

Marijn van Putten*

Are these Nothing but Sorcerers? – A linguistic analysis of Q Ṭā-Hā 20:63 using intra-Qur'ānic parallels

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jiqsa-2023-0002>

Abstract: The seemingly ungrammatical wording of Q Ṭā-Hā 20:63 *'inna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* has been cause for much debate, both in traditional Muslim sources as well as in modern discussion. This paper sets out to reevaluate the grammar of the various reading that are present by comparing them not against the normative grammar as it is established by the medieval grammarians, but rather by comparing its grammar to other, comparable construction in the Qur'an. By analyzing this Qur'ānic verse within its intra-Qur'ānic parallels it is argued that the minority reading *'in hadhāni la-sāḥirāni* is the original intended reading of the 'Uthmānic text, while the grammatically problematic majority reading *'inna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* is to be understood as an approximation to popular non-'Uthmānic readings. Through the comparison with other verses, it is also shown that we may gain deeper understanding into verses of constructions of the type found in Q al-Ṭāriq 86:4 (*wa-'in kullu nafsin la-mā 'alayhā ḥāfiẓun*) and shed light on some of the competing canonical readings in these verses.

Introduction

One of the famously controversial verses in the Qur'an in terms of grammar is Q Ṭā-Hā 20:63.¹ In the majority reading² *'inna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* appears to have an incorrect inflection for case. The expected form is *'inna hādhayni la-sāḥirāni*, as *'inna* governs the accusative. The accusative option is in fact the reading of the canonical Baṣran reader Abū 'Amr b. al-'Alā' (d. ca. 154–56/770–72) despite its disagreement

1 For a discussion on this verse and several of the other difficult verses see John Burton, "Linguistic Errors," 181–96.

2 Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr al-qir'āt*, § 3590–1.

***Corresponding Author: Marijn van Putten**, Leiden University Centre for Linguistics, Reuvensplaats 3–4, 2300 RA Leiden, Netherlands, E-Mail: m.van.putten@hum.leidenuniv.nl, marijnvandputten@gmail.com; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4670-0937>

with the *rasm* (ان هذن لسحرن).³ The problems with this reading were clearly understood very early on. The Kūfan grammarian al-Farrā' (144–207/761–822) already cites a report which traces back to the prophet Muḥammad's wife 'Ā'ishah, who claims that this is a scribal error in the Qur'an.⁴

There is yet another reading, *'in hādhāni la-sāḥirāni*, which is the reading of the now dominant Ḥafṣ transmission from 'Āsim (as well as that of Ibn Kathīr, who however has a slightly different nominative dual form *hādhānni*).⁵ This secondary reading has frequently been understood as containing the negator *'in* followed by the *la-* which takes on the function of *'illā* "except." This gives the meaning, "these two are nothing but sorcerers," drawing upon similar phraseology in the Qur'an that does use *'illā* like *'in hādhā 'illā ṣihrun mubīnun* "this is nothing but manifest sorcery" (Q 5:110, 6:7, 11:6, 34:43, 37:15). This interpretation is clearly awkward, as there is no precedent for the asseverative particle *la-* to take on the meaning of *'illā* in the qur'anic corpus – or, to my knowledge, outside of it – and thus such an understanding comes off as special pleading to resolve a grammatical issue.⁶

However, yet another understanding of this sentence is found in the grammatical literature which has much better support within the qur'anic corpus, namely that this *'in* is to be understood as the *'in al-mukhaffafah* – a short form of *'inna*. In this paper I will argue that this interpretation is in fact the correct one, and that despite being a minority reading, *'in hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* is the intended 'Uthmānic reading of this verse.

The Sisters of *'inna*

The morphosyntactic behavior of *'inna* "verily" is well-known. It is placed at the beginning of a phrase and topicalizes or emphasizes the word it governs. The noun that it governs is placed in the accusative. Usually this noun follows *'inna* directly, e. g. *'inna līlāha 'alā kulli shay'in qadīrun* "God is powerful over everything" (Q al-Baqarah 2:20 and *passim*),⁷ but it may be interrupted by a prepositional phrase

³ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr al-qirā'at*, § 3590–91.

⁴ Farrā', *Ma'āni al-Qur'an*, 2: 183.

⁵ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, § 3590–91.

⁶ In fact, the *la-* in the grammatical tradition is explicitly called *al-lām al-fāriqah* ("the distinguishing *lām*") specifically because its presence helps distinguish the word-initial *'in* from the negator *'in* which cannot be followed by *la-*; cf. Weigelt, "The Particle *La-* in Classical Arabic," 95.

