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UNMASKING *MASKH*: THE TRANSFORMATION OF JEWS INTO "APES, DRIVEN AWAY" (QUR'ĀN 7: 166) IN NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

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REVIEWS

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Abstract This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of the Qurʾānic idea that a group of Jews were punished for desecrating the Sabbath by being turned into apes and driven-away (Qurʾān 7:166). First, I survey and engage critically with recent studies that treat this topic. Following this, I attempt to broaden the framework of enquiry considerably by showing that for Near Eastern monotheists on the eve of Islam, the divine transformation of sinners into "driven away animals" resonated loudly. A selection of Near Eastern materials that have not hitherto been drawn on in this context is introduced, including *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Prayer of Nabonidus*, the Biblical *Book of Daniel* (both the Masoretic Text and Greek versions thereof), Midrashic of the Biblical *Book of Esther*, and Jacob of Serug's *Homily on Daniel* 4. Taken together, these sources allow us to demonstrate that on the eve of Islam, Jews and Christians were well aware of the idea that God can punish the disobedient by animalizing and banishing them. It is within this broad context that Qurʾān 7:166 is to be understood.

Keywords Qurʾān, Jews, monkeys, Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel 4, animalization, banishment

Introduction

The Qurʾānic idea that some Jews who desecrated the Sabbath were punished by Allāh, who transformed them into 'apes' (*qirada*), has attracted much attention over the centuries. This is hardly surprising: The idea is inherently curious (not least because it takes the theory of evolution in the opposite direction), it has been popular amongst anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist

* It is a pleasure to offer this article in honour of Prof. Ella Landau-Tasseron, who has set an inspiring example as a scholar and as a supportive colleague. I would like to thank Christopher Melchert and Uri Rubin for commenting on a draft of this article.

preachers,[1] and it appears to lack a clear precedent in Judaeo-Christian materials from Late Antiquity.[2] Scholars have thus applied themselves to the question of this statement's origins,[3] its meaning,[4] and its legal-theological ramifications,[5] over the past century. Perhaps most influential in this context has been Speyer, whose two-page excursus on the Midrashic materials that possibly contributed to this episode has served as the starting point (and in some cases, the end-point) for subsequent scholars.[6]

The Qurʾān (7:163-166) states that a group of Jews living by the sea sinned by gathering fish on the Sabbath (as this was the only day of the week when fish appeared to be available), for which reason God punished them by transforming them into 'apes, driven away' (*qirada khāsiʾīn*). In two later (Medinan) passages, the idea recurs, in one case the phrase "apes, driven away" is repeated (Qurʾān 2:65-66) with reference to Sabbath-desecrators, in another (Qurʾān 5:60) we hear merely of those "whom God has cursed ... and of whom He made apes, pigs, and servants of Ṭāghūt." What unites the three passages is the reference to animalization as divine punishment. Strictly speaking, however, only two of the three passages are wholly comparable, Qurʾān 7:163-166 and 2:65-66, sharing as they do both the sin (desecrating the Sabbath) and the precise punishment (transformation into "apes, driven away").

Speyer identified three separate Midrashim that seem to provide the sources for this episode, even if they had not been combined into a coherent narrative in pre-Islamic times. In one Midrash (*B. Qiddushin* 72a), there is reference to a group of Babylonian Jews who sinned by fishing on the

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[1] Aluma Solnick-Dankowitz, https://www.memri.org/reports/based-koranic-verses-interpretations-and-traditions-muslim-clerics-state-jews-are.

[2] E. Segal, "Monkey business" in *The Jewish Free Press*, Calgary, April 19, 2007, p. 21. Segal, who approached the topic from a Jewish-Studies perspective, summarizes the problem thus: "Unfortunately, in all the vast stores of ancient rabbinic literature, no text has yet been discovered that corresponds to the Qurʾān's motifs of Jews who caught fish on Saturday, or of their being transformed into swine and monkeys." Already Torrey (*Jewish foundation*, p. 68) conceded that "no haggadic source is known" for this episode.

[3] Lichtenstaedter, "And become ye accursed apes!"

[4] Reynolds, *The Qur'an and its biblical subtext*, pp. 106-117 ("The transformation of Jews"); and Firestone, "Apes and the Sabbath problem."

[5] Cook, "Ibn Qutayba and the monkeys," pp. 51-58 (on 'Metamorphosis in Islam').

[6] Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, pp. 313-314.

Sabbath, for which reason they were banned from the community. In another Midrash (*B. Sanhedrin* 109b), a group of those who sinned by partaking in the Tower of Babel rebellion was transformed into "monkeys, and evil spirits." The third Midrash deemed relevant is that of the Sambatyon river, which flows on weekdays but rests on the Sabbath (or the opposite; *B. Sanhedrin* 65b). Speyer's contribution to the discussion was so seminal that Firestone concluded his recent article on this issue with a full quotation (both in German and with an English translation) of the former's treatment of the topic.[7]

Two studies devoted to the origins of this episode, which have built most considerably on Speyer's foundations and moved the discussion beyond the basic confines of these three Midrashim, are those published by Lichtenstaedter and Rubin.[8] The former focused on the punishment, the latter on the sin that precipitated it. Lichtenstaedter sought to understand why the Jews were transformed into 'monkeys', turning away from the Midrashic sources quoted by earlier scholars in this context, and towards India on the one hand, and ancient Egypt on the other. She identified the Indian monkey-god Hanuman as a possible influence on the cultural milieu of pre-Islamic Arabia, arguing that the Spice Trade between Indian and Arabia allowed for the sort of cultural transmission that would result in Indian monkey-lore surfacing in the Qurʾān. While not impossible, it strikes me as highly unlikely that the transformation of the Jews into monkeys had Indian resonances for the Qurʾān's audience. As Lichtenstadter herself admits, there is no evidence for any of this: "Though not always documented in historical or literary records, [Indian materials in Arabia] may be postulated, or even *assumed*, to have existed. Indian influence on South Arabia has been proven to have existed since earliest times."[9]

The Egyptian option that she proposes, namely the dog-headed monkey companion of Thoth, appears to have more to recommend it, especially as the pathways of cultural transmission between Egypt and Arabia are better documented, and because there is evidence that the dog-headed monkey character was known within some Eastern Christian circles

[7] Firestone, "Apes and the Sabbath problem," pp. 46-48.

[8] Rubin, "Become ye apes repelled!."

[9] Lichtenstaedter, "And become ye accursed apes!," p. 172.

(associated with St. Christopher), where it — and monkeys generally (?) — could be associated with the Devil. Lichtenstaedter concludes her influential article forcefully:

> We can assert with a great deal of confidence that the ape/baboon represented at the time of Muhammad's activity, and the religious atmosphere that surrounded him, the very emblem of depravity and turpitude. Thus, the punishment meted out to the Sabbath violators was indeed a very severe one. They were not just changed into animals — punishment enough — but as apes or baboons they were expelled from human society and thrust into the sphere of Satan, the very antithesis of Allah.[10]

Thus, while the evidence is not "incontrovertible" (Lichtenstaedter's word) in this case, it is interesting, original, and certainly not as easily dismissible as the argument for the Indian monkey-god Hanuman's influence on the Qurʾānic episode.[11]

And yet, there are, in my view, three reasons why Lichtenstaedter's arguments are unconvincing. First, the context of the Qurʾānic passage(s) on the Jews' metamorphosis into monkeys is unmistakably 'Jewish'. The Prophet is encouraged to 'Ask them about the town situated by the sea' (Qurʾān 7:163), and from the context it is clear that by 'them' Allāh is referring to 'the Jews'. Moreover, the episode involves sinful *Jews*, who desecrated the *Jewish* Sabbath, for which they received a divine punishment (as Sabbath-desecrators receive according to Jewish law). Why then would the punishment in this Jewish context suddenly draw on non-Jewish (Eastern Christian) cultural references? Second, the idea that the dog-headed monkey symbolized the Devil in some Christian circles does not mean that these ideas penetrated the Qurʾān. In fact, the Qurʾān has much to say about Iblīs/Shayṭān, the plethora of references to which have been the subject of

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 175.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 164 ("incontrovertible").

serious scholarly attention.[12] This scholarship has uncovered the numerous relationships between Qurʾānic treatments of the Devil/Satan and Judaeo-Christian cultures, but dog-headed-monkey-lore does not appear to play any role in the Qurʾān's portrayal of the Devil. Third, why would a dog-headed monkey be a 'monkey' as opposed to a 'dog'? In fact, the Qurʾānic apes are described as *khāsiʾūn* ('driven away'), and in virtually every classical Arabic dictionary from the Middle Ages, the first example given to elucidate this verb pertains to driving away (*ṭ-r-d*) a *dog*.[13] Dogs, moreover, are widely seen as impure (*najas*) and generally negative in Near Eastern cultures, including Islamic ones.[14] Why, if Lichtenstaedter is right about the dog-headed apes, did the Qurʾān not describe the punishment as transformation into dogs?

Even if her arguments are ultimately deemed to be unconvincing, Lichtenstaedter certainly broadened the scope of investigation, taking us well beyond Speyer's Jewish Midrashim, which had been recycled unquestioningly for so long. In this article, I will follow her example (if not her evidence) and attempt to broaden the framework of enquiry considerably and to show that for Near Eastern monotheists on the eve of Islam, the divine transformation of sinners into "driven away animals" resonated loudly.

