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Biblical Elements in Koran 89, 6-8 and Its Exegeses: A New Interpretation of "Iram of the Pillars"

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Abstract
The meaning of the expression "Iram of the pillars" which is found in Kor 89, 7 has been the subject of many debates among ancient Muslim exegetes. The ambiguous signification of this passage has led to a large number of different interpretations and has (seemingly) led to many myths, whether in classical Arabic literature (religious and profane alike) or in modern Western writings.

The aim of this paper is to give a critical overview and analysis of the various exegeses for this Koranic verse, to study the developments and history of the 'Iram myth' and finally, in light of these elements as well as through a Biblical/Midrashic comparative approach, to suggest our own theory of what was certainly the primitive and forgotten meaning of "Iram of the pillars".

Keywords
Koran, exegesis, *tafsīr*, Iram, Hiram, pillars, Bible, Midrash

Résumé
La signification de l'expression « Iram aux colonnes » que l'on trouve dans le Coran (89, 7) a fait l'objet de maints débats parmi les anciens exégètes musulmans. L'ambiguïté sémantique de ce passage a donné lieu à un grand nombre d'interprétations différentes et, semble-t-il, a engendré beaucoup de mythes, tant en littérature arabe classique (religieuse comme profane) que dans les écrits occidentaux modernes.

L'objet de cet article est de fournir un aperçu critique et une analyse des diverses exégèses de ce verset coranique, d'étudier les développements et l'histoire du « mythe d'Iram » pour enfin, à la lumière de ces éléments mais aussi au moyen d'une approche comparatiste biblique et midrashique, soumettre notre propre hypothèse de ce qui fut certainement le sens primitif d'« Iram aux colonnes ».

Mots clés
Coran, exégèse, *tafsīr*, Iram, Hiram, colonnes, Bible, Midrash

To anyone who has ever opened the Koran, it is no mystery that it contains a great amount of Biblical elements, as Islam is considered to be the continuation of the two previous monotheisms. Indeed, the Koran has incorporated

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Biblical elements not only within itself,[1] but also in the Sunna[2] (*i.e.* the sayings and doings of Prophet Muḥammad or *Ḥadīṯ* in Arabic) and in the former's exegeses (*tafsīr*).

Both non-Muslim and Muslim scholars alike have extensively worked on the subject of Biblical resonances found in various Koranic passages, on the representation differences of major Biblical figures in the Bible and in the Koran, etc.

However, the study of Biblical—and Old Testament especially—traces in Koranic exegeses is more limited and there is yet a lot to be discovered. The main reason behind this is due to the vast quantity of existing *tafāsīr* alongside the fact that many references to Biblical stories contained within the Koranic commentaries are not always obvious.

The aim of this paper will be to analyze a short but significant Koranic passage as it has led to many legends that subsist until the present day; but most importantly because its commentaries are very rich with somewhat hidden elements borrowed from the Bible's canon, some of its apocryphal stories, its exegeses, and materials from the Qumran Dead-Sea scrolls. Furthermore, we will suggest our own theory based on a Biblical passage and its rabbinic interpretations in order to explain a verse that has been a subject of discord since the very beginning of Islam's sacred Book's exegeses.

The passage in question is Koran 89, 6-8,[3] and like many suras revealed in Mecca,[4] it is introduced by a sermon particle called *wāw al-qasam* in Arabic

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[1] For an early (and subjective) orientalist view of this see for example Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 5: "The Arab Prophet's message was an eclectic composite of religious ideas and regulations. The ideas were suggested to him by contacts, which had stirred him deeply, with Jewish, Christian, and other elements".

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 40: "Passages from the Old and New Testaments, rabbinic sayings, quotes from apocryphal gospels […] gained entrance into Islam disguised as utterances from the Prophet".

[3] Kor 89, 6-8 in transliteration is the following: *a-lam tara kayfa faʿala rabbuka bi-ʿĀd/Irama ḏāti l-ʿimād/allatī lam yuḫlaq miṯluhā fi l-bilād*.

[4] The fact that this surah is from the Meccan era (thus part of the early Revelations) is considered to be accepted by a consensus (*iǧmāʿ*) of Muslim scholars according to Ibn al-Ǧawzī (d. 597/1201) in his *Zād al-masīr fī ʿilm al-tafsīr* commentary, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002, V, p. 254. Later, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) in his *tafsīr* entitled *al-Ǧāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (al-Manṣūra, Maktabat al-īmān, n.d., X, p. 439) will even go as far as saying that this surah was revealed to Muḥammad during (literally "after") the night (*nazalat baʿd al-layl*). Also see al-Suyūṭī's (d. 911/1505) Koranic sciences book *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* (Beirut, al-Maktaba l-ʿaṣriyya, 1997), in the first chapter entitled "Of what is known [to have been revealed] in Mecca and in Medina" (*al-nawʿ al-awwal: fī maʿrifat al-makkī wa-l-madanī*). The French scholar Jacqueline Chabbi suggests that this is a composite surah formed from both verses from Mecca and Medina. See her *Le Seigneur des tribus. L'islam de Mahomet*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2010², p. 439.

which initiates the first five verses that are independent from the rest of the surah as far as the meaning goes.[5]

The sixth verse could have indeed opened this 89th surah since it starts with the frequently-used Koranic rhetorical question "Hast thou not seen (*a-lam tara*)"[6]—addressed to either the Prophet or else the latter and human kind in general—that is the starting point of the 105th surah.[7]

From there the following seven verses constitute what can be defined as a "punishment-story"—and what Montgomery Watt calls "a definite type of material found in the Koran"[8]—that is, it tells of the divine destruction of ancient populations or people because of their disbelief in God. In order, these are the ancient Arab tribes of ʿĀd[9] (verse n°6) and Ṯamūd[10] (verse n°9), as well as Pharaoh (verse n°11). Amidst these is an enigmatic verse which will be the center of this study and which has been translated in many different ways.

Here are some English renderings of the passage (Kor 89, 6-8) that we will be analyzing in this paper:

> Hast thou not seen how thy Lord did with Ad,
> Iram of the pillars,
> The like of which was never created in the land[11]
>
> Hast thou not seen, [O Muḥammad], how thy Lord dealt with ʿĀd
> At Iram, adorned with pillars,
> The like of which has not been created in the land?[12]
>
> Seest thou not how thy Lord dealt with the ʿĀd (people)—
> Of the (city of) Iram, with lofty pillars,
> The like of which were not produced in (all) the land?[13]

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[5] See for example Kor 100, 1; 95, 1; 93, 1; 92, 1; 91, 1; 86, 1; 85, 1; 79, 1; 77, 1, etc.

[6] This can be found thirty-one times throughout the Koran.

[7] Kor 105, 1: "Hast thou not seen how Thy Lord dealt with the People of the Elephant?".

[8] W. Montgomery Watt (revised edition of Richard Bell's), *Introduction to the Koran*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1970, p. 127.

[9] Roberto Tottoli, "ʿĀd", *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (*EQ* hereafter): "An ancient tribe to whom the prophet Hūd […] was sent […] but his preaching was largely unsuccessful […]. [The ʿĀd] existed after the people of Noah [and] were originally a nation of ten or thirteen subtribes and one of the first Arab tribes".

[10] Reuven Firestone, "Thamūd", *EQ*: "An ancient tribe […] counted among many peoples who rebelled against God and his messengers. The Ṯamūd succeed the ʿĀd and live in homes hewn out of the earth […] A people called Ṯamūd are mentioned in non-Arabian sources such as Ptolemy (*Geography*)…".

[11] Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, London, George Allen&Unwin, 1955, p. 337.

[12] Arthur Jeffery, *A Reader on Islam. Passages from Standard Arabic Writings Illustrative of the Beliefs and Practices of Muslims*, The Hague, Mouton&Co. Publishers, 1962, p. 32.

[13] Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of The Holy Qurʾān*, Maryland, Amana Publications, 1989, p. 1645.

Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with ʿAd?
Iram of the many pillars;
The like of which was not created in the land?[14]

Have you not seen what your Lord did to ʿAd?
Iram, of the columns?
Its like was never created in any land[15]

The one real difference that arises from these various translations is the way the seventh verse is rendered. First of all, the word *Iram* is either left untouched or else found as implicitly being the name of either a tribe,[16] or a city.[17] Secondly, the "pillars" or "columns" find different adjectives qualifying them: they are "lofty" or "many". Finally, the eighth verse which is grammatically linked to the previous refers to either *Iram*—as can be found in the majority of the translations we used—or else to the "pillars", as Abdullah Yusuf Ali writes: "were not produced…"

These differences are the reflection of an old discussion held through exegeses and which is echoed from the 4th/10th century onwards with such expressions as "The [exegetes] have disagreed",[18] "The [ancient] exegetes (*ahl al-taʾwīl*) disagree on [its] interpretation",[19] "the [ancient] exegetes disagree as to its meaning",[20] "The scholars of Islam (*al-ʿulamāʾ*) have disagreed on the meaning of His words",[21] etc. This disagreement has the meaning of *Iram* and "of the pillars (*ḏāt al-ʿimād*)" for object.

The reason behind this can be found in the fact that the best 'orthodox' and 'approved' way (amongst Sunnis that is) to conduct a commentary on a Koranic passage is first to explain the Koran with the Koran itself.[22] The word

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[14] Majid Fakhry, *The Qurʾan. A Modern English Version*, Reading, Garnet Publishing, 1997, p. 409.

[15] Tarif Khalidi, *The Qurʾan. A New Translation*, London, Penguin Books, 2008, p. 509.

[16] In the glossary following his translation of the Koran, Khalidi writes the following under the *Iram* entry: "A mysterious tribe or place-name, connected with ʿAd".

[17] As seen in Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation, in Fakhry's footnote n°843 linked to the word *Iram*: "The ancient city of ʿAd in central Arabia" and in Khalidi's glossary, as seen in the previous footnote.

[18] Abū ʿAlī l-Ǧubbāʾī (d. 303/915), *Tafsīr Abī ʿAlī l-Ǧubbāʾī*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2007, p. 488.

[19] Abū Ǧaʿfar Muḥammad b. Ǧarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, Beirut, Dār al-fikr, 1988, XV, p. 175.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Ṯaʿlabī (d. 427/1035), *al-Kašf wa-l-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2004, VI, p. 447.

[22] Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Zarkašī (d. 794/1392), *al-Burhān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, Beirut, Dār al-ǧīl, 1988, II, p. 175: *aḥsan ṭarīq al-tafsīr an yufassira l-Qurʾān bi-l-Qurʾān*.

Iram only appears once in the sacred scripture, thus making it impossible to deduce a meaning based on different contexts of the word. The second method to be used, if the first one is impossible, consists of explaining an ambiguous word or expression based on a saying of Prophet Muḥammad.[23] Once again, this cannot be applied as we have no record of the latter explaining the word *Iram* or the general meaning of Kor 89, 7 in any of the canonic sources of *Ḥadīṯ*. The last method that can be used to come to an 'orthodox' exegesis is to base one's commentary on the saying of either the Prophet's Companions (*ṣaḥāba*) or else on a trustworthy member of the following generation, the Successors[24] (*tābiʿūn*). It is only this last method that can and will be used by exegetes, and as these are the opinions of 'mere' men; their opinions are not accepted unanimously.

Therefore, as we will see during the course of this analysis, from the very first centuries of Islam, the Muslim exegetes have been at odds with one another on the meaning of this seventh verse.

First, we will concentrate on the philological aspect of Kor 89, 7, giving a brief overview of the various interpretations of the words *Iram* and *ḏāt al-ʿimād* by basing our study on over thirty Sunni exegeses of different schools of thought. It should be noted here that no classical Shia or Sufi exegeses have commented our passage.[25] We will then go into details as we will discuss three commonly-found opinions concerning our Koranic passage that are based on the Bible.

Secondly we will study the myth of the city of Iram through the two most ancient sources that we know of that cite it: one in an exegesis and the other in a non-exegetical work. We will give a brief overview of the legend's history from its probable beginning up to the 20th century in both Arabic and Western literature.

Finally, we will suggest our own interpretation of what might have very well been the primitive meaning of *Iram ḏāt al-ʿimād*, basing our theory on

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[23] *Ibid. in aʾyāka ḍālika fa-ʿalayka bi-l-Sunna*.

[24] *Ibid.*, II, p. 176: *in lam yūǧad fī l-Sunna, yurǧaʿ ilā aqwāl al-ṣaḥāba* and *al-aḫḏ bi-qawl al-ṣaḥāba* […] *wa-ṣudūr al-mufassirīn min al-ṣaḥāba*: *ʿAlī, Ibn ʿAbbās*….

[25] For Shia exegeses we have looked in: the Imami ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm b. Hāšim al-Qummī's (d. *c*. 307/919) *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān* as well as in the Zaydis al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥakam al-Ḥibarī's (d. 286/899) *Tafsīr* and Furāt b. Ibrāhīm al-Kūfī's (d. 300/912) *Tafsīr*. For Sufi exegeses we have looked in: ʿĪsā b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī's (d. 283/896) *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, Muḥammad b. Mūsā l-Sulamī's (d. 412/1021) *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr* and Ṭalḥa b. Muḥammad al-Qušayrī's (d. 465/1073) *Laṭāʾif al-išārāt*. For instance in the latter's exegesis of our passage, this is what can be read: "[God] mentions the stories of these ancient [people] (*ḏakara qiṣaṣ hāʾulāʾ al-mutaqaddimīn*)"; and in al-Qummī's commentary: "Then ʿĀd died and God destroyed him and his people with the Furious Wind (*ṯumma māta ʿĀd wa-ahlakahu Llāh wa-qawmahu bi-l-rīḥ al-ṣarṣar*)".

the Old Testament and some of its rabbinic exegeses as well as the Islamic sources themselves.

1. *Iram* and *ʿimād*: Two Enigmatic Words

The first word of Kor 89, 7 is *Iram* and, as we have already seen, it has been the center of an ancient debate as to its meaning. In *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾan*, Arthur Jeffery expresses this by stating that "The number of variant readings for this [*Iram*] suggests of itself that the word was a foreign one of which the exegetes could make nothing".[26] We will start by discussing these "variant readings" and will then look into the foreign origin of *Iram*.

As for what follows *Iram* in this verse—that is, *ḏāt al-ʿimād*—it will be analyzed in general terms before we concentrate on its Biblical resonance based on several exegeses.

Different Interpretations of Iram *and* ʿimād

Sunni Muslim orthodoxy has it that the Koran was once and for all standardized in a codex under the third caliph of Islam, ʿUṯmān (d. 35/656), while all the other versions of the holy text were destroyed—even though this is questioned by Western scholars.[27] Nevertheless we know that this unique Koran was far from being unanimously accepted by Muslims and many different recitations (*qirāʾāt*) or ways of reading scripture continued to be used throughout the Islamic world until the 4th/10th century when the text was vocalized and therefore stabilized.[28]

The number of *qirāʾāt* have varied—through time and depending on the transmitters—from about sixty-seven to seven (the latter under Ibn Muǧāhid's reform in the first half of the 4th/10th century).[29] Today, we have access to all

[26] Arthur Jefferey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾan*, Baroda, Oriental Institute, 1938, p. 53.

[27] The first to have discussed this theory is A. Mingana (1878-1937) and he has been followed in his opinion by M. Cook and P. Crone. This theory has it that it is the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (who reigned from 65/685 to 86/705) who assembled the final 'official' codex of the Koran. For a recent overview of this debate, see Etan Kohlberg and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Revelation and Falsification. The Kitāb al-qirāʾāt of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Sayyārī*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 2009, p. 1-23.

[28] Frederik Leemhuis, "Readings of the Qurʾān", *EQ*.

[29] *Ibid.*

of the seven recitations,[30] and thanks to many exegetes' works, the remnants of many "unofficial" ways of reading the Koran have also reached us.

Understanding this system of recitations is key to grasping the different grammatical comments of exegetes as well as the actual various readings they quote and by doing so, providing us with a better comprehension of all of the interpretations of *Iram* and *ʿimād*.

Iram *as Meaning the Destruction*

The famous exegete Abū Ǧaʿfar Muḥammad b. Ǧarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) is the first in our sources to quote the opinions of two major Islamic figures who are Prophet Muḥammad's cousin ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās (d. 68/687) and al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 105/723) who both consider *Iram* as derived from its original trilitary root *ʾ r m*,[31] and thus meaning 'the destroyed (*al-hālik*)': "*Iram* means 'the destroyed', as when you say 'This people was destroyed' (*urima banū fulān*)".[32]

Even though it is not explicit in al-Ṭabarī's *opus magnum*, the sayings that he quotes are actually the reflection of one of the possibilities of 'unofficial' (*i.e.* not included in the seven recitations) Koranic readings that al-Ḍaḥḥāk chose.