⁷ When distinctions between the readings are not relevant, verses are cited in the transmission of Ḥafṣ 'an 'Āsim. When other readings are relevant, this will be mentioned explicitly.

especially if the governed word is indefinite, *'innā fi l-qal'ati sijnan* “In the fortress there is a prison”.⁸

There are two other particles that have very similar behavior, namely *lākinna* “but, yet” and the subordinator *'anna* “that” which likewise govern the accusative.⁹

Wa-lākinna kathīran minhum fāsiqūn
“But many of them are sinners.” (Q al-Mā'idah 5:81)

'a-lam ta'lam 'anna 'llāha 'alā kulli shay'in qadīr
“Do you not know that God is powerful over everything?” (Q al-Baqarah 2:106)

However, these particles are not always followed by nouns. Instead, a verb may follow as well. In such a case, shortened forms of these particles are used, namely *lākin* and *'an*. *'an* is followed by a subjunctive verb, which ends in *-a* in its non-suffixed forms. In Arabic grammatical thought the subjunctive ending *-a* is considered to be *naṣb* just like the accusative ending in the noun. Thus, its morphosyntactic behavior is not considered to change. In the case of *lākin*, however, this behaviour is not retained, and *lākin* may be followed by either a perfect verb or regular imperfect verb in *-u* (*raf*).¹⁰

Wa-mā ḡalamnāhum wa-lākin kānū 'anfusahum yazlimūn
“We did not wrong them; but they wronged themselves” (Q al-Naḥl 16:118)

wa-mā tashā'ūna 'illā 'an yashā'a 'llāhu rabbu l-'ālamīn
“But you will not wish it except if God, the lord of the universe, wills it” (Q al-Takwīr 81:29)

However, such shortened forms are not strictly relegated to the preverbal position. They occasionally can occur in front of nouns. In such cases, there seems to be no obvious difference in meaning from the use of *lākinna*. For example:

wa-lākinī l-rasūlu wa-'lladhīna 'āmanū ma'ahū jāhadū bi-'amwālihim wa-'anfusihim
“But the messenger and those who believed with him fought with their wealth and themselves.” (Q Barā'ah 9:88)

lākinī l-ḡālimūna l-yawma fi ḡalālīn mubīn
“But the wrongdoers today are in obvious error.” (Q Maryam 19:38)

wa-laysa 'alaykum junāḥun fimā 'akḥṭa'tum bihī wa-lākin mā ta'ammadat qulūbukum
“And you have committed no sin if you err therein but for what your hearts intended.” (Q al-Aḥzāb 33:5)

⁸ Fischer, *Grammar*, § 339; Wright, *Grammar*, 1: 284–85; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 36

⁹ Fischer, *Grammar*, § 338; § 415; Wright, *Grammar*, 1: 287, 292; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 39–40.

¹⁰ Fischer, *Grammar*, § 340, § 344; Wright, *Grammar*, 1: 287, 292; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 322–24.

wa-lākīn man sharaḥa bi-l-kufri ṣadran fa-‘alayhim ghaḍabun mina ‘llāhi wa-lahum ‘adhābun ‘azīm

“But those who open their hearts to disbelief, the wrath of God will be upon them, and they will have a great punishment.” (Q al-Naḥl 16:106)

There are a good number of cases where the readers disagree whether *lākīn* or *lākīnna* is used, e. g.

wa-lākīnna ‘l-shayāṭīna kafarū yu‘allimūna ‘l-nāsa ‘l-siḥra wa-mā ‘unzila ‘alā ‘l-malakayni bi-bābīla hārūta wa-mārūt (Majority reading)

wa-lākīni ‘l-shayāṭīnu kafarū yu‘allimūna ‘l-nāsa l-siḥra wa-mā ‘unzila ‘alā ‘l-malakayni bi-bābīla hārūta wa-mārūt (Ibn ‘Āmir, Ḥamzah, al-Kisā‘ī)¹¹

“Rather the devils disbelieved, teaching people magic and that which was revealed to the two angels at Babylon, Hārūt and Mārūt” (Q al-Baqarah 2:102)

fa-lam taqtulūhum(ū) wa-lākīnna ‘llāha qatalahum(ū) (Majority reading)

fa-lam taqtulūhum wa-lākīni ‘llāhu qatalahum (Ibn ‘Āmir, Ḥamzah, al-Kisā‘ī)¹²

“You did not kill them, but God killed them” (Q al-Anfāl 8:17)

wa-mā ramayta ‘idh ramayta wa-lākīnna ‘llāha ramā/e/ā (Majority reading)

wa-mā ramayta ‘idh ramayta wa-lākīni ‘llāhu ramā/e (Ibn ‘Āmir, Ḥamzah, al-Kisā‘ī)¹³

“And you did not throw when you threw, but God threw” (Q al-Anfāl 8:17)

laysa ‘l-birru/u ‘an tuwallū wujūhakum(ū) qibala ‘l-mashriqi wa-l-maghribi wa-lākīnna ‘l-birru man ‘āmana bi-‘llāhi [...] (Majority reading)

laysa ‘l-birru ‘an tuwallū wujūhakum qibala ‘l-mashriqi wa-l-maghribi wa-lākīni l-birru man (‘)āmana bi-‘llāhi [...] (Nāfi‘, Ibn ‘Āmir)¹⁴

“Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but righteousness is that one believes in God [...]” (Q al-Baqarah 2:177)

laysa l-birru bi-‘an ta’tū l-bi/uyūta min zuhūrihā wa-lākīnna l-birru mani ttaqā/e (Majority reading)

laysa l-birru bi-‘an ta’tū/tātū l-bi/uyūta min zuhūrihā wa-lākīni l-birru mani ttaqā/e (Nāfi‘, Ibn ‘Āmir)¹⁵

“Righteousness is not entering houses from the backdoor, righteousness is that one fears God” (Q al-Baqarah 2:189)

¹¹ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, § 2717.