Before turning to the evidence, Rubin's recent contribution to this topic deserves to be highlighted. Building on Hirschfeld's earlier study,[15] Rubin has shown convincingly that the transgression for which the Jews were punished in the Qurʾān refers to the episode recounted in Numbers 11:19-20, where the Israelites complained about the manna with which God provided them, for which reason He punished them by over-feeding them

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[12] The list of modern studies on this topic is very lengthy indeed. For a summary of some Qurʾānic depictions of Iblīs/Shayṭān, and their Judaeo-Christian sources, see Reynolds, *The Qur'an and its biblical subtext*, pp. 39-63 (and the bibliography thereto).

[13] Al-Jawharī's (d. 1002 or 1008) entry on *kh-s-ʾ* (*al-Ṣiḥāḥ*, vol. 1, p. 59), which is widely quoted (e.g., in *Lisān al-ʿarab* and *Tāj al-ʿarūs*), is also available online at: http://www.baheth.info/all.jsp?term=خسأ . A survey of classical Arabic dictionary entries on *kh-s-ʾ* may be found here: https://www.maajim.com/dictionary/خسأ . *Lisān al-ʿArab* (vol. 1, p. 65) begins its entry on *kh-s-ʾ* as follows: "*Khasaʾa: al-khāsiʾ min al-kilāb wa-'l-khanāzīr wa-'l-shayāṭīn: al-baʿīd alladhī lā yutrak an yadnū min al-insān. wa-'l-khāsiʾ: al-maṭrūd*."

[14] In fact, according to traditions preserved by al-Jāḥiẓ, the dog is the result of *maskh* (*Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 1, pp. 222, 292, 297 and 308).

[15] Hirschfeld, *New researches*, p. 108.

for thirty days, until the meat came out of their nostrils and "was loathsome" to them. In Exodus 16 the manna-and-quails story includes a stipulation that the Israelites do not gather the provisions on the Sabbath, and yet a group of them disobeyed God and did so nonetheless. Moreover, as Rubin has cleverly shown, the Qurʾānic context in which the episodes of the Jews transformed into monkeys appears clearly indicates connections to the manna-and-quails episode. Thus, a group of Jews gathered provisions from the water on the Sabbath, and were punished with physically "loathsome" consequences. Rubin marshals ancient Targumic and Midrashic materials that explain the meaning of "loathsome" (*le-zārā*), showing that options such as diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, and croup circulated on the eve of Islam.[16] On these bases, Rubin argues that the Sabbath-desecrating Israelites were punished with "bodily abominable effect(s)," an example of which made its way into the Qurʾānic episode recounted in Qurʾān 7:163-166. As he puts it: "As for the Qurʾān, here, too, the punishment of the unrestrained sinners stands for a detestable bodily infliction, no less obnoxious than diarrhoea and the like. They become apes."[17]

While the focus has always been on the 'apes', the adjective *khāsiʾūn* ("driven away") is no less important a clue for uncovering the episode's resonances. Here, too, Rubin's contribution is important, not least because he is the only scholar to pay any serious attention to this half of the equation. Rubin shows that *khāsiʾūn* (which he renders as 'repelled') is also related to the ancient exegesis on the term *le-zārā*, where a play on words explains *le-zārā* as *le-zārīm*, as 'strangers', or estranged from the Tent of the Covenant. In

[16] To this list, I would add that the Septuagint to Numbers 11:20 renders *le-zārā* as 'cholera'. On this, see Emanuel, *From bards to Biblical exegetes*, p. 147 n. 128.

[17] Rubin, "Become ye apes repelled!," pp. 32-33. Where, in my view, Rubin's argument is weakest is in the assumption that transformation into monkeys is simply another type of obnoxious bodily phenomenon, with which the Qurʾān chose to replace the diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, and cholera, of Judaeo-Christian exegesis. As he points out, there *is* a Midrashic tradition from *Leviticus Rabba* that employs the root *q-r-d.* with reference to nausea as the punishment inflicted upon the erring Jews, but this word is absent from the ancient MSS, occurring only in the printed edition of the Midrash from the early sixteenth century (*ibid*., p. 33 n. 17). And yet, in explaining how 'monkeys' were chosen to replace physical discomforts, he draws on a tradition in *Midrash Tanhuma*, where monkeys are depicted as an over-indulgent animal, even though this source, too, is post-Islamic. Moreover, that Midrash speaks not of over-eating but of over-consuming [alcoholic] drinks, which is a significant dissimilarity between the contexts.

his words: "Therefore, the Qurʾānic description of the transmuted sinners as 'repelled' seems to have preserved the Midrashic interpretation of the biblical *zārā* in the sense of *zārīm*, 'outcasts', conflating it, as it does, with the interpretation of *zārā* as a sort of bodily infliction."[18]

In what follows, I will not offer a clear-cut solution to the question of this episode's origins. Rather, I will attempt to provide the cultural context within which the transformation of Jews into "apes, driven away" is to be understood. It will be argued that Jews and Christians were well aware of the idea that God can punish the disobedient by animalizing them and driving them away. Along the way, we shall turn to such sources as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Prayer of Nabonidus*, the Book of Daniel (both the Masoretic Text and Old Greek versions thereof), Midrashim on the Book of Esther, and Jacob of Serug's *Homily on Daniel 4*, none of which has hitherto been tapped in contextualising this Qurʾānic episode. We will also encounter such themes in Near Eastern history as mourning rituals, Nazirite vows, and Syrian proto-monasticism, which — together with the sources that shall be introduced — broaden the scope of our investigation on the one hand, while still limiting our focus to Near Eastern topics and materials on the other.

1) The Akkadian option

Before identifying the cultural context for the idea that sinners could be punished by animalization and banishment, it is worth confirming that this is indeed what the phrase *qirada khāsiʾīn* actually means. Aside from Hirschfeld, who proposed that *qirada* ('apes') was a mis-reading of *qirāda* ('vermin'), no investigation into this phrase has seriously suggested that *qirada* means anything other than 'apes'. This is despite the facts that 1) the singular form *qird* ('ape') usually takes a *fuʿūl* plural (*qurūd*), as do others in the *fiʿl* form (such as *ʿilm — ʿulūm* ('science-s'), and *jild — julūd* ('leather-s'); and 2) the punishment for the sinners of Numbers 11:19-20 was a 'detestable bodily infliction' — such as diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, or cholera — rather than animalization. It has long been known that the solution to certain

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

Qurʾānic lexicographical conundra may come from recourse to Akkadian,[19] and in this case, too, such an option exists. The Akkadian adjective *qurrudu* (root: *q-r-d*) means "with hair falling out in tufts."[20] Akkadianisms are far more ubiquitous in the Qurʾān than, say, Indian monkey-myths, and it is possible that *qirada* signifies Jews who were punished by having tufts of hair fall out and were banished.

The centrality of 'hair' to the cultural context for the Qurʾānic episode will be discussed below (section 4). For the moment, however, we shall proceed on the assumption that *qirada* does refer to animalization (as apes), both because the entirety of the exegetical tradition assumes this to be the case, and because, as we shall see in what follows, animalization and banishment as a divine punishment is a familiar trope in Near Eastern traditions.[21]

One Akkadian-user who was associated with 'Arabia' is the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus (r. 556-539), an adherent of the Moon-God 'Sin', whose sanctuary was at Harran (unlike the dynasty's patron-deity Marduk, whose sanctuary was at Babylon). Nabonidus's attachment to this heresy led him to abandon Babylonia in favour of Taymāʾ, where he spent ten years in self-imposed exile, while his son Belshazzar ruled in his stead. It is this period of residence in Taymāʾ that is relevant to us here.

2a). Nabonidus at Taymāʾ[22]

Nabonidus's devotion to the Moon-God is well known, both from his own pronouncements and from those of his detractors.[23] While he saw his period

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[19] Jeffrey, *Foreign vocabulary*, p. 298, lists some sixty Akkadian terms that help elucidate Qurʾānic terms. For a recent addition to the list, see Silverstein, "Original meaning."

[20] *Chicago dictionary of Assyriology*, vol. q, p. 319, *s.v.* 'qurrudu'.

[21] The fact that Qurʾān 5:60 includes transformation into *qirada* alongside 'pigs', appears to increase the likelihood that it is animalization that is intended, although the subsequent reference to 'servants of Ṭāghūt' weakens this hypothesis.

[22] A recent summary and contextualization of this episode is provided in Livingstone, "Taimāʾ and Nabonidus: it's a small world."

