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“Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*? Q 85:4–10 in Near Eastern Context.”

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Abstract: This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of a short Qur’ānic passage, Q 85:4–10, which concerns the fate of the enigmatic *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*. It is argued that the ‘eschatological’ and ‘historical’ readings of this passage, which have generally been taken to be mutually exclusive options for its interpretation, are both indispensable for a full contextualization of the verses in question. Furthermore, regarding the historical reading of the passage, it is argued that the verses refer to the events recorded in Daniel 3, rather than to the Martyrs of Najrān episode that most exegetes (and many modern scholars) opt for. Finally, a new etymology for the word *Ukhdūd* is proposed.

Keywords: Qur’ān; *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*; ‘Men of the Pit’; Daniel 3; Martyrs of Najrān; Dhū Nuwās; fire ordeals; martyrdom; hellfire in Islam; Meccan sūrahs.

One cannot claim to understand ‘Islam’, in its many manifestations, without understanding the Qur’ān’s contents and message. But how are we to understand the Qur’ān itself? Often, whether accessed through the original Arabic or in translation, the Qur’ān’s message is accessible and clear to its audience. Indeed, a ‘Scripturalist’ or ‘Fundamentalist’ approach to Scriptures stipulates that such texts are to be read and understood with as few mediators as possible: Qaraites in Judaism and Protestants in Christianity (to name but two examples) have argued forcefully that the many layers of interpretation superimposed on these texts by self-appointed exegetical authorities were unnecessary, unhelpful, illegitimate, and even misleading. We should all read what the text itself says, rather than privileging other people’s interpretations of it. For reasons that are beyond the scope of this article, such an approach never found much success in Islamic thought, and the debate within Qur’ānic studies from the seventh century onwards has almost never been whether interpretative traditions are necessary, but rather *which* interpretative traditions are to be taken as authoritative. Reading the Qur’ān without the help of insights from the Prophet, the *‘ulamā’*, or the *imams* is difficult at best and dangerous at worst. For modern, Western scholars

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who study the Qur'ān, in addition to the Muslim exegetical tradition(s), we must draw on a wide array of Jewish, Christian, and other materials from Late Antiquity to understand the Qur'ān's contents.

In this article, I seek to contribute to our understanding of a Qur'ānic passage to which much attention – both exegetical and scholarly – has already been devoted. As such, it is a good example of the complexities involved in understanding, interpreting, and contextualizing the Qur'ān's verses. Our journey to the meaning and message of this seven-verse passage will pass through traditional exegetical materials, Biblical texts, Jewish and Christian uses of the Bible in Late Antiquity, Zoroastrianism, and pre-Islamic Arabian history and culture. We will encounter magic bowls, martyrologies, Jāhili poetry, fire-ordeals, and other topics that rarely feature in studies of the Qur'ān, all of which will exemplify the difficulty in reading the Qur'ān without recourse to a broad range of supporting materials.

The passage in question is Q 85 (*al-Burūj*):4–10, which famously describes the fate of the enigmatic *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*. Both Muslim tradition and much of western scholarship has, until the late nineteenth century, interpreted this passage historically – that is to say, as referring to an historical event in which a group of people were burned (though scholars disagreed on the identification of these people and on the details of the event generally). More recently, it has been argued that the passage is to be read eschatologically, as referring to disbelievers being burned in hellfire. In this article, it will be argued that both the historical and eschatological readings of these verses are vital to our understanding of the passage: for whereas the verses are indeed imparting an eschatological message, they do so by using the language and contents of an historical event to make their point.

The article is divided into two parts. In part I, I examine the evidence put forward by adherents of the historical approach, and demonstrate that although the Martyrs of Najrān episode is most widely adduced in elucidating this Qur'ānic passage, it is in fact the episode recounted in *Daniel 3* that is most relevant here. In part II, I explain how the imagery and language of *Daniel 3* were deployed as a *historiola*,¹ to refer to the punishment of disbelievers in hellfire. Part II concludes with a discussion of the word *Ukhdūd*'s etymology.

¹ A *historiola* (literally, 'a small story') is a brief mythic tale built into a magic formula, to provide a [quasi-] historical precedent for the efficacy of the magical treatment. Such *historiolas* are in evidence as early as ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian magical texts, and were frequently employed in Christian and especially Jewish magical contexts in Late Antiquity, drawing on Biblical tales as 'historical' precedents. See F. GRAF, s. v. 'Historiola' in *Brill's New Pauly*, eds. H. Cancik and H. Schneider (English ed. Ch. F. Salazar), consulted online at: <http://dx.doi>.

Part I: The ‘Historical’ readings

The passage under discussion, in Arberry’s translation, reads as follows:

- 4) Slain were the Men of the Pit,
- 5) the fire abounding in fuel,
- 6) when they were seated over it
- 7) and were themselves witnesses of what they did with the believers.
- 8) They took revenge on them only because they believed in the All-mighty, the All-laudable,
- 9) God to whom belongs the Kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and God is Witness over everything.
- 10) Those who persecute the believers, men and women, and then have not repented, there awaits them the chastisement of Gehenna, and there awaits them the chastisement of the burning.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the passage’s brevity, there are numerous vagaries in these verses, some of which are merely stylistic, others pivotal to our understanding of the verses’ message. M.H. Shakir, for instance, renders these same verses in this way:

- 4) Cursed be the makers of the pit,
- 5) Of the fire (kept burning) with fuel,
- 6) When they sat by it,
- 7) And they were witnesses of what they did with the believers.
- 8) And they did not take vengeance on them for aught except that they believed in Allah, the Mighty, the Praised,
- 9) Whose is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth; and Allah is a Witness of all things.

org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e515850 (accessed, December 11, 2018). On the *historiola* in Late Antique Jewish magic, see D. FRANKFURTER, “Narrating Power: The theory and practice of the magical *historiola* in ritual spells” in M. Myer and P. Mirecki (eds.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, Leiden, 2011, 457–476; and E. ABATE, “Contrôler les démons: formules magiques et rituelles dans la tradition juive entre les sources qumrâniennes et la Gueniza”, *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 230ii (2013): 273–295, at p. 281: “La magie juive dans l’Antiquité tardive se forme consciemment sur ces prémisses: en conférant un rôle central à l’écriture, forçant ses potentialités, et en se fondant sur l’usage performative et théurgique des noms saints, des versets bibliques et des caractères de l’alphabet. Dans la tradition magique, les histoires bibliques sont utilisées comme des formules, les versets sont considérés à l’aune des noms puissants, et les mages peuvent aller dans certains cas jusqu’à manipuler consciemment des sources sacrées adapter aux exigences du rite.” For an interesting example, see J. LEVINSON, “Enchanting Rabbis: Contest Narratives Between Rabbis and Magicians in Late Antiquity”, *JQR* 100i (2010): 54–94, at p. 61.

- 10) Surely (as for) those who persecute the believing men and the believing women, then do not repent, they shall have the chastisement of hell, and they shall have the chastisement of burning.

Interesting though they may be, the stylistic differences between the two translations are not what will concern us here.² More significant is the rendering of *qutila* at the start of verse 4. Arberry takes this to be a reference to a completed event – the men of the pit *were* slain – whereas Shakir understands the passive form of *q.t.l.* as a supplication (“Cursed *be* the makers of the pit”), this being a use of the passive that has Qur’ānic precedents.³ In other words, whoever these sinners are, and whatever they did, Arberry holds that they have already been punished (at least in part) for it (and, as verse 10 suggests, should they fail to repent for their actions, they will be punished again in the Hereafter). Shakir’s translation of the verses, by contrast, gives the impression that only ‘the believers’ (verse 7) have suffered hitherto. In theory, it should not be difficult to determine which translation is more accurate: As long as we know what transpired in the episode of the ‘Men of the Pit’ we can decide whether they were ‘slain’ in the events alluded to in Q 85 or not. We shall see below that things are not so simple and that, despite the best efforts of centuries of scholarship, even the most basic facts of this passage have evaded consensus.

Before surveying the richly diverse array of interpretations that have been offered in seeking to explain this passage, it is worth first isolating those few uncontroversial data that emerge from a literal (and ‘historical’) reading of the verses.

- 1) There are two groups of people referred to here: ‘The believers’ and ‘those who took vengeance’ (*naqamū*) on them.
- 2) The believers were persecuted by the other group simply because they believed in God.
- 3) The tormentors witnessed what they did to the believers.
- 4) There is a well-fueled fire, by which one of the two groups sat.
- 5) Those who torment believers and do not repent will be burned in hellfire.

Virtually all other details are open to more than one interpretation. Thus, it is unclear whether the ‘Men of the Pit’ are the believers or their tormentors. And, as

² For *aṣḥāb* in verse 4, Arberry’s ‘men’ are Shakir’s ‘makers’ (other popular options include ‘Companions’ and ‘People’), and while they agree on ‘pit’ for *Ukhdūd*, others have opted for ‘ditch’ or ‘trench’.

³ Q 51:10; 80:17; and 74:19, 20 all deploy *qutila* in that sense.

seen, we do not know if this episode ended well for the tormentors (but they will get their comeuppance in the future, probably in the Hereafter) or whether their plan backfired and they were slain in the course of the events described.