¹² *Ibid.*, § 2717.

¹³ *Ibid.*, § 2717.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, § 2717.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, § 2717.

'inna 'līāha lā yazlimu 'l-nāsa shay'an wa-**lākinna** 'l-nāsa 'anfusahum(ū) yazlimūn (Majority reading)

'innā 'līāha lā yazlimu 'l-nāsa shay'an wa-**lākini** 'l-nāsu 'anfusahum yazlimūn (Ḥamzah, al-Kisā'i, Khalaf)¹⁶

"God does not wrong people at all, but they wrong themselves" (Q Yūnus 10:44)

lākini 'lladhīna 'ttaqaw rabbahum(ū) lahum(ū) jannātun tajrī min taḥtihā 'l-(')anhāru [...] (Majority reading)

lākinnā 'lladhīna ttaqaw rabbahumū lahumū jannātun tajrī min taḥtihā 'l-'anhāru [...] (Abū Ja'far)¹⁷

"But those who fear their Lord will have the Gardens beneath which rivers flow [...]" (Q Āl Imrān 3:198)

lākini 'lladhīna 'ttaqaw rabbahum(ū) lahum(ū) ghurafun min fawqihā ghurafun mabniyyatun tajrī min taḥtihā 'l-(')anhāru [...] (Majority reading)

lākinnā 'lladhīna 'ttaqaw rabbahumū lahumū ghurafun min fawqihā ghurafun mabniyyatun tajrī min taḥtihā 'l-'anhāru [...] (Abū Ja'far)¹⁸

"But those who fear their Lord, for them are built chambers upon chambers, beneath which rivers flow" (Q al-Zumar 39:20)

There are only two examples of 'an before a noun rather than in front of a verb, but where it occurs, the noun that follows indeed does not take the accusative, but the nominative as well. In both cases, the 'an is functionally not quite identical to 'anna as it functions as the introduction of direct speech, known by the name 'an al-mufassirah.¹⁹

wa-'ākhiru da'wāhum 'ani 'l-ḥamdu li-'llāhi rabbi 'l-'ālamīn

"And the end of their prayer is: 'Praise be to God, Lord of the universe'" (Q Yūnus 10:10)

wa-nādaw 'aṣḥāba 'l-jannati 'an salāmun 'alaykum

"And they call out to the companions of Paradise: 'Peace be upon you'" (Q al-A'rāf 7:46)

'In al-mukhaffafah

In light of the behavior of the closely related particles *lākin(na)* and *'an(na)* one might expect that *'inna* should also have a short form that is (predominantly) used when it is followed by a verb rather than a noun. Indeed, there are many examples

¹⁶ Ibid., § 2717.

¹⁷ Ibid., § 2901.

¹⁸ Ibid., § 2901.

¹⁹ Wright, *Grammar*, 1: 292; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 29.

of this throughout the Qur'ān.²⁰ All of them are either followed by the verb *kāna*, with a predicate marked with the particle *la-*, or with verbs of perception/consideration like *wajada* “to consider to be” and *ẓanna* “to think to be.”²¹

wa-ʾin kānat la-kabīratan ʾillā ʾalā ʾlladhīna hadā ʾllāh

“It was indeed difficult, except for those whom God guided” (Q al-Baqrah 2:143)

wa-ʾin wajadnā ʾaktharahum la-fāsiqīn

“We found most of them to definitely be sinners” (Q al-Aʾrāf 7:102)

wa-ʾin nazunnuka la-mina ʾl-kādhībīn

“We think you are certainly among the liars” (Q al-Shuʾarāʾ 26:168)

Above, it was shown that the short forms *lākin* and *ʾan* were used before verbs but could also on occasion be used before nouns in the nominative. The Arab grammarians also consider this to be an option for *ʾin*, and they consider *ʾin zaydun la-qāʾimūn* “Zayd is standing” to be semantically equivalent to *inna zaydan la-qāʾimūn*.²² Also within the Qurʾān there is evidence for such uses (outside of Q Ṭā-Hā 20:63); however, in all cases there is disagreement among the readers about the specific reading. All have in common that they start with *ʾin* followed by a noun phrase followed by what is variously read *la-mā* or *lammā*. *La-mā* can transparently be understood as the asseverative *la-* followed by a relative pronoun *mā* “what” which introduces a relative clause. These can be translated to English, with somewhat awkward copular relative clauses, as I have done below to accentuate the structure, but the *mā* is probably best understood as being semantically empty. In the following overview I will refrain from giving a translation of the *lammā* reading, which I will discuss afterwards.

wa-ʾin kullun la-mā jamīʾun ladaynā muḥḍarūn (Majority reading)

“All (of them) is what is present before us, all together” (Q Yā-Sīn 36:32)

wa-ʾin kullun lammā jamīʾun ladaynā muḥḍarūn (Abū Jaʿfar, Ibn ʾĀmir, ʾĀṣim, Ḥamzah)²³

wa-ʾin kullu dhālika la-mā matāʾu ʾl-ḥayāti ʾl-dunyā/e/ā (Majority reading)

“All of that is what is the enjoyments of the worldly life” (Q al-Zukhruf 43:35)

²⁰ Fischer, *Grammar*, § 339; Wright, *Grammar*, 1: 284–5; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 20.

