Qur'anic Internal Prophetic Theophany in Sūrat al-Najm and Sūrat al-Takwīr: An Intra- and Extra-Textual Exegesis

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Sūrat al-Najm, Sūrat al-Takwīr, and Visual tajallī

The Qur'anic discourse presented within the opening verses of Sūrat al-Najm is highly significant, as these verses stand as self-referential articulations of the Qur'anic onto-theological and revelatory paradigms. The implications therein are of direct relevance to many theological and exegetical questions which are significant both for premodern and contemporary theologians and scholars of Islam.

In his Allah Transcendent, Ian Netton traces the ideological history of the semiotic concept of the 'sign' and applies it within his study of the Islamic discourse. The 'sign', as a broad category, has standing as a unit of both text and analysis in semiotic discourse, and specifically the thought of Ferdinand de Saussure, among other scholars.[1] Netton situates this literary interpretive project largely within the Barthesian critical framework of discovering 'what is "valid"' within a semiotic system where validity is interpreted as 'constituting a coherent system of signs'.[2] Since, he contends, 'all literature, including of course, the literature of philosophy and theology', may be considered as a 'system of signs',[3] Netton proposes 'replacing words such as "seme" with a new word, "theologeme", in order to try and provide a unit with greater obvious theological specificity,' defined briefly as 'a basic unit of theological discourse which can also function as a sign'.[4]

I consider Netton's concept of the theologeme to be a highly useful contribution to the technical vocabulary of both semiotics, and religious studies. The present study is in concert with Netton on the utility of such an approach to Qur'anic analysis that is informed by the concerns outlined within both cognitive semiotic and cognitive semantic analyses of the Qur'anic text via the route of the theologeme as the primary base-unit of exegesis. It is my position that nūr Allāh ('the Light of God') is both a

discrete and an interrelated theologeme, which in the context of intra-textual theological argumentation is to be properly situated within the Qur'anic discourse of God's ontology. This onto-theological paradigm presents a simultaneously transcendent-immanence in the nature of the deity. It is further my position that the central theological assertion of Qur'anic rhetorical argumentation is an insistence on the necessity of realising the nature of God, and contemplation of the theophany which constitutes the modality of His self-disclosure (*tajallī*). I am, furthermore, in agreement with the views of Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī as outlined in his pioneering work on the concept of the Qur'anic *naẓm* theory, *Tadabbur-i Qurʾān*.[5] As Mustansir Mir observes with regard to Iṣlāḥī's theory, and that of his mentor Ḥamīd al-Farāhī, '…the principle of *naẓm* is indispensable. Farāhī calls it the first and foremost of all exegetical principles'.[6] However, in contraposition to Iṣlāḥī's main approach within his work, I do not feel that the most productive application of *naẓm* theory is limited to the concept of *naẓm* within a sura or a sura pair.[7] Rather, I contend that there is a set of Qur'anic theologemes that are all facets of the overarching Qur'anic theological narrative. These theologemes each function as a Qur'anic *naẓm*, around which other theologemes function as various pillars (*ʿamūd*) that are interrelated to each other and to the central axis of the *naẓm* around which they revolve; and which are likewise demonstrative of this broader pan-Qur'anic rhetorical interconnectivity. By extending the *naẓm* concept to the Qur'an as a whole, rather than largely limiting it to thematic parallels within a sura, or sura pair, we can engage more richly the interrelationships between theologemes within the Qur'anic discursive. This serves for a better integrated application of *naẓm* theory to both exegetical and literary analyses of the Qur'anic theological discourse.

This discursive nature of the Qur'anic discourse is structured so as to provide ample grounds for the demonstration of how this application of *naẓm* theory functions, especially when not constrained within a specific sura or pair of suras. *Naẓm* theory can be utilized to establish connections between Qur'anic material that may present itself to the reader as outwardly lacking in linear coherence, such as Q. 2:260, Q. 4:164, Q. 4:174, Q. 6:122, and Q. 14:5, which I discuss in this article. These verses, I argue below, are all focused on central Qur'anic themes and around the theologemes of 'Light', 'Resurrection', 'The Day of Judgement', 'God's signs', and 'the Days of God'. When read interconnectedly they elucidate much on the Qur'anic paradigm of these subjects.