Furthermore, although it has been taken as a given that the word *Ukhdūd* is to be rendered ‘pit’ (or ditch, or trench), even this is uncertain: some early Muslim authors saw this word as a singular (pl. *akhādīd*, ‘pits’), while others took it to be a plural form of *khadd* (hence, we have in Q 85:4 ‘men of the pits’). More troubling is the fact that the word is a *hapax legomenon* in the Qur’ān, it does not appear to have a trilateral root (as might be expected from an Arabic word; if it is a singular, as virtually all translators assume, then the word’s root is the very un-Semitic *’kh.d.d.*), and it does not conform to a common Arabic noun-pattern (*uf’ūl*, if it is a plural, *fu’ūl* if it is a singular).

In fact, the only reason that the word *Ukhdūd* is generally taken to mean ‘pit’ is because the Qur’ānic passage is linked to historical events that involved believers being cast into fiery pits. For this reason, and to determine whether the unbelievers were slain or have yet to be punished, it is necessary to establish what the historical events were that are being recounted in this Qur’ānic passage. Muslim tradition, and much of modern Western scholarship, have proposed two historical episodes in this regard: 1) the martyrdom of the Christians of Najrān, and 2) the survival of three Jewish youths in Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace (*Daniel* 3).

The Martyrs of Najrān

The overwhelming majority of Muslim exegetes understand our passage to be a reference to the Martyrdom of Christians in the Arabian town of Najrān, at the hands of the Jewish Ḥimyarite king Dhū Nuwās, which took place in 523 CE. David COOK has collected, summarized, and analysed the numerous Muslim sources that connect the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd* with the Martyrs of Najrān.⁴ This is not the place to revisit all of COOK’s materials or rehash his arguments; all that is necessary at this point is to explain how Q 85:4–10 can be read with the Martyrs of Najrān episode in mind. Accordingly, the Jewish Dhū Nuwās demanded that the Christians of Najrān convert to Judaism under the threat of being cast into fiery

4 D. COOK, “The *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*: History and Hadith in a Martyrological Sequence”, *JSAI* 34 (2008): 125–148. See also T. SIZGORICH, “‘Become infidels or we will throw you in the fire’. The Martyrs of Najrān in Early Muslim Historiography, Hagiography, and Quranic Exegesis”, in A. Papaconstantinou, M. Debié, and H. N. Kennedy (eds.), *Writing ‘True Stories’: Historians and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Medieval Near East*, Leiden, 2009, 125–147.

trenches, and the Christians chose martyrdom over conversion. These Christians are ‘the believers’ of verse 7, and Dhū Nuwās is the one who took revenge on them for their belief. Such authors as al-Ya‘qūbī and Ḥamza al-İşfahānī tell us that Dhū Nuwās is the ‘man of the pit’ referred to in the Qur’ān,⁵ which creates a minor problem in that it implies that the plural ‘Men [of the Pit]’ refers to a single person (Dhū Nuwās). It is perhaps with this in mind that al-Dīnawarī chose to interpret the ‘Men of the Pit’ as being a reference to the martyred Christians of the story, as he writes:

Dhū Nuwās then became Jewish and called on the people of Yemen to become Jewish, and whoever refused was killed. Then he went to the town of Najrān, to Judaize the Christians who were there – for there was there a group who followed the religion of Jesus (lit. ‘the Messiah’) who would not convert. He called on them to leave their religion and become Jewish and they refused. So he called for their king, whose name was ‘Abdallāh b. Thāmīr, had him executed and ... dug trenches for the rest (*khadda akhādīd*), and he burned the people in them. They were the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhūd* whom Allah mentioned in the Quran.⁶

Strangely, having solved the singular/plural inconsistency of Dhū Nuwās as *aṣḥāb*, he then creates another such inconsistency by suggesting that there were ‘pits’ (*akhādīd*) rather than a single pit. In any event, those authors who equate the ‘men of the pit’ with the Christian martyrs are necessarily opting for Arberrý’s translation of *qutila* (‘slain’), whereas those who see the persecutor as the ‘men of the pit’ will prefer Shakir’s “Cursed be” rendering of the verb.

There is much to recommend the Martyrs of Najrān episode as the historical context for our Qur’ānic passage, and there are near-contemporary, Christian sources that describe the events, such as the *Letter of Simeon of Beth Arsham* or the *Book of the Ḥimyarites*, amongst others.⁷ That accounts of this episode were disseminated widely amongst Christians on the eve of Islam might explain why these ‘men of the pit’ could be referenced so casually, without much explanatory

⁵ Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rikh*, Beirut, 1960, 199; Ḥamza al-İşfahānī, *Ta’rikh*, Berlin, 1844, 133.

⁶ Al-Dīnawarī, *al-Akhbār al-Ṭiwāl*, Leiden, 1888, 62–63.

⁷ The literature on this episode and its sources is copious. Classical treatments of the subject include A. Moberg (ed.), *The Book of the Ḥimyarites: Fragments of a Hitherto Unknown Syriac Work*, Lund, 1924; A. JEFFERY, “Christianity in South Arabia”, *The Muslim World*, 36iii (1946): 193–216; J. RYCKMANS, *La persécution des chrétiens Himyarites au sixième siècle*, Istanbul, 1956; and I. SHAHID, *The Martyrs of Najrān: New Documents*, Brussels, 1971. For some recent studies, see e. g. J. BEAUCAMP, F. BRIQUEL-CHATONNET, and C. J. ROBIN, “La persécution des chrétiens de Nagrān et la chronologie ḥimyarite”, *Aram*, 11i (1999): 15–83; F. DE BLOIS, “The Date of the ‘Martyrs of Nagrān’”, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 11i–iii (1990): 110–128; and G. HATKE, “Africans in Arabia Felix: Aksumite Relations with Ḥimyar in the Sixth Century C.E.”, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2011.

detail.⁸ As stated, the overwhelming majority of classical Muslim and modern Western interpreters have seen the Martyrs of Najrān episode as the historical context for Q 85:4–10.

And yet, there are problems. For one, there is no evidence that the Martyrs of Najrān were burnt in a pit, ditch, or trench. Rather, the sixth-century accounts speak of them being crucified or burnt in their churches. As already Joseph HOROVITZ noted,

The reports concerning this event ... relate nothing whatsoever anywhere concerning a pit ... The “Book of the Himyarites” which ... stands very close to the events with which we are here concerned, knows nothing at all ... of the fact that the martyrs were supposed to have been burned in a pit.⁹

Second, as David COOK has pointed out in his study of the *Tafsīr* traditions on the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*, the Muslim exegetes who connect Q 85 to the Martyrs of Najrān do so by relating stories that bear little resemblance to that episode.¹⁰ Moreover, some two centuries ago Abraham GEIGER pointed out yet another weakness of the Martyrs of Najrān connection. In his words, “Commentators make this refer to the punishment of a Jewish Ḥimyarite King who persecuted the Christians, but the appellation ‘believers’ as applied to Christians has no parallel elsewhere in the Qur’ān, no detail bearing on this event is mentioned, and just this one form of persecution (burning) is not given by the martyrologists.”¹¹ In GEIGER’s view, the correct historical context is the episode of the three youths in Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace, as recounted in *Daniel* 3, to which we now turn.

8 On this, see N. NEBES, “The Martyrs of Najrān and the End of Himyar: On the Political History of South Arabia in the Early Sixth Century”, in A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai, and M. Marx (eds.), *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu*, Leiden, 2010, 27–59 at pp. 48–49: “The persecution and martyrdom of the Christians of South Arabia aroused strong feelings throughout Eastern Christianity – and not just there.”

9 J. HOROVITZ, “Jewish Proper Names and Derivatives in the Koran”, *HUCA* 2 (1925): 145–227, at p. 178. HOROVITZ appears to be influenced on this point by H. GRIMME, *Mohammed*, Munster, 1895, vol. 2, 77 n. 4.

10 In his words: “Comparison of the stories above [in exegetical accounts; AS] with those of the historical Martyrs of Najrān does not reveal very many similarities.”

11 A. GEIGER, *Judaism and Islam*, 152–153. Since GEIGER’s days, however, imaginative theories have been proposed regarding the term ‘believers’ in the Qur’ān (on which see, most prominently, F. DONNER, “From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community”, *al-Abḥāth* 50–51 (2002–3): 9–53). GEIGER’s identification of the ‘Men of the Pit’ with the youths in *Daniel* 3 is followed by O. LOTH, “Die Leute der Grube”, *ZDMG* 35 (1881): 610–622, and others.