²¹ Nebes, “*In al-Mukhaffafa*,” 15–17. There is also the construction with the verb *kāda/yakādu* “to be about to” followed by an imperfect verb marked with *la-*, but this construction is less relevant for the discussion at hand.

²² Weigelt, “The Particle *La-* in Classical Arabic,” 95.

²³ ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, § 3312.

wa-'in kullu dhālika lammā matā'u 'l-ḥayāti 'l-dunyā/ē (Abū Ja'far, Ibn 'Āmir, 'Āšim, Ḥamzah)²⁴

wa-'in kullu nafsin la-mā 'alayhā ḥāfiz (Majority reading)
 “Each soul is that which has a protector over it” (Q al-Ṭāriq 86:4)

wa-'in kullu nafsin lammā 'alayhā ḥāfiz (Abū Ja'far, Ibn 'Āmir, 'Āšim, Ḥamzah)²⁵

Medieval works occasionally explain the reading with *lammā* instead of *la-mā* with *'in* not as the short form of the topicalizing particle *'inna*, but rather as the negator *'in*, whereas *lammā* – which usually functions as a conjunction where it translates as “when” or “not yet”²⁶ – is explained as having the meaning *'illā* “except, but.”²⁷ Thus the verses above would have to be explained as being functionally identical to the common *'in ... 'illā* construction such as *'in kullun 'illā kadhdhaba 'l-rusula* “No one of them but denied the messengers” (Q 38:14), which would then allow translations of the previous verses as: “All (of them) are not but presented before us all together” (Q 36:32), “But all of that is not but the enjoyment of worldly life” (Q 43:35), “There is no soul but that it has over it a protector.” (Q 86:4). This explanation was accepted by Nebes in his seminal discussion on the *'in mukhaffafah*,²⁸ following Bergsträsser in this interpretation.²⁹

However, from a linguistic point of view such explanations do not strike me as satisfactory. First, I see no obvious (or even a not-so-obvious) path to go from the semantics of the conjunction *lammā* “when” or “not yet” to the meaning “except.”³⁰ This impression appears to have been shared by quite a few early exegetes. Al-Farrā' on discussing Q 36:32, for example, discusses this interpretation of this verse, but cites his teacher, the canonical reader al-Kisā'ī (d. 189/904):³¹ “Al-Kisā'ī used to reject this opinion, saying: ‘I am not aware of an interpretation of *lammā* with gemination in recitation.”³² For Q 86:4 he says “the masses recited *lammā*, and some of them without gemination (i.e. *la-mā*). Al-Kisā'ī used to pronounce it without gemination, and we are not aware of an interpretation of it with gemination, and it is thought that in the Hudhayl dialect they consider *lammā* to mean *'illā* when

24 Ibid., § 3312.

25 Ibid., § 3312.

26 Fischer, *Grammar*, § 443; Wright, *Grammar*, 287; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 310–311.

27 Akhfash, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 2: 514; Fārisī, *al-Ḥujjah*, 6: 149–50., 397; Ibn Khālawayh, *al-Ḥujjah*, 191, 368; Makki, *al-Kashf*, 2: 215; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 311–14.

28 Nebes, “*In al-Mukhaffafa*,” 12.

29 Bergsträsser, *Verneinungs- und Fragepartikeln und Verwandtes im Qur'ān*, 14–16 n4.

30 There is yet another use of *lammā* used in oaths, which will be discussed below.

31 Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 2: 377.

32 *Wa-kāna 'l-kisā'iyyu yanfi ḥādḥā 'l-qawla wa-yaqūlu: lā 'arīfu jihata lammā fi 'l-tashdidī fi 'l-qirā'ah.*

it occurs with a light *ʾin* (i. e., not *ʾinna*), but they do not consider that correct.”³³ Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923)³⁴ seemingly cites al-Kisāʾī anonymously: “Some of the experts in the Arabic lexicon used to say: ‘I am not aware of an interpretation of *lammā* with gemination.’”³⁵

The explanation of *lammā* in the meaning of *ʾillā* “except” truly runs into trouble when one uses it to parse Q Hūd 11:111.³⁶ This verse is exceptional in that, unlike the other cases, the word following ٱ is clearly accusative, as reflected by its *rasm* ٱ rather than ٱ. It is read in four different ways:³⁷

1. *wa-ʾinna kullan la-mā la-yuwaffiyannahum rabbuka ʾa-mālahum* (Abū ʾAmr, Yaʾqūb, al-Kisāʾī, Khalaf)
2. *wa-ʾinna kullan lammā la-yuwaffiyannahum(ū) rabbuka ʾa-mālahum(ū)* (Ḥafṣ ʾan ʾAṣim, Ḥamzah, Ibn ʾĀmir, Abū Jaʿfar)
3. *wa-ʾin kullan la-mā la-yuwaffiyannahum(ū) rabbuka ʾa-mālahum(ū)* (Nāfiʿ, Ibn Kathīr)
4. *wa-ʾin kullan lammā la-yuwaffiyannahum rabbuka ʾa-mālahum* (Shuʾbah ʾan ʾAṣim)

The first reading reads naturally as identical in meaning as the *ʾin kullun la-mā* reading of Q 36:32, with the difference here being that the short version *ʾin* is not used, but instead *ʾinna*, thus triggering the accusative form *kullan*. Thus, the verse translates to: “All is what your lord will certainly compensate them for their deeds”.