We learn of this in Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Ṯaʿlabī's (d. 427/1035) exegesis *al-Kašf wa-l-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*: "Al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim recited *arama ḏāti l-ʿimādi*[33] […]. The *arama* is the destruction (*al-halāk*)…";[34] thus the meaning of this verse according to this way of placing the vowels would be "of the columns [understood as the name of a place] was destroyed", a

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[30] The number of books in Arabic that deal with the 'Seven recitations' (*al-qirāʾāt al-sabʿ*) is too large to give an exhaustive list. However here are a few that have been edited: Abū Bakr b. Muǧāhid's (d. 324/936) *al-Sabʿa fī l-qirāʾāt*; Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥusayn b. Aḥmad b. Ḫālawayh's (d. 370/981) *al-Ḥuǧǧa fī l-qirāʾāt al-sabʿ*; Abū Muḥammad Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib's (d. 437/1046) *al-Tabaṣṣurāt fī l-qirāʾāt al-sabʿ;* Abū ʿAmr ʿUṯmān b. Saʿīd al-Dānī's (d. 444/1053) *al-Taysīr fī l-qirāʾāt al-sabʿ*; Abū Ǧaʿfar Aḥmad b. ʿAlī b. Ḫalf al-Anṣārī's (d. 540/1146) *al-Iqnāʿ fī l-qirāʾāt al-sabʿ*.

[31] As in all Semitic languages, Arabic nouns or verbs can be traced back to a primal trilitary root formed of three consonants. The trilitary root *ʾ r m* which our Koranic *Iram* derives from literally means 'to destroy' as can be found in al-Azharī's (d. 369/980) dictionary entitled *Tahḏīb al-luġa*: "The land has been destroyed (*aramat al-arḍ al-nabata iḏā ahlakathu*)".

[32] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XV, p. 176. Also see the exegeses of al-Ṯaʿlabī and al-Māwardī.

[33] For a different rendering of this recitation, see Ibn Ḫālawayh al-Iṣbahānī's (d. 603/1206) *Iʿrāb al-qirāʾāt al-sabʿ wa-ʿilaluhā*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2006, p. 514: "It is said that al-Ḍaḥḥāk recited: *aramma ḏāti l-ʿimādi*, that is, they were struck by [divine] punishment (*rammahum bi-l-ʿaḏāb*)". As for al-Qurṭubī, he states that *arama ḏāti l-ʿimādi* is also Muǧāhid and Qatāda's way of reciting (*al-Ǧāmiʿ*, XX, p. 443).

[34] Al-Ṯaʿlabī, *al-Kašf*, VI, p. 448.

meaning that is logical in the context of this particular passage which, as we said, offers a "punishment-story".

Iram *as Meaning the Signs*

According to Montgomery Watt, the people of ʿĀd—who are mentioned in the 6th verse—"built 'signs' or eminences [26.128]; their buildings were still to be seen".[35]

This is the reason behind another way of reciting our verse which takes into consideration the trilitary root ʾ *r m* as meaning 'signs', 'boundary-stones' (*aʿlām*) and more specifically the *aʿlām* of the people of ʿĀd—that they built in such a shape that they resembled minarets (*manāra*), or their tombstones (*qubūr*).[36]

Although al-Ṭabarī is a specialist of Koranic recitations,[37] he does not speak of this verse's reading giving it the meaning of "signs" nor does he mention the fact that *Iram* in itself could signify these *aʿlām*. Instead, we once again have to turn to al-Ṯaʿlabī's exegesis in order to discover that Muǧāhid b. Ǧabr (d. 104/722) used to recite *arama ḏāti l-ʿimādi* and that according to al-Muʾarriḫ,[38] "he who recites *arama* assimilates it to the *ārām* which are the 'signs' (*aʿlām*)—and its singular is *aram*".[39]

Taking this recitation into consideration, the meaning of the verse would become: "…with ʿĀd, the people of the signs (*ahl al-aʿlām*)",[40] which agrees with M. Watt's quotation and the Koranic passage he uses to support his sayings: "Do ye [*i.e.* the people of ʿĀd] build a landmark on every high place…"[41]

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[35] Watt, *Introduction*, p. 127.

[36] Al-Ḫalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 170/791), *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2003, I, p. 65. Also see al-Azharī's *Tahḏīb al-luġa* in which he quotes Abū ʿUmar al-Šaybānī's opinion stating that the *ārām* are "signs", "boundary-stones" and that its singular is *iram*.

[37] He wrote a book entitled *al-Ǧāmiʿ fi l-qirāʾāt* on this subject. See Claude Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue et théologie en islam. L'exégèse coranique de Tabari*, Paris, Vrin, 1990, p. 62-3.

[38] Literally this means "the historian" (our Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya edition wrongly writes *al-Mūriǧ*—it should be corrected by *al-Muʾarriḫ* as can be found in Dār iḥyāʾ al-turāṯ al-ʿarabī's 2002 edition, X, p. 195) and as this is a nickname (*laqab*), we do not have enough information to know who that person is.

[39] Al-Ṯaʿlabī, *al-Kašf*, VI, p. 447.

[40] Abū l-Qāsim Ǧār Allāh Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar al-Zamaḫšarī (d. 538/1144), *Tafsīr al-kaššāfʿan ḥaqāʾiq al-tanzīl wa-ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl fi wuǧūh al-taʾwīl*, Beirut, Dār al-maʿrifa, 2009, p. 1200. Also see al-Qurṭubī, *al-Ǧāmiʿ*, XX, p. 443.

[41] Kor 26, 128. Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation; as will always be the case hereafter.

ʿImād *as Meaning the Pillars*

The trilitary root that *ʿimād* derives from is *ʿ m d* and is a known one in Semitic languages which implies the meaning of 'support'[42]—thus the Arabic *ʿimād* as meaning 'pillars', 'columns'.

One of the very first exegetes in Islam, Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) clearly considers the second part of this seventh verse with the literal meaning "of the pillars" as he uses an Arabic synonym of *ʿimād* to explain this passage: *ḏāt al-asāṭīn*.[43]

This simple and literal solution did not seem to win the Koranic commentators' favor,[44] as this explanation will only reappear alongside the myth of the city of Iram (which, as we will later discuss, first appeared during the 4th/10th century) in order to qualify the latter as a "city of pillars (*madīnat ḏāt al-ʿimād*)".[45]

The reason behind this is clearly that during the two centuries separating Muqātil b. Sulaymān from al-Ṭabarānī, the different exegeses of the word *Iram* did not allow it to be connected (via the Arabic particle *ḏāt* or 'of') to 'pillars'. Indeed, 'the destruction' or 'the destroyed' as well as 'the signs' can hardly be associated to pillars.

ʿImād *as Meaning the Bedouins*

From the very beginning of Koranic exegesis, the word *ʿimād* has also been rendered as meaning 'the Bedouins' as we can read in Muǧāhid b. Ǧabr's (d. 104/722) *Tafsīr*:[46] "They [*i.e.* the people of ʿĀd from the previous verse] were Bedouins (*ahl ʿamūd*), nomads (*lā yuqīmūna*)".[47]

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[42] Jefferey, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, p. 216.

[43] Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2003, III, p. 481.

[44] In his *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, al-Ṭabarī only considers the *ʿimād* as meaning 'pillars' in the eighth verse's commentary: "the like of such pillars were not created throughout the land (*lam yuḫlaq miṯla l-aʿmida fī l-bilād*)" to finally reject this interpretation: "This opinion is wrong (*lā waǧh lahu*)", XV, p. 178.

[45] Abū l-Qāsim Sulaymān b. Aḥmad b. al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/970), *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, Jordan, Dār al-kitāb al-ṯaqāfī, 2008, VI, p. 493.

[46] And probably even earlier, as al-Ṭabarī quotes Qatāda b. Diʿāma (d. 118/736) through two different sources (his teachers Bišr b. Muʿāḏ al-ʿAqadī l-Baṣrī l-Ḍarīr (d. 245/859) and Ibn ʿAbd al-Aʿlā l-Ṣanānī l-Baṣrī (d. 245/859)) saying that "they were Bedouins, nomads, they travelled (*sayyāra* and *ahl ʿamūd*)", XV, p. 177. The exegete al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), in his *Baḥr al-ʿulūm*, seems to be the only exegete to trace this opinion back to Hišām b. Muḥammad b. al-Sāʾib al-Kalbī (d. *c.* 205/820).

[47] Abū l-Ḥaǧǧāǧ Muǧāhid b. Ǧabr, *Tafsīr*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2005, p. 335. This can also be found word for word in al-Buḫārī's (d. 256/870) *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2007; "Kitāb al-tafsīr" (n°65), *Sūrat al-faǧr* (n°89), III, p. 325.

This is the result of a metonymy which takes the literal meaning of *ʿimād* that we have discussed above, and applies these 'pillars' or 'poles' to the tents of the Bedouins. Hence, a very large number of exegetes[48] will consider that in the continuity of the sixth verse that mentions the ancient Arab people of ʿĀd, the seventh verse's *ḏāt al-ʿimād* metonymically refers to the fact that they were "people of poles (literal rendition of *ahl ʿamūd*)", the latter being their tents'; and therefore the people of ʿĀd being nomads.[49]

Having examined two different interpretations of *Iram* and *ʿimād* based on the Arabic language itself, we will now turn to two of the most commonly-found explanations for this word in various exegeses that—knowingly or not—base their sayings on the Old Testament or on writings outside of the Bible's canon.

Iram *as a Proper Noun: The Biblical* Arām

Throughout the immense number of sources that constitute Koranic exegeses we can distinguish three interpretations of the word *Iram*: it is either a 'Nation' (*umma*), a 'tribe' (*qabīla*) or an 'ancestor' (*ab*/*ǧadd*). All of these definitions have that in common that *Iram* is a proper noun: the name of a common ancestor from whom the tribe's name derives.

Iram *as a Nation*

The interpretation of *Iram* as meaning a Nation is apparently first found in the sayings of an ancient exegete we have already encountered in the course of this paper: Muǧāhid b. Ǧabr. It is notable that his opinion is not found in the 'official' version of his *Tafsīr*, but rather through a transmission chain (*isnād*) in al-Ṭabarī's exegesis: "Muǧāhid said that *Iram* is a Nation (*umma*)",[50] or with a slight variation in ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb al-Māwardī's (d. 450/1058) exegesis entitled *al-Nukat wa-l-ʿuyūn*: "It's a Nation [among others] (*umma min al-umam*), as Muǧāhid said".[51]

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[48] Zayd b. ʿAlī (d. 120/740), al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822), al-Huwwārī (d. 3rd/9th century), al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), al-Ṯaʿlabī (d. 427/1035), al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076), al-Baġawī (d. 516/1122), al-Zamaḫšarī (d. 538/1144) and al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153) constitute a non-exhaustive list of 2nd/8th to 6th/12th century exegetes who have quoted this opinion.

[49] Al-Ḫalīl b. Aḥmad, *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*: "The *ahl ʿamūd* and *ahl ʿimād* are the people of the tents (*aṣḥāb al-aḫbiya*) [*i.e.* nomads], who do not travel without them", III, p. 227.

[50] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XV, p. 175.

[51] Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-ʿuyūn*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, n.d., VI, p. 267.

Many exegetes will adopt this interpretation, quoting it word for word,[52] or else using synonyms of the Arabic *umma* such as *umm*[53] or *qawm*.[54] In this, we can certainly link these words to the Biblical Hebrew *goy* that can be found over five hundred times throughout the Old Testament and which also means a 'Nation or 'people'.[55]

We will understand the reason behind the assimilation of *Iram* to the meaning of a Nation by looking into two other definitions of the former that also lead to the idea that it is a proper noun.

Iram *as a Tribe*

Looking at early Koranic interpretations, we can see that the exegetes have adopted the opinion that *Iram* is the name of a "tribe of the people of ʿĀd (*qabīla min qawm ʿĀd*)".[56] It seems as though the first person to have formulated this opinion is once again Qatāda b. Diʿāma (d. 118/736) who is quoted by al-Ṭabarī through the two same sources we have seen in footnote n°46.[57]

This notion of tribe is linked to the fact that the sixth verse mentions ʿĀd and therefore, if *Iram* is in apposition with this ancient people, it becomes one of its names. We see this echoed in very primitive exegeses such as Zayd b. ʿAlī's (d. 120/740) who states that *Iram* embodies "the two ʿĀd: the first (*al-ūlā*) ʿĀd[58] […] and the last (*al-aḫīra*) ʿĀd".[59] Therefore, as Muqātil b. Sulaymān—his contemporary—will say, *Iram* is "one of [the ʿĀd's] tribes"[60]

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[52] Al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*; al-Baġawī, *Maʿālim al-tanzīl*, Beirut, Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2002, p. 1405; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Ǧāmiʿ*, XX, p. 444.

[53] Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Ǧāmiʿ*, XX, p. 443; al-Fayrūzābādī (d. 817/1414), *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2009, p. 1087.

[54] Muqātil, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, III, p. 481; al-Ṭabrisī, *Maǧmaʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, Beirut, Dār al-maʿrifa, 1986, X, p. 737.

[55] William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament. Based Upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner*, Michigan, Eerdmans Publishing, 1988, p. 57. In the Bible, see for example Gen 12, 2; 17, 6-16 and 18, 18.

[56] Muqātil, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, III, p. 481.

[57] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XV, p. 175.

[58] See Kor 53, 50 for that expression: "And that it is He who destroyed the first (people of) ʿĀd". The Arabic *al-ūlā* which is literally rendered as "the first" can also be translated as the "ancient" as Abdullah Yusuf Ali prefers in his translation of the Koran. In the note for 53, 50 he writes: "some Commentators construe, *First ʿĀd people*, distinguishing them from the later ʿĀd people, a remnant that had their day and passed away".

[59] Zayd b. ʿAlī, *Tafsīr ġarīb al-Qurʾān*, Hyderabad, Taj Yusuf foundation trust, 2001, p. 308.

[60] Muqātil, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, III, p. 481.

or one of the people of ʿĀd's two names,[61] apparently according to al-Ḥasan's interpretation.[62]

The reason behind the acceptation of *Iram* as being a proper noun rather than a verb or a common noun is a grammatical one based on the 'orthodox' way of reciting Kor 89, 6-7. Reading in the commonly-accepted way places *Iram* in a state of annexion (*iḍāfa*) to the sixth verse's "ʿĀd" only if the former word is considered to be diptote.[63] In Arabic, foreign loan-words are grammatically marked by two vowels instead of three (hence the term 'diptote'). Since *Iram* is considered to be annexed to ʿĀd, we should read: *bi-ʿĀdi Irami*, but instead the canon of the Koran has *bi-ʿĀdin Irama*; thus the comments of famous grammarian exegetes such as al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822) who writes: "The reciters (*al-qurrāʾ*) did not put *Irama* in the oblique/indirect case (*lam yuǧra*)",[64] or al-Zaǧǧāǧ (d. 311/924): "*Iram* cannot be conjugated (*lā tanṣarifu*) because it is used [here] as the name of a tribe and for that reason [its final vowel] takes a *fatḥa* and it is in the subordination's position (*fī mawḍiʿ ǧarr*)".[65]

Iram *as an Ancestor*

The previous analysis remains mysterious and quite ambiguous as long as we haven't looked into what is meant by the "first ʿĀd".

According to the vast majority of exegetes, the "first" people of ʿĀd are a very ancient one. Zayd b. ʿAlī or Abū ʿUbayda (d. 209/824) write in their *tafsīr*s that the "first" ʿĀd is "*Iram* of the tall (*ḏāt al-ṭūl*)"[66]—a meaning we will make explicit later on—but an interpretation we can already link to the brief exegesis that Muǧāhid gives of *Iram*: "It means 'the ancient' (*al-qadīma*)".[67]

What our 1st/7th century exegete means by this interpretation is that *Iram* is ʿĀd's ancestor's name. The denominations "the first" or "the ancient" are an implicit reference to the ancient Semitic custom—that can be found in the

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[61] For this, also see the Muʿtazilite exegete al-Ǧubbāʾī's (d. 303/915) interpretation: "it was ʿĀd's nickname (*laqab*) by which he was known, so that he could be differentiated from those who bore the same name".

[62] Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Huwwārī, *Tafsīr Kitāb Allāh al-ʿazīz*, Beirut, Dār al-ġarb al-islāmī, 1990, IV, p. 501. It should be noted here that the authority that is quoted is certainly al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728).

