Sophronius also relates the Sasanian conquest of Jerusalem in his fourteenth Anacreontic poem, but Strategios gives more fact-heavy narratives.

[83] Antiochus Strategos, *The Capture of Jerusalem by the Persians in 614 AD*, tr. Frederick C. Conybeare, English Historical Review 25 (1910): 502-517. This translation is easily accessed at http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/antiochus_strategos_capture.htm. Unfortunately it is not a very satisfactory translation of the Georgian original, and omits what Conybeare refers to as "pious ejaculations and other passages devoid of historical interest." Sean Anthony and Stephen Shoemaker are currently working on a new and much-needed English translation of Strategios.

called Rasmi Ozdan, ordered the public criers to go forth and to make proclamation saying: ‘Come out, all of you that are in hiding. Fear not. For the sword is put away from you, and by me is granted peace.’ Then, as soon as they heard that, a very numerous crowd came forth that had been hidden in cisterns and fosses. But many of them were already dead within them, some owing to the darkness, others from hunger and thirst. Who can count the number of those who died? for many tens of thousands were destroyed by the number of privations and diversity of hardships, before those in hiding came out owing to the number of their privations; and they abandoned themselves to death when they heard the chief's command, as if he was encouraging them for their good, and they would get alleviation by coming out. But when those in hiding had come out, the prince summoned them and began to question the whole people as to what they knew of the art of building. When they had one by one specified their crafts, he bade those be picked out on one side who were skilled in architecture, that they might be carried captive to Persia; but he seized the remainder of the people and shut them up in the reservoir of Mamel, which lies outside the city at a distance of about two stades from the tower of David. And he ordered sentinels to guard those thus confined in the moat.

O my brethren, who can estimate the hardships and privations which befell the Christians on that day ? For the multitude of people suffocated one the other, and fathers and mothers perished together owing to the confinement of the place. Like sheep devoted to slaughter, so were the crowd of believers got ready for massacre. Death on every side declared itself, since the intense heat, like fire, consumed the multitude of people, as they trampled on one another in the press, and many perished without the sword. . . .Thereupon the vile Jews, enemies of the truth and haters of Christ, when they perceived that the Christians were given over into the hands of the enemy, rejoiced exceedingly, because they detested the Christians ; and they conceived an evil plan in keeping with their vileness about the people. For in the eyes of the Persians their importance was great, because they were the betrayers of the Christians. And in this season then the Jews approached the edge of the reservoir and called out to the children of God, while they were shut up therein, and said to them : ‘If ye would escape from death, become Jews and deny Christ; and then ye shall step up from your place and join us. We will ransom you with our money, and ye shall be benefited by us.’ But their plot and desire were not fulfilled, their labours proved to be in vain; because the children of Holy Church chose death for Christ’s sake rather than to live in godlessness: and they reckoned it better for their flesh to be punished, rather than their souls ruined, so that their portion were not with the Jews. And when the unclean Jews saw the steadfast uprightness of the Christians and their immovable faith, then they were agitated with lively ire, like evil beasts, and thereupon imagined another plot. As of old they bought the Lord from the Jews with silver, so they purchased Christians out of the reservoir; for they gave the Persians silver, and they bought a Christian and slew him like a sheep. The Christians however

> rejoiced because they were being slain for Christ's sake and shed their blood for His blood, and took on themselves death in return for His death. . .
>
> When the people were carried into Persia, and the Jews were left in Jerusalem, they began with their own hands to demolish and burn such of the holy churches as were left standing. . . . How many souls were slain in the reservoir of Mamel! How many perished of hunger and thirst! How many priests and monks were massacred by the sword! How many infants were crushed under foot, or perished by hunger and thirst, or languished through fear and horror of the foe! How many maidens, refusing their abominable outrages, were given over to death by the enemy! How many parents perished on top of their own children! How many of the people were bought up by the Jews and butchered, and became confessors of Christ! How many persons, fathers, mothers, and tender infants, having concealed themselves in fosses and cisterns, perished of darkness and hunger! How many fled into the Church of the Anastasis, into that of Sion and other churches, and were therein massacred and consumed with fire! Who can count the multitude of the corpses of those who were massacred in Jerusalem!

Strategios later answers his own questions, ironically, by explaining that exactly 24,518 bodies were found in the Mamilla reservoir, out of the city's 66,509 total dead. Mamilla was the scene of the biggest mass slaughter during Jerusalem's conquest, by far, per Christian perception.[84]

The Mamilla reservoir was hewn out of solid rock in antiquity to serve as part of Jerusalem's water supply. Lying well outside the city gates, it is connected to Hezekiah's pool. It usually has a thin layer of water in the wet season, and is completely empty in the dry season. The reservoir's sturdy construction has left it beautifully preserved, as seen below:

[84] These numbers are impossible, but they are what Strategios' Christian propaganda claimed had happened. Archaeology confirms that the Sasanians massacred civilians during the siege, though it refutes Christian claims about the widespread burning of churches. See Gideon Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem (614 C.E.)—An Archaeological Assessment," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 357 (Feb. 2010): 35–48.

It is easy to see why the Sasanians would have seized on this reservoir, when dry,[85] as an ideal place to confine their captives outside the city's gates while assessing what to do with them. A contingent of Sasanian troops arrayed around the structure's perimeter would effectively guard numerous civilians within. But something went wrong, and many captives, weakened by weeks of preceding siege conditions, were evidently killed by the heat exposure and a panicked crush.

Strategios's account is a relatively late and literary compilation of Christian narratives about Jerusalem's conquest by the Sasanians. For Arabophone regions like the Ḥiğāz, on the other hand, the news of Jerusalem's fate would presumably have come by more basic oral narratives reporting that the Sasanian forces had burned the holy city (burning being an omnipresent anti-Sasanian theme), gathered its piteous captives together, and forcibly confined them in a trench, where they had then died *en masse* from the heat and crushing.[86]

Strategios' narrative makes clear that the victorious Sasanians maintained they had not *tried* to kill the city's Christians by confining them in this reservoir. Rather these martyrs were 'accidentally' killed by the heat and crush of their confinement, akin to the Hillsborough disaster and Hajj crushes of our era. Q 85, in my view, vehemently rejects this 'accidental tragedy' stance. Like Strategios, the surah *furiously indicts* the Sasanian forces for *deliberately slaughtering* Jerusalem's believers. The men feigned innocence, but Q 85 directs incendiary rage at their denials, promising that their crimes are witnessed and will be punished. The prosecutorial mode is similar to modern public fury at officials whose misconduct is perceived to have caused disasters like the Hillsborough and Hajj crushes. They may protest their innocence, but they knew their actions were criminal. After decades of public pressure, criminal charges were finally brought in 2016 for the Hillsborough disaster, including 95 counts of manslaughter by gross negligence against former Chief Superintendant David Duckenfield. The Mina Hajj stampede of 2015 produced fierce condemnations of the Saudi regime, including Ayatollah Khamenei's declaration that "[t]he hesitation and failure to rescue the half-dead and injured people... is also obvious and incontrovertible... They murdered them."[87] In the face of the unbearable and yet easily-prevented horrors of a mass crush, excuses are not readily accepted.