[23] The sources are conveniently gathered and analyzed in Schaudig, *Die Inschriften Nabonids von Babylon und Kyros' des Großen*. Nabonidus's point of view on this period of exile in Arabia is reflected in the Harran Stele (*ibid.*, pp. 486-99). According to this source, there had been a rebellion in Babylon and he hid for ten years at the Moon-God's orders (col. 1, ll. 22-26; "He (Sin)

in Arabia as divinely mandated, his detractors have left us with sources that make it clear that he was deemed to have gone mad. The abandonment of both Babylon and Marduk, in favour of the wilderness (Arabia) and a heresy (Moon-worship), was unprecedented, and the episode became legendary in the Near East, with a Jewish retelling of it having resurfaced in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The text 4QPrNab (or '4Q242'),[24] which dates from the second half of the second century BCE, reimagines Nabonidus's exile as follows:

> The words of the prayer with the king Nabonidus of Babylon, the great king prayed when he was smitten with a bad disease (Aramaic: *sh-ḥ-n-ʾ b-ʾ-sh-ʾ*) by the decree of God in Taymāʾ: I, Nabonidus, was smitten with a bad disease for seven years, and since I ['was made like a beast'; or: 'far from men I was driven', I prayed to the gods][25] and a diviner remitted my sins. He was a Jew [from among the exiles and he said]: 'Proclaim and write to give honour and exaltation to the name of God [the Most High,' and I wrote as follows]: 'I was smitten by a bad disease in Taymāʾ [by the decree of the Most High God]. For seven years I was praying to the gods of silver and gold, [and bronze, iron,] wood, stone, clay, since I thought that they were gods...[fragmentary].'

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caused me to flee from my city Babylon..."). The anti-Nabonidus perspective is reflected, for example, in the 'Verse Account of Nabonidus', produced by the early Achaemenids who replaced Nabonidus's Neo-Babylonian dynasty (*ibid*., pp. 563-578). This source describes Nabonidus as "mad" (column iv has "the king is mad"). An English translation by A. L. Oppenheim is provided in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern texts*, pp. 312-315.

[24] The Aramaic text, with an English translation, is available in Flint, "The Daniel tradition at Qumran (2001)," pp. 335ff. See also the discussion in idem, "The Daniel tradition at Qumran (1997)," pp. 55ff.

[25] This clause was reconstructed by Cross ("Fragments of the prayer of Nabonidus") in order to bring the text into line with Daniel 5: 21 ("And his mind was like that of a beast"). Animalization does *not*, however, occur in the fragment itself and this reconstruction must be seen as tentative — perhaps even imposed by an assumption that the text is related to the contents of Daniel. An alternative reconstruction has "and far from men I was driven" — which reflects another aspect of Nebuchadnezzar's animalization, namely that he was banished from human society. This latter option is proposed in Pritchard, *The ancient Near East*, pp. 108-112.

This summary of Nabonidus's period in Taymāʾ is relevant for our purposes in a number of ways. First, the ten-year period is now reduced to a seven-year tenure in Arabia. We shall return to this shortly in our discussion of Daniel 4. Second, Nabonidus was both "smitten with a bad disease" and "far from men [he] was driven" (according to one reconstruction of the text) or animalized (according to another). That is to say, he was smitten with a detestable illness, and "banished"/animalized. Third, Nabonidus's declared reason for the exile and illness is that they were part of a divine punishment: Both are attributed to "the decree of God" and both were alleviated once he "prayed to the most high God" on the advice of a Jewish exile from Judah.[26] Intriguingly, the Aramaic for 'bad disease' is *sh-ḥ-n-ʾ b-ʾ-sh-ʾ*, which brings to mind the wording in Qurʾān 7:165, where the 'wretched punishment' of the Sabbath-desecrating Israelites is referred to as *ʿadhāb baʾīs* prior to being transformed into "apes, driven away."

As it dates from the second-half of the second century BCE, this text recalls events from some 400 years earlier. Clearly, Nabonidus's Arabian exile continued to interest and influence Near Easterners long after the event, and memory of this episode endured for centuries thereafter: In both al-Ṭabarī's *History* and in al-Thaʿlabī's *Stories of the Prophets*, the madness of the last Neo-Babylonian king is recorded, in this case referring to his son Belshazzar, who replaced Nabonidus in Babylon while the latter was in Arabia. Al-Ṭabarī summarizes the events succinctly: "When Belshazzar became king, he became confused in his rule. Bahman dismissed him, and in his stead, he appointed Darius the Mede."[27] This reflects the pro-Achaemenid (and anti-Babylonian) perspective, according to which the Neo-Babylonian dynasty gave way to Persian rule on account of the last ruler's madness, while

[26] The existence of Jews in Taymāʾ during Nabonidus's stay there is not, of course, impossible and both Taymāʾ and the nearby Khaybar were associated with Jews in the centuries prior to the rise of Islam. None other than the famous Jewish poet Samawʾal b. ʿĀdiyā was a native of Taymāʾ, and another ancient Arab poet referred to the town as "Taymāʾ of the Jews" (in Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, vol. 1, p. 67). It has been argued that Jews arrived in Arabia as part of Nabonidus's army, an argument that is well-rehearsed and attractive, yet impossible to prove in the absence of evidence (see, e.g., Adang, *Muslim writers*, p. 1 n. 2). The theory was first proposed in the early twentieth century (see, e.g., Torrey, *Jewish foundations*, pp. 10ff.; reinforced by Gadd, "The Harran inscriptions of Nabonidus").

[27] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. 1, p. 652 (Perlman trans. p. 49.

inaccurately portraying the transfer of power to the Achaemenids as having been smooth.

A better-known, and distinctly pro-Babylonian, retelling of the Nabonidus episode is preserved in the Biblical book of Daniel, where — according to a near-consensus of scholars[28] — a version of Nabonidus's self-imposed exile is recounted, albeit with reference to 'Nebuchadnezzar.'

2b). Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4

The Masoretic Text (MT) version of Daniel is generally thought to date the mid-second century BCE. Daniel itself is generally divided into two halves, with chapters 1-6 containing Babylonian tales in which Jewish protagonists succeed in an exile-court, and chapters 7-12 containing apocalyptic visions credited to 'Daniel'.[29] The second-century dating of Daniel as a whole is secured on the basis of tell-tales signs in the second half of the book, while scholars accept that the legends in chapters 1-6 are based on considerably older materials. Daniel 4 describes how Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that frightened him, for which reason he summoned his wise men, recounted the dream to them, and requested an interpretation of it. They failed to do so and the king had Daniel brought before him to provide an interpretation. The dream is described as follows (vv. 7-14):

> Thus were the visions of my head upon my bed: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and the height thereof was great. The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth. The leaves thereof were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was food for all; the beasts of the field

[28] The precise relationship between the two episodes is subject to academic disputes but the fact that they are related at all is now generally beyond debate, except amongst those theologically bound to read the Biblical text literally. A prominent exponent of the latter trend is Ferguson, "Nebuchadnezzar, Gilgamesh, and the 'Babylonian Job'," pp. 321-323, where it is argued that the madness of Nebuchadnezzar is consistent with actual historical events from his reign, without need to revert to Nabonidus's career.

[29] Collins, *Daniel*, pp. 35-37 (on the dating of Daniel as a whole and on the relative dates for chapters 1-6 (Persian period) and 7-12 (Seleucid period).

> had shadow under it, and the fowls of the heaven dwelt in the branches thereof, and all flesh was fed of it. I saw in the visions of my head upon my bed, and, behold, a watcher and a holy one came down from heaven. He cried aloud, and said thus: Hew down the tree, and cut off its branches, shake off its leaves, and scatter its fruit; let the beasts get away from under it, and the fowls from its branches. Nevertheless, leave the stump of its roots in the earth, even in a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth; Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given to him; and let seven times pass over him. The matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the sentence by the word of the holy ones; to the intent that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever He will, and sets up over it the lowest of men.[30]

After some hesitation, Daniel was persuaded to reveal that it is Nebuchadnezzar himself who has "grown and become strong; for your greatness is grown, and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the end of the earth (v. 19)." Accordingly, Daniel continues, the dream's meaning is as follows (vv. 21-23):

> This is the interpretation, O king, and it is the decree of the Most High, which is come upon my lord the king, that you shall be driven from men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and you shall be made to eat grass as oxen, and shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over you; until you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever He will. And whereas it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be sure unto you, after that you shall have known that the heavens do rule.

[30] Translations from the Hebrew Bible are adapted from *The Jewish Publication Society Bible*.

Daniel recommends that the king mend his ways by giving charity and helping the poor, which Nebuchadnezzar refused to do. After considering Daniel's advice for a year, the king's reaction, and its consequences, are then described (vv. 27-30):

> The king spoke, and said: 'Is not this great Babylon, which I have built for a royal dwelling-place, by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?' While the word was in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven: 'O king Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom is departed from you. And you shall be driven from men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field; you shall be made to eat grass as oxen, and seven times shall pass over you; until you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever He will.' The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar; and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hair was grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws.

After seven years in this state, Nebuchadnezzar accepted God's dominion and was restored to his previous state (as a human) and status (as ruler of the Babylonian Empire).

As with the 'Prayer of Nabonidus' from Qumran, Daniel 4 details a seven-year period of 'banishment' (rather than the ten years of Nabonidus's stay at Taymāʾ), and describes a Jewish exile as being instrumental in the ruler's successful rehabilitation. That the ruler in question is Nebuchadnezzar rather than Nabonidus demonstrates that the idea that a ruler can be divinely punished through banishment and metamorphosis was transferable. Notably, although in the 'Prayer of Nabonidus' the ruler was punished with banishment and a "bad disease," in Daniel the disease is replaced with animalization.[31] The transition between a physical ailment and

[31] As seen, in the 'Prayer of Nabonidus', F. M. Cross reconstructed a lacuna with a reference to animalization, based on a quotation from Daniel. Not only is such an editorial decision circular

animalization supports Rubin's suggestion that a "detestable bodily infliction" could be reimagined as animalization.