[63] Abū l-Ḥasan Saʿīd b. Musʿada—known as al-Aḫfaš al-Awsaṭ (d. 215/830), *Maʿānī l-Qurʾān*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002, p. 309.

[64] Abū Zakariyyā Yaḥyā b. Ziyād b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī l-Qurʾān*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002, III, p. 150.

[65] Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Zaǧǧāǧ, *Maʿānī l-Qurʾān wa-iʿrābuhu*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2007, IV, p. 335.

[66] Abū ʿUbayda, *Maǧāz al-Qurʾān*, Beirut, Muʾassasat al-risāla, 1981, II, p. 297.

[67] Muǧāhid, *Tafsīr*, p. 335 and al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XV, p. 175.

Old Testament's Genesis—which considers that all people and tribes have an ancestor to whom they are attached through their name.

In our Koranic passage, the "first" ʿĀd is considered to be the name of an ancestor. *Iram* then becomes either his grandfather (*ǧadd*) or his father (*ab*); and this based on genealogies such as those that can be found in the book of Genesis.

Among our most ancient sources, Muqātil b. Sulaymān is the first to mention such a genealogy: ʿĀd's "ancestor (*abāhum*) was named "son of Samal,[68] son of Lamech, son of Shem, son of Noah (*ibn Samal b. Lamak b. Sām b. Nūḥ*)".[69] Exception made of the first name, this genealogy is exactly the type that can be found in the Old Testament and more precisely in the Book of Genesis 5, 28-9. However, it should be noted that Muqātil considers Lamech to be Noah's grandson whereas in the Bible, Lamech is Noah's father. Moreover, Shem has five sons in Gen 10, 22, among which none is called Lamech.

Later on, exegetes will support genealogies including *Iram* by basing them either on the sayings of al-Kalbī[70] (d. *c.* 205/820), or else of Muḥammad b. Isḥāq (d. 156/767), who is famous for writing the first biography of the Prophet of Islam, of which only fragments remain.[71]

The grammarian and exegete al-Farrāʾ states that according to al-Kalbī, "Iram is [the son of] Shem, son of Noah (*Sām b. Nūḥ*)".[72]

We then get a more detailed Biblical genealogy in al-Ṭabarī's exegesis where—through the voice of Ibn Ḥumayd[73]—he quotes Ibn Isḥāq as having said: "ʿĀd [is the] son of Aram son of Uz son of Shem son of Noah (*ʿĀd b. Iram b. ʿAwṣ*/*ʿŪṣ b. Sām b. Nūḥ*)".[74] Again, there seems to have been some confusion in the genealogical order between Aram/*Iram* and Uz/*ʿAwṣ*. Ibn Hišām, also quoting Ibn Isḥāq, writes: "ʿĀd is the son of Uz, who is the son

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[68] In al-Fayrūzābādī's *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*: "The ancestor of a tribe (*abū qabīla*)".

[69] Muqātil, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, III, p. 481.

[70] Hišām b. Muḥammad b. al-Sāʾib al-Kalbī, who is also known as Ibn al-Kalbī was specialized in Arab genealogy (he wrote *Ǧamharat al-nasab*) and knew a fair amount concerning ancient and Biblical legends (he wrote a *Kitāb ʿĀd al-ūlā wa-l-āḫira* and a *Kitāb Ḥadīṯ Ādam wa-waladihi*). See Ibn Saʿd's (d. 230/845) *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, 1998, VI, p. 359; and Ibn al-Nadīm's (d. 384/994) *Fihrist*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002, p. 153-4.

[71] We have knowledge of certain passages of this book through citations of his work by such writers as al-Bakkāʾī (d. 182/799) and Ibn Hišām (d. 218/833). See Alfred-Louis de Prémare, *Les fondations de l'islam*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2002, p. 362-3.

[72] Al-Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī*, III, p. 150.

[73] Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Rāzī (d. 248/862) was one of al-Ṭabarī's teachers in *Rayy*. Relevant to us is the fact that he is known for telling "legendary" and biblical tales that al-Ṭabarī included in his *tafsīr*. See Gilliot, *Exégèse*, p. 21.

[74] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XV, p. 176.

of Aram, who is the son of Shem, who is the son of Noah (*ʿĀd b. ʿAwṣ*/*ʿŪṣ b. Iram b. Sām b. Nūḥ*)".[75]

From these genealogies, we understand that the Koranic *Iram* was early on linked to the Biblical mythical ancestor *Arām* whose name can first be found in Gen 10, 22: "The children of Shem; Elam, and Asshur, and Arphaxad, and Lud, and Aram".[76]

We know for a fact that even before the advent of Islam, *Iram* as a person was known to Arabs as we can see this term used in an adjectival form in al-Ḥāriṯ b. Ḥilliza's (d. during the 6th century AD) poem: "The cavalry turns around a man like him, a descendant of Iram"; or a century later, in al-Aġlab b. Ǧušām al-ʿIǧlī's (d. 19/640) poem: "They came with their tribe's leader, and we came with ours: al-Aṣamm, who was of Iram's era". From these examples,[77] we can see that the word *Iram* not only has its primal meaning referring to the Biblical ancestor *Arām*, but also that from there, it gained the meaning of 'ancient', as can be found in Muǧāhid's exegesis.[78]

The Arabs must have adopted the Biblical genealogical system and by doing so, they adapted it by including their own tribes in the continuity of Noah's lineage. As the latter's sons are considered to have moved to different parts of the Earth and then begot different 'races', so the different people living on the East of the Mediterranean Sea (including the Arabic Peninsula) are thought to have been the 'sons of Shem' among which is Aram who has been assimilated to the Koranic *Iram*. Depending on the sources, *Iram* is then either ʿĀd's father or grandfather—in a word, his ancestor. By using the mythical Biblical genealogy system, the Arabic people of the tribe of ʿĀd claimed to have gotten that name from an illustrious ancestor whose prestige is reinforced by the fact that he was Noah's great great grandson.[79]

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[75] Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Mālik b. Hišām, *al-Sīra l-nabawiyya*, Beirut, al-Maktaba l-ʿilmiyya, n.d., I, p. 7.

[76] All Bible quotations hereafter are from the 2008 reprint of the 1997 Oxford edition of the King James Version (edited by R. Carroll and S. Prickett).

[77] For more examples of the word *Iram* in ancient poetry, see for instance the Abbasid caliph Ibn al-Muʿtazz's (d. 255/869) poem as quoted by al-Qušayrī (d. 465/1073) in his *Risāla*: "…Wickedness inherited by ʿĀd from Iram, [like] Khosrau's treasure was inherited from father to son…"; or the Umayyad-era poet Ibn Qays al-Ruqayyāt's (d. 85/703) verses as can be read in al-Zamaḫšarī's exegesis: "The ancestor's glory […] that ʿĀd reached, and Iram before him".

[78] W. Montgomery Watt, "Iram", *EI*².

[79] This is how we can understand what al-Ṭabarānī writes in his exegesis: "Iram was […] ʿĀd's father [*i.e.* the people of ʿĀd's ancestor = *abū*] and thus they [*i.e.* the members of the tribe] trace back their genealogy to their 'father' (*nusibū ilā abīhim*)"; and then al-Samaraqandī: "ʿĀd is the son [*i.e.* the posterity] of Iram (*ʿĀd b. Iram*) and they trace their lineage back to their eldest ancestor (*nasabahum ilā abīhim al-akbar*), as when you say 'Bakr son of Wāʾil' (*Bakr b. Wāʾil*)".

Iram *as a City: The Biblical* Arām

Basing their opinions on the same grammatical analysis that allowed the interpretation of *Iram* to have the meaning of a proper noun, the exegetes—apparently at the end of the 2nd/8th, beginning of the 3rd/9th century—began to consider a new option for the meaning of *Iram*.

The two famous grammarians and exegetes from Kūfa and Baṣra, respectively al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822) and al-Aḫfaš al-Awsaṭ (d. 215/830) seem to be among the first—if not the very first—to have quoted the opinion that considers *Iram* as being the name of a city. The first writes: "The reciters (*al-qurrāʾ*) did not put *Iram* in the oblique case (*lam yuǧra*): from what they say, it's the name of a city (*ism balda*)";[80] while the second simply states that *Iram* "can [...] be the name of a city".[81]

From this point on, it is only very exceptionally that exegetes will not consider this option as part of the exegetical possibilities for *Iram*.[82] Moreover, it is after the aforementioned exegetes that more detailed views about the city in question will be developed. Thus, we find different options—based on 'trustworthy' sources—regarding the location of this so-called city of *Iram*.

One of the most common interpretations is that *Iram* is none other than Alexandria, in Egypt. In his *tafsīr*,[83] and through the voice of his Egyptian teacher, Yūnus b. ʿAbd al-Aʿlā (d. 264/877), al-Ṭabarī supports this opinion by quoting an authoritative source: that of Muḥammad b. Kaʿb al-Quraẓī (d. *c.* 117/735), a former Jew who converted to Islam and was recognized for his great knowledge.[84]

Another option is that *Iram* is the name of a place located somewhere in Yemen. It should be noted here that this opinion does not appear in exegeses *strictu sensu*, but rather in geographical dictionaries such as ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Bakrī's (d. 487/1093) *Muʿǧam mā staʿǧama min asmāʾ al-bilād wa-l-mawāḍiʿ*, or Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī's (d. 622/1225) *Muʿǧam al-buldān*; as well as in the mythical tale parts of some exegeses—which will be the focus of our second part.

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[80] Al-Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī*, III, p. 150.

[81] Al-Aḫfaš, *Maʿānī*, p. 309.

[82] Al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076) in his *al-Waǧīz fī tafsīr al-Kitāb al-ʿazīz*; or al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) in their famous *Tafsīr al-Ǧalālayn*, for example, do not mention this interpretation. However it should be noted that both exegeses are extremely concise (*waǧīz* in Arabic).

[83] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XV, p. 175.

[84] W. Montgomery Watt, "Ḳurayẓa", *EI*².

The first author writes, under the entry *Iram ḏāt al-ʿimād*, that "it is said that *Iram ḏāt al-ʿimād* is located in the *Abyan* desert in Yemen [...] and also that it is on the outskirts of *Saḥūl* in Yemen".[85]

As for the second, he states that Iram is located "in Yemen, somewhere between the Hadramaut [desert] and Sana'a".[86]

The last interpretation is perhaps the most famous one: the city of Iram is actually pre-Islamic Damascus. As it was the case for Alexandria, this opinion is quoted by al-Ṭabarī: "al-Maqburī said that *Iram ḏāt al-ʿimād* is Damascus".[87] Here, our exegete refers to Abū Saʿīd al-Maqburī[88] (d. between 85/705 and 96/715), yet another authoritative source of information according to Sunnis.[89]

It is interesting to note that three other different 'trustworthy' sources will be quoted by Muslim dictionary authors and exegetes to support this opinion: Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab[90] (d. 96/715), ʿIkrima b. ʿAbd Allāh[91] (d. *c.* 105/723) and Ḫālid al-Rabʿī[92] (d.?). What these four men (we can only guess as far as the last is concerned) have in common is that they are either Companions (*Ṣaḥāba*) of Prophet Muḥammad or Successors (*Tābīʿūn*)—that is of the following generation. This gives them a very special place in Sunni Islam and thus confers an authoritative status to their sayings.

As Western scholars have pointed out, the opinion that *Iram* is the name of the city of Damascus was "perhaps influenced by its association with the biblical Aram and, no doubt, its plentiful columns".[93] This Biblical place in question is the city that is referred to as "Arām" in the Old Testament. As we previously mentioned, according to the Biblical myth, Noah's grandson, Aram, left for the East after the Flood and begot what would become the Aramaeans (today's Syrians) who founded states in Mesopotamia where actual epigraphic traces of their existence can be found from as early as the 14th century BC and

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[85] Abū ʿUbayd ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Bakrī, *Muʿǧam mā staʿǧama min asmāʾ al-bilād wa-l-mawāḍiʿ*, Cairo, Maktabat al-Ḫānǧī, 1996, I, p. 140.

[86] Yāqūt b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿǧam al-buldān*, Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, 1977, I, p. 155.

[87] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XV, p. 175.

[88] His opinion will then be cited by: al-Ṯaʿlabī; al-Bakrī; al-Ṭabrisī and Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311) in his history of Damascus: *Muḫtaṣar taʾrīḫ Dimašq*.

[89] Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, V, p. 85.

[90] Then cited by: al-Ṯaʿlabī; al-Baġawī; al-Ṭabrisī and Ibn al-Ǧawzī (d. 597/1201) in his exegesis: *Zād al-masīr fī ʿilm al-tafsīr*.

[91] Then cited by: al-Ṯaʿlabī; al-Māwardī; al-Baġawī; al-Ṭabrisī; Ibn al-Ǧawzī and al-Qurṭubī.

[92] Then cited by: al-Ṯaʿlabī and Ibn al-Ǧawzī.

[93] Paul M. Cobb, "Iram", *EQ*. Also see Watt, "Iram", *EI²* and Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, p. 53.

which refer to them as *Akhlamu* or *Aramu*. Their presence is then attested in Syria and in North-West Palestine about one thousand years BC.[94]

This helps us understand that the Biblical Hebrew word *Arām*, just like our Koranic *Iram*—as interpreted by the exegetes—has two meanings that are linked: it is the name of a mythical ancestor; and the name of the Aramaeans' kingdom—the capital of which is none other than Damascus.[95] An example of this can be found in the Old Testament, in the second Book of Samuel: "Then David put garrisons in Syria/Aram of Damascus (*va-yāsēm Dāvid neṣivīm ba-Aram Dammēsēq*) . . .".[96]

What we have just discussed and the fact that in the Koran, *Iram* is said to be "of the pillars" (by adopting the literal interpretation we have seen previously)—a qualification that can easily be attributed to Damascus[97]—further explains how and why the exegetes have adopted in a nearly-unanimous way the opinion that *Iram* is a city and more precisely that it is Damascus.[98]

Ḏāt al-ʿimād *and the People of* ʿĀd: *An Echo to the Biblical* nefilīm*?*

After having given an overview of the many possible interpretations for *Iram*; and having seen the manner in which some of them can be linked directly to the Old Testament; and after having studied two opinions regarding *ḏāt al-ʿimād*—one stating the literal meaning of 'pillars' and the other the metonym that it derives from giving it the meaning of 'Bedouins'—we will now concentrate on one last definition of the second part of Kor 89, 7 that is based on Biblical writings.

In this part, we will examine *ḏāt al-ʿimād* and its interpretations that derive from its literal meaning of 'pillar'. Both explanations, we will see, consider this *ḏāt al-ʿimād* with the sense of 'of the tall'.

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[94] André-Marie Gérard, *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1989, p. 94.

[95] Perhaps this is how we can understand what al-Ṭabarī writes in his exegesis: "*Iram* was [. . .] the capital (*bayt mamlaka*) of the [people of] ʿĀd", XV, p. 175.

[96] 2 Sam 8, 6.

[97] See for example al-Bakrī, *Muʿǧam*, I, p. 140: "It is said that [*Iram*] is Damascus and that four hundred thousand stone pillars can be found there".

[98] Al-Ṭabarī seems to be the only exception as he writes that *Iram* "is either Damascus or Alexandria. The [people of] ʿĀd's country (*bilād*) is the one referred to by God in His Book: 'Mention (Hūd) One of ʿĀd's (own) brethren: Behold he warned his people About the winding Sand-tracts (*al-aḥqāf*) . . .' [Kor 46, 21]. The [word] *aḥqāf* is the plural of *ḥiqf*: it's a winding sandy land (*huwa mā nʿaṭafa min al-raml wa-nḥanā*). [However], neither Alexandria nor Damascus are sandy cities (*min bilād al-rimāl*) while that valley (*šiḥr*) [that is made of *al-aḥqāf*] is part of the land of Hadramaut, and not [Alexandria and Damascus]", XV, p. 178.

First, we can see that some exegetes offered an interpretation linked to the sixth verse and the ancient people of ʿĀd by stating that what is meant by *ḏāt al-ʿimād* is 'of the tall/of the high and great constructions' (*ḏāt al-bināʾ al-rafīʿ/ḏāt al-abniya l-ʿiẓām al-murtafiʿa*). This is what we can read in both the Ibadite al-Huwwārīʾs[99] (d. 3rd/9th century) and the Muʿtazilite al-Ǧubbāʾīʾs[100] (d. 303/915) exegeses. According to the former commentator and, later on, to the Shia al-Ṭūsī, this is al-Ḥasan's opinion.