The three youths in *Daniel 3*

Chapter 3 of the book of *Daniel* recounts how the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar constructed a golden statue, sixty cubits in height, and ordered all his subjects to bow down to it, otherwise they will be cast into a “burning fiery furnace” (*atūn nūrā yaqidetā*). All agreed to do so, except for three Jewish courtiers who refused to bow to the idol on religious grounds. Upon hearing of this, Nebuchadnezzar demanded of these three specifically that they bow to his idol or they “shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is the god that shall deliver you out of my hands?” (v. 15). The three Jews nonetheless refused to comply. A furious Nebuchadnezzar demanded that the fire be heated seven times more than usual, that the three Jews be bound, and that they be cast into the fire (vv. 19–21). However, because the fire was so exceedingly hot, a flame shot out from it and killed (*qaṭṭil*) the men tasked with casting the Jews into the furnace (v. 22). Although the three youths had been cast into the furnace alone, when Nebuchadnezzar checked on them he saw *four* figures in it, unharmed, with the fourth figure having the appearance “like a son of the gods” (v. 25). The king was duly stunned and had the Jews released from the furnace. The king gathered the leaders of the empire who witnessed the fact that the Jews had emerged entirely unscathed from the furnace. *Daniel 3*: 28–29 continues:

Nebuchadnezzar spoke and said: ‘Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who has sent His angel, and delivered His servants that trusted in Him, and have changed the king’s word, and have yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God. Therefore I make a decree, that every people, nation, and language, which speak anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill; because there is no other god that is able to deliver after this sort.’

As a candidate for the contextualization of Q 85:4–10, *Daniel 3* has some clear advantages over the Martyrs of Najrān option. First, the distinction between the believers (the three Jewish youths) and the unbelieving persecutor (Nebuchadnezzar) is unambiguous in this case, whereas from the Qur’ān’s perspective it is not clear why the Christians of Najrān were more ‘believers’ than the Jewish Dhū Nuwās. Second, Q 85:4–10 seems to imply that those (plural) who sought to persecute the believers were themselves killed, and this is precisely what happens in *Daniel 3*:22, where the men who cast the Jews into the furnace were killed by its flames.¹² As GEIGER put it, “If we compare the passage [Q 85] with the story of the

¹² To these points may be added the fact that in both Q 85:10 and *Daniel 3* (28 ff.) there is stress on the [possible] repentance of the tyrant in question. (I owe this point to Andreas Kaplony.)

three children all fits in perfectly. The three believers would not bow themselves before an idol, and were thrown into the fiery furnace; those who threw them in were slain by the heat and the believers were saved. Evidently Muḥammad here alludes to this.”¹³

Third, and crucially, the language employed in both contexts is strikingly similar.¹⁴ Thus, although in both *Daniel* 3 and Q 85 we are clearly dealing with a fire, and we would thus expect the victims (be they believers or their tormentors) to be ‘burned’, ‘roasted’ or some other verb, in both texts the verb employed is from the same *q.t.l.* (Aramaic: *q.t.l.*) root.

Additionally, the phrase “burning fiery furnace” is repeated no fewer than *eight times* as a set phrase in *Daniel* 3 (verses 6, 11, 15, 17, 20, 21, 23, 26). This is the dominant formulation in the entire chapter and although the context changes every time it is employed, the phrase remains as it is, frozen. Tantalizingly, Q 85:4–5 employs a similar formulation: the ‘Pit’ (*Ukhdūd*) is qualified by the words “abounding in fiery fuel”, the Arabic of which is *al-nār dhāt al-waqūd*. As such, the *Ukhdūd* of Q 85 and the *atūn* of *Daniel* 3 are both qualified by words from the roots *n.w.r.* and *w.y.q.d.* And if Hani HAYAJNEH is correct that South Arabian linguistics would favour of vocalization of *Akhdūd* rather than *Ukhdūd*,¹⁵ then the parallel between the two texts is even closer, with *aXXūX + n.w.r. + w.q.d.* in Q 85: 4–5, and *aXūX + n.w.r. + y.q.d.* in *Daniel* 3. It is perhaps with these similarities in mind that a ninth-century Christian translation of *Daniel* renders the phrase ‘burning fiery furnace’ by translating *atūn* (‘furnace’) as *Ukhdūd*.¹⁶ M. HJÄLM, who has worked on this translation, has pointed out the existence of Islamic influence on it,¹⁷ and we must assume that the use of the word *Ukhdūd* in lieu of *atūn* reflects not some pre-Qur’ānic Christian term (I will return to the question

¹³ GEIGER, *Judaism and Islam*, 153.

¹⁴ Curiously, despite the direct relevance of philological considerations, the linguistic parallels between the two texts have not hitherto been highlighted by scholars.

¹⁵ H. HAYAJNEH, “Arabian Languages as a Source for Qur’anic Vocabulary”, in G. S. REYNOLDS, *New Perspectives on the Qur’an*, London, 2011, 134–137, s. v. ‘al-Ukhdūd’.

¹⁶ Miriam L. HJÄLM, *Christian Arabic Versions of Daniel: a comparative study of early MSS...*, Leiden, 2016, 140: MS Sinai Arabic 1 *ad* Daniel 3:19 (“and he commanded to heat the furnace”) has *wa-amara an yuwaqqad fī al-ukhdūd*; 168–169: in MS Sinai Arabic 1 *ad* Daniel 3:20–23 the phrase burning fiery furnace, which is repeated three times in the MT, is reduced; instead, we get *wa-amara ... awthaqū al-nafar al-thalātha, wa-taqaddamū bihim fī wasaṭ al-khdūd* (w/o ‘a’), *wa-ūwthiqū ... fa-qudhifū fī wasaṭ al-Ukhdūd al-nār wa-al-nafar fī al-nār...* Interestingly, HJÄLM translates this as: “and he commanded ... ‘Bind the three persons and bring them into the middle of the furnace.’ And they were bound ... and cast into *the midst of the pit*, that of fire. And the three persons were in *the fire*...”. (Emphasis mine.)

¹⁷ HJÄLM, *Christian Arabic Versions of Daniel*, 251–254 (‘Islamic vocabulary’).

of *Ukhdūd*'s etymology below) but rather the influence of Qur'ānic vocabulary on ninth-century Christian Arabs. But this is precisely the point: in seeking an Arabic word to render Nebuchadnezzar's 'furnace' our translator chose *Ukhdūd* (rather than assuming it to mean 'pit').

Finally, although it is often ignored in studies of the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*, verse 6 ("when they were sitting by it") also ties this passage to *Daniel* 3. While there is nothing like this phrase in the Biblical account of the three Jews cast into the furnace, a number of magic bowls from Late Antique Mesopotamia appear to make reference to the Biblical episode, albeit with some changes. Four recently published Aramaic bowls include a charm "From the mouths of the three old men who were sitting in a furnace (*atūnā*)... From the names of the three old men who were sitting in a furnace..."¹⁸ Interestingly, in two other bowls, the three men are described not as sitting *in* a furnace but rather "sitting at the mouth of the furnace" (*'al pūma de-atūnā*),¹⁹ which is equivalent to Q 85:6, "when they were sitting near it" (*idh hum 'alayhā qu'ūd*).²⁰

The parallels between *Daniel* 3 and Q 85:4–10 are numerous and it is perhaps not surprising that some Muslim exegetes interpreted the latter text in light of the former. To cite but two examples, al-Qurṭubī stated that the victims in Q 85 were "followers of Daniel" while Ibn Kathīr explained that Q 85:4–10 refers to Daniel and two of his companions²¹ who are cast into a fire.²² Other exegetes, appar-

18 D. LEVENE, *Jewish-Aramaic Curse Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia*, Leiden, 2013, 37–41 (and see p. 97, where an unedited bowl opens with a simile based on Daniel's three associates in the furnace). For contextualization of these bowls, see J. MOKHTARIAN, *Rabbis, Sorcerers, Kings, and Priests*, Oakland, Ca., 2013, 133–134. *Daniel* 3 is referenced in other magic bowls and Coptic texts (see e. g. R. SMITH, *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, Princeton, 1999, 100).

19 LEVENE, *Jewish-Aramaic Curse Texts*, 41. A convenient, side-by-side comparison of the two formulations may be found in D. LEVENE's earlier study, "'This is a Qybl' for Overturning Sorceries': Form Formula – Threads in a Web of Transmission" in G. Bohak, Sh. Shaked, and Y. Harari (eds.), *Continuity and Innovation in the Magical Tradition*, Leiden, 2011, 219–244 at p. 237.

20 To the list of parallels one might add the reference, in Q 85:8, to 'revenge' (*naqamū*) which might be related to the idea in *Daniel* 3 that those who sought to burn the three Jews were burned themselves. Both the reference to "sitting at the mouth of the furnace" and to "revenge" refer to the three protagonists of *Daniel* 3, whereas in the Qur'ān these phrases appear to relate to the tormentors. It appears therefore that it is the language but not the narrative of the two texts that is comparable.

21 The Bible indeed has three believers although Daniel is not one of them. But see the discussion in E. HERZFELD, *Zoroaster and His World*, Princeton, 1947, 828.