Thus, Daniel 4 provides an example of divine punishment that entails animalization and being driven away ("you shall be driven from men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field," as v. 29 puts it efficiently). Moreover, the Aramaic term for 'driven [from men]' (Daniel 4:22, 29, and 30) is derived the from the root *ṭ-r-d* ('to expel', 'to banish'), which is the most common verb employed in classical Arabic dictionaries in defining *kh-s-ʾ*.[32]

What was the sin for which Nebuchadnezzar was being punished in Daniel? The text itself suggests that it is the ruler's arrogance, in refusing to acknowledge God's dominion, that has led to his predicament, just as an acknowledgement of divine power could reverse it.[33] Interestingly, ancient interpretations of this episode point specifically to the sort of arrogance familiar from the Tower of Babel passage (Genesis 11:1-9). Despite its common designation (as 'the *Tower* of Babel'), the latter episode gives equal prominence to *two* conspiracies planned by the sinning generation, namely the construction of a *city* and of a *tower*. As Genesis 11:4-5 puts it:

> And they said: 'Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men built. (Emphasis mine)

As seen, in Daniel 4:27, Nebuchadnezzar's last statement before God banishes and animalizes him is a pronouncement of his majesty, as it is reflected in

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in its logic, but in Daniel the animalization is explicit and *replaces* the 'bad disease', rather than supplementing it. In any case, Daniel undoubtedly preserves the double-punishment of banishment and animalization, regardless of whether the 'Prayer of Nabonidus' provides another example of this from the Second Temple period.

[32] A survey of classical Arabic dictionary entries on *kh-s-ʾ* may be found here: https://www.maajim.com/dictionary/خسأ (See above, n. 13, for *Lisān al-ʿArab*'s equation of "*al-khāsiʾ*" with "*al-maṭrūd*."

[33] By contrast, Daniel's advice that the ruler be charitable to the poor (v. 24) implies that it is disregard for the weak that has angered God.

the *city* that he has built. Furthermore, the dream that Daniel interpreted for him describes the king as a tree that "reached unto heaven," echoing the "tower, with its top in heaven" in Genesis 11. Additionally, early Midrashim such as the *mekhilta de-rabbi yishmaʿel*[34] and the Babylonian Talmud (*B. Ḥullin* 89a), as well as the fourth-century Christian Aphrahat,[35] read the passage in Isaiah 14: 12-15 as being a reference to Nebuchadnezzar (despite the fact that the latter post-dated Isaiah by over a century):

> How are you fallen from heaven, O day-star, son of the morning! How are you cut down to the ground, that cast lots over the nations! And you said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, above the stars of God will I exalt my throne, and I will sit upon the mount of meeting, in the uttermost parts of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High.' Yet you shall be brought down to the nether-world, to the uttermost parts of the pit.

Nebuchadnezzar's hubris in seeking to reach the heavens, and his rejection of God's dominion by taking pride in the majesty of his city Babylon, bring him in line with those who sinned in the Tower of Babel episode. And whereas most exegetes associate the Tower of Babel conspiracy with Nimrod (rather than Nebuchadnezzar), the Midrashic corpus is replete with parallels between these two arrogant tyrants:[36] Nimrod tested Abraham in a furnace, Nebuchadnezzar tested Daniel's companions in the same manner, and both tyrants are said to have died when God caused an insect to enter their brain and torment them; to name but two examples of their comparability.[37] The relevance of Nebuchadnezzar's connection to the Tower of Babel episode comes from one of the three Midrashim identified by Speyer as being pivotal

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[34] Henze, *Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar*, p. 76.

[35] Henze, "Nebuchadnezzar's madness," p. 551.

[36] Interestingly, the historical Nebuchadnezzar II was in fact instrumental in the renovation of the building that is thought to have inspired the Biblical account of the Tower of Babel. In the words of one recent scholar, "[During Nebuchadnezzar's reign] extensive work was done on the Etemenanki, the ziggurat of Babylon that found its way into the OT as the infamous Tower of Babel" (Sack, *s.v.* 'Nebuchadnezzar', *The Anchor Bible dictionary*, vol. 4, p. 1059).

[37] On this topic, see Lowin, "Narratives of villainy," *passim*.

for unlocking the meaning of Qurʾān 7:163-166, specifically the reference in *B. Sanhedrin* 109b to one group of Tower of Babel sinners, who were punished by being transformed into monkeys.

Thus far, we have established the existence of a divine punishment for arrogance that entailed banishment and animalization (or severe physical ailments), and a connection with the Tower of Babel episode. The sin of arrogance is not, however, directly related to the desecration of the Sabbath. What might connect the materials covered thus far with the Qurʾānic view of the Jews is the accusation that the latter were arrogant. As Qurʾān 5:82 states:

> You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity toward the believers [to be] the Jews and those who associate others with Allah; and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, "We are Christians." That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant.

The implication here is that the Jews (and polytheists) are arrogant (*istakbara*), the latter being the sin of hubris for which Nebuchadnezzar was punished in Daniel 4 and its exegesis. In Late Antiquity, Daniel 4 continued to capture the attention of exegetes, both Jewish and Christian, whose interpretations of the episode will now be shown to have influenced Muslim traditions on Daniel particularly, as well as other *Isrāʾīliyyāt* (broadly conceived) more generally.

2c). Old Greek Daniel 4, Jacob of Serug, and early Islamic sources

The book of Daniel was immensely influential in Antiquity and beyond, especially amongst Christian readers for whom the apocalyptic materials in chapters 7-12 and the tantalizing references to the 'Son of Man' (Daniel 7:13-14) were deemed relevant to Christian theology. A number of versions of Daniel were thus in circulation in Antiquity. One of these is the Old Greek (OG) version, which appears to date to the first century BCE, although the

relative precedence of this version and MT Daniel is still debated.[38] This version of Daniel is of interest to us as the most significant difference between its contents and those of MT Daniel comes from OG Daniel 4:30a-c, where Nebuchadnezzar's seven-year transformation is described in detail.[39] MT Daniel simply states that,

> The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar; and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hair was grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws. (v. 30)

OG Daniel, by contrast, provides Nebuchadnezzar's own, detailed recollection of the events:

> 'I, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, was bound seven years. They fed me grass like an ox, and I would eat the tender grass of the earth. And after seven years I gave my soul to supplication, and I petitioned before the Lord, the God of heaven, concerning my sins, and I entreated the great God of gods concerning my ignorance. And my hair became like wings of an eagle, my nails like those of a lion. My flesh and my heart were changed. I would walk about naked with the animals of the field. I saw a dream and forebodings gripped me, and after a while a great sleep overtook me, and drowsiness fell upon me. And at the completion of seven years my time of redemption came, and my sins and my ignorances were fulfilled before the God of heaven, and I entreated the great God of gods concerning my ignorances, and lo, one angel called me from heaven: 'Nebuchadnezzar, be subject to the holy God of heaven, and give glory to the Most High. The dominion of your nation is being given back to you.'

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[38] On which, see Newsom, "Now you see him, now you don't," p. 279 n. 36. Newsom argues that OG Daniel is later than the MT, incorporating as it does post-MT Rabbinic understandings of the story and its characters.

[39] The translation of OG Daniel is adapted from the *NETS* 'Daniel', available at: http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/40-daniel-nets.pdf.

Moreover, the OG stresses the nature of Nebuchadnezzar's sin. Whereas MT Daniel 4:19 simply states that "you, O king, have grown and become strong; for your greatness is grown, and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the end of the earth," the OG (4:19) has: "You, O king, have been exalted above all humans who are upon the face of the whole earth. Your heart was exalted with pride and power vis-à-vis the holy one and his angels." The king's "pride and power vis-à-vis the holy one and his angels" is a clear reference to his arrogance. In OG Daniel, therefore, we have a version of this episode that stresses both the banishment and animalization period, as well as the king's arrogance.

More relevant for our purposes is Jacob of Serug's (d. 521) Syriac *Homily on Daniel 4*, a retelling of the episode in considerable detail, which stresses not only the animalization of Nebuchadnezzar, but focuses repeatedly on his banishment. Hence, Jacob of Serug reminds us that the king was "driven away from men ... they rejected him and drove him from his kingdom, the madman who had ceased [to be a normal person] ... [he was] driven away from his kingdom." In one particularly detailed passage, Jacob writes:

> Not only was he sent away from [among] kings, but rather from [among] his human race he was expelled and mixed with animals. He drove him out to the field, that he should not be human, for him to realize what authority God has. He brought the exalted one low, down from his kingdom, and his human status, and gave him a portion with the rank of the animal of the field, to be neither king nor human being. Because he thought of himself not as human but as king. Had he known, while he was king, that he is human, he would not have been estranged from men to become a beast...[40]

The repeated attention paid to the theme of banishment in this source is important, as it clarifies that the removal of an animalized person from

[40] Jacob of Serug's *Homily on Daniel 4* is translated in Henze, *Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar*, Appendix Three, pp. 256ff.

society is not simply a natural consequence of their transformation into a non-human: Obviously, a Jew who was metamorphosed into an ape would not continue to go to work, pray in the synagogue, and partake in communal life. What Jacob of Serug's homily underlines is the fact that banishment was not simply a corollary of animalization but an important, independent aspect of the divine punishment of the arrogant.