Furthermore, al-Ṭabarī and al-Ṭūsī—only to cite these two exegetes—quote Ibn Zayd's opinion who is said to have considered that *ḏāt al-ʿimād* means that the people of ʿĀd built solid and firm constructions (*iḥkām bunyānihim*).

It seems quite logical that the Koran commentators would have considered these interpretations, since the people of ʿĀd—as we have previously discussed—were thought to have built high constructions (as stated in Kor 26, 128).

Secondly, in order to understand the last exegetes' interpretation of *ḏāt al-ʿimād* that we will study, we need to turn to the trilitary root of *ʿimād* once again.

According to the (supposed) author of the very first Arabic dictionary—al-Ḫalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (d. 170/791)—the *ʿummud*, a word also formed on the *ʿ m d* root, means a "vigorous young person (*al-šābb al-šadīd*) who is full of youth".[101] Also, it can mean "corpulent and bulky (*ḏāt ǧism wa-ʿabāla*)".[102]

A later grammarian, Ibn Sīda (d. 358/1066) will write in his *al-Muḫaṣṣaṣ fī l-luġa* dictionary that the same al-Ḫalīl b. Aḥmad had also given the word *ʿummud* the meaning of "tall" (*al-ṭawīl*).

Also—and this demonstrates the intrinsical link that exists between grammar and exegesis—many *tafāsīr*[103] mention an apparently popular saying among Arabs which was used to qualify a tall man and that we chronologically find first in an exegesis—Abū ʿUbayda's (d. 209/824)—although the lexicographer al-Mubarrad (d. 285/897) will often be quoted as the source of this expression.[104] The latter is: *raǧul muʿammad* which means "a tall man".

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[99] Al-Huwwārī, *Tafsīr*, IV, p. 501.

[100] Daniel Gimaret, *Une lecture muʿtazilite du Coran. Le tafsīr d'Abū ʿAlī al-Djubbāʾī (m. 303/915) partiellement reconstitué à partir de ses citateurs*, Louvain, Peeters, 1994, p. 854.

[101] Al-Ḫalīl b. Aḥmad, *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, III, p. 227.

[102] *Ibid.*

[103] Abū ʿUbayda Maʿmar b. al-Muṯannā (d. 209/824), *Maǧāz al-Qurʾān*; ʿAbd Allāh b. Yaḥyā b. al-Mubārak al-Zaydī (d. 237/851), *Ġarīb al-Qurʾān wa-tafsīruhu*; al-Huwwārī, *Tafsīr*; al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*; al-Zaǧǧāǧ, *Maʿānī*; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Tafsīr*; al-Ṯaʿlabī, *al-Kašf*; al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat*; al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*; al-Zamaḫšarī, *al-Kaššāf*; al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153), *Maǧmaʿ*, etc.

[104] For instance, in two famous dictionaries that are al-Azharī's (d. 369/980) *Tahḏīb al-luġa* and Murtaḍā l-Zabīdī's (d. 1205/1791) *Tāǧ al-ʿarūs*.

In short, we find two meanings deriving from the trilitary root that forms our Koranic word *ʿimād*: on the one hand the strength or vigor and on the other, the height; two meanings that are also contained in 'pillar'.

It is precisely these two meanings that appear early on in Kor 89, 7's exegeses through the sayings of two authoritative figures we have already seen: Prophet Muḥammad's cousin Ibn ʿAbbās and the *Tābiʿī* al-Ḍaḥḥāk, as quoted by al-Ṭabarī; although this interpretation can also be found directly via two other Successors' exegeses: Zayd b. ʿAlī and Muqātil b. Sulaymān.

In the latter two's exegeses, we learn on the one hand from Zayd b. ʿAlī that *ḏāt al-ʿimād* means "of the tall (*ḏāt al-ṭūl*)"[105]—referring to the first people of ʿĀd; and from Muqātil, that they were called like that because "God—Great and Mighty—compared (*šabbaha*) their height (*ṭūlahum*)—when they were standing up (*iḏ kānū qiyāman fī l-barriyya*)—to the likes of pillars (*ʿimād*)".[106]

We also learn from many exegeses the precise height of these tall people of ʿĀd—although with great variations. In brief, their height ranges from eighteen or twelve *ḏirāʿ*[107]—roughly 8 meters and 68 centimeters or 5 meters and 79 centimeters[108]—to such incredible heights as five hundred cubits—more than 241 meters![109]

Thus, to quote Muǧāhid's expression, we can clearly see that the people of ʿĀd were considered to have been giants with "bodies that [touched] the sky (*kāna lahum ǧism fī l-samāʾ*)".[110]

The second aspect of these gigantic ʿĀd based on the metaphorical sense of *ʿimād* is the fact that they are considered to have been strong (*šidda*) and powerful (*quwwa*). This notion is based on al-Ḍaḥḥāk's saying as quoted in al-Ṭabarī's exegesis.[111]

In the same frame of idea, we also find a *ḥadīṯ* (that does not appear in the six Sunni 'canonic' collections) quoted by several later exegetes to explain *ḏāt al-ʿimād* and that contributes to the ʿĀd's mythical dimension: "The Prophet (peace and blessings of God be upon him) mentioned *Iram ḏāt al-ʿimād* and

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[105] Zayd b. ʿAlī, *Tafsīr*, p. 308.

[106] Muqātil, *al-Tafsīr*, III, p. 481.

[107] A *ḏirāʿ* is an ancient measure that could be translated by "cubit". One *ḏirāʿ* is the equivalent of 48.25 cm. See W. Hinz, "Dhira'", *EI*².

[108] Muqātil, *al-Tafsīr*, III, p. 481; al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XV, p. 177. The ʿĀd's height being of twelve cubits is Qatāda's opinion in the latter's exegesis.

[109] Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Ǧāmiʿ*, XX, p. 444. Here, it is Ibn ʿAbbās' opinion that is quoted. It is interesting to note that al-Qurṭubī cites Ibn ʿArabī refuting this interpretation by quoting a *ḥadīṯ* (found in both al-Buḫārī's and Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*) stating that God created Adam with a height of sixty cubits, and that since then, mankind's height has only decreased.

[110] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XV, p. 176.

[111] *Ibid.*, p. 177.

said: 'One of the men [of ʿĀd] took an enormous rock and threw it on his tribe. They were then destroyed' ".[112]

The fact that the people of ʿĀd are thought to have been giants of an illustrious time is further confirmed in Ibn al-Aṯīr's (d. 630/1232) history book entitled *al-Kāmil fī l-taʾrīḫ*, in a chapter that bears the title "Mention of the events that took place between Noah's [era] and Abraham's". Therein, the author speaks of the people of ʿĀd who were

> strong and powerful (*ǧabbār*),[113] of great height (*ṭūl al-qāma*)—the like of which does not exist. God the Most-High said: 'Call in remembrance that He made you inheritors after the people of Noah, and gave you a stature tall among the nations [Kor 7, 69]'.[114]

Here not only do we find the Biblical mythological genealogy establishing the people of ʿĀd among the descendents of Noah, but also a Biblical reminiscence of the giants.

Indeed, the sixth book of Genesis mentions that before the Flood, "there were giants in the earth".[115] The Hebrew word used for giants is *nefilīm*, from the Hebrew *nāfal* which implies the idea of falling. Thus, they are 'the fallen'—because, to quote the famous French 11th century Rabbi and exegete Rachi (d. AD 1105), "they fell and made the world fall (*šēnnāfelū ve-hifilū ēt-haʿolām*)".[116] By staying in the canon of the Old Testament, we do not know much more about these giants, except for the fact that they were the result of the union of the "sons of God" (*i.e.* the angels) to the "daughters of men".[117]

Another mention of these giants in the Old Testament can be found in the account of the Moses-sent expedition in the land of Canaan as told in the book of Numbers: "Nevertheless the people *be* strong that dwell in the land, and the cities *are* walled, *and* very great; and moreover we saw the descendants of Anak[118] there";[119] and "… The land, through which we have gone to search

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[112] Al-Ṯaʿlabī, *al-Kašf*, VI, p. 448; al-Zamaḫšarī, *al-Kaššāf*, p. 1200; al-Ṭabrisī, *Maǧmaʿ*, X, p. 737; Ismāʿīl b. Kaṯīr (d. 774/1373), *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, Beirut, Dār al-Andalus, 1983, VII, p. 285.

[113] Another meaning of the Arabic *ǧabbār* is 'giant', which is the equivalent of the Biblical Hebrew *gibor*.

[114] Ibn al-Aṯīr, *al-Kāmil fī l-taʾrīḫ*, Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, 1982, I, p. 85.

[115] Gen 6, 4.

[116] Rabbi Šlomo ben Yitzḥaq (= Rachi), *Ḥūmaš Rašī. Le commentaire de Rachi sur la Torah*, Paris, Biblieurope, 2005, p. 55.

[117] Gen 6, 4.

[118] It is this race of giants that is compared to the *nefilīm* who have "cities great and fenced up to heaven" (Dt 9, 1) and are "A people great and tall" (Dt 9, 2).

[119] Nu 13, 28.

it, *is* a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it *are* men of great stature. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, *which come* of the giants…"[120]

What the Muslim exegetes have said about the people of ʿĀd in the context of the exegesis of Kor 89, 6-7 is clearly an echo to the Biblical *nefilīm*. Both are ancient peoples, giants and very powerful. Moreover, we see a clear parallel between the story of Moses and the giants and the fact that the early exegete Zayd b. ʿAlī (d. 120/740) states that the "first ʿĀd" are "the ones whom Moses (*Mūsā*)—peace be upon him—fought (*qātalahum*)".[121]

But the resemblances do not stop here as the apocryphal Biblical sources as well as the Dead Sea scrolls help us better comprehend the close link between the Hebrew writings and Koranic material.

Indeed, if we look at the Book of Enoch (4Q201 1 iii 16) that was found in one of the Qumran caves, we discover more about the giants and their height: "… They became pregnant with them and begot giants who were three thousand cubits high".[122] Thus, we find a definite resemblance between the extreme height of the giants in the Koranic exegeses (and especially Ibn ʿAbbās' opinion as having said that the people of ʿĀd were five hundred cubits high) and the Qumran manuscript that also uses cubits—which are almost equivalent to the Islamic ones[123]—and a large number of them, to depict the amazing height of these *nefilīm*.

By turning to the Apocrypha, we find yet other information regarding the same giants that are once again echoed in the various exegeses of Kor 89, 7 that we have previously seen. These sources are the Book of Wisdom, the Book of Baruch and Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus) and their common trait is that they all mention the giants' death as well as its cause: "For in the old times also, when the proud giants perished…";[124] "There were the giants famous from the beginning, that were of so great stature, and so expert in war. Those did not the Lord choose, neither gave he the way of knowledge unto them: But they were destroyed, because they had no wisdom, and perished through

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[120] Nu 13, 32-33.

[121] Zayd b. ʿAlī, *Tafsīr*, p. 308.

[122] André Paul (ed.), *La bibliothèque de Qumrân. 1-Torah/Genèse*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 2008, p. 21. It should be noted here that the numerous manuscripts found in Qumran and gathered under the title "Book of Giants" (corresponding to 1Q23 up to 6Q8) attest that the very laconical and brief passages that have to do with the giants in the Old Testament were indeed very popular—at least among the Essenian community.

[123] One Biblical cubit corresponds to roughly 45 centimeters. See Gérard, *Dictionnaire de la Bible*.

[124] Wisdom 14, 6.

their own foolishness";[125] and "He was not pacified toward the old giants, who fell away in the strength of their foolishness".[126]

Here, not only do we find materials used in Koranic exegeses, but also elements of the Koran itself. Thus the concept of the giants who were destroyed by God because their great strength and height had made them arrogant and God-like, an evident echo of which can be seen in Kor 41, 15: "Now the ʿĀd behaved arrogantly through the land, against (all) truth and reason, and said: 'Who is superior to us in strength?' ".

To conclude this first part, it is particularly interesting to look at the exegeses of the following verse—the eighth—which summarize quite well the two dominant and preferred interpretations regarding our Koranic passage.

The debate between exegetes has the Arabic feminine pronominal suffix *hā* that is adjoined to the fourth word of Kor 89, 8 for subject: *allatī lam yuḫlaq miṯluhā fī l-bilād* or "The like of which was not created [throughout] the land". The problem this poses is: what does the *hā* refer to? As a mark of the feminine gender in the Arabic language, it can either refer to a proper noun of foreign origin (*ʿağamī*) such as *Iram*; or else to a plural of inanimate objects such as 'pillars' for instance. The different interpretations of this verse will try to determine what was considered to be so unique.

In short, the exegetes' opinions have been divided into two categories. First of all, there are those who consider that the eighth verse is the reflection of the last point we discussed, which is that, to quote our 2nd/8th century exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān: "God—Great and Mighty—has not created the like of the people of ʿĀd among the human race".[127] As we saw, this ancient people is unique because of "the height of their bodies (*ṭūl aǧsāmihim*)"[128] and because of their "power and strength (*al-baṭš wa-l-ayd*)".[129] In a word, the *hā* refers to the "first" people of ʿĀd who were giants, thus the like of whom had never been created in the world.

The second opinion appears in later exegeses and is linked to the interpretation of *Iram* as the name of a city. In his exegesis entitled *al-Nukat wa-l-ʿuyūn*, al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) accounts for both most popular interpretations of the *hā* particle: "The like of their city with pillars was not created throughout the land (*lam yuḫlaq miṯla madīnatihim ḏāt al-ʿimād fī l-bilād*); as ʿIkrima

[125] Baruch 3, 26-28.
[126] Sirach 16, 7.
[127] Muqātil, *al-Tafsīr*, III, p. 481.
[128] Al-Huwwārī, *Tafsīr*, IV, p. 501.
[129] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XV, p. 177.

said";[130] as well as the previous one that is here considered as being al-Ḥasan's interpretation.

In the Muʿtazilite exegete al-Zamaḫšarī's (d. 538/1144) *al-Kaššāf* we even find a variation of this second opinion that is that "the like of the city of Šaddād was not created [throughout] all the cities of the world".[131]

We will now turn to the second part of this paper in which it is precisely this mysterious "city of Šaddād" that will be the object of our study.

2. The Myth of the City of Iram

The myth of the city of Iram—the genesis of which lies in part in the interpretation discussed previously—embodies perfectly the intrinsic link that exists between Biblical-inspired stories and the Koran and its exegeses. Here, we will look at the formation and contents of Iram's legend and see its repercussions on Arabic culture and literature. We will then turn to the study of the criticism of the city of Iram's myth alongside the entire genre which is called *isrāʾīliyyāt*, that is the adaptation of Biblical material to interpret obscure Koranic passages. It should be noted that the main theme of this second part has more or less been the object of an article written by the French professor Jamel Eddine Bencheikh entitled "Iram ou la clameur de Dieu—Le mythe et le verset". However, his article does not look into the origins of the Iram legend (discussed in our third and last part) and moreover he *de facto* considers that the legend of the city of Iram's construction "finds its origins in verses 5 and 6 [*sic*] of the 89th surah", a point we will hopefully argumentatively refute in the same third part.[132]

The Historic of the Myth's Textual Presence

As we have already seen, the possibility that Kor 89, 7's *Iram* could be interpreted as the name of a city is, as far as we know, inexistent from exegeses until the beginning of the ninth century, when the two grammarians and exegetes—al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822) and al-Aḫfaš al-Awsaṭ (d. 215/830)—mention the possibility that *Iram* is a proper noun: that of a city.

We then have to wait until the 4th/10th century to see the myth of the city of Iram appear in Muslim texts. It is difficult to be certain of the exact period

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[130] Al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat*, VI, p. 268.

[131] Al-Zamaḫšarī, *al-Kaššāf*, p. 1200.

[132] Jamel Eddine Bencheikh, "Iram ou la clameur de Dieu—Le mythe et le verset", *REMMM*, 58 (1990), p. 70-81: "Le mythe de la construction […] de la ville d'Iram […] prend naissance dans le commentaire contesté des versets 5-6 [*sic*] de la sourate LXXXIX" (p. 70).

when this myth came to life. As far as we know, the first exegesis to include the detailed account of this legend is the *Tafsīr al-kabīr* written by the famous traditionist (*muḥaddiṯ*) al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/970), even though the 'historian' Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī l-Masʿūdī (d. 346/957) gives an account of the legend of the city of Iram that clearly indicates that it was already a known story during the first half of the 4th/10th century, and probably even before.[133]

According to the well-known historian and historiographer Ibn Ḫaldūn (d. 808/1406), al-Ṭabarī mentioned the myth. However, the former does not say in which work of his he does so, and, although it is true that a long and detailed version of the story of the city of Iram does appear in his *Taʾrīḫ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, it only does so in its Persian augmented translation; not in the Arabic editions available today.[134]

Thus, we must dismiss Ibn Ḫaldūn's statement that considers al-Ṭabarī as having written about the myth of the city of Iram.