Archaeology confirms that Mamilla was the site of a Sasanian massacre. As Bowersock observes, "[t]he one secure correlation with information in Strategios occurs in the case of a rock-cut cave in Mamilla, some 120 meters west of the Jaffa Gate. Strategios states that masses of Christians who assembled at Mamilla were massacred and that the pious Thomas removed their corpses to a nearby cave. The cave that has been excavated at Mamilla did indeed prove to contain human bones, and a small chapel in front of it was decorated with Christian symbols,

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[85] Sources give conflicting dates for the siege's end, ranging from late April to late June.

[86] Such narratives would primarily have been diffused via trade activity, but also by missionary travels and troop movements. There is no way to know exactly how the Mamilla reservoir was described in initial Arabic oral reports about Jerusalem's fate (consulting the Arabic translation of Strategios would not resolve that), but the structure would presumably be described as a man-made pit or channel of some sort.

[87] https://www.dw.com/en/irans-ayatollah-khamenei-rebukes-saudi-arabia-for-hajj-exclusion/a-19528690.

including three crosses. Anthropological analysis of the bones has suggested that most of the hundreds of skeletons in the cave were the remains of young persons, with women outnumbering men. Avni writes 'All this suggests that the deceased met a sudden death.'"[88]

With this historical context, Q 85:1-9 can be efficiently explained. Reacting to oral reports about the worst Sasanian atrocity in Jerusalem's downfall, the surah presents a vision in which the men's wicked actions against the hapless believers are construed as acts that they themselves will suffer from. With the same type of symmetrical eschatological curse that Q 111 proclaims, these men's reified own actions will return to indict them. What they did to the believers in the Mamilla reservoir will be done unto them, eternally, in the pit of hell.

Q 85:1 opens the surah by invoking *al-burūǧ*, often rendered 'the constellations' but literally meaning 'the towers,' these representing the forces of cosmic fate that serve the Lord above them; compare Q 74:30, swearing that there are 'nineteen' over *saqar*. Those nineteen are not "angels of hell" but rather "the seven and the twelve," meaning the twelve zodiacal houses and the seven classical planets[89]—this being the omnipresent late-antique Syrian and Mesopotamian concept of the forces of cosmic fate that rule over lower material creation. Continuing this inevitable fate theme, Q 85:2 swears by the promised Day of Judgment. Q 85:3 then swears "by a witness and what is witnessed!" Although usually taken to mean God, the lack of a definite article is significant. Q 85:2-3 can be better understood as an invocation that parallels Q 75:1-2, *lā 'uqsimu bi-yawmi l-qiyāma^{ti} / bi-l-nafsi l-lawāma^{ti}*, "I swear by the Day of Resurrection! And I swear by the accusing self!"[90] Both invocations cite the cosmic forces and the eschatological accounting system that will ensure God's inescapable judgment on the Day. Accordingly, Q 85:3 swears by how their "ethical selves" will certainly witness against men on the Day of their resurrection.

Q 84:4-6 then proclaims how the men arrayed around the *uḫdūd* had 'killed' their own selves by trapping the believers and forcing them to die of the heat and crush below. The surah's use of *uḫdūd*, an Arabic term conveying an elongated 'furrow' or 'trench,' can be explained as reflecting the fact that the Mamilla reservoir functioned to channel the city's water supply, rather than being a disconnected pit or hole; cf. Lane, 706a, defining the word as meaning "*A furrow, trench,* or *channel, in the ground*." These men are portrayed as sitting over their trench, like cackling demons, knowing perfectly well what was happening to the innocent people they had trapped beneath them, but doing nothing to prevent the tragedy that slowly unfolded. As these men sat and tormented the believers 'burning' below, the fires of hell were being filled with fuel for them. Q 85 portrays this massacre as an act of deliberate vengeance for the believers' pious belief in God—in particular, an act of vengeance taken because Jerusalem's populace had chosen to resist the Sasanian siege for so long, believing that God's signs had permanently entrusted the holy city to Christian rule, rather than to Jewish or Persian rule (cf. Q 17:1-10). Q 85 accuses the

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88 G.W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam* at 92, citing G. Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem."

89 The sun, the moon, and the five planets that are visible to the naked human eye.

90 The first-person address suggests that the Q 75 oath may be a pre-quranic formula, which was adapted to articulate a quranic invocation.

victorious Sasanians and their allies of taking a depraved revenge on civilians who had only piously followed God's command. Pro-Sasanian sympathizers would deny that these men took deliberate revenge on their captives, claiming their deaths were just a regrettable accident. Furiously rejecting that hollow excuse, Q 85 ties the men's behavior to their preceding siege of the Holy City, insisting that the subsequent slaughter in the reservoir was no 'tragic accident.'

Q 85 promises that these guilty men will take the place of their victims when this scene is repeated in the future. That is why Q 85:4-6 is composed with such ambiguity, blurring the men and their victims. Just as these men tormented the believers in the trench, so their own sin would return to witness against and torment them in the pit of hell. This eschatological curse mirrors Q 111's curse against Abū Lahab. The men are split into the guilty parties and their accusing selves, the reified sins that God will eternally join them with on the promised Day.

As a near-contemporaneous response to the Jerusalem massacre, Q 85 can be assigned a precise compositional date relative to world-historical events, which is rare for the Qur'ān. Since the siege of Jerusalem ended in April-June of 614 (the exact date is uncertain), Q 85 would likely have been composed in late 614 to early 615, as oral reports about the disaster diffused along trade routes. Interestingly, this chronology also coincides neatly with when Islamic tradition assigns the traditional revelation date of Q 85, shortly after the prophetic mission began in 610.

Q 85 obviously does not derive from Strategios' written account. Its curse was still enmeshed in the early oral propaganda matrix that only later coalesced into such literary compilations. A parallel chronological issue is raised here by the Ḏū-l-Qarnayn story of Q 18:83-102. Tommaso Tesei and Kevin van Bladel have both argued that this quranic anecdote derives from the Syriac Alexander Legend, which was composed as Byzantine war propaganda around 629-30 CE, meaning Q 18 would be composed near or after Muḥammad's death in 632. Objecting, some tradition-minded scholars have suggested the Syriac version might instead derive from Q 18, which is very implausible. I suggest the Syriac and quranic narratives may just be 'sister clades.' Their anti-Sasanian theme emerged from the regional cauldron of informal apocalyptic propaganda, in which modular oracles of divine judgment and retribution were continuously reused and restated relative to new historical developments. Quranic adaptation of such themes in Second and Third Meccan surahs (which subordinated them to adjuncts of neo-prophetic authority) could therefore be earlier than parallel literary Christian forms, even if the quranic versions did not directly influence the latter. Quranic ideology was in this sense forged at the cutting edge of regional apocalypticism.