Importantly for our purposes, Jacob of Serug's text, or the traditions that informed it, appear to have influenced early Muslim writers on Daniel and related topics. The evidence comes from an ostensibly innocuous detail in his retelling of Nebuchadnezzar's transformation. MT Daniel 4 tersely mentions that when Nebuchadnezzar was admiring his imperial capital, a voice fell from heaven, declaring that the dream will now become a reality, at which point Nebuchadnezzar was animalized and banished. Jacob of Serug, however, adds a crucial detail to these events:

> A quick torment from the Judge to the mocker was sent, because he had been rash to speak up. While the word of the scoffer was still in his mouth, **God slapped him**, because he had ridiculed that righteous one who had interpreted his dream. And while he was still speaking, the strong one changed, and his mind came to an end, and his intellect ceased, and his mind broke, and he began to rave foolishly...[41]

Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī recount this episode in their respective works, and they, too, include this telling detail in their accounts. Al-Thaʿlabī, fuses the story of Daniel in the Lions' Den (Daniel 6) with Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 4), and explains that a group of Magi became jealous of Daniel and had him and his Jewish companions — six Jews in total — cast into the Lions' Den, for failing to adhere to the king's religion. Upon returning to inspect the outcome, Nebuchadnezzar noticed a seventh person, unharmed in the pit. The seventh one was one of the angels "and **he slapped Nebuchadnezzar, whereupon he became one of the wild beasts** and

[41] Henze, *Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar*, p. 263 (emphasis mine).

carnivores, and God transformed him for seven years. Then He returned him to his previous form and returned his rule to him."[42]

Elsewhere, al-Thaʿlabī includes a curious version of Daniel 4 (again, interwoven with another Daniel tale, this time from Daniel 2), which details the king's animalization and banishment in great detail. Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream is as follows:

> As for the tree, your rule will depart and God will cause you to return as a bird, a great eagle, and you will rule over the birds; then God will send you back as a bull, and you will rule over the domesticated animals; then He will send you back as a lion, and you will rule over the wild beasts and beasts of prey. From the time God transforms you as we have mentioned, seven years will pass, but for all of that your heart will remain a human heart so that you may know that it belongs rule over Heaven and Earth and that He has power over the Earth and all who are upon it. As for what about its root remaining, that means that your rule will persist."[43]

If nothing else, this passage suggests that whereas the idea that divine punishment might entail animalization endured the vicissitudes of transmission that the Daniel 4 story underwent between cultures and languages, the precise details of animalization (into which animal — or

[42] Al-Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 278: *wa-laṭama Bukhtnaṣṣar laṭmatan fa-ṣāra fī al-wuḥūsh wa-'l-sibāʿ wa-**masakhahu** Allāh sabʿa sinīn*" (Brinner trans., pp. 568-569; emphasis mine). Al-Ṭabarī (*Taʾrīkh*, vol. 1, p. 717) includes a shorter version of the same episode, including the detail that the angel slapped Nebuchadnezzar to induce the animalization. The Rabbis (*B. Nidda* 30b) related a tradition, according to which all foetuses are taught the Torah while in utero, only for an angel to slap them at birth, causing all the knowledge acquired to be forgotten. The fact that al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī include this idea specifically regarding Nebuchadnezzar's animalization clinches the argument that they are drawing on Jacob of Serug (or his sources) in this case, rather than the Jewish one mentioned in the Talmud. Curiously, the Talmudic idea, that a slap can cause a person amnesia, is reflected in al-Ṭabarī's recounting of Daniel 2, where Nebuchadnezzar requests not only the interpretation of his dream, but a description of the dream itself since, "something struck me and made me forget the dream" (*Taʾrīkh*, vol. 1, p. 667). In MT Daniel 2, there is no reason for the king's inability to remember the contents of the dream.

[43] Al-Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, pp. 277-278 (Brinner trans., pp. 567-568).

animals — the sinner was transformed) were not fixed. Indeed, early Islamic sources interpreted the idea of *maskh*, transfiguration, to which the animalization of the Jews belongs, as referring to a broad range of animals (lizards, eels, dogs, etc.). Even the Qurʾān, in 5:60, lists pigs alongside apes.[44]

The flexibility of this theme in Late Antiquity and the early centuries of Islam is also in evidence with regard to the object of divine animalization, as it was earlier, when a story concerning 'Nabonidus' was associated with 'Nebuchadnezzar'. Thus, for instance, al-Yaʿqūbī was aware of the basic details of Daniel 4, simply reporting that, "God turned Nebuchadnezzar into a female animal. He continued to live with the race of animals for seven years, after which, it is said, he repented, turning to God (to whom belong Might and Majesty) who restored him to human life after which he died."[45] On the other hand, al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī both preserve an account according to which the prophet Jeremiah underwent animalization (*contra* the Biblical record of events): "The prophet realized that is was his decision [that brought about the Jews' misfortunes]... He lost his mind and mingled with wild beasts (*khālaṭa al-wuḥūsh*). Nebuchadnezzar with his troops entered Jerusalem, conquered Palestine, slew the Israelites, until he annihilated them, and destroyed the temple."[46] Another example of this theme's transferability comes from Rabbinic descriptions of Titus's (r. 79-81) death. As was the case with tyrants such as Nimrod and Nebuchadnezzar, the Rabbis associated Titus (destroyer of the Second Temple) with Nebuchadnezzar (destroyer of the First Temple) and reported that God caused a mosquito (or a gnat) to penetrate Titus's ear, buzzing thereafter for seven years during which he went mad.[47] Thus, Nabonidus's historical decade of [self-]banishment and madness (according to his detractors), came to be recalled as a seven-year banishment and illness in the

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[44] For a detailed summary of the various forms that *maskh* could take, see Ch. Pellat, 'Maskh', *EI*[2], *s.v.* For a survey of this phenomenon in *adab* texts, with references to numerous animals in this context, see Traini, "La metamorphose."

[45] Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. 1, p. 71. Nebuchadnezzar's animalization is described as follows: *wa fī zamānihi* ***masakha*** *Allahu Bukhtnaṣṣara bahīmatan unthā fa-lam yazal yantaqil fī ajnās al-bahāʾim sabʿa sinīn.* And see Ebied and Wickham, "Al-Yaʿkubi's account."

[46] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. 1, p. 665. Al-Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 274 (Brinner trans., p. 560) has, "[Jeremiah] went forth wondering, associating with the wild animals, while Nebuchadnezzar and his troops entered the Temple."

[47] *B. Gittin* 56b.

'Prayer of Nabonidus', as a seven-year banishment and animalization of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4, as a seven-year madness of Titus in the Talmud, as Belshazzar's unspecified period of madness and abdication, or Jeremiah's [self-]banishment and [pseudo-]animalization in early Muslim chronicles.[48]

To summarize thus far: On the eve of Islam, well-known accounts circulated in the Near East, which described the divine punishment of sinners by animalization and banishment. While there was an historical kernel to this idea, the story was retold numerous times, often regarding different sinners (just as the precise details of the animalization could change from case to case). Perhaps the most influential such story was that of Nebuchadnezzar, as recorded in Daniel 4 and its exegesis, aspects of which can be shown to have influenced Muslim traditions. Interestingly, this tyrant was associated in Late Antiquity with the Tower of Babel episode, which — in one pre-Islamic Midrash — resulted in the animalization of the conspirators as *monkeys*. Moreover, Late Antique interpretations of Nebuchadnezzar's sin focused on his arrogance, an accusation implicitly levelled against Jews in the Qurʾān.

Despite all this, we have not hitherto encountered animalization and banishment as divine punishment for *Sabbath-desecration*. For this, we must turn away from Nebuchadnezzar and towards his 'granddaughter', Vashti.

[48] It seems to me that the Sasanian Shāh Kavādh I's biography was also 'coloured' by that of Nabonidus, as the former ruler is said to have abandoned the traditional (Zoroastrian) religion in favour of Mazdak's heresy (just as Nabonidus abandoned Marduk for the Moon-God), which led to his being temporarily deposed and exiled (496-8 CE), only to be reinstated as Shah upon renouncing the heresy. Lewy ("The Babylonian background") has suggested that the mythological figure of Kay Kāvūs was based in some part on stories about Nabonidus and Nebuchadnezzar (for instance, an eagle-borne flying contraption is attributed to both Kāvūs and Nebuchadnezzar). Perhaps ʿAbbāsī-era historians of pre-Islamic Iran conflated materials about Kavādh and Kāvūs (whose father was also named Kavādh), thereby reading into Kavādh I's biography a Nabonidus-type episode of temporary abdication-through-heresy. This, however, is mere conjecture. On this topic, see also Yarshater, "Iranian national history," pp. 447-448, who disputes Lewy's findings.