Wahb b. Munabbih

By looking at al-Ṭabarānī's account of the myth in question, we notice that—as it is common for Arab-language writers to do—he quotes the source of the story that he includes at the end of the interpretation of Kor 89, 6-8: "Wahb b. Munabbih told the story of the city of Iram of the pillars".[135] Interestingly, until the beginning of the 7th/13th century, this myth is always attributed to Wahb in various exegeses; and from then on we either do not find a name at all,[136] or else this tale is said to be found in a book entitled *Life of the Kings* (*Kitāb Siyar al-mulūk*) and written by al-Šaʿbī.[137]

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[133] Many later exegeses wrongly mention al-Ṯaʿlabī (who died one century after al-Masʿūdī and al-Ṭabarānī) as the first to quote the legend of Iram.

[134] The Persian translation is that of al-Balʿamī (d. between 382/992 and 387/997) who gave a modified account of the original text with additional material. We had access to this translation through its French rendition by Louis Dubeux entitled *Chronique d'Abou-Djafar Mohammed Tabari, fils de Djarir, fils d'Yezid*. As for the two Arabic editions we studied they are: al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīḫ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, Cairo, Dār al-maʿārif, 1979; as well as al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīḫ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2008.

[135] Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Tafsīr*, VI, p. 493.

[136] Yāqūt (d. 622/1225), *Muʿǧam*, I, p. 155: "Al-Zamaḫšarī states that Iram is Alexandria. Others say that Iram of the pillars […] is located in Yemen, between Hadramaut and Sanaʾa; and was built by Šaddād". Also al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1271), *al-Ǧāmiʿ*, XX, p. 445: "It is said (*ruwiya*) that ʿĀd had two sons: Šaddād…"; the exact same sentence is then found in Aḥmad b. Maḥmūd al-Nasafī (d. 710/1310), *Madārik al-tanzīl wa-ḥaqāʾiq al-taʾwīl*, Damascus, Dār Ibn Kaṯīr, 2008, III, p. 638; and in Ibn Ḫaldūn (d. 808/1406), *Taʾrīḫ*, Beirut, Dār al-kitāb al-lubnānī, 1981, I, p. 20.

[137] Al-Ibšīhī (d. 851/1447), *al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fann mustaẓraf*, Beirut, Dār al-ǧīl, 1986, II, p. 140.

In order to better understand the city of Iram's myth, we need to give a few details about this Wahb b. Munabbih who is said to have been the author—or at least the transmitter—of this legend.

Abū ʿAbd Allāh Wahb b. Munabbih was born in Yemen *c.* 31/651 and died *c.* 114/732. Two elements concerning his career are relevant to our study.

First of all, he was a famous storyteller (*qāṣṣ aḫbārī*) of Persian descent and was very knowledgeable of the People of the Book's (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) traditions and thus is a source of countless *isrāʾīliyyāt*. Indeed, he is known for being the author of many adaptations of Judaic or Christian sources into Arabic and is said to have been the author of a *Kitāb al-Isrāʾīliyyāt*.

Secondly, he is said to have written a book on the legendary history of ancient Yemen entitled *Kitāb al-Mulūk al-mutawwaǧa min Ḥimyar wa-aḫbārihim wa-qiṣaṣihim wa-qubūrihim wa-aśʿārihim*.[138]

As we will see, the myth of the city of Iram is both an adaptation of Judaic and Christian writings as well as a legendary story that takes place in Yemen.

Two Intertwined Stories

Contrarily to what has often been said, the description of the opulent city of Iram that we will now see is not "always detailed".[139] Indeed, if we take the Ḥanafī jurist al-Samarqandī's (d. 373/983) *Baḥr al-ʿulūm fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, we find a very laconic sentence—in which we don't know who "he" refers to—that barely summarizes the contents of the full story: "It is [also] said that *Iram* is a name for the heaven (*ǧanna*) that was built, but he died before entering it. This is mentioned in a long story told by Wahb b. Munabbih".[140]

Other exegetes will also avoid entering into details and will use one or two sentences to tell the legend of the city of Iram.[141]

As we said, the first time a detailed account of the city of Iram's myth can be found within the scope of exegeses is in al-Ṭabarānī's *Tafsīr*. First of all, in one sentence he summarizes the story as he includes it as a possible interpretation for 89, 7's expression *ḏāt al-ʿimād*. Thus we simply read: "It is [also] said that it is the name of a city (*ism madīna*) of pillars [made of] gold and silver (*ḏāt al-ʿimād wa-l-ḏahab wa-l-fiḍḍa*) that was built by Šaddād b. ʿĀd".[142]

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[138] See R.G. Khoury, "Wahb b. Munabbih", *EI*²; as well as de Prémare, *Les fondations*, p. 336.

[139] Cobb, "Iram", *EQ*.

[140] Abū l-Layṯ Naṣr b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr al-ʿulūm*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1993, III, p. 476.

[141] See for example Abū Muḥammad Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 437/1045), *Muškil iʿrāb al-Qurʾān*, Beirut, Muʾassasat al-risāla, 1988, p. 817 and al-Baġawī, *Maʿālim*, p. 1405.

[142] Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Tafsīr*, VI, 493.

Although our exegete then states that the most "literal" (*ẓāhir*), thus the most canonical interpretation for this part of the verse is not the latter explanation, al-Ṭabarānī still chooses to incorporate the full version of this story of the city that was built by Šaddād—a story that is about three times the size of his exegesis on Kor 89, 6-7.

The legend of the city of Iram as presented in this exegesis can be divided into two distinct parts. The first part tells the story of a Bedouin who stumbled upon the lost city in such a manner that it sounds like a truthful account. The second part is intertwined in the first, as one of the protagonists—a historic figure—recalls and tells an ancient story: that of the construction of the city of Iram by Šaddād.

The City's Discovery

In the story's premises we are introduced to a person named ʿAbd Allāh b. Qilāba,[143] who goes looking for one of his missing camels in the Yemeni desert and stumbles upon a city.

It should be noted here that this introduction is a common one in Arab stories, as the legend of another lost city—that of Wabār[144]—clearly demonstrates. Indeed, in this tale yet another man walking in the desert stumbles upon a lost city: Wabār.[145] Oftentimes the legends of the cities of Iram and Wabār have been linked by Western scholars (this because they are two Arab "Atlantis" that are located in an unidentified place in the South of the Arab Peninsula said to be home to the people of ʿĀd), and some have wrongly said that the legend of Iram is a "remythification" of Wabār's.[146]

The first description of the city is brief: "It was comprised of a citadel (*ḥiṣn*) which was surrounded by numerous palaces (*quṣūr*) and high boundary-stones (*aʿlām ṭiwāl*)".[147]

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[143] And not "Abû Qilâba" as Bencheikh writes in his "Iram", p. 75 and *passim*. The identity of this person remains mysterious. Could it be ʿAbd Allāh b. Qilāba b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Zayd b. ʿAmr al-Ǧarmī (whose *kunya* is Abū Qilāba and who died *c.* 104/724; see Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, VII, p. 183)? As far as the dates go, there is no contradiction, as Wahb b. Munabbih died about ten years after him. But it seems likely that he is a made up figure.

[144] According to the legend—as well as the Arabic mythical genealogy system—this name derives from an ancestor: Wabār b. Iram (*i.e.* Wabār, son of Iram) who settled in Southern Arabia after the post-Babel confusion of languages. His own name then became this place's name. See for example in Abū Ḥanīfa l-Dinawarī's (d. 281/894) *al-Aḫbār al-ṭiwāl*, Bagdad, Maktabat al-muṯannā, 1959, p. 3: "And Wabār b. Iram set off for the place beyond the desert sands (*mā warāʾ al-raml*) which is known as Wabār".

[145] Al-Bakrī, *Muʿǧam*, IV, p. 1366.

[146] Chabbi, *Le Seigneur des tribus*, p. 499.

[147] Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Tafsīr*, VI, p. 493.

Not only do we recognize the boundary-stones or "signs" that are also called *ārām* in Arabic and that the ancient people of ʿĀd was known through legends as well as Kor 26, 128 for their high constructions; but we also must note the presence of a unique citadel—an element that will be of relevance later on as we will discuss its link with the Babel episode.

As Ibn Qilāba enters this ghost-city, the reader discovers more about the singular richness of its composition. The variety of precious stones and woods enumerated in our text is extremely detailed: the two entrance doors are "made of the best variety of aloe wood (*min aṭyab ʿūd*) and are inlaid with sapphires and topazes (*muraṣṣaʿān bi-l-yāqūt al-abyaḍ wa-l-aḥmar*)";[148] under every single palace inside the city are "pillars [made of] emeralds and sapphires (*aʿmida min zabarǧad wa-yāqūt*)";[149] the rooms are "made of gold, silver, pearls and sapphires (*mabniyya bi-l-ḏahab wa-l-fiḍḍa wa-l-luʾluʾ wa-l-yāqūt*)"[150] and "covered with pearls, musk and saffron (*mafrūšat kulluhā bi-l-luʾluʾ wa-l-misk wa-l-zaʿfrān*)".[151]

From the description of this Heaven-like city—for those are the Bedouins' very words: "This is the Garden [*i.e.* Heaven] which God the Most-High has depicted in His Book!"[152]—one can only see the numerous parallels with the Bible's representations[153] of either Solomon's Temple[154] as can be seen in the first book of Kings for example (a matter we will further discuss in our last chapter), or else the "Holy City of Jerusalem" as it is depicted in the New Testament's book of Revelation.

Indeed, the text whose authorship is attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih—a fine connoisseur of Biblical texts—contains many echoes of Revelation 21, 11-22; and especially of its precious stones composition:

> And the building of the wall of [Jerusalem] was *of* jasper: and the city was pure gold […] And the foundations of the wall of the city *were* garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation *was* jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald…[155]

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[148] *Ibid.*

[149] *Ibid.*

[150] *Ibid.*

[151] *Ibid.*

[152] *Ibid.*, VI, p. 494.

[153] Here, we will not talk about the Koranic parallels—such as the "rooms" (*ġurfa* pl. *ġurafāt ġurufāt*) that can be found in Kor 29, 58 for example—which are not relevant to our subject.

[154] The comparison is even made explicit in al-Ṯaʿlabī's long and detailed account of the legend in his *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ = ʿArāʾis al-maǧālis*, Beirut, al-Maktaba l-ṯaqāfiyya, n.d., p. 127: "By God! No one has made [a city] like the one Solomon, son of David (peace be upon him), built (*wa-Llāh mā aʿṭā aḥad miṯl mā aʿṭā Sulaymān b. Dāwūd ʿalayhi l-salām*)!".

[155] Rev 21, 18-19.

To prove the existence of this wonderful city, Ibn Qilāba then decides to bring some of its precious stones back to his (unidentified) city in Yemen. Once there, he tells people about this discovery and the news soon reaches Muʿāwiya who asks to see the Bedouin alongside a person named Kaʿb.

These two new names belong to actual historic figures. The first one is none other than the well-known fifth caliph, Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān (d. 60/680) who started his political career as Damascusʾ governor and became caliph in 40/661 after his predecessor, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, was assassinated. We know from the very presence of Kaʿb that this story is set while Muʿāwiya was a governor.[156]

The second one is Abū Isḥāq Kaʿb al-Aḥbār b. Mātiʿ (d. 32/652), a former Jewish learned religious man who was born in Yemen (precisely in Ḥimyar) and apparently converted while ʿUmar reigned as caliph.[157] He is most famous for integrating Jewish stories in Islamic traditions—the result of which are called *isrāʾīliyyāt*.[158]

It seems as though the inclusion of historical figures is used here to give the legend a truthful side; in the same manner that the dialogue between these two people serves to reinforce the realistic tone of the text.

Moreover, the fact that Muʿāwiya asks Kaʿb—who is very knowledgeable in Jewish scriptures—to come give his opinion regarding the discovered city clearly indicates that the latter is linked to Jewish legends and stories; and that when Ibn Qilāba thought to himself that the city he had just discovered was Heaven as described in His Book, the Book in question was most certainly the Bible and not the Koran.[159]

As a way to introduce the legend of the city that has just been discovered, Muʿāwiya asks Kaʿb the following question: "Is there a city of gold and silver in this world?", the meaning of which could be rendered as "Is there a Heaven on Earth?". When Kaʿb answers positively by saying that "the name of the city is Iram of the pillars",[160] the governor orders him to tell him the origins of this city in question.

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[156] Al-Ibšīhī, in his *al-Mustaṭraf* will even say that the events took place during the second caliph, ʿUmarʾs era (d. 23/644). Here we must note that there is an obvious anachronism as Kaʿb refers to Muʿāwiya as "Commander of the Believers (*Amīr al-muʾminīn*)"—the official title of the caliphs.

[157] Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, VII, p. 446.

[158] De Prémare, *Les fondations*, p. 170.

[159] Especially since at the time the story takes place (between 19/640 and 23/644), there is no complete and definite compilation of the Koran.

[160] Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Tafsīr*, VI, p. 494.

The Genesis of the City's Foundation

Through the words of Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, we learn in a legendary way that there were once two brothers, sons of a powerful king from the first tribe of ʿĀd—thus the story is set in illustrious times—whose names were Šaddād and Šadīd.

After the latter died, Šaddād "ruled alone, and the kings of the world submitted to him (*tadānat lahu mulūk al-arḍ*). [During this time,] he devoted himself to the reading of books (*kāna waliʿan bi-qirāʾat al-kutub*)".[161] In one of these books, Šaddād found a mention of Heaven and set himself to build its like on Earth, "thus disobeying God the Most-High (*ʿutwan ʿalā Llāh taʿālā*)".[162]

In order to attain that goal, he employed one hundred princes (*amīr*) who in turn each had one thousand aides (*aʿwān*) under their command. Also, as Šaddād had power over "two hundred and sixty" kings throughout the world, he wrote to them, ordering them to gather all the precious stones (*ǧawāhir*) found in their lands in order to build this city that would be the like of Heaven on Earth.

Still through the voice of Kaʿb answering Muʿāwiya's questions, we discover that it took three hundred years to "design and build" the city and that at that time, Šaddād was seven hundred years old.

We then learn that "God called it 'of the pillars' because of the emerald and sapphire pillars that [were] under [the city]";[163] which indicates that while there is an explanation for the *ḏāt al-ʿimād* part of the Koranic verse, there is however none for the word 'Iram'.

The epilogue to the legend of the city of Iram is presented in two parts. First off we read that upon completion of his city, Šaddād ordered his workers back there to build what the Bedouin in the first part of the story had found, that is a citadel, one thousand palaces all around it and one thousand boundary-stones next to every palace. Once this was done, Šaddād as well as his army, servants and women were kept busy in their preparations to leave for this city during ten years.

Secondly, we learn of all of these people's demise in the "punishment-story" manner that we have discussed in the introduction. Indeed, as a result of Šaddād's arrogance and defiance towards God, he and his men never even got to see the city, as "God sent on all of them [...] a mighty Punishment from

[161] *Ibid.*
[162] *Ibid.*
[163] *Ibid.*

the sky (*ṣayḥa ʿaẓīma min al-samāʾ*)[164] that destroyed them, leaving no one behind".[165]

Different Versions of the Myth

Al-Masʿūdī: A Non-Exegetical Version of the Myth of the City of Iram

As we have previously mentioned, the first author (that we know of) to have written about the legendary city of Iram is al-Masʿūdī.

In his 'history'[166] book entitled *Murūǧ al-ḏahab wa-maʿādin al-ǧawhar*, we find a chapter that bears the title "An account of Alexandria's stories, its constructions, its kings and its wonders" which starts by the portrayal of Alexander the Great who is on an expedition to look for a "land with pleasant air, earth and water".[167] We do not know why he is on this quest, but nevertheless he ends up in what will become Alexandria and there, very much like Ibn Qilāba in Wahb b. Munabbih's story, he stumbles upon "the ruins of mighty constructions (*āṯār bunyān ʿaẓīm*) as well as numerous marble pillars (*ʿamad kaṯīra min al-ruḫām*)".[168]

Not only are these premises similar to the previous ones as far as the discovery of the ruins is concerned, but also they contain two relevant pieces of information for us: the lost city's remains are located in Alexandria—one of the possibilities mentioned in the exegeses for the city of Iram as we have previously discussed—and among these are pillars.