Several medieval authorities argue, regarding Q 36:32, that *lammā* can be understood as *la-man-mā* “certainly whoever;” which after the regular assimilation of the *nūn* to the *mīm* (*la-mam=mā*) was contracted to *la-mmā*.³⁸ This explanation

³³ Farrāʾ, *Maʾānī al-Qurʾān*, 3: 254.

³⁴ Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 19: 432.

³⁵ *Wa-kāna baʿḍu ʾahli ʾl-ʾarabiyyati yaqūlu: lā ʾa-rifu wajha lammā bi-ʾl-tashdīd.*

³⁶ The difficulty of this verse was noted by Bergsträsser, who nevertheless argues for the meaning *ʾillā* “except,” arguing that there is no evidence for the use of *lammā/la-mā* as an alternative to *al-lām al-fariqah*. This point is well-taken, but I do not think that skews the argument in favor of the *ʾillā* interpretation. After all, there is no unambiguous evidence for *lammā/la-mā* having the meaning of “except” either, outside the constructions under discussion. The advantage of interpreting it as a form of *la-*, is that after that it requires no further syntactic special pleading especially in the verse Q 11:111, whereas this form remains problematic if *lammā/la-mā* is interpreted as having the meaning of *ʾillā*. Cf. Bergsträsser, *Verneinungs- und Fragepartikeln und Verwandtes im Qurʾān*, 14–16 n4.

³⁷ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, § 3311–2.

³⁸ Ibn Khālawayh, *al-Ḥujjah*, 191; Farrāʾ, *Maʾānī al-Qurʾān*, 2: 29; Fārisī, *al-Ḥujjah*, 4: 384, who does not approve of this interpretation and considers the reading a problem (*mushkilah*); Makkī, *al-Kashf*, 1: 537.

is not implausible, but alternatively one could argue that *la-mmā* is simply some sort of not-entirely-understood emphatic pronunciation of the same particle *la-mā*. What one cannot argue for is that it is the particle *lammā* with the meaning of *‘illā* “except.”³⁹ When one accepts that *‘inna* can occur with *lammā*, just like *‘in*, then it becomes difficult to accept that *‘in* must be considered a negator when it occurs with *lammā* in Q 36:32, 43:35 and 86:4. Indeed, the medieval authorities occasionally cite *la-(m)mā* in its asseverative use as a possible – and to some, clearly preferable – understanding of *lammā* even for the other verses.⁴⁰

The remaining two readings with *‘in* followed by *kullan* are explained as instances where *‘in*, despite being the short form, continues to govern the accusative case.⁴¹ These strike me as less preferable readings which were likely imposed rather artificially onto the text to strengthen the similarity to the *‘in kullun ... la(m)-mā* verses discussed above. While there are several cases of *‘in* followed by the nominative, within the Qur’ānic corpus there are no other examples where a shortened *‘in* continues to govern the accusative. Another proposed view is that *kullan* takes the accusative because it functions as the object of the following verb *la-yu-waffiyannahum* “he will compensate them”. This seems odd, as *kullan* is essentially functioning as the head of an asyndetic relative clause, and therefore its case should follow its function in the main clause, not that of the relative clause. Indeed, already Al-Farrā’ says it is an option he does not like (*huwa wajhun lā ‘ashtahīhi*) because one does not say ***‘in zaydan la-‘aḍrabu* “it is Zayd whom I will surely hit” or ***mā zaydan ‘illā ‘aḍrabu* “it is none other than Zayd whom I will hit”, so it is a mistake with both *‘illā* and *la-* (*fa-hādhā khaṭa‘un fī ‘illā wa-fī ‘l-lāmi*).⁴²

Therefore, to sum up: *‘inna* may indeed occur in its short form *‘in* just as *lākinna* and *‘anna* do. This form *‘in* is clearly attested in front of verbs in the Qur’ān, but also in several rare cases in front of nouns. The construction in which it occurs in front of nouns consistently combines with *kull* ‘all, each’ and an asseverative relative clause *la-m(m)ā*. In one case this exact same construction occurs which uses the long form *‘inna* followed by the accusative *kullan*, confirming that *‘in* should not be understood as the negator *‘in*, but instead as the shortened form of the topicalizer *‘inna*.