In Q. 4:174 God addresses mankind saying *Oh mankind! Verily there hath come to you a convincing proof from your Lord; for We have sent unto you a light [that is] manifest.*[8] Within this verse is contained the three theologemes of God's light (*nūr Allāh*), its descent (*nuzūl*), and its clear manifest nature (*mubīn*) presented to mankind.

The concept of *nūr Allāh* is an example of Qur'anic *naẓm*, functioning as a central theme around which one can see interconnectivity with other Qur'anic material. In Q. 2:260 the reader is presented with a discussion between God and Abraham, with Abraham enquiring on the nature of resurrection (*qīyāma*):[9]

> Behold! Abraham said: 'My Lord! Show me how Thou givest life to the dead.' He said: 'Dost thou not then believe?' He said: 'Yea! but to satisfy my own understanding.' He said: 'Take four birds; tame them to turn to thee; put a portion of them on every hill, and call to them; they will come to thee, [flying] with speed. Then know that Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise.'

Q. 6:122 likewise presents the reader with a description of the ontological nature of resurrection (*qīyāma*).[10]

> Can he who was dead, to whom We gave life, and a Light whereby he can walk amongst men, be like him who is in the depths of darkness, from which he can never come out?

We find in this narrative a presentation of the teleological dimension of the lucent nature of resurrection which echoes the fifth verse of *Sūrat Ibrāhīm* (Q. 14:5), wherein Moses described as being sent:[11]

> … with Our Signs (*bi-āyātinā*) [and the command]. 'Bring out thy people from the depths of darkness into light (*min al-ẓulumāti ilā'l-nūri*), and teach them to remember the Days of Allah. Verily in this there are Signs for such as are firmly patient and constant – grateful and appreciative.'

In all the preceding verses, we find a presentation of the concept of God's Light and signs (*āyāt*) that is inclusive of the general concept of theological/metaphorical light (*nūr*), and the concept of divine light (*nūr Allāh)* that belongs to God specifically and as a metaphysical property connected to his guidance, in the preceding verses, functionally related to resurrection. This is the theologominal *naẓm* structure found in Q. 4:174, cited above. This light is clear, makes clear, and descends from God. Furthermore, it is connected to resurrection (both both *yāwm al-qīyāma* specifically and resurrection in general, with the concept of resurrection here as the *ʿamūd*), and intersects with the discourse on light presented in Q. 4:164 and Q. 6:122. The concept of resurrection as it is portrayed in Q. 2:260 is largely *ʿaqlī* in nature (a mental state, rather than future period in linear historiography), connected to divine light, and *taslimī* (conditional upon cultivation of submission to God) in its ontology as an event. Light, then, which is connected with the heart/mind of the human being, whether as a general

principle for mankind,[12] or with specific worthy persons, such as the Prophet, the Ahl al-Bāyt or imams,[13] is thus connected to the concept of resurrection in Qur'anic discourse, as well as to the idea of acceptance (*taslīm*) of God's message and His messengers, i.e. *nabī Ibrāhīm*.

Sūrat al-Najm contains further material that is highly relevant to both the present discussion, and more broadly to any discussion of theophany within an Islamic context. This is especially true, since, as Nicolai Sinai observes, this sura presents 'the most elaborate Qur'anic account of a visionary encounter between the Prophet Muḥammad and the divine annunciator of the revelation of the Qur'an'.[14] The question of the ontologically visual nature of the experience however is a robustly debated issue. Wesley Muhammad notes in his doctoral dissertation that the content of *Sūrat al-Najm*, especially 'the first eighteen verses of this early-Meccan passage which describe an enigmatic visual encounter between Muḥammad and an unidentified being, would later become the centre of discussions on the issue of whether or not the Prophet actually saw God in this world (along with sūrat al-Takhwīr 81:15–24).'[15] Wesley Muhammad is further correct to note that among many classical *mufassir*s there is a tradition of interpretation that reads Gabriel into the passage, making an angelic visitation, not a theophany, the content of Muḥammad's two visions: 'Many Western scholars however, primarily for philological reasons, have generally taken these visions to be of God'.[16] (Consensus is not unanimous however, and there is disagreement between both classical and modern scholars over the identity of the being who is described in decidedly Godlike terms as the agent of revelation, being *the noble messenger, the one mighty in power*, *shadīd* in Q. 53:5–6).