The Pillar's Inscription

The emphasis is then placed upon one of these pillars in particular, a "great pillar" (*ʿamūd ʿaẓīm*),[169] which bears inscriptions in the South-Arabian Ḥimyari script. These are a brief rhymed account of the primitive city of Iram's construction in Šaddād's own words as well as the 'second' Iram's—a sort of copy of the 'original' city transplanted in Alexandria.

The inscription starts in a way that we will find later on and with variations in several exegeses or dictionaries:[170]

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[164] For the *ṣayḥa* (literally the 'scream') see for example Kor 11, 67; 11, 94, 15; 73.

[165] Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Tafsīr*, VI, p. 495.

[166] According to modern standards, this work can hardly be considered as a history book. It is meant to be a universal history that goes from illustrious times (illustrated by many stories that are today considered as legends) to the author's era.

[167] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ al-ḏahab wa-maʿādin al-ǧawhar*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2004, I, p. 384.

[168] *Ibid.*

[169] *Ibid.*

[170] See for example al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat*; al-Bakrī, *Muʿǧam* or al-Qurṭubī, *al-Ǧāmiʿ*.

> I am Šaddād, son of ʿĀd and I am the one who has strengthened the cities and who has cut the mighty pillars from the mounts and mountains with my own hands (*šadadtu bi-sāʿidī l-bilād wa-qaṭaʿtu ʿaẓīm al-ʿimād min al-ǧibāl wa-l-aṭwād*)[171]

In the previous account of the city of Iram built by Šaddād, he was a king from the first tribe of ʿĀd's son. In this version, he becomes the legendary ʿĀd's own son. Thus, the story of the construction of the mythical city is set even further in time and as we had previously seen, the descendants of ʿĀd being powerful giants, it is no wonder that Šaddād (whose name can literally mean 'the powerful' or even 'the violent') has cut out pillars from the mountains with his bare hands.

Afterwards, Šaddād continues and literally quotes Kor 89, 7-8: "I am the one who built Iram of the pillars, the like of which was not created [throughout] the land".[172] This is followed by his saying that he has decided to "build the like of Iram (*aradtu an abniya hāhunā ka-Iram*)"[173] in *proto*-Alexandria, which may seem paradoxical as he has just stated the fact that the like of Iram has never been created.

Nevertheless, Šaddād recalls the construction of this second Iram that took place in a legendary perfect era when there was "no fear, no old age, no worries and no sickness".[174]

However, this perfect state comes to an end when Šaddād faces a mysterious event or person which/who wants to put an end to his ambition of building a second city of Iram. This makes him very anxious and he decides to leave *proto*-Alexandria for his home. It is only at the end of his recollection of the events that we can guess—through ambiguous sentences—that Šaddād must have been informed by God of the terrible punishment that was awaiting him and his two Heaven-like cities: "I left quickly [...] because of the lack of time [that I had left] and [because of] God's [decision]".[175]

The pillar's inscription that is being read by Alexander the Great ends in a long sentence mentioning the "perishable aspect of the worldly matters (*fanāʾ al-dunyā*)"[176] which is reminiscent of wisdom maxims such as the ones that can be found in the Old Testament's book of Ecclesiastes.[177]

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171 Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ*, I, p. 384.
172 *Ibid.*
173 *Ibid.*
174 *Ibid.*
175 *Ibid.*
176 *Ibid.*
177 For this fatalist thematic in pre-Islamic poetry, see Tor Andrae, "Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum", *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift*, 23-25 (1923-1925), p. 188-96.

Indeed, Šaddād who has most certainly been made aware that his works and his own life are coming to a term, concludes his inscription by giving advice to anyone who will read his words in the future: "Do not let yourself be fooled and misled by the material world after I am gone, for the latter is but an illusion that takes back what it had given us".[178] We find very similar sayings in Ecclesiastes:

> I made me great works; I builded me houses […] Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all *was* vanity and vexation of spirit, and there *was* no profit under the sun.[179]

Alexander the Great's 'Third Iram'

Although Alexander the Great meditates on Šaddād's last words, these do not seem to affect him as he decides to do the exact opposite of what the ancient king was warning his potential readers against.

Thus, we learn that Alexander decides to build his city in a very materialistic and ostentatious manner. The account of this enterprise is very similar to what we had read in the story of Šaddād's construction of the city of Iram as told by Wahb b. Munabbih:

> [Alexander the Great] gathered workers from [many] countries and he drew the foundations' [layout] which would be several 'miles' in height and width (*ḫašara l-ṣunnāʿ min al-bilād wa-ḫaṭṭa l-asās wa-ǧaʿala ṭūlahā waʿarḍahā amyālan*). He then collected different varieties of stones and marble from Sicily, Northern Africa and Crete […] in order to build the foundations (*wa-atathu al-marākib fīhā min anwāʿ al-ruḫām wa-anwāʿ al-marmar wa-l-aḥǧār min ǧazīrat Ṣiqiliyya wa-bilād Ifrīqiyya wa-Iqrīṭiš*).[180]

Throughout the account of the new city's construction, the importance of the pillars is predominant. The most important pillar is the marble one that is erected in front of Alexander's tent and on which a bell is suspended. Other pillars are also mentioned, such as the ones that act as scarecrows, bearing images to scare off the aquatic beasts (*dawābb*) that try to demolish the city; or pillars adorned with talismans (*ṭullasmāt*) that are eighty cubits high.

The conclusion of the construction of Alexander the Great's city is the same as Šaddād's. Indeed, as the former had not taken the latter's words in consideration, history had to repeat itself, and that is why Alexander—in an ambiguous

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[178] *Ibid.*

[179] Ec 2, 4-11.

[180] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ*, I, p. 384-5.

pessimistic and rhymed phrasing reminiscent of Šaddād's inscription—orders that the following words be written on the new city's doors:

> This is Alexandria. I had wished that it be founded on [the basis of] felicity, success, prosperity, joy, happiness as well as stability throughout the ages (*hāḏihi l-Iskandariyya. Aradtu an abniyahā ʿalā l-falāḥ wa-l-naǧāḥ wa-l-yumn wa-l-saʿāda wa-l-surūr wa-l-ṭabāt fī l-duhūr*); but God—High and Mighty, Lord of the Heavens and the Earth—has chosen otherwise.[181]

In al-Masʿūdī's text, the details of the reason behind the sudden turn in events just after the cities' constructions are completed are left unexplained. We can only guess that the fact that Alexander has built a high and ostentatious city is seen by God as an act of rebellion and therefore He chooses to destroy it (*arāda Llāh* […] *ḫarābahā*).[182]

Between Myth and Reality

To conclude this brief analysis of a few relevant passages from the *Murūǧ al-ḏahab*, we can note that there seems to be a link between Alexander the Great's wish to build a great city as told in a legendary way by al-Masʿūdī and certain historical facts.

As we have said earlier, our legendary stories have this in common that whether it is Šaddād in Yemen, Šaddād in *proto*-Alexandria or Alexander the Great, they all wish to build a magnificent city with precious materials and especially a city which contains high constructions. In Wahb b. Munabbih's text we find the citadel, and in al-Masʿūdī's, the tall pillars.

Much like the ancient and probably mythical people of ʿĀd who built high eminences or 'signs', Šaddād was destroyed by God alongside his city (or cities in the *Murūǧ al-ḏahab*) of Iram, and Alexander's construction was demolished as well.

This allows us to draw a parallel between these stories and the Biblical one known as the "tower of Babel", as can be found in Gen 11: "And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top *may reach* unto heaven…";[183] the result of which is that God scattered the men all over the Earth and thus they ceased to build the city.[184]

By considering this episode, a clear link between this and Alexander's story arises. Today, we know that the 'real' Babel tower—or at least its inspiration—is the Babylonian ziggurat that was ransacked by Xerxes the 1st in 479 BC and

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[181] *Ibid.*, I, p. 387.
[182] *Ibid.*, I, p. 385.
[183] Gen 11, 4.
[184] Gen 11, 8.

then repeatedly and systematically destroyed by none other than Alexander the Great who wished to rebuild it entirely. But he died before the completion of this project and the construction site soon became an abandoned stone quarry.[185]

These historical informations have quite obviously influenced Alexander the Great's story as we have seen it in al-Masʿūdī's *Murūǧ al-ḏahab*; thus rendering it a blend of a Biblical tale, a legend used to explain a Koranic passage and historical events.

The Myth in Various Arabic Works

By looking through dozens of Arabic sources, we have found that—as we have just seen—al-Ṭabarānī and al-Masʿūdī, two authors who died during the 4th/10th century, are the first to have mentioned the city of Iram of the pillar's legend through different formats and inside different stories.

It is our opinion that the attribution of the Biblical-influenced myth to Wahb b. Munabbih is likely, thus making it a story that was probably first told at least during the 1st/7th century.

Although it is difficult to assess with certainty who the first author to have quoted this legend is, we can however formulate the hypothesis that—as far as exegeses are concerned—Abū l-Qāsim Sulaymān b. Aḥmad b. Ayyūb al-Ṭabarānī is the first. We have not found a single *tafsīr* before his that mentions the myth; and he is even quoted by a later exegete as being the one who gave an account of this story; for indeed, in al-Ṯaʿlabī's (d. 427/1035) *al-Kašf wa-l-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, we can read the following at the very beginning of the chain of transmitters (*isnād*) preceding Iram of the pillar's story: "Abū l-Qāsim has informed us that [...] according to Wahb b. Munabbih, Ibn Qilāba went out to look for one of his camels that had gone missing...".[186]

To a reader familiar with Arabic onomastics and exegetes, the *kunya* that is "Abū l-Qāsim" can belong to none other than al-Ṭabarānī. Moreover, in another edition of this commentary, we find: "Abū l-Qāsim *al-mufassir*",[187] meaning "the exegete". Thus, there is very little doubt left as to who is referred to by this otherwise ambiguous beginning of an *isnād*.

Al-Ṯaʿlabī, after having named his source of information, gives a very similar account of the legend of Iram of the pillars. There is however one notable

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[185] Gérard, *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, p. 121.

[186] Al-Ṯaʿlabī, *al-Kašf*, VI, p. 449. Of great interest is the same author's "Stories of the Prophets" (*Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*) book entitled *ʿArāʾis al-maǧālis* which contains an extensively detailed account of the Iram legend spread out over five pages.

[187] Al-Ṯaʿlabī, *al-Kašf*, Beirut, Dār iḥyāʾ al-turāṯ al-ʿarabī, 2002, X, p. 196.

difference, which is the epilogue. Where al-Ṭabarānī's account ended with the divine punishment and the deaths of Šaddād and his followers, al-Ṯaʿlabī adds an ending whose 'author' is not Wahb b. Munabbih but "learned men (*ʿulamāʾ*) of Ḥimyar",[188] and which states that Šaddād had a son named Marṯad who was spared from destruction and who buried his father in the Hadramaut desert. The story then ends with a poem that mentions Šaddād's (who is called "master of the high citadel") life and punishment in eleven verses that are said to be placed near the dead king's head on a big golden plaque (*lawḥ ʿaẓīm min ḏahab*).[189]

During the course of the 5th/11th century, apart from al-Ṯaʿlabī, not a single exegete—as far as we know[190]—will mention the legend of Iram of the pillars in his *tafsīr*. The only exception is al-Māwardī who does hint at the legend—in his exegesis *al-Nukat wa-l-ʿuyūn*—by using a phrasing similar to what we have seen in al-Masʿūdī's work:

> I am Šaddād, son of ʿĀd. I am the one who has erected the pillars (*rafaʿtu l-ʿimād*), I am the one who worked the inside of the country with my own hands (*šaddadtu bi-ḏirāʿī baṭn al-sawād*) and I am the one who buried a treasure seven cubits (*ḏirāʿ*) [under the earth] that only Muḥammad's people will find (*kanaztu kanzan ʿalā sabʿ aḏruʿ lā tuẖriğuhu illā ummat Muḥammad*).[191]

It should also be noted that al-Bakrī, the geographer we have previously mentioned and who died at the very end of the 5th/11th century, writes in his geographic dictionary:

> In Alexandria, a wall was found and on it were these inscriptions: "I am Šaddād, son of ʿĀd, the one who has erected the pillars when there was no old-age, when there were no deaths and when stones were as soft as clay (*anā Šaddād b. ʿĀd alladī naṣaba l-ʿimād iḏ lā šayb wa-lā haram wa-iḏ al-ẖiğārat fī-l-līn miṯl al-ṭīn*)".[192]

We have to wait until the 6th/12th century to see almost every exegete mention the legend of the city of Iram in their works. This starts with brief accounts as can be found in al-Baġawī's (d. 516/1122) *Maʿālim al-tanzīl*:

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188 Al-Ṯaʿlabī, *al-Kašf*, VI, p. 450.

189 *Ibid.*, VI, p. 451.

190 We have looked in Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib's two exegeses *Muškil iʿrāb al-Qurʾān* and *al-Hidāya ilā bulūġ al-nihāya*; al-Ṭūsī's *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*; al-Qušayrī's (d. 465/1073) *Laṭāʾif al-išārāt*; and al-Wāḥidī's two exegeses *al-Waǧīz fī tafsīr al-Kitāb al-ʿazīz* and *al-Wasīṭ fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-maǧīd*.

191 Al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat*, VI, p. 268.

192 Al-Bakrī, *Muʿǧam*, I, p. 409.

> It is [also] said that Šaddād, son of ʿĀd built it in a way that had never been seen throughout the world (*banāhu Šaddād b. ʿĀd ʿalā ṣifat lam yuḫlaq fī l-dunyā miṯluhu*). He then went towards it alongside his tribe (*sāra ilayhi fī qawmihi*) and when he was at distance of a day and a night from it, God sent a mighty Punishment from the sky unto him and his tribe that destroyed them all (*baʿaṯa Llāh ʿalayhi wa-ʿalā qawmihi ṣayḥa min al-samāʾ fa-ahlakathum ǧamīʿan*).[193]

From that point on, the exegetes will include substantially more detailed accounts of the legend. To mention a few, the Shia al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153) uses pretty much al-Ṭabarānī's version in his *Maǧmaʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*; and then—to conclude the 6th/12th century—the Ḥanbalī exegete Ibn al-Ǧawzī (d. 597/1201) gives an account of the myth that is similar to al-Ṯaʿlabī's in his *Zād al-masīr fī ʿilm al-tafsīr*.

Recent Developments Around the Legend of the City of Iram

In this last part of our second chapter, we will look at what we have entitled 'recent' developments surrounding Iram's myth. By that adjective we mean we will exit what is commonly known as the Arabic Middle-Ages and enter the era that goes from the 7th/13th century up to the present day.

The Critique of a Myth: The Dismissal of the Use of Bible-Inspired Materials in Exegeses

The first doubts regarding the truthfulness and validity of Iram of the pillars' story seem to have come not from exegeses but rather from dictionaries. Indeed such criticisms can be found under the article "Iram of the pillars" in Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī's (d. 622/1225) *Muʿǧam al-buldān*—an encyclopaedic sum of the world's countries.

Therein, the author gives a very long and detailed account of the legend—detailing for example the names of different governors, stating that Šaddād was a giant, giving the city's exact height, etc.—before concluding with a statement that indicates the probability that, around the end of the 6th/12th and beginning of the 7th/13th century, the story became the subject of a debate:

> I mention this tale (*qiṣṣa*) based on what we have been told and rejecting responsibility as to its validity (*ṣiḥḥa*). It is thought to be one of the story-tellers' (*quṣṣāṣ*)[194] embellished and made up stories (*aḫbār*).[195]

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[193] Al-Baġawī, *Maʿālim*, p. 1405. Also see al-Zamaḫšarī, *al-Kaššāf*, p. 1200.

[194] On these story-tellers' role in the elaboration of the Koran, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi's "Un texte et une histoire énigmatiques", in *Dictionnaire du Coran*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2007, p. xxii or M.A. Amir-Moezzi and Etan Kohlberg, "Révélation et falsification. Introduction à l'édition du *Kitāb al-qirāʾat* d'al-Sayyārī", *Journal Asiatique*, 293/2 (2005), p. 663-722.

[195] Yāqūt, *Muʿǧam*, I, p. 157.

Here, we will remember that the probable source of the city of Iram's story is Wahb b. Munabbih who was a famous storyteller (*qāṣṣ aḫbārī*), an element that is present in the geographer's last sentence.