A fascinating last point: Q 85:17-22 concludes this surah by asking whether the story of "the forces" has come to the recitation's addressee, of Pharaoh and Ṯamūd, and proclaims that those who disbelieve call the message (i.e. of God's repetitive and inevitable judgment against wicked oppressors) a lie. Q 85:20 swears that God surrounds the deniers from behind. Q 85:21-22 then proclaims *bal huwa qurʾānun majīd*^{un} */ fī lawḥin maḥfūẓ*^{in}, meaning "rather it is a glorious *qurān* in a preserved tablet," or alternatively "a glorious *qurān* preserved in a tablet," since the pausal case endings are theoretical constructs (and the medial glottal stop was not

pronounced in quranic Arabic, meaning it was a *qurān* not a *qur'ān*[91]). Per Nöldeke's chronology, Q 85:21-22 is the first use of the word *qurān* in the warner's recitations. It does not yet appear to refer to a defined corpus of Arabic recitations that has been given to the prophet. As Hawting astutely comments, "[i]n v. 21, is it a glorious *qur'ān* preserved in a tablet, or in a preserved tablet? Whatever the answer, *qur'ān* here seems to refer to something other than the Qur'ān."[92] The indefinite *qurān* of Q 85 appears to designate a discrete royal proclamation, God's judgment, which would be effectuated against the wicked men per terms inscribed in a heavenly tablet that God's angelic forces had brought down (cf. Q 97). Being a decreed reality set forth in an incorruptible tablet, the Lord's angelic forces would effectuate this promised salvation-by-division (*i.e.* a. *furqān*) regardless of whether its contents were verbally relayed to humans as a reminder or not. A *qurān* sent down from God and the warner's delivery of Arabic recitations about that *qurān*, proclaiming its message to his people, were originally two somewhat different things. Yet the act of prophetic proclamation secondarily came to overtake and absorb its subject matter. As argued in *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*, the decreed judgment[93] that God had sent down with his angelic servants for imminent delivery to a gathered people, which was the primary subject of Q 97, was displaced in later quranic theology by re-conceptualizing the salvation that the Lord had sent down as "the Qur'ān," understood as the verbal Arabic guidance that was sent down *to the Arabian prophet alone*. The Lord's *amr* was reinterpreted to center on securing obedience to his charismatic prophetic authority, as the temporal proximity of final judgment became increasingly indeterminate and marginalized.

At the more basal stage of Q 85, by contrast, the Lord had sent down a *qurān* that his angelic forces would effectuate by dividing a gathered people into the saved and damned. All focus was on the angelic forces' pending delivery of this salvation (which had already begun to visibly manifest, as in the prefiguring sign that Q 105 relates). The Lord's human servant just divined and transmitted signs that warned of the temporally-imminent decreed judgment. He was not alone in that function. Other men could also divine the decreed judgment by contemplating its prefiguring visual omens (cf. Q 54:1-4 and 105), the signs of nature, and the signs of prior judgments.[94] A theological axis point, Q 97 proclaimed that the specific time for salvation's delivery had recently been set or 'measured' by God's quantifying act of will, his *qadr*, making his Day of Judgment imminent and unavoidable. This quantifying decree defined every divine punishment cycle, which concluded with its 'measured' day of the dividing punishment (hence Q 97:5 concludes that the night of the *qadr* is peace, as salvation 'gestates' *until the rising of the*

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91 See M. van Putten, "Hamzah in the Quranic Consonantal Text."

92 G. Hawting, *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary*, p. 408.

93 Cf. the other quranic reference to God's engraved correspondence: the *tarmīhim bi-ḥiğāratin min siğğīl* of Q 105:4. Avian delivery of this correspondence effectuates an annihilating judgment on the wicked people, which only secondarily (via man's observation of their devastating effects) constitutes a visible sign of the impending final judgment.

94 Q 54:1-6 and Q 78:1-5 depict 'the deterring news' as reports that the people are all debating *independently* of the warner's interpretation of this news as an omen of the imminent final judgment. Only secondarily was this deterring news assimilated to "The Qur'ān."

dawn, when it will be 'born' by angelic agency).[95] Whether humans thereafter divined the prefiguring signs of this immanent solar salvation, by receiving verbal messages from angels or by considering other omens, was just a warning or reminder about what their Lord had already decreed. Here I note that the Qur'ān's "mysterious letters" appear just once in Nöldeke's "First Meccan" period, this being the *nūn* of Q 68:1, which Nöldeke classifies as the 18th surah.[96]I will venture a guess at its meaning: the *nūn* simply indicates that what follows is a *nuḏr*, "a warning" (cf. Q 77:6), this defining the essential nature of the ensuing divine message. The mysterious letters' function would then parallel Q 85:21-22: they are not proto-titles or human initials, but rather identify the specific type of 'written' divine message that follows, marking it as an authoritative type of lordly correspondence.

In sum, the point was divine retribution. Rather than being a radically-indeterminate recitation that was almost entirely disconnected from any contemporary historical events, Q 85 can be understood as a comprehensible, determinate, and logical oracle that was proclaimed as a contemporaneous response to the most significant historical martyrdom of its era.

This brings me to my concluding section below. If this is all so logical, then why are Q 85 and 111 almost invariably interpreted in specialized Meccan isolation, instead of in continuity with the era's more generalized forms of apocalypticism? The answer, I suggest, is that at a relatively early compositional juncture these older structures of anti-Sasanian ideology were consciously subjected to a process of radical transformation and displacement within *quranic theology itself*, culminating with the transformation of prophetic function explicitly attested by Q 80—an early surah wherein God, in my interpretation, commands his servant to cease focusing all of his attention on the sins of Khusrow II (*i.e.* the man who had turned away from the blind man by joining the palace coup against his own father, Hormozd IV[97]), and instead minister more to his local Ḥiǧāzī populace. This perceived divine command catalyzed the Ḥiǧāz-isolating reorientation of quranic horizons. Crucially, the expected anti-Sasanian salvation had failed to manifest any further. After Ḏū Qār (604-11), Khusrow II's forces were not visibly

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95 Cf. Noah's flood in Q 54:12, *fa-ltaqā al-māu 'alā amrin qad qudir*, "and so met the waters for a decreed [*qudir*] *amr*."

96 The mysterious letters do not resurface until the *hā mīm* of Q 44:1 (53rd surah in Nöldeke's chronology) and the *qāf* of Q 50:1 (54th surah). Apart from Q 68, they appear almost entirely in "Second and Third Meccan" surahs, with two exceptions in the "Medinan" Q 2 and 3. Incidentally, if these letters identify the *type of lordly communication* that follows, then the *qāf* of Q 50:1 simply indicates that the following revelation is a *qurān* (as Arthur Jeffery has previously surmised), while the *hā mīm* of Q 44:1 likely indicates that what follows is a *ḥukm maktūb,* a written judgment or guidance (cf. Q 13:37), consistent with Q 44:2 swearing by *wa-l-kitābi l-mubīn* and Q 44:4 declaring that in this night *fīhā yufraqu kullu ʾamrin ḥakīm*. At the "Second Meccan" point, the prophet's Arabic revelations were beginning to consciously lay claim, as a form of revealed 'guidance/instruction,' to the soteriological functions and characteristics that were previously held by the written judgment brought down by angels.

97 For a discussion of Q 80:1-10, see D. Beck, *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*. Khusrow II ascended the Sasanian throne via a palace coup that first blinded and then later murdered Khusrow II's own father, Hormozd IV.

punished again until their initial Anatolian defeat by Heraclius in the winter of 622. In the prolonged interim period, the obstinate failure of the allegedly-imminent salvation to continue materializing any further would have necessitated a progressive reconceptualization of what God had actually sent down as a saving *qurān*. The charismatic function of guiding the local community, in accordance with the prophet's receipt of authoritative divine revelations, became hypertrophied relative to the basal centrality of expecting salvation by the imminent Day. With this reorientation, the prophet's perceived opposition was abstracted and generalized away from the unrepentant-yet-unpunished Khusrow II. That basal opposition was replaced by the prophet's assertion of revealed guidance against the king's equivalent 'polytheistic' sinners in the Ḥiğāz, generalizing his opponents (hence the Third Meccan Q 30:2-5 declares that the Romans will win, while omitting to specify against whom they will win). The revealed divine commandments in the warner's recitations became construed as the *actual* salvation that God had sent down as his *qurān*. This revealed divine guidance had manifested as a type of *furqān* (salvation-by-division) via its divided reception in the Ḥiğāzī community. Q 85 was thus delivered on the precipice of a radical transformation of quranic theology, in which the soteriological centrality of progressively-manifesting cosmic judgment was systematically displaced by the centrality of communal subordination to revealed prophetic guidance.