39 Which is why both readings with *lammā* are outright dismissed by Fārisī, *al-Ḥujjah*, 4: 386–88.

40 Farrā’, *Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān*, 2: 377; Makkī, *al-Kashf*, 2: 215.

41 Fischer, *Grammar*, § 428.

42 Farrā’, *Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān*, 2: 29–30.

***Lammā* in the meaning of *'illā* in oaths**

The reason why the grammarians and exegetes seem to have been tempted to interpret *lammā* as meaning *'illā* seems to stem from the use of *lammā* in oaths, where it can be used interchangeably with *'illā*, e. g., *nashadtuka bi-llāhi lammā fa'alta* “I swear to you by God, you must do it” may also be expressed as *nashadtuka bi-'llāhi 'illā fa'alta* “I swear to you by God, you must do it.” Such constructions are explicitly invoked, for example, by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) in order to defend the understanding of *lammā* in the meaning of *'illā* in *'in ... 'illā* constructions.⁴³ However this compares two clearly different constructions, and the *'illā* in such constructions performs a different functional role than the *'illā* in *'in ... 'illā* construction.

As Fischer points out, sentences in oaths introduce the wish with *'in* “if” if it is a negative oath and *'illā* for a positive oath.⁴⁴ An oath like *nashadtuka 'llāha 'in rimta hādihā 'l-makāna 'abadan* “I swear to you by God that you shall never leave this place!”, should literally be understood as “I swear to you by God that if you ever leave this place (the consequences will be dire).” By extension *'illā* in such oaths does not mean “except,” but should be parsed as *'in-lā* “if not,” thus *bi-ḥayātī 'il-lā 'anshadtanī 'l-bayta* should be understood as “by my life, if you do not recite the verse for me (the consequences will be dire)!”

Lammā may be used in such constructions for positive oaths in the place of *'illā*. If anything, *lammā* here should therefore mean “if not” and not “except” as it ostensibly would in *'in ... lammā* constructions when one takes *'in* as the negator. But it seems to me that the *lammā* in the oath constructions can in fact be understood as an emphatic form of *la-* or *la-mā*, thus a sentence like *nashadtuka bi-'llāhi lammā fa'alta* could be interpreted as “I swear to you by God that you may certainly do it (or that it certainly may be what you will do)!” This construction therefore does not provide compelling evidence that *lammā* can mean *'illā* in the sense of “except.”

These two are certainly sorcerers!

With the use of the *'in al-mukhaffafah* discussed above, it is now possible to return to the famously problematic verse Q 20:63 that we started this discussion with, which can be understood in a new light with the preceding discussion. When one reads

⁴³ Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 894.

⁴⁴ Fischer, *Grammar*, § 456.

this verse as *'inna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* the lack of accusative inflection of *hādhāni* is indeed a grammatical anomaly,⁴⁵ and for this very reason this reading should not be considered the intended reading of the Ṭhmanic text, and neither should *'inna hādhayni la-sāḥirāni*, which is grammatically unremarkable, but disagrees with the *rasm*.

The remaining reading, however, *'in hādhān(n)i la-sāḥirāni*, only adhered to by Ḥafṣ 'an 'Āṣim and Ibn Kathīr among the canonical readers, can be understood as both grammatical and in line with the *rasm*. This construction should not be understood as an *'in ... 'illā* construction where *la-* inexplicably takes on the meaning of *'illā* “except,”⁴⁶ but instead it should be understood as the asseverative *'inna ... la-* construction, using the short form *'in* instead of *'inna* just like in Q 36:32, 42:35 and 86:4. While such an interpretation has fallen out of favor in modern translations, it is well-attested in the medieval works of (grammatical) exegesis. Thus, Q 20:63 should be translated as “these two are certainly sorcerers!”

Is *'inna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* the *lectio difficilior*?⁴⁷

Although hidden in a footnote of an article otherwise almost entirely unrelated to the topic at hand, Nicolai Sinai has once made the argument that the *'inna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* reading is to be considered the preferred reading, arguing that this reading is grammatically quite difficult to explain, but is nevertheless the majority reading among the canonical readings.⁴⁸ It would be difficult to explain this widespread preference for an otherwise awkward grammatical construction, where other grammatical options are present, had it not reflected a more original recitation. Sinai therefore points out that it is the *lectio difficilior* and should be preferred.

45 One might note that *hādhān(n)i* only ever occurs in the nominative form in the Qurʾān (see Q 20:63, 22:19) and thus might wonder whether the form inflected for case at all. But here one should note that the feminine *hātayn(n)i* (Q 28:27) does occur in the accusative form, in a syntactic context where this is expected. From this I believe that it is likely that in the Qurʾānic Arabic dialect the dual proximal deictic inflected for case; cf. Van Putten, *Quranic Arabic*, 278; Al-Jallad, *The Damascus Psalm Fragment*, 68–69.

46 It strikes me as likely that this awkward interpretation of *la-* as *'illā* took inspiration from reports of non-Ṭhmanic companion readings that do use *'illā* like *'in dhāni 'illā sāḥirāni*. Ibn Khālawayh, *Mukhtaṣar*, 88; Farrāʾ, *Maʾāni*, 2: 184.