It is indeed true that many voices within early Orientalist scholarship and, indeed, among Western academic intelligentsia well into the 1970s, would take it as a matter of course that the narrative articulated in *Sūrat al-Najm* describes a direct encounter with the deity. However, many more recent studies published by Euro-American academics (post 2008) would not assume that at all, as we can see in Nicolai Sinai's affirmation that earlier claims that Muḥammad had seen God 'is only one possible account'.[17] Likewise, as Wesley Muhammad notes, many classical *tafsīr*s, such as those of Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Ḥajar, assumed that the *shadīd* (the 'one of power') referred to in this verse was an angelic mediator, Gabriel.[18] These exegetes largely gave precedence to narrations within the *ḥadīth* literature that would lean towards interpreting the verse as an angelic encounter, rather than those asserting direct theophany. However, there were contrapositions, such as those met with in *Sunan al-Nasāʾī*.[19]

Moving the discussion on to directly address the text of *Sūrat al-Najm*: : the first three verses of *Sūrat al-Najm* form a rhetorically significant oath cluster, and are followed by a description of a visionary experience, which entails an encounter between the Prophet who is receiving the revelation (vv. 4–5) and the revelator, who is described as *shadīd*

in verse 5. The text is explicit on this point, and irrespective of the identarian assignation, the one who is *shadīd* is the one conveying the recitation to the recipient of the divine communication. This recitation is further articulated as a message being delivered by 'the possessor of power' (*dhū mirra*) who is then said to 'rise' or 'become established' (*fa'stawā*) until He is 'in the horizon's highest point' (*wa-huwa bi'l-ufuqi'l-aᶜlā*) in verses 6–7.

There is an occurrence of the same wording (*bi'l-ufuq*) in what I contend is a parallel narrative account of the same, or a similar, event (perhaps the 'second descent' referred to in Q. 53:13) in Q. 81:23. Therein a description of the ontology of the Qur'an is provided (in Q. 18:19–20) that asserts, *Verily, it is the sayings of an honourable messenger, possessor of power with the Lord of the Mighty Throne*.[20] The most natural reading of this, preserving both the ideas that the Prophet is the one articulating the revelatory act, and that the Qur'an is a divine speech-act taught directly by the deity (Q. 96:1–5), mandates that the messenger is Muḥammad, being granted *quwwa*, and the one revealing the message to him is God (Q. 96:1).

A Non-Visual Vision? The Semiotics of Theophany in Qur'anic *naẓm*

There is further attestation to the identity of the agent behind the revelatory speech act in Q. 41:2, which makes the assertion explicit that the Qur'an is *tanzīlun mina'l-raḥmāni'l-raḥīmi* (*Sent down from the unconditionally Beneficent*[21]). Ibn Kathīr records the position of Ibn ᶜAbbās and ᶜIkrima that the statements in Q. 53 that *the heart lied not in what it saw* (Q. 53:11) and that *Indeed he saw him in another descent* (Q. 53:13) meant that Muḥammad saw God twice in his heart.[22] Ibn Kathīr does not reject these traditions, and recognises that this was a position held by *muffasīr*s from earlier generations on the basis of reports from the companions of the Prophet.[23] This interpretation is likewise recorded in *Jāmīᶜ al-Tirmidhī*, which records that:[24]

> ᶜIkrima narrated from Ibn ᶜAbbās: Muḥammad saw his Lord. I asked,
> 'Did not God say: *No vision can grasp Him, but He grasps all vision*
> [Q. 6:103]. He said, 'That is, if he performs self-disclosure of His light
> (*tajallī*) and that light *is* His light, and Muḥammad saw his Lord on two
> occasions.'