Over a century later, the Šāfiʿī (although Ḥanbalī in theology) exegete Ismāʿīl b. Kaṯīr (d. 774/1373) also mentions the Iram legend in an abridged version, which he then strongly criticizes. On the one hand he qualifies the story of Iram's construction as being part of the "Israelite legends (*min ḫurāfāt al-isrāʾīliyyīn*)",[196] that is, of the *isrāʾīliyyāt* genre that we mentioned earlier; as well as stating that the latter were fabricated (*waḍaʿa*) by heretics (*zanādiqa*).[197]

On the other hand, Ibn Kaṯīr disqualifies Ibn Qilāba's discovery story not by criticizing its contents but by stating that its transmission chain or *isnād* is not "valid" (*ṣaḥīḥ*)—a method used to judge the quality of a prophetic *ḥadīṯ* but rarely seen to determine a story's validity.

Moreover, our exegete goes on saying that even if the transmission chain was valid and Ibn Qilāba was an authentic actual person, it would still be an invented story (*iḫtalaqa*) containing elements of the legends that could be heard in the pre-Islamic 'ignorance' ages (*min al-ǧahla*).

It is a bit later that we can read the most vehement critique of Iram's myth through the words of the famous historian ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ḫaldūn (d. 808/1406). As an introduction to his *Taʾrīḫ*, he dismisses legend after legend in a chapter entitled "On the merit of historic knowledge". Therein, he expresses his feelings about what he considers to be the antithesis of the aforementioned "historic knowledge". Substantially, this is what he writes about the city of Iram:

> No historian and no population have [ever] given an account of this story (*ḫabar*). If they said that its ruins had disappeared and that no trace of it was left, then it would be more believable. But they state that it is still here […]. Their nonsense (*haḍayān*) goes so far as to say that it is invisible and that only soothsayers and magicians can see it. All of these opinions are but inventions (*ḫurāfāt*).
>
> [The exegetes] have taken into account these stories that resemble fabricated (*mawḍūʿa*) tales (*aqāṣīṣ*) that are similar to lies (*kaḍab*) and to what can be found in various farces (*muḍḥikāt*).[198]

The Resurgence of the Legend of the City of Iram

Although some authors during the 7th/13th and 8th/14th centuries did strongly criticize and condemn the *isrāʾīliyyāt* genre in general and the story of Iram in particular, this however did not stop a myth that was just starting to develop.

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[196] Ismāʿīl b. Kaṯīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, Beirut, Dār al-Andalus, 1983, VII, p. 286.

[197] *Ibid.*

[198] Ibn Ḫaldūn, *Taʾrīḫ*, Beirut, Dār al-kitāb al-lubnānī, 1981, I, p. 21-2.

Indeed, many later exegeses will still speak of the legend but will also join its critique, reusing many of the adjectives that we have seen in the previous part.[199]

However, some will still mention the Iram myth with no hint of criticism. This is the case of such exegetes as al-Fayrūzābādī (d. 817/1414) who, in his *Tanwīr al-miqbās min tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*[200]—which is a short *tafsīr*—writes:

> It is said that Iram is the name of the city that Šaddād and Šadīd built and that had golden and silver pillars. Their like in beauty and magnificence had not been built throughout the land.[201]

Perhaps the most significant proof that the city of Iram of the pillars' myth was not put to an end by its detractors is that it will appear in many non-exegetical works. We have already seen that it was integrated in 'historic' works and in geography dictionaries. But it will also become part of the Arabic literary culture, as mentions of Iram will be found in the world-famous *One Thousand and One Nights*,[202] in al-Ibšīhī's (d. 851/1447) *al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fann mustaẓraf* and in modern literature as well, such as in the Lebanese Khalil Gibran's (d. 1931) play which is itself entitled *Iram, City of the High Pillars*.[203]

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[199] For instance, this is the case in al-Šawkānī's (d. 1250/1834) *Fatḥ al-qadīr* or al-Ālūsī's (d. 1270/1854) *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*.

[200] As Andrew Rippin has demonstrated, this exegesis is falsely said to be al-Fayrūzābādī's (also spelled and pronounced al-Fīrūzābādī) work. See A. Rippin, "*Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* and criteria for dating early *tafsīr* texts", *Jerusalem Studies on Arabic and Islam*, 18 (1994), p. 38-83.

[201] Al-Fayrūzābādī, *Tanwīr al-miqbās min tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2008, p. 647. For later exegetes who will quote this legend see for example: Ibn ʿĀdil (d. 880/1475) in his *al-Lubāb fī ʿulūm al-Kitāb*; al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480) in his *Naẓm al-durar fī tanāsub al-āyāt wa-l-suwar*; Abū l-Suʿūd (d. 969/1562) in his *Iršād al-ʿaql al-salīm ilā mazāyā l-Kitāb al-karīm*; al-Fayḍ al-Kāšānī (d. 1091/1680) in his *al-Ṣāfī fī tafsīr kalām Allāh al-wāfī*; Ibn ʿAǧība (d. 1224/1809) in his *al-Baḥr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-maǧīd*; and Aṭṭafayyiš (d. 1332/1914), with a particularly long version of the story, in his *Himyān al-zād ilā dār al-miʿād*.

[202] *Alf layla wa-layla*: "… they went to the city of Babel and stayed in Iram ibn ʿĀd's garden. […] And he questioned them about that city's description in the hope that one of them, with God Almighty's grace, would help him find her and the garden of Iram".

[203] Khalil Gibran, *Iram, cité des Hautes Colonnes* (translated from the original English text *Iram, City of the Lofty Pillars*—which we have not had access to—by Thierry Gillyboeuf): "Êtes-vous entrée dans Iram, la cité des Hautes Colonnes, par le corps ou par l'esprit ? Cette cité d'Or est-elle bâtie avec les éléments chatoyants de ce monde et érigée en quelque endroit précis, ou bien est-elle une cité imaginaire ou spirituelle que seuls les prophètes de Dieu peuvent atteindre par l'extase quand la Providence revêt leurs âmes d'un voile d'éternité ?", in Khalil Gibran, *Les dieux de la terre*, Paris, Mille et une Nuits, 2003, p. 46.

Even more surprising is the fact that Iram's qualifier—of the pillars (*ḏāt al-ʿimād*)—will be given as a name to a complex of five high-rise towers in Tripoli, Libya that was completed in 1990.[204]

Finally, it should be noted that the legend of Iram will also find an echo in Western literature. A point in case of that is the American horror author H.P. Lovecraft's (1890-1937) use of not only the general setting of the legend which presents a solitary person who discovers an abandoned mysterious city in his short story "The nameless city" (1921) but also of the terminology in the latter story as well as in "The call of Cthulhu" (1926): "Of the cult, he said that he thought the centre lay amid the pathless deserts of Arabia, where Irem, the City of Pillars, dreams hidden and untouched".[205]

3. A New Interpretation of Iram

The lack of any 'canonical' material to correctly interpret Kor 89, 7 that in itself has led to many disagreements regarding the meaning of the word *Iram*—disagreements that have never been settled—is a clear proof that the primal meaning of the word as well as the context it is situated in was quickly forgotten.

An element of answer as to why this was the case can be found in Andrew Rippin's words:

> Because of the truncated and referential style in the quranic citation of biblical material which presupposed knowledge on the part of its audience of the actual details of the narratives, the emergent Muslim community was faced with the problem of how to understand its own scripture once the original Judeo-Christian environment was left behind.[206]

Considering this statement, we think we might be able to bring a new comprehension to our Koranic passage. Our hypothesis is that indeed "Iram of the pillars" is a citation of a biblical material and one whose meaning as well as original provenance was forgotten soon after Muḥammad's death and the rapid Arabic invasions that followed and which left readers and interpreters of the sacred Muslim texts in a new and radically different setting.

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[204] These eighteen story towers are generally known as the Dhat el Imad or Dhat el Emad complex.

[205] Howard Phillips Lovecraft, "The call of Cthulhu", in *The Haunter of the Dark*, London, Grafton Books, 1989, p. 81.

[206] Andrew Rippin, "Interpreting the Bible through the Qurʾān", in *Approaches to the Qurʾān*, ed. G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, 1993, p. 251.

Hence we will discuss what, in our opinion, is the original biblical source of "Iram of the pillars" and will then proceed on to analyze its integration in its Koranic context as well as its exegetical one.

The Two Biblical Ḫīrām and the Koranic Iram

In the first book of Kings, The Old Testament mentions two men whose names are Ḫīrām. In most English language translations their name is spelled "Hiram". The phonetical resemblance between this name and "Iram" as well as the story that surrounds them is what has led us to consider a possible link between the Biblical Hiram and its Koranic counterpart.

Lexical Considerations

As far as the origins of the word *Ḫīrām* itself, it is most likely derived from the Phoenician name Ahirom or Aḫiram which was shortened into Ḫīrām[207]—the meaning of which is "my brother is exalted".[208] In fact, the oldest example we have of the Phoenician language is through a 7th century BC inscription on bowl fragments which mention the "governor of Qarth-ḥadasht, servant of Ḥiram, king of the Sidonians".[209]

On the pronunciation level, we unfortunately do not have enough material to explain the exact origin of the transition from the guttural "ḫ" in the Biblical Hebrew Ḫīrām to the soft *hamza* that serves as a support for the "i" vowel in the Koranic "Iram". In the Syriac Bible—the Pšiṭṭā—its pronunciation is the same as in Hebrew; and in Arabic translations of the Bible,[210] the Hebrew "ḫ" undergoes a common change when it is transposed into Arabic which turns it into a softer "ḥ".[211]

With our limited sources on this particular subject we can only suggest two possibilities. Either the first word of the seventh verse was soon misspelled as its meaning was forgotten and the closest known word that resembled it was "Aram"/"Iram"; or else the word underwent an internal change that might have occurred during the Prophet's time or even before in Judaic-Christian

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[207] Jacob Katzenstein, "Hiram", *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (*EJ* hereafter), Jerusalem, The Mac Millan Company, 1972, VIII, p. 500.

[208] Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1994, I, p. 313.

[209] G.A. Cooke, *A Text-book of North-Semitic Inscriptions*, Oxford, 1903, p. 52. See p. 53-4 for the author's explanation as to who is the Ḫīrām mentioned in the inscriptions.

[210] See for example *al-Kitāb al-muqaddas*, Beirut, Dār al-Mašriq, 1989, p. 637.

[211] Examples of that change can be seen in many words such as the Hebrew verbal root *ḫākam* that became *ḥakama* in Arabic, *ḫāṣan* that became *ḥaṣana*; the Hebrew word *ḫāšab* that became *ḥasab* in Arabic, etc.

milieus, as is the case with a proper noun like the Hebrew Ḫēnok (Enoch) that was 'Arabized' as Iḫnūḫ.[212]

If the latter phenomenon is what actually happened—and that is more likely in our opinion—an intermediate form of our word in question would have been Iḫram. In the latter, it is not impossible that the two adjoining letters "ḫ" and "r" underwent an assimilation process that left the word spelt "Iram".

Although we have no textual proof[213] to back our theory, what we will discuss next is most certainly solid enough to assert the link between "Ḫīrām" and "Iram".

The First Ḫīrām

In the Old Testament's first book of Kings which tells of the beginnings of Solomon's reign over Israel—a parallel account of which can be found in the second book of Chronicles—we learn that God gave the king "wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the seashore".[214]

Solomon decides to build a Temple for God, thus fulfilling his late father David's wish. In order to do so, he sends to a person named Hiram, the king of Tyre who "was ever a lover of David"[215] and who had "beautified Tyre and its temples and engaged in extensive constructions".[216]

With the materials sent by Hiram—cedar wood and stone—Solomon builds the "house of the Lord" in a manner detailed throughout 1 K 6.

Much like king Šaddād's heavenly city of Iram, the Biblical temple is high and wide: "its length was sixty cubits, its width twenty, and its height thirty cubits";[217] it has rooms or chambers and is made of precious materials such as "cedar" and "cypress" wood[218] as well as "pure gold".[219]

These elements are of course still too insignificant to allow a connection between the Koranic "Iram of the pillars" and the Biblical Ḫīrām who participates in the making of Solomon's Temple, and we need to look further into

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[212] Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, p. 51.

[213] We have looked in François Déroche's *La transmission écrite du Coran dans les débuts de l'islam. Le codex Parisino-petropolitanus*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 2009 which deals with one of the very first manuscripts of the Koran and includes its modified facsimile. Unfortunately, this manuscript does not contain suras beyond the 72th.

[214] 1 K 4, 29.

[215] 1 K 5, 1.

[216] Katzenstein, "Hiram", *EJ*.

[217] 1 K 6, 2.

[218] 1 K 6, 15.

[219] 1 K 6, 20-21.

the Old Testament account of the Temple's construction to find more relevant information.

The Second Ḫīrām

Still in the first book of Kings, in its seventh chapter, we discover another person who bears the name Ḫīrām. This new figure is not a king but a simple half-Phoenician half-Israelite metal craftsman who is employed in casting the bronze objects for Solomon's Temple.[220]

The very first element that this second Ḫīrām starts with is—and this seems of great relevance to us—the casting of "two pillars"[221] which are not only made of the precious material that is bronze but are also very high as we can read that each one of them is "eighteen cubits high".[222] Their description that follows goes on from 1 K 7, 15 to 1 K 7, 22.

Indeed it seems relevant to point out the fact that in this Biblical passage, this second Ḫīrām is directly associated with the Temple's pillars (the *ʿamūdīm* in Biblical Hebrew), just as in the Koran, Iram is associated to the pillars (the *ʿimād* in Arabic) through the use of the particle *ḏū* (or *ḏāt* for the feminine/object plural) which expresses possession of a quality or an attribute by someone or something.

Is it then possible that the original and lost meaning of Kor 89, 7-8 was "Ḫīrām with the pillars, the like of which were not created" in terms of height and beauty? Here, let us point out that the interpretation of Iram as the name of a man was not excluded from exegeses as we can read that apparently,[223] the grammarian and exegete that we have already encountered in the first part of this work, al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822) had said: "If [Iram] is the name of a man (*in kāna sman li-raǧul*) then it is diptote…".[224]

Divine Punishment

If we consider our Koranic passage's structure and the list of its destroyed people—which starts at the sixth verse and ends with the tenth—we come to notice two important facts. The first one, as we had mentioned in our introduction, is that what the people of ʿĀd (6th verse), the people of Ṯamūd (8th verse) and Pharaoh (9th verse) have in common is their refusal to believe in God (according to the Koran, prophet Hūd was sent to the ʿĀd, prophet Ṣāliḥ was sent to the Ṯamūd and Moses as well as a mysterious man sometimes

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[220] Katzenstein, "Hiram", *EJ*.
[221] 1 K 7, 15.
[222] *Ibid.*
[223] The word "man" (*raǧul*) does not appear in our edition of al-Farrāʾ's exegesis.
[224] Ibn al-Ǧawzī, *Zād al-masīr*, VIII, p. 258.

linked to Ezekiel in exegeses serve as a prophetic figures in Pharaoh's case), considering themselves more powerful than He and thus generating His anger that will in turn become a divine punishment against them.

The second fact that is of prime importance is that in pastoral Arabia, the act of building—especially high constructions—was seen as one of defiance towards God,[225] as the prohibition of building in a solid, durable and high manner is a recurrent Koranic proscription.[226]

The people of ʿĀd, we have already seen, were thought to have built high constructions: "Do ye build a landmark on every high place to amuse yourselves? And do ye get for yourselves fine buildings in the hope of living therein (forever)?"[227] and to have been punished—in part—because of that.[228]

The people of Ṯamūd are in turn accused of being builders and of doing so "out of mountains"[229]—hence they are qualified as those "who cut out (huge) rocks in the valley"[230] in our Koranic passage. According to the French scholar Jacqueline Chabbi, the Ṯamūd's punishment as a cause of this action could be a remnant of pre-Islamic bethel cults; the latter being rocks that had once been part of mountains. *Ipso facto*, these mountains would have been considered as a "house of god (*bayt ilāh*)".[231]

As for Pharaoh—a mythical and metaphorical figure in the Koran—he is associated five times with the aforementioned two people in the "punishment stories".[232] In Kor 89, 10, he is said to be *ḏī l-awtād*, literally "of the stakes/pegs". The exegeses offer many different interpretations of this rather enigmatic qualification and it seems to us that a logical explanation behind it is that these "pegs" are a metaphor for the Pyramids that look like mountains—the latter being described precisely as "pegs" in Kor 78, 7.[233]

Considering this information, it only seems legitimate to assume that Iram—a name included amidst this list of builders destroyed by God—is also a person or a people divinely punished for the same reasons.