22 Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, Beirut, 1967, vol. 19. 290; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, Beirut, 1388, vol. 7, 260–261.

ently torn between the options, sought to conflate the two episodes and retold the *Daniel 3* story with Dhū Nuwās as the persecutor of the believers.²³

The relevance of *Daniel 3* to Q 85:4–10 is supported by two further points, the one short the other requiring a careful reading of sources that have not been utilized in this context until now. The short point is that the story of the three youths in Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace was very popular in the Near East in Late Antiquity, particularly amongst Syriac-speaking Christians. Thus, both Jacob of Serug (d. 521) and Narsai (d. 502) – amongst others – treated this story in great detail.²⁴ The significance of pre-Islamic Syriac materials for our understanding of Qur’ānic passages is well-established and there is, therefore, a reasonable channel of transmission from *Daniel 3* to Q 85.²⁵ The longer point is that even disregarding the foregoing arguments against the Martyrs of Najrān and in favour of *Daniel 3* as the historical event alluded to in Q 85, the theological messages of these respective stories are entirely different and it is the message of *Daniel 3* (and not that of the Martyrs of Najrān episode) that is consistent with Q 85 and with the Meccan sūrahs more generally, as we shall now see.

The theological message of Q 85

It should go without saying that the point of Q 85:4–10, as with any other episode recounted in the Qur’ān, is to convey a message of theological or spiritual importance. And yet, previous studies of the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*, learned though they

²³ COOK, “The *Aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*”, 137. The absurdity of this conflation is readily apparent: Why would the Jewish convert Dhū Nuwās persecute three Jewish youths for their belief in [the Jewish] God? Clearly the insertion of Dhū Nuwās in this way is meant to reconcile the competing traditions about this passage that circulated at the time.

²⁴ See, most recently, R.A. KITCHEN, “Three Young Men Redux: The Fiery Furnace in Jacob of Serug and Narsai”, *Studia Patristica* 78 (2017): 73–84.

²⁵ In general, the existence of apocryphal additions to *Daniel* that deal with this episode, namely ‘The prayer of Azariah’ and ‘The song of the three children’, additions that were deemed canonical by various eastern churches in Late Antiquity and were used in prayer services, provides yet another witness to the circulation of *Daniel 3* lore in the Near East on the eve of Islam (See CHARLES, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, Oxford, 1913, vol. 1, 634 ff.). Interestingly, v. 25 of ‘The prayer of Azariah’ says that the fire into which the three youths were cast “spread, and it burned those Chaldeans whom it found *about the furnace*” (emphasis mine), recalling Q 85:6 and the Jewish magic bowls discussed above. These additions may also have been known in mainstream Jewish circles: a tradition in the Babylonian Talmud suggests that the three youths recited parts of what would become the *Hallel* prayer while in the fiery furnace (*Pesaḥim* 118a).

may be, have paid little if any attention to the ‘point’ of the episode in seeking to understand its historical background. Instead, the existence in the Qur’ānic passage of believers and persecutor(s), and of one or both side(s) being cast into fire, spurred both exegetes and modern scholars to find a suitable story from pre-Islamic times that shares these narrative details. That both the Martyrs of Najrān story and the episode of the three youths in *Daniel* 3 have been brought into play in seeking to elucidate Q 85:4–10 is peculiar as these two episodes make entirely different, contradictory theological points. Rather than choosing one of the two stories and reading its theology (as well as its history) into Q 85, we should be determining what theological message Q 85 – and Meccan sūrahs in general – is seeking to impart, and only then decide which of the two historical episodes is consistent with that message.

Despite the superficial similarity between two stories about ‘believers’ being cast into a fire by (a) villain(s), *Daniel* 3 and the Martyrs of Najrān episode tell us very different things about God and His relationship with believers and sinners. *Daniel* 3 is the story of God delivering believers from a fire, unharmed (while their tormentors burn),²⁶ whereas the Martyrs of Najrān story is about believers dying for their belief in a fire. In other words, is Q 85:4–10 trying to tell us that God will act for the righteous in this world (and save them miraculously) or that we can forego life in this world as God will compensate the righteous (such as martyrs) in the Hereafter? Similarly, are we to expect that God punish in this world those who persecute believers, or that their comeuppance will be delayed, perhaps until the Afterlife? In what follows, it will be argued that on the eve of Islam, Jewish, Iranian, and Arabian religious logic dictated that believers could expect God to intervene and save them from fire, whereas the lack of such divine intervention was not meant to encourage martyrdom but rather indicated that those who are burned do not enjoy God’s favour.

Jewish Evidence

The idea that God will intervene on behalf of His followers to save them from fire occurs explicitly in the Qur’ān (Q 21:51–70), where we hear of Abraham being cast into a fire (v. 68) for having challenged the idolatry of his father’s religious circle, only for God to intervene and save him by cooling the fire miraculously

²⁶ Another major point of *Daniel* 3 appears to be Nebuchadnezzar’s ultimate repentance, which, as stated, is also hinted at in Q 85:10.

(v. 69).²⁷ Interestingly, the episode ends with God declaring, “And they wished to conspire against him, but We made them the greatest losers” (v. 70), hinting at the same sort of measure-for-measure justice encountered in *Daniel* 3:22. Similarly, some of the contents of Q 21:51–70 echo Narsai’s treatment of the *Daniel* 3 story,²⁸ while al-Ya‘qūbī concludes his account of Abraham’s miraculous survival in Nimrod’s furnace by stating that Nimrod, amazed by this miracle, publicly exclaimed that whoever is seeking to adopt a god should choose the god of Abraham, which brings to mind Nebuchadnezzar’s reaction to the miracle in *Daniel* 3:28–29.²⁹

This episode of Abraham’s survival in the furnace originates in ancient Jewish elaborations on *Genesis* 11:28, which refer to Abraham’s brother, Haran, dying “in the presence of his father.” The second-century BCE *Book of Jubilees* (12:12–14) explains that,

Abram arose in the night and burned the house of the idols. And he burned everything in the house. And there was no man who knew. And they rose up in the night, and they wanted to save their gods from the midst of the fire. And Haran rushed to save them, and the fire flared up over him. And he was burned in the fire and died in Ur of the Chaldees before Terah, his father. And they buried him in Ur of the Chaldees.³⁰

Another version of this midrash is found in the fifth-century CE *Genesis Rabbah*, which describes Nimrod’s frustration with Abraham (following a disputation about the former’s idols), to which Nimrod reacted as follows:

27 In the Babylonian Talmud (*Pesaḥim* 118a), when Nimrod casts Abraham into the fiery furnace Gabriel told God that he will descend to earth and cool the fire. God insisted on doing it Himself, but promised Gabriel that he will be able to save the three youths from another fiery furnace in the future, which he does (after a debate with ‘Yorqemu, the angel of hail’, who had also wanted to save the three youths).

28 Narsai has the three youths refuse to bow to Nebuchadnezzar’s idol by calling it “a silent thing” (KITCHEN, “Three Young Men Redux”, 75), just as Abraham rejects his father’s idols, which do not speak (Q 21:63, 65). By contrast, Jacob of Serug’s treatment of the *Daniel* 3 episode has the youths justify their refusal to bow by drawing on the language of ‘Bel and the Dragon’ (vv. 4–6, where the contrast is made between the ‘living God’ and idols made by hand, just as the three youths in Jacob of Serug say that the idol is “humanly manufactured and not alive”; KITCHEN, “Three Young Men Redux”, 76). Q 37:83–98 has a comparable account of Abraham’s disputation with the idolaters, and their casting him into a fiery structure (v. 97). God states that the conspirators were the ones who were made ‘debased’ (v. 98), and it is implied that Abraham was saved, though God’s intervention is not stated as explicitly as in Q 21.

29 Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rikh*, Leiden, 1883, vol. 1, 22 (translated in *The Works of Ibn Wāḍih al-Ya‘qūbī: An English Translation, Volume 2*, eds. M.S. Gordon, C.F. Robinson, E.K. Rowson, and M. Fishbane, Leiden, 2018, 279).

30 In R.H. CHARLES, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, Oxford, 1913, 31.

(Nimrod) said to him: You are merely piling words; we should bow to none other than the fire. I shall therefore cast you in it, and let your God to whom you bow come and save you from it! Haran (Abraham's brother) was standing there. He said (to himself): what shall I do? If Abraham wins, I shall say: "I am of Abraham's (followers)," if Nimrod wins I shall say, "I am of Nimrod's (followers)." When Abraham went into the furnace and survived, Haran was asked: "Whose (follower) are you?" and he answered: "I am Abraham's (follower)!" So, they took him and threw him into the furnace, and his innards were burned and he died and predeceased Terah, his father. This is the meaning of the verse (Gen 11:28), "And Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah."³¹

In this version of the story, which is closer chronologically to the Qur'an, Haran does not simply die in a fire (as per the *Jubilees* account); he dies in the furnace into which Nimrod cast Abraham (for his belief in God), and from which Abraham miraculously emerged unharmed. Haran's declaration of belief, according to this text, was opportunistic, whereas Abraham's was genuine. God intervened to save Abraham from the furnace, but Haran "died in the presence of his father" (*Genesis* 11:28).³²

Most interesting for our purposes, however, is the version of this story that chronologically bridges the foregoing two accounts and is the earliest reference to Abraham surviving in a furnace³³ that was intended to punish him for his belief in God. In Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* (6:16–17; early Christian-era), it is not Nimrod who is Abraham's antagonist, but a different (minor) Biblical character, Yoqтан:

They took him (=Abram) and built a furnace and lit it with fire. They threw the bricks into the furnace to be fired. Then the leader Yoqтан, dismayed, took Abram and threw him with the bricks into the fiery furnace. But God stirred up a great earthquake, and burning fire leaped forth out of the furnace into flames and sparks of flame, and it burned up all those standing around in front of the furnace. All those who were consumed in that day were 83,500. But there was not even the slightest injury to Abram from the burning of the fire.³⁴

The significance of Yoqтан's involvement will become clear when we turn to Arabian evidence below. Here it is worth pointing out an important parallel

³¹ *Genesis Rabbah* 38:11 (*ad Genesis* 11:28).