3) Vashti in Late Antiquity and the transformed Jews

Vashti appears in the Biblical Book of Esther as the Queen of the Persian Empire during the reign of Ahashwerosh ('Xerxes', r. 486-65). The latter held banquets over a 187-day period, to which high-ranking officials from all over the empire were invited (Esther 1:3-10). Towards the end of the festivities, Ahashwerosh summoned his queen to appear before him and some officials (who are likely to have been inebriated), to display her beauty publicly (Esther 1:10-11). Vashti refused to do so, for which reason the king's advisors recommended, amongst other things, that she be deposed ("the king gave her royal estate unto another that is better than she" — Esther 1:19). Neither the MT nor the Greek versions of Esther describe precisely what happened to her. It would not be unreasonable to assume that she was executed, but this is not stated in the text and it is equally likely that she was 'exiled' or banished from the palace in some way. This latter interpretation is proposed, to cite but one example, by Sulpicius Severus (d. 425 CE), according to whom, "[Vashti], more prudent than the foolish king, and being too modest to make a show of her person before the eyes of men, refused compliance with his orders. His savage mind was enraged by this insult, **and he drove her forth, both from her condition of marriage with him and from the palace**" (emphasis mine).[49] In other words, Vashti was banished.

Why did Vashti refuse to obey the king's order? The answers proposed, from ancient to modern times, vary greatly. What concerns us here is that the Rabbis in Late Antiquity took a far less favourable view of Vashti than the Christian Sulpicius Severus did, and supplemented her Biblical biography with numerous details that are relevant to us. First, she was remembered as having been Nebuchadnezzar's granddaughter,[50] and as such, she was associated with evil herself. Second, the evil Vashti is said to have refused to comply with the king's request because an angel caused her body to transform in an embarrassing way: According to one Rabbi, she was smitten with leprosy; according to another, she was given a tail.[51] In other words, she was either partly-animalized, or she suffered from what Rubin

[49] Sulpicius Severus, *Sacred history*, chapter XII.
[50] Shemesh, "The metamorphosis of Vashti," p. 364.
[51] *B. Megilla* 12b.

calls a 'detestable bodily infliction'. The fact that an angel effected these transformations indicates that their source was divine. Why, then, did God decide to punish Vashti in this way? Again, the Rabbis in Late Antiquity provide the answer: In the same context (*B. Megilla* 12b) we are told that God punished Vashti for having forced Jewish women to desecrate the Sabbath.[52]

Taken together, on the eve of Islam, Vashti was associated with the sin of Sabbath-desecration, for which reason she was divinely punished through banishment and animalization (or afflicted with a detestable bodily infliction).

4) Voluntary animalization and banishment

Amongst the objects of animalization mentioned above, the prophet Jeremiah stands out as something of an exception, for two reasons.

First, there is no comparable account in the Bible or its exegesis of Jeremiah's "losing his mind and mingling with wild beasts." The prophet *is* reported to have been thrown into a pit (Heb. *bor*; Jeremiah 38:6), due to the unpopularity of his prophecies about the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, but this is hardly a case of banishment and animalization. It may be that the term 'pit', which was rendered *jubb* in Arabic translations of this verse and *gūvā* in Aramaic ones, was confused with the *gov/gubbā*, '[lions'] den' in Daniel 6 (vv. 13, 17 and 21) in which Daniel 'mingled' with wild animals, miraculously emerging unscathed. However, Daniel's and Jeremiah's experiences are entirely different: Whereas the former was cast into the lions' den as a punishment, the latter appears to have mingled with wild beasts in some sort of mourning or penitence ritual, as Jeremiah realized that his actions were (inadvertently) partly to blame for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Second, and related to this latter point, Jeremiah's madness and pseudo-animalization are 'voluntary', or at the very least, not the result of a

[52] "The wicked Vashti used to take the daughters of Israel and strip them naked and make them work on Sabbath." Interestingly, other Midrashic sources compare Vashti to a *pig*, which brings to mind the second group (after 'apes') of animalized sinners listed in Qurʾān 5:60. On Vashti as a pig, see *Esther Rabba* (Vilna edition), 4:5, and, more generally, Shemesh, "Metamorphosis of Vashti," p. 362 and n. 25; and Kahn, *Echoes of Eden*, pp. 82-3.

divine punishment. In the following section, we will trace the very long history of self-banishment and animalization in Near Eastern cultures, which complements the foregoing discussion of divinely-effected punishments of this nature, and which — eventually — will be shown to be relevant to our understanding of the transformation of the Jews into "apes, driven away" (Qurʾān 7:166).

4a) The Epic of Gilgamesh

In a monograph on Nebuchadnezzar's "madness" in Daniel 4,[53] Matthias Henze argued that this episode is based on the *humanization* of Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Enkidu is described in sub-human terms, as a 'wild man', raised by animals,[54] who is gradually humanized and then integrated into human society, where he becomes Gilgamesh's companion and closest friend. According to Henze, the demotion of Nebuchadnezzar from proud king to banished animal was meant consciously to mock the king's negative trajectory, as he *re*gressed along the same route through which Enkidu *pro*gressed. What Henze does not mention is that the Epic of Gilgamesh includes yet another point of comparison with Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4: When, at the end of Tablet 8, Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh is distraught and, in what are clearly mourning gestures, he tears his hair and clothes; shortly thereafter, we find Gilgamesh roaming the wilderness and wearing animal skins, that is to say, removing himself from society and self-animalizing.[55]

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[53] Henze, *Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar*.

[54] Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh*, p. 68 (Tablet I, ll. 35-41: "His whole body was covered thickly with hair, his head covered with hair like a woman's; the locks of his hair grew abundantly ... He knew neither people or homeland ... he fed with the gazelles on grass, with the wild animals he drank at waterholes...").

[55] Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh*, pp. 187-188 (Tablet VIII, column ii, ll. 18-22), where Gilgamesh mourns Enkidu, saying: "Like an eagle I circled over him, like a lioness whose whelps are lost he paces back and forth. He tears and messes his rolls of hair. He tears off and throws down his fine clothes like things unclean." Later (p. 190, Tablet VIII, column iii, ll. 4-5), Gilgamesh adds: "And after you, I will cover my body with unshorn hair, I will put on a dog-skin and roam the wilderness." I owe this latter point to Noga Ayali-Darshan. The ancient Near Eastern origins of Nebuchadnezzar's metamorphosis have been revisited in recent years. See Avalos, "Nebuchadnezzar's affliction," as well as the studies with which Avalos engages in the article.

The removal of hair as an ancient Near Eastern mourning ritual is referred to (negatively) in Deuteronomy 14:1, and (neutrally) in Jeremiah 41:5, amongst many other Biblical references to the practice.[56] At some point, Judaism came to incorporate precisely the opposite ritual within its stipulations for ritualized mourning: The hair of the head and beard were *not* to be shaved for a period of 30-days (Hebrew: *sheloshim*).[57] Letting one's hair grow long evokes both the Bible's hairy wild-man *par excellence*, Esau, on the one hand (cf. e.g. Genesis 25:25), and the ascetic Nazirites on the other (cf. Numbers 6, *passim*). It is to the latter, who may represent another example of voluntary self-banishment, that we now turn.

4b) Nazirites and Rekhabites

Becoming a Nazirite — the root *n-z-r* denotes 'separation' or 'abstinence' — entailed abstaining from wine, letting one's hair grow long, and avoiding contact with a corpse. The default period, to which one who undertakes a Nazirite vow without specifying a time-frame is committed, spans 30 days,[58] that is to say, the same period during which a mourner allows his hair to grow (and, incidentally, the period during which God over-fed the Israelites with meat in Numbers 11:20). A Nazirite is not, however, in a state of mourning: From the fact that the first sacrifice that the Nazirite offers upon completing his tenure is a sin-offering (Numbers 6:11), it has been suggested that the institution was originally associated with penitence.[59]

Vowing to abstain from wine was also associated with the Rekhabites, who generally shunned civilized life and lived as nomads. Jeremiah 35:6-11 describes them as follows:

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[56] Such as Isaiah 15:2; 22:12; Jeremiah 16:6; 41:5; 48:37; Amos 8:10; and Job 1:20.

[57] See, for example, *B. Moʿed Qattan* 27b for such mourning rituals.

[58] m. *Nazir* 3:1; *B. Nazir* 16a. The famed exegete Rashi (France, d. 1105) explains that 30 days is the minimum period for hair to grow wild (Heb. *peraʿ*; as per the Nazirite stipulation in Numbers 6:5, on which Rashi is commenting).

[59] Milgrom ("Sin-offering or purification-offering?," pp. 237-239) has argued that this was actually a purificatory offering, rather than a sin-offering. While his arguments have been widely accepted (cf. e.g. Diamond, "An Israelite self-offering," p. 10), the Rabbis were unanimous in interpreting the *ḥaṭṭāt* as a sin-offering, which perplexed them — what sin is the Nazirite atoning for? A common answer was that committing to the Nazirite conditions was itself a sin, for which the Nazir had to atone, the circular logic of which renders this answer unconvincing.