47 I would like to thank Hythem Sidky for his valuable input in helping me think through this section.

48 Sinai, “When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure? Part II,” 519 n41.

This argument seems defensible,⁴⁹ but would initially seem to go directly against the above argument that *'in hādān(n)i la-sāḥirāni* is not only a grammatically correct reading, but also the one intended by the Ṭhmanic text. However, this need not be a contradiction, and it is important to keep in mind that the Ṭhmanic text is *not* the original composition of the text, but rather a standardization of the Qur'ān. Variant readings associated with this text are the result of a complex interaction between the (frequently) pre-Ṭhmanic oral tradition and an attempt to adhere to this new standard text. In light of this, it seems possible that Sinai's argument in principle holds up when speaking of the original composition of the text, all the while maintaining that the Ṭhmanic text indeed intended *'in hādān(n)i la-sāḥirāni*.

It is possible to take as the original composition the much more typical *'inna hādḥayni la-sāḥirāni* construction, while acknowledging that there were other viable and probably existing oral variants such as the intended Ṭhmanic *'in hādān(n)i la-sāḥirāni* and companion readings such as *'in dhān(n)i 'illā sāḥirāni* “these two are nought but sorcerers”,⁵⁰ and variations thereupon.⁵¹

Abū 'Amr's reading was able to access the non-Ṭhmanic reading *'inna hādḥayni la-sāḥirāni* with only a minor intervention into the *rasm*, and quite a few non-canonical readers did likewise.⁵² Abū 'Amr is remarkable among the canonical readers in more readily – although still very rarely – disagreeing with the Ṭhmanic text,⁵³ and therefore him adopting what would have been a popular pre-Ṭhmanic reading that disagreed with the Ṭhmanic text is easily understood.

This brings us to the *lectio difficilior*, *'inna hādḥāni la-sāḥirāni*. While certainly the majority of the readers adhered to this reading and its reading is the most difficult, it does not mean that therefore it must be considered the most probable original reading of the Ṭhmanic text. This skips over the issue that Qur'ānic readings are the result of an interaction between the oral tradition and the written text. It is clear that the majority of the readers, both canonical and non-canonical, avoided devi-

49 Though, only if we accept the grammaticality of *'inna* being followed by the accusative – which I believe is to be doubted. This would not make it the more difficult reading, but the more unlikely reading.

50 Ibn Khālawayh attributes it to Ibn Mas'ūd and al-Farrā' attributes it to Ubayy ibn Ka'b. It seems likely that knowledge of these companion readings gave rise to the rather awkward attempts to understand the *'in hādān(n)i la-sāḥirāni* construction as an *'in X 'illā Y* construction by the later exegetes. See Ibn Khālawayh, *Mukhtaṣar*, 88; al-Farrā', *Ma'āni al-Qur'ān*, 2: 184.

51 The lower text of the Ṣan'ā' palimpsest, for example shows clear traces of *mā dhān(n)i 'illā sāḥirāni*; see Sadeghi and Goudarzi, “Ṣan'ā' 1 and the Origins of the Qur'ān,” 86.

52 The readings of 'A'ishah, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Nakha'ī, 'Aṣim al-Jaḥḍarī, al-A'mash, Ibn Jubayr and Ibn 'Ubayd are reported in Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, 7: 350.

53 Van Putten, “When the Readers Break the Rules,” 438–61.

ating from the *rasm*, and this should be taken into account when evaluating such variants. Assuming that *inna hādhayni la-sāhirāni* was the preferred pre-ʿUthmānic reading, the closest reading that could be achieved without violating adherence to the *rasm* would be *inna hādḥāni la-sāhirāni*. It seems that readers preferred *inna hādḥāni la-sāhirāni* – perhaps emboldened by observations that one finds among early grammarians that the Banū al-Ḥārith would not inflect *hādḥāni* for case⁵⁴ – over the marked construction intended by the ʿUthmānic text (*in hādḥāni la-sāhirāni*), or the ones that violated the *rasm* (*inna hādḥayni la-sāhirāni* or *in dhāni ʾillā sāhirāni*). The *lectio difficilior* argument would then only argue for a common popularity of the *inna hādḥayni la-sāhirāni* reading before readers came to be confronted with a *rasm* that could not accommodate such a reading – leading to the difficult reading.

As a final note, it is worth pointing out that in this model of the competing readings interacting with the ʿUthmānic standard, it is not necessarily obvious that *inna hādḥayni la-sāhirāni* is to be considered the *lectio difficilior* (and therefore *potior*) in relation to other non-ʿUthmānic readings, most notably ones that would have used the *in/mā (hā)dhāni ʾillā sāhirāni* construction. These are all perfectly plausible readings with only a very minor difference in meaning and no exegetical value. It does not strike me as possible to recover what the original wording of the composition would have been. I am not sure that such a question even makes sense if the Qurʾān was originally a (semi-)oral composition, which in its early years enjoyed considerable freedom of oral recomposition and reformulation as the famous *ṣabʿat aḥruf* hadith seems to suggest.⁵⁵

Conclusion

It is hoped that this excursus into the syntax of the Qurʾān highlights the importance of using the Qurʾān itself to understand its syntax. The Qurʾān is a corpus on its own, and frequently has constructions that are rare if not non-existent outside of it. By strictly adhering to what can be gleaned from different sections of the Qurʾān, and closely examining the relevant variant readings in such locations, it is possible to come to new insights that are informed not by later grammatical interpretation but by the corpus itself. Nevertheless, it is important to stress the importance of the medieval grammatical-exegetical works while approaching the syntax of the

54 Farrāʾ, *Maʾānī al-Qurʾān*, 2: 184.

55 For a compelling discussion on the early Qurʾān within a Parry and Lord-style oral composition framework see Dutton, “Orality, Literacy and the ‘Seven Aḥruf’ Ḥadīth.”