³² This midrash is also connected to *Genesis* 15:7 ("I am your Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees", with the latter phrase being understood to refer to 'the fire of the Chaldeans'; hence, God reminds Abraham that He extricated him from the Mesopotamian furnace).

³³ K. VAN DER TOORN and P.W. VAN DER HORST, "Nimrod before and after the Bible", *Harvard Theological Review* 83i (1990), 1–29, at pp. 19–20.

³⁴ The translation is based on H. JACOBSON, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum, with Latin Text and English Translation*, Leiden, 1996, 100 (commentary on pp. 369–370).

between this text and *Daniel* 3, namely that those who sought to burn Abraham in the furnace were themselves burnt by a flame that shot out from the fire, as was the case in *Daniel* 3:22, where a flame shot out and killed the men who were tasked with immolating the three youths.³⁵ The obvious connections between the Abraham furnace-midrash and the *Daniel* 3 episode have led scholars to debate (inconclusively) which came first.³⁶ Whatever the answer may be, there are numerous Jewish texts from Antiquity to the rise of Islam that describe God intervening to save worthy Jews from a fire that was meant to persecute them for their beliefs.

Already in *Jeremiah* (29:21–23) we hear of Ahab and Zedekiah, two false prophets whom God punished by delivering them to the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, "the king of Babylon, who roasted them in fire". In the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 93a), the story is elaborated upon and compared to that of *Daniel* 3 (which also relates to Nebuchadnezzar's reign). When the two false prophets were to be cast into the furnace, they protested that in the *Daniel* 3 case there were *three* youths whereas they are only two. It was thus agreed that they could bring another person with them into the furnace and they chose the high priest Joshua, as they believed that in his merit they would all be saved from the fire. The three were cast into Nebuchadnezzar's furnace and only Joshua survived, though his clothes were singed. Thus, as in the cases of Abraham and of the three youths in *Daniel* 3, God is seen here to intervene and save believers from a furnace, while disbelievers will perish in it. As this version of the story resurfaces in the early-Islamic-era *Pirqey de-Rabbi Eliezer*,³⁷ it is clear that it was in circulation in both Palestine and Iraq, on the eve of Islam and shortly after its emergence.

Related to the foregoing texts are the midrashic elaborations on *Genesis* 38, which relates the story of Judah and Tamar. Here, Judah orders that his daughter-in-law Tamar be punished by immolation for fornication (vv. 24–26). When Judah discovered that Tamar had tricked him and that it was he who impregnated

³⁵ On this point, see C.A. EVANS, "Abraham in the Dead Sea Scrolls", in P.W. Flint (ed.), *The Bible at Qumran: Text, Shape, and Interpretation*, Grand Rapids, MI., 2001, 149–158 at p. 154.

³⁶ See, e.g. Sh. LOWIN, *The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives*, Leiden, 2006, 197 n. 50; and A. SHINAN and Y. ZAKOVITCH (trans. V. Zakovitch), *From God to Gods*, Philadelphia, 2012, ch. 15 ('Out of the Fire: Recovering the story of Abraham's origins'), 138–148, esp. p. 145: "The similarity leads us to wonder: Did lacunae in the biblical story about Haran's death and Terah's departure for the city of Haran trigger the development of the traditions we found in post-biblical literature, which were patterned after the Daniel tradition? Or is the reverse true: Did an ancient story about Haran and Abraham (a story that for some reason was omitted by the Pentateuch) leave its imprint in Daniel 3 and then reappear, returning to the surface in apocryphal and Rabbinic literature?" The authors opt for the latter.

³⁷ G. Friedlander (trans.), *The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer*, London, 1916, 247 f.

her, he spared her the punishment and declared her to be ‘righteous’. There is no miraculous intervention here, of course, but exegetical elaborations on this story add details that bring the story into conversation with the texts discussed above. In *Jubilees* (41:19–20), for instance, Judah’s declaration of Tamar’s righteousness is followed by the added clause “And therefore let them burn her not”, thereby connecting righteousness with salvation from fire. According to the Babylonian Talmud (*Sotah* 10b), when Judah saved Tamar in this way, a Divine voice announced: “Just as you have saved Tamar and her two sons, I will save the lives of your three descendants [viz. the three youths of *Daniel* 3]”.

The connection between the Judah and Tamar episode and that of *Daniel* 3 is also made in Targums to *Genesis* 38. In the Late Antique *Targum Neofiti*, we read the following:

“And Judah said, ‘Bring her out and let her be burned.’ *And Tamar went out to be burned by fire and she asked for the three witnesses but did not find them. She lifted up her eyes on high and said, ‘I beseech by the mercies from before you, O Lord, ... answer me in this hour... and give me the three witnesses and I promise you three just men in the valley of Dura: Haniah, Mishael, and Azariah. When they go down into the burning fire they will sanctify your holy name. And immediately the Lord heard the voice of her holy supplication, and he said to Michael, ‘Go down and give her his three witnesses... Judah immediately stood up upon his feet and said, ‘I beg of you brothers, and men of my father’s house, listen to me: It is better for me to burn in this world, with extinguishable fire, that I may not be burned in the world to come whose fire is inextinguishable. It is better for me to blush in this world that is a passing world that I may not blush before my just fathers in the world to come. In the measure in which a man measures it shall be measured to him, whether it be a good measure or a bad measure.’*”³⁸

Whereas in the Babylonian Talmud God rewards Judah for having spared Tamar by promising him three descendants who will survive Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace, in this case it is Tamar who, in praying that God intervene to save her, promises Him three descendants who will sanctify His name (by refusing to bow to Nebuchadnezzar’s idol). A similar idea is reflected in the Islamic-era³⁹ *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*.⁴⁰ The point, again, is that Jewish sources from antiquity to the early Islamic centuries, and from both Palestine and Iraq, convey the idea that God can

³⁸ *Targum Neofiti* (trans. M. McNamara), Collegeville, 1992, 176 ff. Non-italicised text is quoted from *Genesis* 38; italicised text is added by the Targum in McNamara’s translation.

³⁹ The post-Islamic dating of this text is based on the existence within it of Muslim names (e. g. ‘Fatimah’, which is given as the name of Ishmael’s wife). Recently, B. MORTENSEN (*The Priesthood in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Renewing the Profession*, Leiden, 2006) has argued that much of the Aggadic material in this text dates from the fourth-century CE.

⁴⁰ *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, translated, with Introduction and Notes by M. Maher, Liturgical Press, 1992, 129–130 ad *Genesis* 38:24–26.

intervene to save believers from fire, an idea that is often connected in these texts to the *Daniel 3* episode. The use of the latter episode as a *historiola* in Aramaic magic bowls from Late Antiquity, as discussed earlier, supports the idea that the theological message of *Daniel 3* was widely disseminated amongst Jews on the eve of Islam, and righteous Jews cast into a furnace for their beliefs could be led to expect a miracle (salvation in this world) rather than martyrdom (salvation in the Hereafter).

Iranian Evidence

In Late Antique Iranian religious thought, the idea that righteousness or innocence are connected to an imperviousness to immolation was widespread and even formalized in judicial contexts. In the words of Mary BOYCE:

Fire was also used judicially in ancient Iran. Those accused of lying or breach of contract (*miθra-*) might be required as an ultimate test to establish their innocence by submitting to a solemnly administered ordeal by fire. In one such ordeal the accused had to pass through fire, in another molten metal was poured on his bare breast; and there are said to have been some 30 kinds of fiery tests in all... In each case, if the accused died, he was held to have been guilty; if he survived, he was innocent, having been protected by Mithra and the other divine beings.⁴¹

Various examples from pre-Islamic times abound. In one case, the chief Mowbed during the reign of Shapur II (r. 309–379), Ādurbād the son of Mahrspand, was subjected to an ordeal of molten bronze to prove the validity of his religion (he passed the test).⁴² Crucially, Zoroaster himself is said to have survived fire ordeals. The second-century CE Dio Cocceianus relates that a fire rained down from Heaven on Zoroaster, but the latter escaped unscathed,⁴³ and much later, Islamic-era sources recount similar stories, with God intervening to save Zoroaster from

⁴¹ M. BOYCE, s.v. ‘Ātaš’ in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 3, 1–5, cf. eadem, “On Mithra, Lord of Fire,” *Monumentum H. S. Nyberg I*, Acta Iranica 4, 1975, 70–72. See also M. SHAKI, s.v. ‘Judicial and Legal Systems ii. Parthian and Sasanian Judicial Systems’, in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 15, 177–180 (“The trial by ordeal was a prevalent means of resolving a case.”).