> They said: "We will drink no wine; for Jonadab the son of Rekhab our father commanded us, saying: Ye shall drink no wine, neither you, nor your sons, for ever; neither shall you build houses, nor sow seeds, nor plant vineyards, nor have any; but all your days you shall dwell in tents, that you may live many days in the land wherein you sojourn. And we have hearkened to the voice of Jonadab the son of Rekhab our father in all that he charged us, to drink no wine all our days, we, our wives, our sons, nor our daughters; nor to build houses for us to dwell in, neither to have vineyard, or field, or seed; but we have dwelt in tents, and have hearkened, and done according to all that Jonadab our father commanded us. But it came to pass, when Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon came up against the land, that we said: 'Come, and let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Chaldeans, and for fear of the army of the Arameans;' so we dwell at Jerusalem."

Intriguingly, the self-banishing, wine-shunning Rekhabites were forced to break their tradition of dwelling in the wilderness by none other than Nebuchadnezzar. Perhaps there is, thus, a poetic justice of sorts in Nebuchadnezzar's involuntary banishment *to* the wilderness in Daniel 4.[60] In any event, just as wine-consumption was associated with the formation of civilized life,[61] renouncing wine is associated with separation from society.

Perhaps the most famous Nazirite was Samson. Interestingly, although as a Nazirite he was expected to refrain from contact with corpses and from wine, his story casually refers to these stipulations going unfulfilled (Judges 14), with only the growing of his hair signifying his status (and the divine source of his strength). As one scholar put it with reference to the Samson story, "Shaving is clearly the most crucial restriction, as growing

[60] Note, also, that in the case of Jeremiah opting to mingle with animals, the agent of destruction whose actions triggered Jeremiah's withdrawal is Nebuchadnezzar.

[61] Hence, when Noah emerges from his ark in the aftermath of the Flood, to repopulate the earth and re-establish civilized life on it, the first thing he does is plant a vineyard (Genesis 9:20).

one's hair long served as an outward, distinctive sign of Nazirite status."[62] The centrality of 'hair' to the Nazirite vows is highlighted by the final ritual undertaken by the Nazirite: The ceremonial cutting of his hair and placing it on the 'sacrifice of the peace offering', at which point he is released from the Nazirite status. Thus, the Nazirite's *deliberate* removal of his consecrated hair represents the high-point of his holiness. By contrast, the Akkadian *qurrudu* (encountered above) refers to the *involuntary* shedding of tufts of hair, and as such may point to a low-point of holiness.[63] This can be relevant to Qurʾān 7:166 should we decide to reinterpret *qirada* as meaning something other than 'apes'.

Other possible connections between the Nazirite institution and the Qurʾānic transformation of Jews into "apes, driven away" come from the ancient interpretations of *le-zārā*, "loathsome," which refers to the punishment for the manna-sinners in Numbers 11:19-20. According to one pre-Islamic source, *le-zārā* means *le-azhara*, 'as a warning'.[64] Another ancient interpretation of *le-zārā* renders the term *le-zārīm* (sing. *zār*), 'as strangers'.[65] The Hebrew '*zār*' is the equivalent of the Akkadian *nakru*, with both terms capturing the sense of 'strange', 'stranger', and 'estrangement'. Importantly, this brings the punished Israelites into line with [self-]banished groups such as the Rekhabites and perhaps also the related, wine-rejecting Nazirites, for, as Henze states, "[G]roups living outside of the civilized urban centers such as nomads or mountaineers are most commonly referred to as strangers (Akkadian *nakru*)."[66] Accordingly, the manna-sinners may have been punished with banishment from society. Recall that one of the three

[62] Greenstein, "The riddle of Samson," p. 251. In fact, Hermann Gunkel ("Simson," pp. 42-43) interpreted the Samson story as symbolizing a rivalry between culture and nature, that is between the civilized and the 'wild'.

[63] It is perhaps worth considering, further, that just as abstention from wine is associated with 'holiness' in these contexts, the consumption of wine was punishable, according to some early Islamic traditions, with transformation into monkeys and pigs (cf. Rubin, "Apes, pigs and the Islamic identity," pp. 99ff.).

[64] Rubin, "Become ye apes repelled!," p. 32. Interestingly, in his short coverage of the Samson story, al-Ṭabarī renders 'Nazirite' as *nadhīr*, 'warner', perhaps reflecting an ancient understanding of Nazirites as warners (*Taʾrīkh*, vol. 1, pp. 794-795; Perlman trans. pp. 171-172); and cf. Rippin, "The Muslim Samson," p. 244, for discussion of this word-play.

[65] Rubin, "Become ye apes repelled!," p. 33.

[66] Henze, *Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar*, p. 94.

Midrashim adduced by Speyer concerns the Jews in a Babylonian town who were punished for fishing on the Sabbath by being banned from the community (*B. Qiddushin* 72a).[67]

Whether or not these points are deemed relevant to our understanding of Qurʾān 7:163-166,[68] it is clear that alongside the divinely-effected punishment through animalization and banishment, there were those who voluntarily removed themselves from civilization, and simulated aspects of animalization — by growing their hair, donning animal skins, or 'mingling with wild beasts' — either as a mourning ritual or as an atonement for sins. Thus, just as God can punish sinners by *actually* animalizing them and banishing them from society, penitents can self-punish by *affecting* animalization and banishment. What must be appreciated here is that these ideas were well-known in Jewish and Christian circles during Late Antiquity: The Nazirite institution occupies an entire treatise of the Mishna and of both Talmuds; the Samson story — then as now — was widely known even amongst children, and the Epic of Gilgamesh was amongst the most influential literary works in the ancient world, leaving its mark on the Bible, Manichaean literature, the Alexander Romance-Cycle, and the 1001 Nights, amongst other specimens of world literature.[69]

On the eve of Islam, however, it was Nebuchadnezzar's seven-year transformation, recounted in Daniel 4, that appears to have had the most direct influence on Near Easterners aspiring to penitential animalization and banishment, as we shall now see.

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[67] Also relevant to this interpretation are the Targumim that render *le-zārā* as *le-rīḥūq*, a term that Rubin takes to mean 'abomination' (Rubin, "Become ye apes repelled!," p. 32), but which literally means 'made remote' (on which, see Jastrow, *Dictionary*, p. 1474, *s.v. rīḥūq*). That the classical Arabic dictionaries render *khāsiʾ* by the roots *ṭ-r-d* and *b-ʿ-d*, the latter in the *afʿala* form, supports the idea that the *qirada khāsiʾīn* can mean "apes, made remote [from society]' (see above, n. 13, for sources).

[68] It should be noted that the term *khāsiʾīn* is an *active* participle. Hence, although consistently rendered as a passive adjective ('driven away', 'repelled', 'banished'), the word itself signifies that the animalized sinner is self-banishing.

[69] Dalley, *Legacy of Mesopotamia*, pp. 43, 57, 73-74, 101, 165, and 170-171; and eadem, "Gilgamesh in the Arabian Nights."

4c) Nebuchadnezzar — villain or role model?

The transformation of Nebuchadnezzar in *Daniel* 4 particularly, and the stories recounted in Daniel 1-6 generally, present a problem for Jewish readers: The stories describe Nebuchadnezzar — the evil tyrant who destroyed the Temple, plundered and desecrated its contents, exiled and murdered countless Jews, and who is known in Rabbinic sources as 'the wicked' (*ha-rasha*ʿ) — as a reasonable king, who promoted Daniel and his companions, and who, in Daniel 4, actually atoned for his sins and was restored to his rule after the seven-year period of animalization and banishment. Did Nebuchadnezzar repent? David Satran has shown that the rabbis and early Christians offered different answers to this question.[70] Whereas the Rabbis found strategies to reconcile the plain text of Daniel 4, including — amongst other options — discounting the tyrant's supposed repentance as disingenuous, Christians, especially from Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) onwards, accepted Nebuchadnezzar as a true penitent.[71]

There were, of course, exceptions on both the Jewish and Christian sides. The Jewish Queen Helena of Adiabene (d. 50 or 56 CE), for instance, committed herself to a seven-year period as a Nazirite,[72] which may well have been modelled on Nebuchadnezzar's seven-year transformative period. And the fourth-century Christian Aphrahat, followed the Rabbis in interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's metamorphosis as a divine punishment rather than a process of rehabilitation.[73] It is Ephrem who represents a break with Rabbinic interpretation of this episode, comparing Nebuchadnezzar's exile among the beasts to Adam's expulsion from Paradise: "The king of Babylon resembled Adam, king of the universe: both rose up against the one Lord and were brought low; He made them outlaws, casting them afar."[74]

Ephrem's interpretative innovation came to inspire proto-monastic groups of ascetics, such as the late-fourth/fifth century Syrian Anchorites,

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[70] Satran, "Early Christian and Jewish interpretation." See also Wills, *The Jewish novel*, pp. 48-49.

[71] See also, Henze, "Nebuchadnezzar's madness," who builds on Satran's findings.

[72] m. *Nazir* 3: 6, *B. Nazir* 19b.

[73] Henze, "Nebuchadnezzar's madness," p. 556.