Furthermore, we can find a symmetry in our passage which indicates that Iram is indeed an individual's name: on the one hand are two ancient people

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[225] Jacqueline Chabbi, *Le Coran décrypté. Figures bibliques en Arabie*, Paris, Fayard, 2008, p. 141.

[226] *Ibid*., p. 135.

[227] Kor 26, 128-129.

[228] This is also noted in Bencheikh, "Iram", p. 73.

[229] Kor 15, 82.

[230] Kor 89, 9.

[231] Chabbi, *Le Coran décrypté*, p. 138.

[232] Kor 38, 12-13; 50, 12-13; 54, 18-42; 69, 4-9; and 89, 6-10.

[233] Jean-Louis Déclais, "Pharaon", *Dictionnaire du Coran*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2007, p. 671.

or tribes' names—ʿĀd and Ṯamūd—which are presented with no qualifier; and on the other hand are two individuals' names—Iram and Pharaoh—which on the contrary are followed by qualifiers through the use of the Arabic particle *ḏū*.[234] Thus, Iram is defined by the pillars and Pharaoh by the Pyramids. This can all be summarized in a chart (the Koranic order of the verses is found by reading from top to bottom and the symmetry by reading from left to right):

"…with the ʿĀd"—verse 6	"… with the Ṯamūd…"—verse 9
"Iram of the (*ḏāt*) pillars…"—verses 7-8	"…Pharaoh of the (*ḏī*) Pyramids"—verse 10

It seems clear to us that the parallels between the sixth and ninth verses and between the seventh and tenth verses were intended and thus, that Iram can only be an individual's name—like Pharaoh is. In this context, it makes sense that the two (or one of them) Biblical Ḫīrām might have had a part in the primitive Koran.

Indeed, the first Ḫīrām—much like the people of Ṯamūd—has an intrinsic relation to stones as he comes from Tyre, a Phoenician city located on a rocky island (the city's name is Ṣor in Hebrew and literally means "rock"); while the second Ḫīrām starts his work with the high and beautifully adorned pillars—that one might say did not have their like created throughout the land.

Yet by staying within the texts of the Old Testament itself, it is still difficult to grasp the full primitive meaning of "Iram of the pillars" and especially to understand why Ḫīrām would be included in a list of punished people who acted wrongly towards God. Do both Ḫīrām not contribute to a noble task by building the "house of the Lord"?

In order to understand its Koranic use, we need to turn to extra-Biblical writings.

Ḫīrām in the Midrash and Iram in the Tafsīr

To discover more about the first Ḫīrām, we have to leave the Old Testament's book of Kings and turn to the book of Ezekiel. Although Ḫīrām is

[234] Regarding the fact that the Koran uses *ḏāt*—the feminine form of *ḏū*—we offer the hypothesis that the Arabic feminine word for city, *madīna*, is implied in Kor 89, 7 rendering a virtual meaning of "[the city of] Iram of the pillars (*madīnat Iram ḏāt al-ʿimād*)" as it is the case in Kor 54, 13: "But we bore him on an [ark] made of […] planks and […] palm-fibre (*wa-ḥamalnāhu ʿalā ḏāt alwāḥ wa-dusur*)" where the *ḏāt* implicitly stands for the feminine Arabic noun for ark or boat, *fulk* (for the latter word in the same context of Noah's story see for example Kor 7, 64; 10, 73; 11, 37 etc.).

never textually mentioned therein, we will see that Rabbinic commentaries of ambiguous verses of the Bible—the *midrašīm* (invariably spelled 'midrash' hereafter)—will play a great role in developing a parallel story surrounding him that will further enlighten us on our Koranic "Iram of the pillars".

Ḫīrām in Midrashic Texts

As the late French Islam scholar Alfred-Louis de Prémare had noted regarding the theme of the "punishment stories" applied to ancient peoples in Prophet Muḥammad's predication, the latter

> made its own—by giving them an Islamic meaning—the Hebrew traditions conveyed by the Bible, the Apocrypha, or the Synagogal Rabbinic commentaries (*Midrash*)—which are often integrated in the Aramean translations of the Bible that are called *Targum*. Similarly, it revisits the Arab historico-legendary stories dealing with the past of human groups that traveled throughout the Peninsula [such as the people of ʿĀd, Ṯamūd, etc.].[235]

Our theory is that this is exactly what happened with "Iram of the pillars" as it is part of a so-called "punishment story" that must have been commonly found in Midrash as well as in Targums in the Arabic Peninsula at the time of the Prophet of Islam's predication.

It is precisely by looking at a Midrash compilation such as the *Midrash Rabbah* that we find the first elements of an answer to the mystery that is "Iram of the pillars". The aforementioned book of Ezekiel contained in the Old Testament delivers a prophecy against the "prince of Tyre",[236] also called "king of Tyre"[237]—who has early on[238] been assimilated to none other than the first Ḫīrām—from the first verse up to the nineteenth.

In the course of this Biblical passage, the king of Tyre is accused of being arrogant, of having grown rich, and most of all of having considered himself a god—the consequence of which is that he will "die the deaths of *them that*

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[235] Alfred-Louis de Prémare, "Le thème des peuples anéantis dans quelques textes islamiques primitifs, une vision de l'histoire", *REMMM*, 48 (1988), p. 11: "[La prédication de Muḥammad] reprend à son compte, en leur conférant un sens islamique, les traditions hébraïques véhiculées par la Bible, la littérature intertestamentaire, ou les commentaires rabbiniques des synagogues (*Midrash*), lesquels sont souvent insérés dans les traductions araméennes de la Bible appelées *Targum*. Dans la même ligne, elle réinvestit les récits historico-légendaires des Arabes sur le passé des groupes humains qui parcoururent la Péninsule…".

[236] Ez 28, 2.

[237] Ez 28, 12.

[238] The first texts to make a parallel between Ḫīrām and the prince and king of Tyre seem to be the Mekhiltas.

are slain".[239] In this we find a parallel with the accusations against the people of ʿĀd and the *nefilīm* as well as their demise.

The sin that Ḫīrām has committed by declaring himself a god is further pointed out in different passages of the *Midrash Rabbah*: "the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw that Nebuchadnezzar and Hiram would declare themselves gods; therefore was death decreed…"[240] and

> Just as idolaters will be punished, so will their gods be punished. You find the same in the case of Hiram. When he made himself a god, what is written of him? *Because thy heart is lifted up, and thou hast said: I am a god* (Ezek. xxviii, 2). The Holy One, blessed be He, chided him…[241]

It is also interesting to note the similarity between the list of people punished by God in our passage of Kor 89, 6-10 and the list found in the midrash for the eighth chapter of Exodus' "*Va'era*": "Pharaoh was one of four men who claimed divinity and thereby brought evil upon themselves. These were: Hiram, Nebuchadnezzar, Pharaoh, and Joash, king of Judah…".[242]

It seems to us that we are here in presence of a clear parallel between the four Koranic people or persons of Kor 89, 6-10 who also "brought evil upon themselves" and the four mentioned in the midrash—especially since, if our theory is correct, Hiram and Pharaoh are found in both lists while it is possible that the two left were replaced by figures well-known in Arab culture;[243] what de Prémare called a "[revisitation of] the Arab historico-legendary stories".

Iram in the Tafsīr*: A Trace of the Koranic Origins through the Midrashic Ḫīrām?*

As we have seen, it is very likely that the word "Iram", which is found only once throughout the entire Koran and which has been the subject of countless interpretations and debates, is none other than the sinful king of Tyre, Hiram, as represented in the Midrash literature that was common among Jews and Christians (in the latter's *Targum*s for instance) living in Arabia at the time of prophet Muḥammad's predication. The origin of this Hiram and his

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[239] Ez 28, 8.

[240] Rabbi Dr H. Freedman (translated and edited by), *Midrash Rabbah*, London, The Soncino Press, 1983, I, p. 66.

[241] *Ibid.*, II, p. 888.

[242] *Ibid.*, III, p. 116.

[243] Bencheikh almost realizes that when he states that Šaddād—much "like Solomon, Nimrod, Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander—rules the world (Comme Salomon, Nemrod, Nabuchodonosor et Alexandre, il règne sur le monde)", "Iram", p. 74.

story was apparently soon forgotten and thus transformed, readapted to fit the Arabian culture.

This was without counting on the exegetical integration of a revisited version of one of the probable original midrash that contained the origin of Kor 89, 7. The best proof of that can be found within the *Tafsīr* itself. As we have previously seen, al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/970) seems to be the first exegete to mention Wahb b. Munabbih's account of the story of the city of Iram of the pillars in his exegesis of Kor 89, 7-8.

The tale ends with Kaʿb—the former Jewish learned man—mentioning a sort of prophecy that states that only one Muslim man, during Muʿāwiya's era, will enter king Šaddād's heavenly city of Iram. He then carries on by giving his description, and when he suddenly sees Ibn Qilāba—the Bedouin who discovered the city—he yells: "This is the man!".

Muʿāwiya, in turn, congratulates Kaʿb for his knowledge and the story ends with the latter's reply—one that will never be quoted by all the later exegetes and authors who will mention the legend, whether extensively or not.[244] It is interesting that it is this very sentence that, in our opinion, brings light to the origins of the meaning of "Iram of the pillars". This is what Kaʿb replies:

> O Commander of the Believers, God has not created a single thing in this world that he has not explained in the Torah to his servant Moses—peace be upon him (*mā ḫalaqa Llāh šayʾan fī l-dunyā illā wa-qad fassarahu fī l-Tawrāt li-ʿabdihi Mūsā, ʿalayhi l-salām*)[245]

This leads us to consider the definition of the Midrash. According to the rabbinic tradition, when the Revelation occurred on the Sinai, God not only gave Moses the written Torah, but also oral teachings among which were the rules of interpretation that allow humans to gain knowledge of the secret meanings of the Bible.[246]

From this we understand that what Kaʿb is actually saying to Muʿāwiya is that the story of the city of Iram built by Šaddād which he has just mentioned is part of God's explanation of the Torah to Moses, in other words, a midrash. The very verb used in the Arabic text which we have translated as "to explain" is *fassara*/*yufassiru*. The noun (*maṣdar*) that derives from this verbal form is *tafsīr* or "exegesis".

In short, although it is very unlikely that Kaʿb actually had this conversation with Muʿāwiya, what we can conclude is that Wahb b. Munabbih, the

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[244] The only exception we found was in al-Ṯaʿlabī's *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 129.

[245] Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Tafsīr*, VI, p. 495.

[246] José Costa, *La Bible racontée par le Midrash*, Paris, Bayard, 2004, p. 6.

probable author of the text—who is known for having adapted many Judaic or Christian sources into Arabic—and through Kaʿb al-Aḥbār's voice, reveals the source of his readapted tale of the city of Iram by stating that it is part of Jewish exegesis.

Indeed, the Midrash has developed a vast legend surrounding Hiram that exceeds what we have already seen in the *Midrash Rabbah*.

A 20th century Rabbi, Louis Ginzberg (1873-1953), in his vast compilation of midrashic materials entitled *The Legends of the Jews*, dedicates a chapter to the midrash surrounding Hiram. Therein, we once again find the idea that Hiram considered himself a god, but this is developed in a manner that is directly relevant to Wahb b. Munabbih's story as well as to the Koran itself: "[Hiram] sought to make men believe in his divinity by the artificial heavens he fashioned for himself".[247]

In this we find the exact parallel of king Šaddād who "committed himself to building [Heaven's] like". Then, the description of the "seven heavens" built by Hiram—a possible reminiscence of Herodotus' eight tower building in Babylon which in turn could find an echo in the Biblical Babel Tower—with their precise measures and the detail of the materials used in their construction can only remind us of Šaddād's "Heaven on Earth": "The sixth [heaven was] of silver, and the seventh of gold, all separated from each other by canals".[248] This finds a direct echo in Wahb b. Munabbih's tale of the city of Iram which is made of "gold and silver" and through which "canals" pass.

Moreover, in the Midrash, Hiram uses "diamonds and pearls" in the composition of his artificial heaven, while Šaddād's heavenly city is inlaid with "emeralds, sapphires and pearls".

The conclusion to the story in the Midrash and in Wahb b. Munabbih's is also the same. In the first, God tells Hiram that He will destroy the cause of his pride: Solomon's Temple that he helped build. And so Hiram's construction is buried by God in the ground.[249] In the second, God punishes Šaddād and his followers by destroying them as well as the city of Iram, which in some accounts is also said to be buried in the ground.[250]

It seems to us that our theory is backed up by all of these elements. The "Iram" of Kor 89, 7 is the Biblical Hiram as seen through midrashic literature. The fact that in the Koran, he is qualified as being "of the pillars" (or implicitly

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[247] Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews. Vol. IV: Bible Times and Characters from Joshua to Esther*, New-York, Cosimo, 2005, p. 335.

[248] *Ibid.*

[249] *Ibid.*, p. 336.

[250] Al-Ibšīhī, *al-Mustaṭraf*, II, p. 141.

being referred to as Iram of the city of the pillars) is also a point that can be found in Ginzberg's summing up of Midrash, for Hiram builds his artificial seven heavens on "four iron pillars".[251] Therefore, it can be said that Hiram is "of the pillars"—just like God in the Koran is "of the Throne of Glory (*ḏū l-ʿarš al-maǧīd*)"[252] for instance—"the like of which have [never] been created" as they are the foundations of a seven-story artificial heaven made of precious metals and stones.

Looking at the most ancient sources of exegesis as well as dictionaries has proved to be insufficient to discover a long-lost Koran meaning. An enigmatic passage like Kor 89, 7 which contains no 'canonical' authority for its explicitation can only lead to a plethora of interpretations which are often—consciously or not—based on Biblical writings.

During the course of this study, we will have noted the intrinsic link existing between the Muslim's sacred Book and various Jewish and Christian scriptural sources; a link that is easily explained by the geographical proximity between communities that made the Arabic Peninsula a 'melting-pot' of religious influences, as well as the religious proximity that is claimed by the Prophet of Islam himself as he is the continuation or the reminder of the previous two monotheisms.

Hence it is not surprising that the Koran contains many traces of Jewish and Christian influences—among others—in the same way that the former's exegeses do. As during Muḥammad's era former Jews and Christians—for example—converted to Islam, they naturally brought in their own influences into the new faith. This phenomenon is what we have discussed through the historic figure of Kaʿb for instance. The latter, as well as someone like Wahb b. Munabbih, were known for having adapted Biblical stories—whether from the Bible itself or from its exegeses—to explain certain ambiguous Koranic passages or bring further details to others; a phenomenon called *isrāʾīliyyāt* and which was severely criticized from the 7th-8th/13th-14th century on and remains a subject of debate as well as a point of disagreement between Muslims.

Paradoxically, it is through the use of these very *isrāʾīliyyāt* in Koranic exegeses that we can bring light on certain misunderstood elements of the Muslim's Holy Book.

We have seen that the expression "Iram of the pillars" was unclear to Muslims very early on and that it led them to consider many very different interpretations for both terms in this verse. All this while what we think was the

[251] Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, p. 335. Compare this to what Wahb b. Munabbih is said to have stated: "God called it 'of the pillars' because of the emerald and sapphire pillars that [were] under [the city]".

[252] Kor 85, 15.

primitive meaning of Kor 89, 7 was in front of them, in Wahb b. Munabbih's legend of the city of Iram—an Arabic adaptation of the midrashic origin of the Koran's "Iram of the pillars"—in which the Biblical king Hiram became king Šaddād,[253] and common premises of a Bedouin in the desert discovering a lost city were included.

Thus, we conclude that the primitive intent of the "punishment story" contained in the eighty-ninth surah of the Koran and which goes from the sixth verse to the thirteenth (which brings the divine punishment epilogue) was to present a list of ancient people who had refused to believe in God and had disobeyed Him in different ways—although all had this in common that they built constructions that were seen as an act of defiance towards God—in a manner frequently found in the Koran (we have seen that the enumeration of ancient people destroyed by God is not unfamiliar) and yet introducing a parallel that is not habitual.

Indeed verses six and nine mention the two ancient Arab people of ʿĀd and Ṯamūd who had refused to believe in their God-sent messengers and were well known in Muḥammad's audience; and verses seven, eight and ten mention Hiram who declared himself a god and built high artificial heavens sustained on pillars, as well as Pharaoh who also considered himself a god and built high Pyramids.

[253] It should be noted here that the names Šaddād and Šadīd—his brother's name—literally mean "firm" and "strong" and that the two pillars that the second Biblical Hiram builds have names: the first is *yaqīn* and derives from the Hebrew verbal root that means "to reinforce" while the second is *boʿaz* which literally means "with strength" (see 1 K 7, 21).