Basal oracles had to be at least partially reinterpreted alongside this Ḥiğāz-isolating transformation of the prophetic mission. That reinterpretation was integrated into the newer recitations, facilitated by many profound innovations that surface at the Second and Third Meccan compositional junctures. The fundamental interpretive rift here thus does not derive from uncomprehending or confused exegesis by much later Islamic tradition. Long before the prophet's death, and probably long before his *hiğrah* to Yaṯrib, the prophet and his followers evidently began systematically reinterpreting his basal oracles to shift and re-center their presumptive referents towards the local Quraysh context, rather than upon Khusrow II and his forces in distant Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Charismatic prophetic authority was *constructed* by means of this isolating interpretive dislocation, which was facilitated by envisioning a new sacred geography that 'twinned' structures of the northern conflict into perceived Ḥiğāzī equivalents.

7. Conclusion—Some Unpopular Observations About Charismatic Prophetic Authority, Divine Speech, And Writing

Within quranic studies there is a near-universal consensus that the prophet did not undergo a radical shift in how he understood his own revelations. This consensus has several corollaries. First, the prophet cannot have come to believe that he once had significantly misunderstood the references of God's revealed messages. Second, the prophet cannot have developed a relatively high degree of antagonism towards some specific aspects of his earliest oracles. Third, quranic recitations cannot have been compiled into written form with the aid of active scribal contributions while the prophet lived; the living prophet must have rigorously determined the revelation's verbal format in its entirety, without any significant contribution by other authors. On these points, critical scholars and traditional scholars alike generally agree—in relation to the formalization of revealed divine speech as surahs, the living prophetic function between 610-632 CE was remarkably homogeneous.

Universally popular as it may be, this consensus is not really plausible or consistent with the quranic corpus. In his book section entitled "Post-Muhammadan additions to the Qur'an," Nicolai Sinai suggests that Q 3:7 is the most likely example of a post-prophetic addition to the Qur'ān, concluding that "the case for a post-prophetic date is not negligible."[98] The case is easy to see. Q 3:7 declares "He (it is) who has sent down on you the Book, of which some verses are clearly composed – they are the mother of the Book – but others are ambiguous. As for those in whose hearts (there is) a turning aside, they follow the ambiguous parts of it, seeking (to cause) trouble and seeking its interpretation. No one knows its interpretation except God." The Qur'ān here proclaims that some parts of its revelation corpus are *muḥkamātun*, usually rendered "clear" but probably meaning "authoritative/guiding." But other parts of the corpus are "ambiguous," *mutašābihātun*, which might also be rendered "allegorical/resembling." These ambiguous or allegorical parts should *not* be followed, and believers should *not* attempt to interpret them. Those who do try to interpret them are causing trouble.

For the living prophet to criticize his own revelations in this manner, declaring them partly indecipherable, may seem strange. Yet the continual reinterpretation of old oracles was omnipresent in Near Eastern prophecy. Reinterpretation becomes unavoidable whenever prophetic oracles are preserved in *writing*. Writing dislocates oracles from their immediate temporal context, giving them a durative aspect. Written oracles persist with precision, such that any divergence or conflict between an oracle and later historical events or ideologies becomes evident. This oracular persistence motivates a dynamic process whereby old prophecies are reinterpreted and restated to express what is later felt to be their 'true' meaning. The process may be formalized with literary activity and redactions, as with biblical prophetic texts. Early Christians thus naturally interpreted the book of Isaiah as prefiguring the coming of Jesus, the messiah. The idea that this interpretation was 'wrong' because it was not 'original' reflects a profound misunderstanding of what divine speech was in the first place. The book of Isaiah was produced by an elaborate process of restatements, reinterpretations, and augmentations. Late-antique Jewish and Christian interpretations of Isaiah were very different than how the biblical text was understood by its redactors, which was very different than how its embedded Israelite oracles had originally functioned.[99] Similarly, in late-antique apocalypticism the referents of older prophecies were constantly reinterpreted relative to newer events, kings, and empires (e.g., the Alexander Legend).[100] The idea that an oracle's 'true' meaning was limited to the subjective

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98 N. Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 54.

99 For the book of Isaiah's propagandistic stances relative to changes in the circumstances of Judah's imperial subordination, see Göran Eidevall, "Propagandistic Constructions of Empires in the Book of Isaiah," in *Divination, Politics, & Ancient Near Eastern Empires*, eds. A. Lenzi and J. Stökl (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2014): 109-128.

100 Lorenzo DiTommaso has incisively described this phenomenon as follows: "The historic persistence of coherent macro-structures in the manuscript evidence in this literature cannot be explained in terms of typology or travesty, or as the result of textual drift. Rather, older apocalyptica were repeatedly cannibalised for their module oracles, which were then contemporised and combined with fresh material (or material drawn from other texts) to produce new compositions. Each composition is the literary precipitate of an essentially dynamic

mindset of its human diviner at the first moment of the oracle's delivery was nonsensical. The basic concept of intuitive divination presupposed that a deity's message might be understood differently at later junctures, especially after the prophesied events had manifested.[101]

In quranic studies, this prophetological principle is suppressed by the overwhelming influence of Islamic (and particularly Sunni) tradition, where Muḥammad's conduct and statements carry supreme authority. The prophet's subjective understanding of his revelations is treated as absolutely authoritative, and consequently static (since uncertainty would mean the prophet's understanding might be improved upon). That dogma is not easily reconciled with verses like Q 3:7, much less Q 22:52, which declares in connection with the judgment's failure to manifest that when every prophet begins reciting, Satan casts something into his recitations, until God later abolishes what Satan put in. The Qur'ān could hardly be more direct in affirming that temporary error is part of all prophecy, which God eventually corrects. The earliest believers seem to have freely affirmed a substantively evolving prophetic function. Shahab Ahmed has shown how the *qissat al-ġarānīq* (story of the cranes, often called the story of the 'Satanic verses' in English) was almost universally accepted in Islam's first centuries.[102] Temporary prophetic misunderstandings, reflecting wishful human thinking that had once been projected onto the Lord's message, were simply not incompatible with being a true prophet. There is little reason to believe the prophet did not hold the same attitude towards his earliest recitations that Q 22:52 expresses. Compare interpolations like Q 74:31 and 73:20.

A broader prophetological perspective is useful here. Scholars have used biblical, Neo-Assyrian, and Old Babylonian prophecies to produce wonderful comparative analysis.[103] In Near Eastern prophecy, the transmitting human diviner did not necessarily know what the transmitted message means. He did not compose it. It is not his words. He is a vessel who has been selected to deliver the deity's correspondence, akin to an imperial courier. Mesopotamian incantations thus included oaths swearing that the divine words were not human words, *e.g.* "This incantation is not mine. It is an incantation of Ea and Asalluhi. It is an incantation of Damu and Dinkarrak. It

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compositional process." Lorenzo DiTommaso, "Armenian Apocalyptica and Medieval Apocalypticism: SomeReflections," in *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition: A Comparative Perspective*, eds. K. Bardakjian and S. L. Porta (Leiden: Brill, 2014): 739.