⁴² A. TAFĀZZOLĪ, s.v. ‘Ādurbād ī Mahrspandān’ in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 1, 477. For another example, see J. DE MENASCE, “Kartak the Heretic and the Ordeal by Fire”, *Studia Iranica* 15ii (1986): 159–163.

⁴³ *Orations*, 36.40, in Y. KIEL, “Abraham and Nimrod in the Shadow of Zarathustra”, *The Journal of Religion* 95i (2015): 35–50, at p. 44.

fire.⁴⁴ The importance to Zoroastrianism of the idea that Zoroaster survived a fire ordeal through divine intervention is highlighted by the existence an *anti-Zoroastrian* account that has Zoroaster dying in the fire that rained down upon him from the Heaven; presumably such an account demonstrates that one way to polemicize against Zoroastrianism is to argue that Zoroaster failed a fire ordeal.⁴⁵

A particularly interesting example comes from the story of Siyavash in the Persian national epic, the *Shāhnāma*. In one sub-plot of his story, Siyavash is prepositioned by his stepmother, Queen Sudabeh, wife of Kaykāvūs. He rejects her advances and she falsely accuses him of sexual violence against her. This is clearly a recasting of the story of Joseph in the house of Potiphar (*Genesis* 39:7 ff.) or, more precisely, of the Qur'ānic version of this story (Q 12:21 ff.). In the *Shāhnāma* version, however, the story takes a particularly Iranian twist: rather than establish his innocence through the intervention of a witness who points out that his shirt was torn from behind (implying that it is he who was fleeing from her attack, which is how the Qur'ān recounts the events in verses 26–28), Siyavash undergoes a fire ordeal, from which he emerges unscathed. At this point, the *Shāhnāma* and Biblical/Qur'ānic versions link up again and the hero is not allowed to benefit from his vindication, with Siyavash fleeing eastwards, to Turan (the traditional enemy of Iran), and Joseph being imprisoned.⁴⁶ In other words, the Iranification of this story involves adding the detail that the hero emerged unharmed from a fire as proof of his virtue/innocence. In Late Antique Iran, as in contemporary Judaism, the virtuous withstand fire, rather than being martyred by it.⁴⁷

44 KIEL, “Abraham and Nimrod in the Shadow of Zarathustra”, 44–45. KIEL believes that this thirteenth-century CE text is based on much earlier sources, which is likely; the question is, of course, precisely how early they are.

45 Pseudo-Clement, *Homilies*, 94 (in KIEL, “Abraham and Nimrod in the Shadow of Zarathustra”, 43).

46 On this, see e. g. N. YAVARI, “Polysemous Texts and Reductionist Readings: Women and Heresy in the *Siyar al-Mulūk*”, in N. Yavari, L.G. Potter, and J-M. R. Oppenheim (eds.), *Views from the Edge: Essays in Honor of Richard W. Bulliet*, New York, 2004, 322–362, at p. 334.

47 It is with this in mind that we may understand the common Judeo-Persianate custom of burning effigies of Haman on Purim (on which, see A.J. SILVERSTEIN, *Veiling Esther, Unveiling her Story: On the Reception of a Biblical Book in Islamic Lands*, Oxford, 2018, ch. 4). Burning Haman is a sign of triumph over him, rather than of his martyrdom.

Arabian Evidence

Perhaps most important for our purposes is evidence that similar ideas prevailed in Arabia (particularly, from the Ḥijāz southwards) on the eve of Islam. Before turning to new materials, we must return to a text already encountered, Pseudo-Philo's account of Abraham's emergence from a fiery furnace. As seen, this is the earliest text to mention not only that Haran died in the furnace's flames, but that Abraham was miraculously saved from them. Crucially, although subsequent midrashim (including Christian and Muslim ones) would agree with *Genesis Rabbah* that it was Nimrod who cast Abraham into the furnace, Pseudo-Philo – our earliest source for the story – states that it was Yoḡṡan who did so. In the so-called Table of Nations, the Bible (*Genesis* 10:25) tells us that Yoḡṡan was the brother of Peleg "in whose days the earth was divided (*niflega*, from the same root as 'Peleg')." The division of the earth is associated, of course, with the Tower of Babel (*Genesis* 11:1–9), whose construction came to be attributed to Nimrod (though the Bible itself does not specify that the conspirators who built the Tower and the City had a leader at all).⁴⁸ One could surmise that Pseudo-Philo connected Yoḡṡan to the casting of Abraham into the furnace because of this chronological overlap with the Tower of Babel episode: Recall that in Pseudo-Philo's text, the furnace into which Abraham was cast had bricks in it, just as the Tower of Babel episode specifies that the conspirators "said to one another: 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly'" (*Genesis* 11:3). In this way, we can understand what Yoḡṡan is doing in the earliest version of the Abraham-furnace story.

But there is another reason to connect Yoḡṡan to this event. Having introduced him and his brother Peleg, the Table of Nations continues (*Genesis* 10:26–30) by detailing Yoḡṡan's progeny, who were the peoples of South Arabia (Sheba, Hadramawth, etc.). In fact, as is known, Muslim tradition equated Yoḡṡan with 'Qaḥṡan', after whom the Qaḥṡānī Arabs – the 'pure' Arabs of South Arabia (as opposed to the Arabized 'Adnānī descendants of Ishmael, according to early Muslim sources) – are named.⁴⁹ Yoḡṡan, in other words, was the originator of South Arabia's people and cultures, and in pre-Islamic times (apparently, already

⁴⁸ Nimrod's association with the Tower of Babel episode is based, amongst other things, on the Bible's description of him as the king of Shin'ar (*Genesis* 10:10), which is where – shortly thereafter (*Genesis* 11:2) – we are told that the Tower of Babel episode took place. Note, also, that al-Ya'qūbī (*Ta'riḡh*, vol. 1, p. 17) refers to Nimrod as having built the Tower of Babel, which he refers to as a *bunyān*, this being the same (relatively rare) word used in the Qur'ān (37:97) for the furnace into which Abraham was cast.

⁴⁹ J. RETSO, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads*, Abingdon, 2003, 30 ff.

by the time Pseudo-Philo was writing), it was known that South Arabians employ a fire-ordeal to distinguish between true and false religions, a fact that we will now demonstrate.

In Jāhilī Arabia, fire ordeals were used not merely in the judicial contexts encountered in pre-Islamic Iranian traditions.⁵⁰ Rather, they served specifically to determine the merits of competing religious traditions. One example of this comes from Ibn al-Kalbī's *Book of Idols*, which describes the idolatry prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia. When treating the goddess Al-Lāt (who, together with Manāt and al-ʿUzza, formed a well-known triumvirate of goddesses worshipped – amongst other places – in Mecca on the eve of Islam),⁵¹ Ibn al-Kalbī tells us the following:

Allāt continued to be venerated until the Thaḳīf embraced Islam, when the Apostle of God dispatched al-Mughīrah ibn Shuʿbah, who destroyed her and burnt her [temple] to the ground. In this connection, when Allāt was destroyed and burnt to the ground, Shaddād ibn ʿĀriḍ al-Jushamī said warning the Thaḳīf not to return to her worship nor attempt to avenge her destruction:

‘Come not to Allāt, for God hath doomed her to destruction;
How can you stand by one which doth not triumph?
Verily that which, when set on fire, resisted not the flames,
Nor saved her stones, is inglorious and worthless.’⁵²

The implication of these verses is clear: A deity is worth veneration as long as it can prove its power – the fact that Allāt could not survive immolation disproves her divine status. While this logic is strongly implied here, it is stated directly in Ibn Hishām's biography of Muḥammad (on the authority of his source, Ibn Iṣḥāq), when describing the conversion of South Arabian rulers to Judaism in the late-fourth or early-fifth century to Islam. We are told that the Ḥimyarite king Abikarib Asʿad (ca. 383–433) converted to Judaism through the actions of two Jewish rabbis (more on whom below). Following this, the king sought to convert his subjects to the religion, as Ibn Hishām reports:

50 Interestingly, the modern Bedouin tribes of southern Israel practice a fire-ordeal in which emerging unscathed from the fire proves one's innocence in judicial contexts. Without knowing when and where this practice originated, we cannot be certain of the relevance of this to our discussion. On this see J. GINAT, *Bedouin Bisha'h (sic!) Justice: Ordeal by Fire*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2012. Again, the idea is that the innocent emerge unscathed. The word should be *bish'ah*, to do with ugliness.

51 See e.g. Q 53:19–23.

52 Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, trans. N.A. Faris, *The Book of Idols*, Princeton, 1952, 15.