Qurʾān in this way. While such works often have a maximalist approach to presenting different options, and it is not always possible to get a clear answer from them as to what the preferred understanding should be, they are an essential body of literature that gives a broad overview of different interpretations that are around. Taking a comparative approach to parallel constructions within the Qurʾānic corpus, it becomes possible to decide which interpretation is the most compelling. Doing so, it becomes clear that Q 20:63, which at first seems like a grammatical anomaly can be understood within the attested grammar of the corpus, and turns out to be a rare, but nevertheless understandable formation if read as *ʿin hādihāni la-sāḥirāni* “these are surely sorcerers!”

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Hamza Khwaja, Phillip Stokes and an anonymous reviewer for providing valuable input on this paper.

Funder Name: H2020 European Research Council

Funder Id: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13039/100010663>

Grant Number: 101044127

Bibliography

- Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī. *Al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ fī al-tafsīr*, 11 vols. Edited by Ṣidqī Muḥammad Jamil. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2010.
- Akhfash al-Awsaṭ, Abū Ḥasan Saʿīd b. Masʿadah al-. *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*. Edited by Hudā Maḥmūd Qarrāʾah. Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1990.
- Al-Jallad, Ahmad. *The Damascus Psalm Fragment: Middle Arabic and the Legacy of Old Ḥigāzī*. Chicago, IL: Oriental Institute, 2020.
- Bergsträsser, Gotthelf. *Verneinungs- und Fragepartikeln und Verwandtes im Qurʾān: Ein Beitrag zur historischen Grammatik des Arabischen*. Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1914.
- Burton, John. “Linguistic Errors in the Qurʾān.” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33 (1988): 181–196.
- Dutton, Yasin. “Orality, Literacy and the ‘Seven Aḥruf’ Ḥadīth.” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 23 (2011): 1–49.
- Fārisī, Abū ʿAlī al-. *al-Ḥujjah fī ʿIlal al-Qirāʾāt al-Sabʿ*. Edited by ʿAdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd and ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwaḍ. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1971.
- Farrāʾ, Abū Zakariyyā Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-. *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*. Edited by Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Najjār and Aḥmad Yūsuf al-Najātī. Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1983.
- Fischer, Wolfdietrich. *A Grammar of Classical Arabic*, 3rd ed. Translated by Jonathan Rogers. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Ibn Hishām al-Anṣārī, Jamāl al-Dīn. *Mughnī al-labīb ʿan kutub al-aʿrīb*. Edited by Māzin Al-Mubārak, Muḥammad ʿAlī Ḥamid Aḷlāh, and Saʿīd al-Afghānī. Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1964.
- Ibn al-Jazarī, Abū l-Khayr. *Nashr al-qirāʾāt al-ʿashr*, 5 vols. Edited by Ayman Rushdī Suwayd. Beirut & Istanbul: Dār al-Ghawthānī, 2018.
- Ibn Khālawayh, Abū ʿAbd Allāh. *al-Ḥujjah fī al-qirāʾāt al-sabʿ*. Edited by ʿAbd al-ʿĀl Sālim Makram. Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1979.

- . *Mukhtaṣar fī shawādh dh al-Qurʾān min Kitāb al-Badīʿ*. Edited by Gotthelf Bergsträsser. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2009.
- Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib. *al-Kashf ʿan wujūh al-qirāʾāt al-sabʿ wa-ʾilalihā wa-hijājihā*. Edited by Muḥyī al-Dīn Ramaḍān. Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 1984.
- Nebes, Norbert. “In al-Mukhaḥḥafa und al-Lām al-Farīqa. I.” *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 7 (1982): 7–22.
- Putten, Marijn van. *Quranic Arabic: From Its Hijazi Origins to Its Classical Reading Traditions*. Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2022.
- . “When the Readers Break the Rules. Disagreement with the Consonantal Text in the Canonical Reading Traditions,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 29 (2022): 438–61.
- Sadeghi, Behnam, and Mohsen Goudarzi. “Ṣanʿāʾ 1 and the Origins of the Qurʾān.” *Der Islam* 87 (2011): 1–129.
- Sinai, Nicolai. “When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure? Part II.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77 (2014): 509–21.
- Ṭabarī, Abū Jaʿfar al-. *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl ʾāy al-Qurʾān*. Edited by ʿAbd Aḷḷāh al-Turkī. Cairo: Dār Hajar, 2001.
- Wright, William. *A Grammar of the Arabic Languages*. 3rd ed. Revised by W. Robertson Smith and M.J. de Goeje. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896.
- Weigelt, Frank. “The Particle *La-* in Classical Arabic.” *Quaderni Di Studi Arabi* 15 (2020): 67–108.
- Zamakhsharī, Abū Qāsim Maḥmūd al-. *Tafsīr al-Kashshāf*. Edited by Khalīl Maʾmūn Shayḥā. Beirut: Dar al-Maʾrifah, 2009.