This narration is followed in *Jāmīᶜ al-Tirmidhī* by successive *ḥadīth* relating that '… the Prophet saw Him'[25] and clarifying the modality of this witnessing to be internal, relating that 'ᶜIkrima narrated that Ibn ᶜAbbās said [regarding Q. 53:11] *the heart lied not in what it saw*: 'He saw Him with his heart'.[26] This in turn echoes the words found in Q. 41:53–54, *soon We will show them Our signs in the farthest horizons and in themselves, until it becomes manifest clarity with them that this is the divine Truth …*

God is encompassing of all things (*bi-kulli shayʾīn muḥīṭun*). The parallel usage of the words is both rhetorically and theologically highly significant. *Muḥīṭun*, as Lane notes,[27] is indicative of both completely surrounding and engulfing, in the sense of water (similarly to *ḥulūl*).

Returning to the question of the ontology of the being who is the object being witnessed in Q. 53, and modality of that vision, we argue that the totality of the preceding internal Qurʾanic material and classical narrative traditions suggest the affirmation of a theophany. What is highly significant however, is this is an internal theophany (*bī qalbī*), the nature of the witnessing being an internal witness of the vision of the heart rather than one located in spatial locality or in a specific physical manifestation, which would characterise the older Orientalist interpretation of a vision of the Divine. While some more modern commentaries , such as that of Mawdūdī, may confidently assert that 'there remains no doubt that here "mighty in power" implies the angel Gabriel and not Allah',[28] who is being referred to in these verses,[29] many of the earliest *ḥadīth* scholars and Qurʾanic *mufassīr*s (such as al-Tustarī, writing in the mid to late third century AH, or al-Tirmidhī in the *Bāb al-Tafsīr* in his *Jamiʿ*, written in the mid second century) either accepted the interpretive option, or took for granted, that it was a theophanic encounter with God which is being described. Thus, in his *tafsīr* al-Tustarī comments on Q. 53:11 that 'the heart did deny what he saw. That is to say, what he saw at the witnessing (*mushāhada*) of his Lord, through the vision (*baṣar*) of his heart as a face-to-face encounter (*kifā*).'[30]

The Islamic tradition has not limited such communication with the divine to the prophets, as we can see from a *ḥadīth* recorded by al-Tirmidhī, according to which:[31]

> Jābir said, 'The Messenger of God … called ʿAlī on the Day … of al-Ṭāʾif, and spoke privately with him, so the people said, 'His conversation with his cousin has grown lengthy …' The Messenger of Allah said, 'I did not speak privately with him, rather Allah spoke privately with him.'

It is often assumed that the Shii tradition eschews all notions of theophany as *visio dei*.[32] However, as has been demonstrated by Pouresmaeil, this is a vast over-simplification. When we survey the Shii tradition, we can actually find numerous highly relevant examples of theophany.[33] We might then ask, if it is safe to assume that the vision described in the preceding Qurʾanic verses describes a vision of God, what is the modality of that vision? As has been noted by Zachary Markwith 'Allah is at the center of creation through the theophany of the purified heart of the Universal Man … the Prophet of Islam said, "The Heart of the faithful is the throne (*al-ʿarsh*) of the All-Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*)."'[34] This was, according to William Chittick, likewise the understanding of the Sufi shaykh Jāmī.[35]

Returning to the exegetical principles of *naẓm*, we can see evidenced some further exemplars of intra-textual filiation with the idea of internal witnessing of beatific vision in what at first might seem like an unlikely place to seek support for Qur'anic articulations of *visio dei*, specifically, the example of Moses and the shattering of the mountain in Q. 7:143, when *his God directly manifested himself (tajallā rabbahu).*[36] Also immediately relevant is the material presented in Q. 46:12, *and from before this was the Book of Moses, a guidance and a mercy (kitābu Mūsā imāman wa-raḥmatan), and this Book (kitāb) confirms in the Arabic tongue.* Further to this, Q. 59:21, in polyphonic interconnectivity with the preceding material, repeats this 'mountain + word of God + self-revelation' discourse: *If we had caused this recitation (qurʾān) to descend upon a mountain, indeed you would have seen it humble itself, utterly rent asunder from fear of God.*[37] Rather than being revealed to a mountain, however, the Qur'an self-referentially declares it was revealed to mankind, and specifically the Prophetic paragon of humanity *par excellence* who is the only ontological being truly capable of receiving the fullness of divine indwelling, as *nūr mubīnā* 'manifest Light'. We find then the following theologemes within the discourse forming the *naẓm* structure of an interrelationship:

> *nūr* ('light')
> *imāma* ('divine guidance')
> *kitāb Allāh* ('the Book of God')
> *kalām Allāh* ('the speech act of God')
> *tajallī* ('the self-revelation of God')

The interrelationships provided by these theologemes provide new avenues to access the multifocality of the Qur'anic discourse on the theophanous nature of divinity, and mankind, as the *ʿarsh* by means of which that theophany is actualised. These theologemes of 'the mountain' and the speech-act of God (*kalām*, *kitāb*) are connected, with both light (Q. 46:12) *and tajallī* (Q. 7:124) functioning as the pillars of the *naẓm* structure of the Qur'anic discourse on theophany.

In conclusion, the Qur'anic discourse then, is indeed demonstrably one grounded in theophany. This is true of humanity in general, as the supreme locus of the names and attributes of God, and especially of the prophetic witness of this internal theophany, as the archetypal example of this theomorphic theophany. This is the prophetic *tajallī al-nafs* which Q. 41:53 describes as being realised through the witnessing of the divine presence, *in the farthest horizons, and in themselves.*

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NOTES

1 Such as in the works of Charles Peirce, whose uses of 'sign' include definitions of its function as being the concept that 'a sign is anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*)' (Netton, *Allah Transcendent*, p. 78. Emphasis in original).

2 Netton observes 'To Study Kindian semiotics is therefore to study the world of 'semes', 'sememes' signifiers and signified … I propose at this stage to replace such words as seme and sememe by a new word, 'theologeme' in order to try and provide a unit with greater obvious theological specificity … a theologeme, here and elsewhere in this book is to be defined briefly as a *basic unit of theological discourse which can also function as a sign.* All literature, including of course the literature of philosophy and theology, may be considered as a Barthesian system of signs' (Netton, *Allah Transcendent*, p. 79. Emphasis in original).

3 Netton, *Allah Transcendent*, p. 79.

4 Netton, *Allah Transcendent*, p. 79. Emphasis in original.

5 In his specific articulation of the concept of *naẓm*, an idea common to both Arabic and Urdu poetic and scriptural literary analyses, which is, in general, the idea of a central theme or themes common to a piece of metred versification, around which the narrative structure revolves. Iṣlāḥī primarily continues the intellectual legacy of his teacher, Ḥamīd al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Farāhī, which al-Farāhī outlined in works such as *al-Takmīl fī uṣūl al-taʾwīl*, published in 1968, with some significant departures from his teacher. The most significant of these departures from the *naẓm* theory as outlined by al-Farāhī is the development of the concept of the sura pair. For a discussion of this see Mir, *Coherence*, pp. 33–37.

6 Mir, *Coherence*, p. 30.

7 What Kamran Bashir in his excellent treatment of *naẓm* as a tool for Qur'anic exegesis has called 'the framework of linear *naẓm*'. See Bashir, 'Revisiting Modern *naẓm* Approaches', p. 6.

8 Yūsuf Alī, *The Holy Qur'ān*, p. 235.

9 Yūsuf Alī, *The Holy Qur'ān*, pp. 105–106.

10 Yūsuf Alī, *The Holy Qur'ān*, p. 313.

11 Yūsuf Alī, *The Holy Qur'ān*, p. 620.

12 As was the opinion of Ibn ʿAbbās and ʿUbbay b. Kaʿb. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 7, pp. 84–85. And Muqātil (cited in) Hamza et al., *An Anthology*, vol. 1, pp. 350–351.

13 Such as was the opinion of al-Ṭabarī (224–310/839–923) and al-Qummī (*c.* fourth/tenth century) (see Hamza et al., *An Anthology*, vol. 1, pp. 353, 359. Likewise, Mulla Sadra (978–1049/1571–1640) affirmed the fundamental essence of both positions (Mulla Sadra, 'On the Hermeneutics', pp. 75–80).