When he invited them to accept his religion on the ground that it was better than theirs, they proposed that the matter should be subject to the ordeal by fire. The Yemenis say that a fire used to settle matters in dispute among them by consuming the guilty and letting the innocent go unscathed. So his people went forth with their idols and sacred objects, and the two rabbis went forth with their sacred books hanging like necklaces from their necks until they halted at the place whence the fire used to blaze out. On this occasion when it erupted the Yemenis withdrew in terror, but their followers encouraged them and urged them to stand fast, so they held their ground until the fire covered them and consumed their idols and sacred objects and the men who bore them. But the two rabbis came out with their sacred books, sweating profusely but otherwise unharmed. Thereupon the Ḥimyarites accepted the king's religion. Such was the origin of Judaism in the Yemen.⁵³

This account, which is repeated in numerous early-Islamic sources, makes it clear that the fire ordeal was routinely used in South Arabia to settle disputes, including those concerning the relative merits of competing religions. Crucially, upon witnessing the miracle of the Jews' survival in the fire, the Ḥimyarites accepted the new religion. Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī refers to this Jewish king as *Ṣāhib al-ḥabayri*, 'the possessor of the two rabbis', without offering much further detail,⁵⁴ as though the story was well-known, and Ibn al-Kalbī similarly refers to 'the two rabbis' cursorily, adding that they were specifically instrumental in the abandonment of the Arabian idol "Ri'ām".⁵⁵ Both Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarī draw on Ibn Ishāq in recounting more detailed renderings of the conversion story, and perhaps unsurprisingly al-Ṭabarī provides multiple versions of the account. In one such version, al-Ṭabarī relates that the newly Jewish king (known here as al-Ṭubba' [II]) attempted to return to his homeland, the local population objected to his conversion to Judaism:

When Ṭubba' drew near to Yemen in order to enter it, the Ḥimyarites blocked his way to it, telling him that he could not enter it because he had abandoned their religion. He invited them to accept his (new) faith, saying, 'It is a better religion than yours.' They retorted, 'In that case, come and settle the matter with us by the ordeal of fire,' and he agreed. He related: According to what the Yemenis assert, there was in Yemen a fire, by means of which they would settle matters in dispute among themselves; the fire would devour the wrongdoer but leave the one who had suffered injury unscathed. When they told this to Ṭubba', he replied, 'You have made a fair proposition'...⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibn Hishām, *The Life of Muḥammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sirat Rasūl Allāh* (trans. a. Guillaume), Oxford, 1955, 17.

⁵⁴ Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, *Ta'riḫh*, 131.

⁵⁵ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 11.

⁵⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫh al-Rusul wa l-mulūk*, Leiden, 1879–1901, vol. 1, 904–905 (trans. C.E. Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume 5. The Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, Albany, N.Y., 1999, 170 ff.). See also Ibn Hishām, *The Life of Muḥammad*, 10.

Here the fire ordeal is described in more detail, and the account continues with the story of the rabbis and their sacred books miraculously surviving unharmed, while the idolaters did not. The role played by the Jews' scriptures is also interesting, as it ties into a broader range of anecdotes about the miraculous survival of holy texts from immolation.

Fire-resistant Scriptures

Returning to the book of *Jeremiah*, we read in chapter 36 that Jeremiah's prophecy, in which he hoped to convince the people of Judah to repent, was rejected by the King of Judah, Jehoiakim. The latter is described sitting at his furnace (Heb. 'akh), casting "three or four columns" of the scroll at a time into the fire, until all of it was consumed. Three Jews had sought to dissuade the king from burning the scrolls, to no avail. The king then sent for Jeremiah and the latter's scribe, Baruch ben Neriah, to punish them, but God concealed them, and dictated a second version of the prophecy to Jeremiah, which included a number of additions. A second scroll was thus prepared.

This chapter is of relevance to us in two ways. First, although scholars have long identified in Jeremiah's career numerous parallels with that of Moses (e. g. the destruction of the first scrolls replaced by the second, as with the Tablets that Moses brought),⁵⁷ there are also parallels with *Daniel* 3. Not only do the events take place during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in both cases (with Jehoiakim serving as the ruler of Judah), but here we have a furnace, into which "three or four" are cast (as in *Daniel* 3 – where three figures enter the furnace, but four are then seen in it), as well as God's intervention to save the believers from the king's violence. And in both cases, three Jews challenge the king's actions. Second, despite these similarities, it is significant that in *Jeremiah* 36 the "three or four" scrolls that are cast into the furnace are *not* saved by God – a second version of them is dictated. At some point thereafter, however, the idea emerged that God will save not only believers from immolation, but His scriptures too, and *Jeremiah* 36 is thus a sort of *terminus post quem*⁵⁸ for the idea that Scriptures can miraculously survive immolation.

57 W. HOLLADAY, "Jeremiah and Moses: Further Observations", *JBL* 85i (1966): 17–27 at p. 26 for comparison between *Jeremiah* 36 and Moses's Torah.

58 Strictly speaking, *Jeremiah* 36 is the *opus post quem*.

One example comes from the Talmudic story of Ḥaninah ben Teradyon.⁵⁹ Here, we are told that Ḥaninah flouted the Roman law against Torah study, by reading a Torah scroll himself and holding public assemblies for Torah study. Some Romans discovered this offense and,

Took hold of him, wrapped him in the Scroll of the Law, placed bundles of branches round him and set them on fire. They then brought tufts of wool, which they had soaked in water, and placed them over his heart, so that he should not expire quickly. His daughter exclaimed, “Father, that I should see you in this state!” He replied, “If it were I alone being burnt it would have been a thing hard to bear; but now that I am burning together with the Scroll of the Law, He who will have regard for the plight of the Torah will also have regard for my plight.” His disciples called out, “Rabbi, what do you see?” He answered them, “The parchments are being burnt but the letters are soaring on high.” “Then open your mouth” [they said] “so that the fire enters into you.” He replied, “Let Him who gave me [my soul] take it away, but no one should injure oneself.” The Executioner then said to him, “Rabbi, if I raise the flame and take away the tufts of wool from over your heart, will you cause me to enter into the life to come?” “Yes,” he replied. “Then swear to me” [he urged]. He swore unto him. He thereupon raised the flame and removed the tufts of wool from over his heart, and his soul departed speedily. The Executioner then jumped and threw himself into the fire. And a Heavenly voice exclaimed: R. Ḥaninah b. Teradyon and the Executioner have been assigned to the world to come.⁶⁰

A number of points stand out from this account, not least of which is the fact that the ‘believer’ in this Jewish story did not survive the fire into which he was cast for his beliefs. While some rationalise this by explaining that Ḥaninah was being punished for his sin of pronouncing God’s name,⁶¹ it is also worth pointing out that Ḥaninah appeared not to be affected by the extreme heat – he was holding a conversation with his daughter, disciples, and even his executioner while burning to death. Evidently, there is a miracle here,⁶² but not full salvation. Furthermore, as far as Ḥaninah is concerned, although he has accepted his fate, martyrdom must not be sought (“Let Him who gave me [my soul] take it away, but no one should injure oneself”). Finally, while the rabbi himself is burnt in the fire, the letters of the Torah are miraculously saved. Apparently, Ḥaninah had

⁵⁹ Babylonian Talmud, ‘*Avodah Zarah* 18a.

⁶⁰ Translations from the Babylonian Talmud are adapted from Isidore Epstein’s ‘Soncino’ edition, *The Babylonian Talmud*, London, 1948. On this episode, see R. KALMIN, *Jewish Babylonian between Persia and Roman Palestine*, Oxford, 2006, 22–29; and J.L. RUBENSTEIN, “Martyrdom in the Persian Martyr Acts and in the Babylonian Talmud”, in G. Herman and J.L. Rubenstein (eds.), *Aggadah of the Bavli and its Cultural World*, Providence RI, 2018, 175–210, at pp. 182 ff.

⁶¹ KALMIN, *Jewish Babylonian between Persia and Roman Palestine*. 133.

⁶² Actually, there are numerous ‘miracles’ here: Ḥaninah is able to secure a place in the Hereafter for the Roman executioner, and a Heavenly voice emerges.

expected to be saved too, by virtue of his proximity to the Torah scroll, but God chose only to save His scripture.⁶³

As seen, in *Jeremiah* 36 God did not choose to save His scriptures from the furnace, although a curious tradition related by al-Ya'qūbī does suggest that Torah scrolls from Jeremiah's time were miraculously saved from immolation:

In [Daniel's] time, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and wrought slaughter among the children of Israel. He took them captive and brought them to the land of Babylon. Then he went into the land of Egypt and killed Pharaoh the Lame, its king. *Nebuchadnezzar took the Torah and the books of the prophets that were in the Temple; he put them into a well, threw fire onto them, and pressed them down.* The prophet Jeremiah lived at that time. ... When the children of Israel returned to their land, they made Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel king over them. He rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and he rebuilt the Temple, spending forty-six years rebuilding it. In his time God transformed Nebuchadnezzar into a female beast. He continually wandered among various kinds of beasts for seven years. Then it is said that he turned back to God, who cause him to live as a man again; then he died. *Zerubbabel was the one who brought out the Torah and the books of the prophets from the well in which Nebuchadnezzar had buried them. He found them intact, not burnt.*⁶⁴

Not only does this account relate that Torah scrolls miraculously survive burning, but it does so in the context of Daniel's career, referring directly to the episode (*Daniel* 4) in which God transformed Nebuchadnezzar into an animal for seven years, and hinting at Nebuchadnezzar's casting of the three youths into a fire from which they were saved, only here they are Jewish *Scriptures* rather than youths.