[101] Christian polemic of late antiquity criticized the Jews' obstinacy in denying what biblical prophetic texts, in Christian perception, obviously meant. This was akin to modern denials of anthropogenic global warming—the event had already happened, just as had been predicted, so only moral depravity could explain the deniers.

[102] Shahab Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017). The story of the cranes cannot be a real historical episode, but its acceptance shows that the concept of temporary prophetic error was not originally anathema.

[103] See, e.g., Jonathan Stökl, *Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: A Philological and Sociological Comparison* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Alan Lenzi and Jonathan Stökl, eds., *Divination, Politics, & Ancient Near Eastern Empires* (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2014); Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Martti Nissinen, ed., *Prophecy in its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2000).

is an incantation of Ningirimma, mistress of incantations." The incanted message was usually clear enough to its intended human audience, but the logic of disavowing any human authorship meant that the messenger did not necessarily know what his deity's words meant. An extreme example of the disjunction is David's betrayal of Uriah in 2 Samuel 11:14-15: "In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. In it he wrote, 'Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die.'" Uriah faithfully delivered his lord's letter, and was killed because of his ignorance about its meaning.

Normally, the commissioned prophet was not an authoritative representative of the deity, able to make extemporaneous declarations and orders that embodied the deity's binding will. Normally, he-or-she was not invested with or possessed by a spirit of divine authority. Q 88:21-22 declares that the Lord's servant is merely a warner and not an overseer over the people, *lasta ʿalayhim bi-muṣayṭir*. This courier function contrasts with the awesome theophanic being of Q 53 and 81, who is indeed invested with God's authority, and so acts as God's manifestation in the material world below. This heavenly being is like an imperial emissary, just as Khusrow I wrote to Justinian to effectuate a treaty in 562 CE and declared "We thank the brotherly gesture of the emperor for the peace between the two empires. We have instructed Yazdgushnasp, our divine chamberlain, and have given him full powers."[104] A parallel divinizing investiture had not, at the early Meccan stage, been made in the Lord's Arabian servant. He was still in essence a courier, and the message of warning his Lord had given him to deliver was not yet portrayed as uniquely authoritative guidance relative to the other revealed signs that men might contemplate about the coming judgment.

Unfortunately the ideal type of the charismatic prophet still dominates quranic studies. This largely reflects the influence of literate religious traditions centered on Jesus, Muḥammad, and Moses. It obscures the fact that claiming such charismatic authority was *abnormal* for historical Near Eastern prophets, meaning those humans who communicated a deity's message through intuitive divination.[105] Ordinarily, the human diviner just claimed to vocalize the deity's

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[104] The quotation is from the report by Menander the Guardsman, as translated by B. Dignas and E. Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 141.

[105] My admiration for Max Weber is unflagging, but as David Petersen rightly critiques him here, "Weber maintained that charisma was not simply a psychological quality; rather it also had a sociological side. Charisma—as charismatic authority, to be distinguished from traditional and from bureaucratic authority—worked itself out by creating a following. One would, therefore, expect a charismatic prophet to attract a group of followers or disciples. This is not always the case with individuals in the Hebrew Bible whom we characterize as prophets. . . . The key issue is the existence of a group of followers around a putative charismatic prophet. ... But apart from [Elisha and Isaiah 8:16], there is little warrant for arguing that Israel's prophets exercised charismatic authority through the creation of a disciple band or some other group gathered around the prophet." D. Petersen, "Defining Prophecy and Prophetic Literature," in *Prophecy in its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, Martti Nissinen, ed. (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2000): 33-44, 37. Looking beyond Israelite prophecy to ancient Near Eastern prophecy more generally, charismatic authority proves to be the exception, which is usually generated by extensive post-prophetic literary activity, or attaches to the leaders of political rebellions.

message, the importance of which was not delimited by the authority or greatness of the deity's chosen human transmitter. Jonathan Stökl thus notes that:

> It is true that Neo-Assyrian prophetic oracles include messages in which a deity, usually a form of Ištar, says that she is active on the king's behalf in the divine council. As Nissinen admits, 'the prophets never play a personal role in the process.' The prophetic involvement in the divine council is limited to the prophets' role of transmitting the divine message which they had received from a deity, who was acting as a messenger, reporting the decisions of the divine council him- or herself.[106]

Deities sometimes spoke by possessing a person's body, as ecstasy. The other primary method was through commissioning and sending a messenger, like a courier. As Stökl notes:

> [I]s someone who is known to transmit divine messages 'sent' by that deity, or how is this act of transmission to be understood? Someone who is possessed by a spirit or deity can hardly be said to be sent, as they would no longer be in control of their own behaviour. This corresponds to the classic understanding of ecstatic prophecy, where a deity uses someone's body to speak.[107]

By contrast, "[t]he alternative is that of a deity speaking to a human messenger, who is aware that they are being commissioned to go and pronounce their message to the intended recipient."[108] In the first divination type, human personality is obliterated, and the ecstatic may not even remember what the deity stated when possessing them, much less know what it meant. The quranic warner, in his adamant denials of being *mağnūn* (possessed), is not an ecstatic. Rather he plays the second role, one sent as a commissioned messenger. He knows what his task is, and he knows what the message is, but he does not necessarily know exactly what the message he conveys means. Q 75:18-19 makes this distinction explicit: "When We recite it, follow its recitation. Then surely on Us (depends) its explanation [*bayānahu*]." Similarly, Q 55:2 may be the earliest quranic use of "the Qur'ān" in something like its traditional sense. Q 55:1-2 proclaims that Al-Raḥmān has taught the Qur'ān. Q 55:3 states that God has created man. Q 55:4 then proclaims that God has *also* taught the explanation to him, *l-bayāna*. These were two different (albeit related) things.[109] The deity presumably intended the message to be comprehended by its addressee(s)—the Qur'ān declares itself to be *mubīn*, meant to be understood—but that intent does not guarantee a successful interpretation. The Lord may, or may not, teach the correct explanation of his messages to any given human at any particular time.

In quranic studies, interpretation of the early corpus is usually conformed to the specialized ideals of charismatic authority that permeate the later corpus. This subordination

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106 Jonathan Stökl, *Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: A Philological and Sociological Comparison* (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 225.

107 Ibid., 223.

108 Ibid.

109 This distinction forms the basis for the Bahā'ī view that Bahā'ī scriptures are a revealed explanation, the *bayāna*, of quranic recitations.

comports with the dictates of later quranic theology, certainly, but it is *anti-critical*. The teleological lens forces every object of its vision into a prototype that foreshadows the later prophetic mission centered on delivering "the Qur'ān."[110] When Sinai writes that "[r]ather than submission to an ecclesiastical hierarchy, acknowledging the early Qur'an's truth claim only required submission to the Qur'anic Messenger's prophetic charisma,"[111] he tracks later quranic ideology, which systematically retro-projects an idealized model of charismatic prophetic authority onto a corpus of older apocalyptic oracles.[112] One starts with a charismatic prophet and the Qur'ān that was sent down unto him. In consequence, that same structure is perceived in nascent form wherever one looks. This methodological problem is exemplified by the idea of "interpreting the Qur'ān through the Qur'ān"—an unabashedly circular exegetical mantra. Such approaches inevitably conclude with refined theology. While that theology often displays great power and sophistication, it is a different discipline than critical analysis.