14 See, Sinai, 'An Interpretation', p. 1.

15 Williams, '*Tajallī wa-Ru'ya*', pp. 101–102.

16 Williams, '*Tajallī wa-Ru'ya*', pp. 101–102.

17 Sinai, 'An Interpretation', p. 8.

18 For example, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, writing in the 800/1400s in his commentary on the question 'Did Muḥammad see his Lord?' instructs the one eliciting such questions 'to meditate on the *transcendence* of God, and the impossibility of that occurring (the Prophet seeing God).' See, Ibn Ḥajar, *Kitāb al-Tafsīr*, vol. 9, *Bāb Sūrat al-Najm*, p. 523.

19 'And also, at other instances He (God) comes in the form like that of a young man and reveals it to me' (al-Nasāʾī, *Sunān*, vol. 1, *ḥadīth* 930, p. 409).

20 Translation mine.

21 Translation mine.

22 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 9, p. 312.

23 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 9, p. 312, citing the *tafsīr* works of al-Qurṭubī and al-Ṭabarī as precedent. However, he does consider these traditions somewhat problematic, and to be approached cautiously.

24 '*dhālika idā tajallī bi-nūr alladhī huwa nūruhu wa-qad raʾā Muḥammad rabbahu marratayn*' (al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmīᶜ*, vol. 5, p. 582, *ḥadīth* no. 3279).

25 al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmīᶜ*, vol. 5, p. 583 , *ḥadīth* no. 3280

26 al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmīᶜ*, vol 5, p. 583, *ḥadīth* no. 3281. All of the preceding *ḥadīth*s in al-Tirmidhī were graded either *ḥasan* or *ṣaḥīḥ*, by the notable *muḥaddith* Abū ᶜĪsā.

27 Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. 2, pp. 663.

28 Mawdūdī, *The Meaning of the Qur'ān*, vol. 5, p. 209.

29 This view is also the position offered in the fifteenth-century *Tafsīr al-Jalālāyn* on the relevant verse of *Sūrat al-Najm*. The explanatory gloss is provided that 'this means it is Gabriel, peace be upon him', positing that it was an angelic vision described. However, it is relevant to note that in *Tafsīr al-Jalālāyn*, on the parallel narrative accounts of the events in *Sūrat al-Najm* and *Sūrat Takwīr* (Q. 81:16–29) the assertion is made the one sending the revelation (and hence the direct object of the visionary experience), is God. See, al-Suyūṭī and al-Mahallī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālāyn*, p. 597.

30 al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, p. 212.

31 al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmīᶜ*, vol. 6, p. 397, *ḥadīth* no. 3726.

32 Ehsan Pouresmaeil frames that axiomatic presupposition thusly: 'figures of different persuasions from the Sunnī tradition have not only believed that this is possible but that this has also occurred numerous times. In contrast, we see that the Shīʾī tradition has been opposed to such a possibility' (See, Pouresmaeil, 'Seeing Allah While Dreaming', p. 66).

33 See for example, the well-known 'Sermon of Exaltation' (*khuṭba al-aftakhāraʾ*), the 'Sermon of the Gulf' (*khuṭba al-taṭanjīyya*), and 'the Knowledge of the *Imām* by means of his Illumination' (*maᶜrifat al-imām bi'l-nūrānīyya*), as collected by al-Ḥāfiẓ Rajab al-Bursī. See al-Bursī, *Mashāriq Anwār*, especially pp. 255–263.

34 Markwith, 'The Imām and the Qūtb', p. 26.

35 As William Chittick notes: 'Jāmī's interpretation of the famous *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, "God created Adam in His own form", illustrates more fully how he understands man as the locus of theophany for the name "Allah" … the form is ontologically connected to its own meaning. Hence man as the "form" of Allah is ontologically the manifestation of Allah and the means whereby he is known in the physical world … [the] theophany of the name "Allah" is the basis for al-Jāmī's exposition of Man's relation to the Universe' (Chittick 'The Perfect Man', p. 145).

36 Translation mine.

37 Translation mine.

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