[74] *Ibid*., p. 559.

who modelled themselves on Nebuchadnezzar's metamorphosis.[75] In the Syriac *Letter to the Mountaineers*, one such group of ascetic-hermits in the wilderness receive encouragement from an anonymous author (once thought to be Ephrem himself), as follows:

> "Nebuchadnezzar, like you, also went into the desert in order to do penance. ... You have run to the wilderness like him.... You have become equal to animals instead of conversing with angels. And you eat grass instead of food."[76]

Thus, on the eve of Islam, Syrian Anchorites and other Near Eastern ascetics took Nebuchadnezzar's metamorphosis in Daniel 4 as a model for their own spiritual path to penitence, by retreating to the wilderness and 'animalizing'. Crucially, this indicates that the meaning of Daniel 4 itself was also undergoing a transformation, as these ascetics reimagined the divinely-punished Nebuchadnezzar as having been a *voluntary* penitent, following in the footsteps of Gilgamesh (the mourner), of Jeremiah in Muslim sources, of atoning Nazirites, of civilization-shunning Rekhabites, and others. This interpretational shift indicates that these categories were fluid, and presumably the shift could go in the other direction: Hence, the Jews in a Babylonian town who went fishing on the Sabbath and were 'banished' by the community (*B. Qiddushin* 72a), could be remembered as having been divinely banished, to cite but one example of relevance to this topic.

What also emerges from the Jewish-Christian debate over the sincerity of Nebuchadnezzar's repentance is the possibility that the Qurʾān and early Muslim tradition were aware of it. Al-Thaʿlabī preserves a tradition according to which Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 728) was asked whether Nebuchadnezzar ended his life as a believer. Wahb's reply, which anticipated Satran's conclusions by a millennium, is that "I have found that the People of the Book differ over that; some say he died a believer, whereas others say he died an infidel because he burned the Temple and the books in it and slew

[75] Henze (*ibid*., p. 564) puts it thus: "Hermits... become like wild animals, roaming the steppe in perfect seclusion, eating whatever herbs or roots they can find... sleeping on the ground... Frequently, the life of hermits is compared to that of wild animals: they grow their hair and nails, and beasts become their only companions."

[76] *Ibid*., pp. 565-566.

the prophets, so that God became very angry at him[77] and would not accept his penitence at that time."[78] Perhaps the Qurʾān was also aware of this debate: Qurʾān 5:61, which immediately follows reference to those who were divinely-punished by being transformed into "apes, pigs, and servants of Ṭāghūt," states: "And when they come to you, they say, 'We believe.' But they have entered with disbelief [in their hearts], and they have certainly left with it. And Allah is most knowing of what they were concealing." Might the Qurʾān be obliquely weighing into the Jewish-Christian debate about Nebuchadnezzar by favouring the Jewish interpretation of Daniel 4? Bearing the 'Jewish' context of Qurʾān 7:163-166 (and 5:60) in mind, such a suggestion may be worthy of consideration.

Conclusions

In this article, I have attempted to contribute to our understanding of the Qurʾānic idea that God punished a group of Sabbath-desecrating Jews by transforming them into "apes, driven away." Underpinning our investigation was the assumption that both parts of this phrase are relevant to its interpretation. Until now, with the notable exception of Rubin, scholars have approached this issue by focusing on the first element ('apes') alone. This is problematic for two reasons. First, because, as seen in numerous examples from Near Eastern culture, "banishment" and "animalization" are often presented as an inseparable pair of divine punishments.[79] Second, because, as demonstrated above, the precise details of the animalization

[77] The Arabic here has *ghaḍiba Allāh ʿalayhi ghaḍaban shadīdan*, using the same verb employed in Qurʾān 5:60, where God cursed those with whom he became angry (*man laʿanahu Allāh wa-ghaḍiba ʿalayhi*), transforming them into apes, pigs, and slaves of Ṭāghūt.

[78] Al-Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 278 (Brinner trans., p. 568). Rubin ("Apes, pigs and the Islamic identity," p. 101) quotes Prophetic traditions according to which the Umayyads were compared to monkeys and pigs for having desecrated the Prophet's *minbar*, using it for their public addresses. The desecration of the Prophetic *minbar* here would parallel Nebuchadnezzar's desecration of the Temple and its contents, with the sinner(s) in both cases punished by animalization.

[79] Note that in early Islamic tradition, too, the punishment of metamorphosis — *maskh* — is often paired with *khasf*, referring to the earth's engulfing of sinners, which is an extreme version of banishing them from society. On this, see Rubin, "Apes, pigs and the Islamic identity," p. 91.

could change. The Qurʾān *does* refer specifically to 'apes', but it also refers to 'pigs' in a related context, while variations on the animalization and banishment stories that we encountered allow for the details to change: In one instance, God transformed (*masakha*) Nebuchadnezzar into more than one species within a single account. Thus, attempts to trace the 'apes' aspect of the punishment, and this aspect alone, are both incomplete and somewhat misguided.

In the foregoing discussion, I have not argued for a single, definitive solution to the question of the Qurʾānic phrase's origins. However, although I have not located a 'smoking gun' from pre-Islamic civilization that served as a model for the transformation of the Sabbath-descrating Jews, we have encountered our fair share of 'smoke', that is to say, instances from Near Eastern cultures in pre- and early-Islamic times in which punishment (either divine or self-inflicted) through animalization and banishment featured prominently. Moreover, these instances occur in some of the most influential texts of Near Eastern history, some of which were heatedly debated by Jews and Christians on the eve of Islam, debates of which early Muslims (and perhaps the Qurʾān itself) appear to have been aware.

By broadening the framework of enquiry into the Qurʾānic phrase's origins, we have been able to propose three alternative interpretations of the phrase's meaning. First, we considered the Akkadian *qurrudu*, "with hair falling out in tufts," as an alternative etymology for *qirada*, both because the two words share a Semitic root, and because virtually all the pre-Islamic instances of animalization encountered entail the removal/ sanctification/over-growing of hair. Second, we introduced to the discussion the Late Antique Midrashim surrounding Queen Vashti, who was divinely punished for causing Sabbath-desecration by being banished and animalized. That she was also associated with 'pigs' is also suggestive of a connection of sorts with the Qurʾānic '*maskh*.'[80] Third, and most importantly, we highlighted the well-known narrative(s) concerning Nabonidus and Nebuchadnezzar, which were recounted numerous times, from both pro- and anti-Babylonian perspectives, and the details of which were cut-and-

[80] I refer to *maskh* here in quotation marks as the Qurʾān's own description of the Jews' metamorphosis is not referred to as '*maskh*' until centuries later. On this, see Rubin, "Apes, pigs and the Islamic identity," p. 90.

pasted to the biographies of other important figures in Near Eastern history (Kavādh, Jeremiah, Belshazzar, Titus, etc.). The divine punishment of Nebuchadnezzar, who was animalized and banished, captivated Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity, who differed in their interpretations of the story, which only served to increase interest in it. Even Wahb ibn Munabbih knew that Jews and Christians debated the story's meaning and significance.

The case of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4 may be taken simply as an example of divine punishment for arrogance through animalization and banishment. But a more imaginative — and, necessarily, conjectural — relationship between Daniel 4 and the Qurʾān might also be proposed. Accordingly, Nebuchadnezzar was transformed into more than one animal (as quoted in Islamic sources), and Qurʾān 5:60 refers specifically to him: The ape, pig, and servant of Ṭāghūt (see Daniel 3 for Nebuchadnezzar as a servant of idols) might all apply to him. Similarly, the 'wretched' (*baʾīs*) punishment mentioned in Qurʾān 7:165 echoes the 'evil' (*b-ʾ-sh*) affliction mentioned in the Prayer of Nabonidus, while the 'banishment' (*ṭ-r-d*) of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4 brings to mind the Arabic root deemed equivalent to *kh-s-ʾ* in virtually all pre-modern dictionaries. Finally, the reference to a disingenuous penitent in the following verse (5:61) might be an attempt to weigh into the Jewish-Christian debate regarding Daniel 4.[81] Even if this interpretation is an over-reading of the evidence, we can at the very least propose that the popularity of the Nebuchadnezzar episode on the eve of Islam contributed a 'vocabulary' that could be deployed in recounting other episodes of divine punishment of this sort.

Be this as it may, one may surmise that a story about Jewish sinners, who were transformed into 'apes, driven away', would ring familiar to a Near Eastern monotheist in the seventh-century. The animalization and banishment of sinners, be they divine or self-inflicted, will have resonated with an audience who will have heard echoes of the famous Epic of Gilgamesh, of Daniel 4 or the Prayer of Nabonidus, of Vashti's punishment,

[81] Note also that just as the Tower of Babel episode in the Bible was originally described as a 'group effort' (with no leader), yet it came to be associated with a single tyrant (Nimrod or Nebuchadnezzar), so the transformation and banishment of a single person (Nebuchadnezzar) could be reimagined and applied to a 'group effort' (the Sabbath sinners). This is, of course, stretching the evidence — but what should be recognized is that the evidence is much more flexible than previously conceded.

of proto-monastic ascetics, Nazirites, and so forth, all of which were widespread in the Near East on the eve of Islam. It is within this broad framework of enquiry that the Qurʾānic statement(s) on this topic are to be understood.

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m. Mishna

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