Basally, the warner (despite his neo-Moses format[113]) was an anonymous servant of his deity, like millennia of intuitive diviners before him. Along with delivering divine speech, he references confirming signs that he had not delivered, and which other men could discern—the visible signs of punishments, nature, and prior scriptures. Submitting to the charismatic authority of the human warner at the basal stage would have been equivalent to audiences of Old Babylonian or Neo-Assyrian prophets responding by proclaiming submission to the (commonly anonymous or low status) diviner.[114] Oracles were authoritative, certainly, but their transmitting humans were important for confirming the message's authentic provenance, not for accumulating a sect of subservient human acolytes (see Q 88:21-22, disclaiming the warner's authority over the people). Absent unusual circumstances, to proclaim the authority of an intuitive diviner would improperly merge the deity's authority with his-or-her human messenger, treating the diviner as if he were a deity's actual earthly representative. The mistake would be akin to treating a postman as being the author of the government correspondence he delivers.[115]

The warner's insistence on his human nature should be understood in this light. He did not yet claim that the deity had invested him with irresistible divine authority; he was not yet an overseer equivalent to the Lord's astral emissary of Q 53 and 81. *Aspiration* to such a messianic status emerges in Second and Third Meccan surahs, most dramatically in Q 17:79-81, where the warner is promised that he may obtain a *maqāman maḥmūdan*, or 'praiseworthy position/rank,'

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[110] The subject exceeds this paper, but I discuss anti-teleological analytical methodology at length in *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*.

[111] N. Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 167.

[112] This point is emphasized by my book's title, *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān: From Anonymous Apocalypse to Charismatic Prophet*.

[113] The idea that every believer was a Moses-type who must oppose his 'spiritual pharaoh' was a prominent concept in pre-Islamic Syrian Christian homiletic literature that was associated with 'Messalian' ideology, e.g. the *Book of Steps* and Pseudo-Macareus.

[114] Cf. Q 43:31, in which the prophet's people object as to why quranic revelation was not instead given to a "great man of the two settlements," *raǧulin mina l-qaryatayni 'aẓīmin*.

[115] Note the contrast here between intuitive divination (like prophecy) and technical divination (like astrology or extispicy). The latter requires technical authority.

if he is sufficiently diligent in his nightly vigils,[116] and God may grant him a *sulṭānan naṣīran*, meaning a 'helping power/authority.' These late-Meccan verses evidence an explicit aspiration for the Lord's Arabian servant to be elevated into a semi-divine figure who will be granted angel-tier power over others, a proto-caliph who will command absolute obedience. Emerging in the Second and Third Meccan surahs, that aspiration would become dogma in the Medinan corpus, which is largely defined (as Sinai notes[117]) by its insistence that God's human messenger must be obeyed. Such counter-Heraclian authority was constructed over time, as Byzantine power failed to rebut Sasanian advances, and the Ḥiğāz became conceptualized as an alternative theater where the Lord's *amr* would manifest pursuant to neo-prophetic authority.[118]

Q 97:4 exemplifies the secondary quranic transition towards charismatic authority. Guillaume Dye and Nicolai Sinai both conclude that Q 97:4 has been interpolated.[119] Q 97:4, reading *tanazzalu l-malāikatu wa-l-rūḥu fīhā bi-'iḏni rabbihim min kulli 'amrin*, is almost twice as long as the other four verses in Q 97, and breaks the surah's *saǧ'* word-stress meter. The phrase *bi-'iḏni rabbihim*, "by the permission of their lord," and the reference to God's spirit, the *rūḥ* of the Holy One, are aberrations for the early Meccan stage. Although Sinai suggests that the entirety of Q 97:4 was probably interpolated, I argue otherwise in *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*. The pre-interpolation form of Q 97:4 was likely *tanazzalu l-malāikatu fīhā min kulli 'amr*, with *wa-l-rūḥu fīhā bi-iḏni rabbihim* being the secondary insertion. This conservative reconstruction does not alter any words or spelling, removes anachronistic terms, and restores the strict *saǧ'* format. Citing parallel language and themes, I argue that Q 97:4 was likely interpolated at the same juncture when the "Third Meccan" Q 16 was composed. Q 16:101 addresses the audience's complaints that earlier surahs had been corrected, proclaiming "When We exchange a verse in place of (another) verse—and God knows what He sends down—they say, 'You are only a forger!' No! But most of them do not know (anything)." Q 16:102 follows by enjoining "Say: 'The spirit of the holy [*rūḥi al-qudusi*] has brought it down from your Lord in truth, to make firm those who believe, and as guidance and good news for those who submit."

But why was Q 97:4 interpolated to insist that God had sent his *rūḥ* down with his permission? What theological mandate was so crucial at this juncture that it required crudely altering the basal recitation? By the "Third Meccan" stage of Q 16, quranic theology had become driven by overwhelming need to ascribe a sort of proto-caliphal authority to the prophet, which he exerted by directing revealed divine guidance to his community. To support that charismatic

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116 This is by far the earliest quranic use of *mḥmd* in relation to the quranic warner. The usage may derive from his name, or alternatively his name may have derived from it.

117 Nicolai Sinai, "The Unknown Known: Some Groundwork for Interpreting the Medinan Qur'ān," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 66 (2015–2016): 47–96.

118 In this theological sense, the prophet and his community progressively learned the true import of his revealed messages, and that process of progressively learning the quranic truth continues to this day, with the constant growth of Islamic tradition. From a critical perspective, however, that same process systematically annihilated basal oracular referents.

119 Guillaume Dye, "La nuit du Destin et la nuit de la Nativité," in *Figures Bibliques en Islam* (2012): 107–169; Nicolai Sinai, "'Weihnachten im Koran' oder 'Nacht der Bestimmung'? Eine Deutung von Sure 97," *Der Islam* 88 (2012): 11–32.

authority, it became imperative to establish that God's authoritative spirit had been sent down for the new prophetic cycle. Descent of that spirit had, in a vague way,[120] conferred a *representative* function on the human prophet, giving him authority akin to that formerly held by the distant angelic emissary of Q 53 and 81. The warner assumed what had once been segregated angelic authority, and quranic soteriology was reoriented towards obeying the prophet's uniquely-revealed guidance. The night of the *qadr* in Q 97 could no longer be the typological night when God decreed the date for his saving judgment to manifest in history, as transmitted by mass angelic descent in a cyclical act of divine will. Q 97 was reinterpreted as relating the descent of revelatory authority to God's Arabian prophet, a descent construed as a type of salvation in itself.

That is why Q 44:1-6 was composed like a corrected Q 97—expressing what the more basal surah had "really" meant. Older soteriology centered on a gestating cosmic judgment that had begun erupting into our lower world (Q 105, 54) was interpretively subordinated to newer soteriology centered on neo-prophetic authority. In this mode, Q 100:1-5 was exegetically neutralized as relating an arbitrary raid of Arabian war horses. That reading erased these verses' original sense of invoking the advent of the Lord's Day, with cosmic horses pulling the sun's chariot to split the darkness with God's fiery justice at dawn—a straightforward image of cyclical cosmic judgment.[121] Exemplifying how a soteriology of nocturnal decree followed by inevitable judgment-at-dawn (Q 97) was displaced by the new soteriology centered on the prophet's delivery of revealed guidance (Q 44), Q 17:78 declares that night is the time for prayer, while *wa-qurān l-fağri inna qurān l-fağri kāna mašhūdan*, dawn is the time for a *qurān*. By this 'Second Meccan' stage, the prophet's act of proclaiming his Lord's *qurān* was being conflated with the *qurān* itself,[122] just as the 'news' that the people are said to be debating in Q 54:1-5 and Q 78:1-5 became conflated with the prophet's revealed recitations *about* the import of that news.

This soteriological transformation required the prophet and his followers to see that the true import of his basal recitations lay in establishing his prophetic authority among the Quraysh, rather than in proclaiming that world-ending judgment had been decreed in response to the sins

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120 The Qur'ān displays defensive anxiety about this, as with Q 17:85, "They ask you about the *rūḥ*. Say: 'The *rūḥ* (comes) from the *amr* of my Lord. You have only been given a little knowledge (of it)." Note how when God breathes some of his *rūḥ* into Adam in Q 15:28-43, the angels then fall down and prostrate to Adam. In Q 2:30, Adam is said to have been created as God's *ḫalīfat*, his representative on Earth. The *rūḥ* is associated here with proto-caliph authority.

121 In later Iranian religion, the horses that brought solar fire at dawn became equated with Mithra, the deity who enforces human justice. "The Sasanians kept the older religious traditions regarding the horse: Many representations of the horses of the sun/Miθra are known, by this time fully winged. The throne of Ḵosrow I Anōšīravān rested on the figures of such horses, and the iconography rapidly spread to the west and far east." "Asb," Mid. And NPers. 'horse,' in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Vol. II, Fasc. 7 (2011): 724–37. For more detail, see D. Beck, "The Astral Messenger, the Lunar Revelation, the Solar Salvation."

122 Pre-Islamic Manichaean missionaries were known as "Callers of the Call," because they repeated the Syriac *qry'*, an entity/message that 'called' mankind to return to heaven. See Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 3d ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 74ff. Their 'calls' were repetitions of The Call.

of distant Sasanian forces. God had called and sent his prophet to warn Quraysh Mecca about its polytheistic sins, rather than making him a peripheral warner about the cosmic doom coming against Seleucia-Ctesiphon (a doom which appeared less likely with each year of unchecked Sasanian expansion[123]). The prophetic mission was systematically reconceptualized to fit this shift. The "Third Meccan" Q 42:7 and 6:92 describe God as having commissioned his prophet to warn the polytheistic "mother of cities" about its coming judgment. Mecca was creatively construed like a Ḥiǧāzī Babylon, with Muḥammad being sent to warn its people. This description of the prophetic commission still tracked the basal anti-Sasanian format, but its geographical referents were transferred (with the stretch of conceptualizing Mecca as the fount of civilization) to accord with the new Ḥiǧāz-isolating conception of what the prophet's task actually was.

Notably, Q 53 claims that God's astral emissary had made *two* visible descents to the quranic warner, implying that the *second* theophanic descent was needed to justify or effectuate a substantive alteration of the prophetic function at a comparatively early juncture, relative to the message that the *original* theophanic descent had given. Sinai brilliantly emphasizes how Q 53 constitutes a radical turn of the prophetic mission towards condemning perceived local polytheism, making a new type of communal polarization and conversion possible:

> This monotheistic turn then induced a radical polarisation of the Qur'anic audience into Believers and Unbelievers – a polarisation that would eventually turn violent ... It is fascinating that we can pinpoint with some confidence the texts in which this momentous step was first taken. What appears to be the earliest passage testifying to an incipient disavowal of polytheism is a passage in surah 53: (vv. 19-22 and 25) rejecting the view that the three Arabian goddesses al-Lāt, al-'Uzzah, and Manāt are daughters of God.[124]

Many basal surahs were likely assigned putative new Meccan or old South Arabian[125] referents alongside this polarization, isolating them from their original apocalyptic context. Rigid linkage

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[123] See Q 68:8-9, "So do not obey the ones who call (it) a lie. They wish that you would compromise, and then they would compromise." Compromise on what? Usually said to be 'polytheism,' I suggest these verses instead reflect the warner's refusal to compromise with accepting what increasingly appeared to be the new reality of an enduring Sasanian regional domination—which many Quraysh were inclined to accept. Rather than compromise in that regard, the warner appears to have reconceptualized what his message and prophetic task actually were, shifting his message towards critiquing the *širk* of his local opposition. Compare Q 17:73-76, which addresses the same subject, and states "Surely they almost tempted you away from what We inspired you (with), so that you might forge against Us (something) other than it, and then they would indeed have taken you as a friend."

[124] N. Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 174.

[125] One of the last "early Meccan" surahs, Q 55 begins with Q 55:1-4 proclaiming that Al-Raḥmān has taught the Qur'ān, created man, and also taught him "the explanation," *l-bayāna*. The surah's use of the South Arabian name for God, which begins at this compositional juncture, may reflect a transformation of the prophetic function that incorporated new elements of South Arabian monotheistic ideology. Ceaseless rhetoric against *širk*, 'associating,' also begins being introduced at the same compositional juncture; the *širk* concept similarly appears to derive from

to the Byzantine-Sasanian war was severed. Despite ingenious efforts to perceive and articulate new referents, this contextual shift would inevitably have rendered many old quranic references deeply ambiguous—and often no longer fully intelligible. The prophet and his early followers would have recognized that. Even if Q 3:7 was a post-prophetic addition, consequently, its hostility towards interpreting certain aspects of the quranic revelations could represent an authentic exegetical imperative that the prophet and his early followers had developed.

Proliferating quranic alterations are acknowledged at the Second/Third Meccan juncture. Q 87:6-7 states "We shall make you recite, and you will not forget—except whatever God pleases. Surely He knows what is spoken publicly and what is hidden." A.J. Droge annotates his translation here "vv. 6b-7 may be a later addition (notice the sudden shift from first- to third-person discourse.)" Q 16:101 declares "When We exchange a verse in place of (another) verse – and God knows what He sends down – they say 'You are only a forger!' No! But most of them do not (anything)." Q 2:106 states "Whatever verse We cancel or cause to be forgotten, we bring a better (one) than it, or (one) similar to it." Q 13:9 proclaims "God blots out whatever he pleases and He confirms (whatever He pleases). With him is the mother of the Book."

Writing likely facilitated this transformation. Islamic tradition denies the prophet's literacy, and it displays ambivalence towards written Qur'ān manuscripts, insisting on the primacy of unbroken oral transmission.[126] The process of producing written compilations of prophetic oracles tends to blur and merge oracular pronouncements with scribal contributions. As such, "[i]t is often difficult to distinguish between actual prophetic oracles and literary prophecies created by scribes. For example, even the Mari prophecies, which, in general, were written at roughly the same time they were uttered, were recorded by scribes who may have

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South Arabia. This suggests that the prophet may have come to understand the Lord's *qurān* in a very different and more "Arabian" way. He had been taught *l-bayāna*, perhaps via what he articulated as the second theophanic descent of Q 53. Compare Q 16:103, "Certainly We know that they say 'Only a human being teaches him.' The language of the one to whom they perversely allude is foreign, but this language is clear Arabic." The people's accusation here may be directed at the secondary introduction of South Arabian monotheistic concepts and terminology into Second and Third Meccan recitations, as the prophet and his followers reconceptualized what his prophetic mission actually was—a campaign to purge Ḥiğāzī polytheism. Cf. Carlos Segovia, "Abraha's Christological Formula RḤMNN W-MS1Ḥ-HW and its Relevance for the Study of Islam's Origins," *Oriens Christianus* 98 (2015): 52–63.

[126] That insistence is difficult to square with the many divergences between classical Islamic recitation tradition and the Ḥiğāzī Arabic language of the *rasm*. See the body of recent work by Ahmad Al-Jallad and Marijn van Putten, *e.g.* Ahmad Al-Jallad, "Was it *sūrat al-baqárah*? Evidence for antepenultimate stress in the Quranic Consonantal Text and its Relevance for صلوه Type Nouns," *ZDMG* 167, no. 1 (2017), 81–90; Marijn van Putten, "The development of the triphthongs in Quranic and Classical Arabic," *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 3 (2017), 47–74; Marijn van Putten, "Hamzah in the Quranic Consonantal Text," *Orientalia* 87:1 (2018): 93-120.

paraphrased or used stereotypical language."[127] If one were not told otherwise, one would *prima facie* assume the same was true of the later quranic corpus. Computer analysis by Andrew Bannister reveals that surahs are highly formulaic in general, but the Medinan surahs reach an astounding formulaic density of between 55.01% to 25.50%, depending on whether 3, 4, or 5 base sequences are used.[128] Bannister concludes that this formulaic density suggests orality, whereas I might instead suggest that the transition towards intensified formulaic density in 'Medinan' surahs implies a progression away from (1) purely oral short compositions that were probably composed by progressive oral repetition until fully memorized[129] towards (2) much looser and longer semi-literary compilations, which partly reflected the scribal perception, assembly, repetition, and codification of the prophet's extemporaneous speech.[130] At a relatively early juncture in the prophetic mission, a *collaborative* mode of formalizing quranic recitations into written surahs may have accompanied the recognition of a charismatic leader who on occasion delivered authoritative divine speech. Compare how Q 25:4-5 rebuts the prophet's opponents who criticize the ostensible role of writing and multi-authorial collaboration in forming his recitations: "Those who disbelieve say, 'This is nothing but a lie! He has forged it, and other people have helped him with it. So they have come to evil and falsehood. And they say 'Old tales! He has written it down, and it is dictated to him morning and evening.'"

The rapid increase in surah length, the abandonment of the strict *saǧ'* format, the use of 'mysterious letters' to open surahs, and the disappearance of massive oaths invoking the forces of cosmic fate, all collectively imply a relatively early shift from pure orality to a semi-orality in which memorization was at least partly facilitated by written texts.[131] Islamic tradition identifies

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127 Lester L. Grabbe, "Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy from an Anthropological Perspective," in *Prophecy in its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, Martti Nissinen, ed. (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2000): 13-33, 26.

128 See Andrew Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017); Andrew Bannister, "Retelling the Tale: A Computerised Oral-Formulaic Analysis of the Qur'an," paper for the 2014 IQSQ meeting in San Diego.

129 Cf. Q 73:1-4, which refers to the warner "arranging" the *qurān* at night, *wa-rattili l-qurʾāna tartīlan* (traditionally this is said to just refer to the mode of quranic recitation). At this early juncture the Lord's *qurān* was still conceived of as something distinct from the warner's Arabic recitations that arranged and communicated the *qurān* to his people.

130 Cf. the discussion of how orality in Arabic poetry relates to writing in Michael Zwettler, *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry: Its Character and Implications* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978).

131 A consistent finding of modern studies of oral epic is that "[d]espite all documented flexibility epic singers maintain that they always sing their songs in the same way and would not dream of changing anything. They are proud of their capacities for memory and claim that they carefully preserve the songs they have learned from others and repeat them word for word. Their predecessors have done the same, and that is how they are able to represent events from long ago exactly as they happened. The fieldworker's tapes demonstrate the opposite." Minna S. Jensen, "The Challenge of Oral Epic to Homeric Scholarship," *Humanities*, 6, 97 (2017): 8. Written texts work to partially constrain this flexibility.

many scribes who served the prophet in various capacities, including writing down the Qur'ān.[132] The long late surahs were surely formalized with scribal aid; they can hardly have been delivered once extemporaneously, and then flawlessly repeated from purely aural memory thereafter.[133] Indeed, some of the prophet's scribes are reported to have intentionally changed parts of the Qur'ān when they recorded the prophet's revealed utterances. 'Abdullāh ibn Sa'd ibn Abī al-Sarḥ is related as claiming to have fooled the prophet whenever he wished, writing down different verses that the prophet then approved (e.g. when the prophet had dictated *samī'un 'alīm* he would instead consciously write down *'alimun ḥakīm*).[134] He is said to have ultimately reverted to paganism because he had no faith in Muḥammad's authority, claiming that he had easily led the prophet as he wished. Similar quranic changes are also attributed to 'Abdullāh ibn Ḫaṭal and to an anonymous Christian scribe in Yaṯrib.[135] Such reports are fiction, no doubt, but they illustrate how a relatively collaborative process of surah formalization was not inconceivable for early believers—it was possible, and articulated as a problem. Critical scholarship should consider the possibility that at later stages of his career the prophet was not particularly averse to a strongly collaborative process of formalizing his oracular pronouncements into written form. Stark alterations like Q 97:4, 74:31, and 73:20 could reflect the written codification of older recitations, with the scribal addition of live prophetic comments that had corrected their message[136]—as opposed to the prophet alone composing their final form, or else the interpolated verses being composed and added as scribal glosses after the prophet's death.

My fundamental point in this concluding section is not to argue that any particular such compositional model must be correct, but rather that the consensus view rests on, at minimum, debatable and relatively indeterminate foundations. Instead of conforming to that consensus, critical analysis of the quranic corpus should primarily be driven by maximizing (a) logical efficiency and (b) interpretive yield relative to the systematic resolution of textual problems.

3/30/2019

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[132] For an exhaustive compilation of references to the prophet's scribes, see M. Muṣṭafā Al-A'ẓamī, *The Scribes of the Prophet*, tr. A. M. Al-A'ẓamī (London, Turath Publishing).

[133] The tradition generally reports that the prophet would deliver the revelations, scribes would write them down, and the scribes would then read the written versions back to the prophet, who would confirm that the written terms were correct.

[134] For a discussion, see A'ẓamī, *The Scribes of the Prophet*, at pp.52- 58.

[135] Ibid. at pp. 48, 89.

[136] Discussing idiosyncratic verse divisions in the earliest manuscripts, Déroche suggests that scribes made active contributions to surahs while editing written texts, citing the tradition that Muḥammad adopted rhyme fixes proposed by a scribe. See François Déroche, *Qur'ans of the Umayyads: A First Overview* (Leiden: Brill, 2014): 26-29. Relatively intensive redactional activity could, in similar respects, have been undertaken while the prophet was alive. Cf. G. Dye, "The Qur'ān and its Hypertextuality in Light of Redaction Criticism," presented at Nangeroni Meeting Early Islam: The Sectarian Milieu of Late Antiquity? (Early Islamic Studies Seminar, Milan, 15–19 June 2015).