Examples of Holy *words* miraculously surviving a fire may also be found in early Muslim sources. The most important of these is the *ḥadīth* related by Abū 'Ubayd, on the authority of 'Uqbah ibn 'Āmir, who is reported as having heard the Prophet Muḥammad say: "If the Qur'ān were on an untanned hide and then thrown into a fire, it would not burn." Perhaps unsurprisingly, this *ḥadīth* generated a considerable amount of debate between those scholars who chose to interpret it literally (hence the Qur'ān can miraculously survive fire) and those whose

⁶³ In the Babylonian Talmud (*Mo'ed Qaṭan* 25a) the letters of the Torah are compared to human souls, which may be of relevance here.

⁶⁴ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'riḫ*, vol. 1, 70–71; translated in *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qūbī: An English Translation, Volume 2*, 327–328 (emphasis mine.). Contrast this version of events with the one provided by al-Ṭabarī, in which Nebuchadnezzar indeed burned the Torah, and its contents were returned to the Jews during the time of Ezra not by retrieving the miraculously intact scrolls but through an angel's intervention, after which "the Torah presented itself in [Ezra's] chest" (*fa-mathalat al-tawrāh fī ṣadrihi*; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, vol. 1, 669–670).

more rational approach (for the assertion of imperviousness to fire can be readily tested and disproved) led them to interpret it allegorically.⁶⁵

Another example comes from one of the early Muslim treatments of the Martyrs of Najrān episode, which these authors connect to Q 85:4–10. In this version of the story, transmitted by Ibn Hishām, a local magician (*sāḥir*) was teaching magic to the children of Najrān. A ‘believer’ by the name of Faymiyyūn set up a tent on the children’s route to their magic lessons, in which Faymiyyūn would pray. One child took an interest in this man and his prayers and converted to monotheism (thereby abandoning his magic-studies). The child requested that Faymiyyūn teach him the “greatest name of God”, but he refused to do so. Thus, we are told, the boy wrote all the names of God on arrows and shot them into a fire. Only the arrow with God’s greatest name survived and in this way the boy came to know what the name was. There is much of interest in this story, not least of which are the many parallels between the full version of the narrative and traditions about Daniel.⁶⁶ In fact, the various back-stories given in classical Muslim sources for the Martyrs of Najrān episode⁶⁷ have considerably more to do with *Daniel* 1–6 than they do with accounts of the Martyrs of Najrān: the accounts make reference to court magicians; to a monotheist who prays publicly to the annoyance of the magicians or the king, and who defeats a lion with God’s assistance; to a holy object that is impervious to fire; to three believers who are killed by a tyrant; and in most versions the evil king eventually converts to the true religion.⁶⁸ Virtually none of these elements features in Christian accounts of the Martyrs of Najrān, but all of them may be traced to Daniel stories, with Dhū Nuwās replacing Nebuchadnezzar as the persecuting ruler.

⁶⁵ On this debate, see T. ZADEH, “‘Fire Cannot Harm It’: Mediation, Temptation, and the Charismatic Power of the Quran”, *Journal of Quranic Studies* 10ii (2008): 50–72, esp. pp. 54 ff.

⁶⁶ According to *Yosippon*, for instance, Daniel’s [illicit] public prayers (*Daniel* 6) were witnessed not by jealous courtiers but rather by a child playing outside of his house. For the possible Coptic Christian background to the Faymiyyūn accounts, see G. NEWBY, “An Example of Coptic Literary Influence on Ibn Ishāq’s *Sirah*”, *JNES* 31i (1972): 22–28. Faymiyyūn’s story has been made into an Egyptian children’s animated film (*Riḥlat al-Khulūd*; English title: “The Boy and the King”, Astrolabe Pictures, 1992).

⁶⁷ For these, see COOK, “The *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*”, and JEFFERY, “Christianity in South Arabia”.

⁶⁸ David COOK, who analysed these traditions, is stumped by the reference to the tyrant’s conversion in these stories (“The *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*”, 139), but it is wholly understandable in the context of *Daniel* 1–6, where Nebuchadnezzar is repeatedly won over by the Jews and their God, in one case even converting outright (*Daniel* 4:31 ff.).

Dhū Nuwās and the Fire Ordeal of Najrān

Until now, it has been assumed that Muslim sources – from the Qurʾān onwards – understood the Martyrs of Najrān episode in the way that Christian sources related it. Determining whether Q 85:4–10 is about a ‘miracle’ (*Daniel* 3) or a ‘martyrdom’ (Martyrs of Najrān) presupposes that the latter case could only be understood from the Christian perspective, that is to say, as a case of believers being martyred by an unbeliever. And yet, along the way we have encountered evidence that this may not in fact be the case. The Qurʾān does not distinguish between ‘believing’ Christians and ‘unbelieving’ Jews; the narratives of the Martyrs of Najrān story in Muslim sources are often closer to *Daniel* stories than to Christian accounts of this event; and in any case the Christian accounts do not refer to the martyrs being burned in a ‘pit’ (or the like).

In fact, bearing in mind the foregoing discussion of miraculous salvation from fire in Jewish, Iranian, and Arabian contexts, we may not be surprised to discover that some Muslim authors understand Dhū Nuwās’s actions against the Christians of Najrān differently. Al-Dīnawarī’s account of this episode, encountered earlier, opens with some background information of Dhū Nuwās’s own religious history:

The story of Dhū Nuwās. Dhū Nuwās and his people had, in the land of Yemen, a fire that they would worship. From this fire would emerge a neck (*ʿunq*) that stretched out to a length of three parasangs and would then retract to within [the fire]. Some Jews who were in Yemen said to Dhū Nuwās, “O King, your worship of this fire is pointless. Were you to join our religion we would extinguish it, with God’s help, so that you could learn that you are in error in your [choice of] religion.” The king replied: “I will join their religion if they manage to extinguish it.” So when the neck emerged they brought their Torah, opening it up, and began reading from it, and the fire was pushed back, allowing them to reach the [fire]temple where [the neck] was, and they continued to read the Torah until the fire was extinguished. Dhū Nuwās then became Jewish and called on the people of Yemen to become Jewish, and whoever refused was killed ...⁶⁹

Two points regarding this passage should be clear to us by now. First, a version of the story about the ‘two rabbis’ who converted the earlier South Arabian king Ṭubbaʿ II is here associated with Dhū Nuwās. Second, the latter adhered to the ‘Arabian’ principle that success in a fire ordeal is proof of a religion’s truth. In a tantalizing version of the story, Ḥamza al-Ṣfahānī (p. 133) suggests that what Dhū Nuwās was actually doing to the Christians of Najrān was challenging their theology to a traditional, Arabian duel:

⁶⁹ Al-Dīnawarī, *al-Akhhbār al-Ṭiwāl*, 62–63.

Dhu Nuwas was the Companion of the Ukhdūd, and the one who called to those who were in Yemen to become Jewish. He had been in Yathrib and was impressed by Judaism (*a‘jabathu*) so he became Jewish. The Jews of Yathrib urged him to raid Najrān in order to subject the Christians there to an ‘inquisition’ (*li-‘imtiḥān man bihā min al-naṣārā*). For they had received Christianity from a man who came to them from amongst the Jafnids who ruled in Syria. He (Dhū Nuwās) went from there (Yathrib) to them and exposed them to pits (*akhādīd*), which he dug in the earth and filled with fire. He submerged⁷⁰ into [these pits] whoever stuck to their Christianity...⁷¹

According to Simeon of Beth Arsham’s version of the events, Dhū Nuwās’s persecution of the Christians turned on the nature of Jesus as he could not accept their belief that Jesus was not merely a man.⁷² (As far as the Qur’ān is concerned, on this point it is Dhū Nuwās who is the ‘believer’, not the Christians.) Perhaps, then, it is an oversimplification to take the Christian martyrologies at face value – this being a genre that does not normally reflect detached history – and rather than seeing in Dhū Nuwās a crazed anti-Christian, seeking to settle some political or religious score with Christians/Christianity/the Byzantines, we may interpret his actions in Najrān against the backdrop of his own experiences and of Arabian inter-religious rivalries more generally: just as the Jews defeated his own theology in a fire-ordeal, leading him to abandon his traditional beliefs and adopt theirs, Dhū Nuwās expected the Christians of Najrān to abandon their belief in Jesus’s divinity upon failing a fire ordeal. After all, this is how things worked in Arabia.⁷³

This is not to say that such considerations went through Dhū Nuwās’s own mind, only that Q 85:4–10’s [Arabic] author and [Arabian] audience may have understood the Najrān episode in this way rather than as praiseworthy tale of Christian martyrdom at the hands of Jews.

⁷⁰ The edition has *‘.r.f.*, which I prefer to read as *gh.r.q.*, ‘submerge’.

⁷¹ Ḥamza al-Ṣfahānī, *Ta’rikh*, 133.

⁷² JEFFERY, “Christianity in South Arabia”: “And we said to them, “We are not demanding of you that you deny God, the maker of heaven and earth, nor that you worship the sun or the moon or other luminous bodies, or any other creature, but that you deny Jesus, He who considered Himself as God, and say only that He is man and not God.”

⁷³ In fact, it is how things worked in *Daniel* too, where time and again Nebuchadnezzar abandoned his anti-Jewish beliefs, and expressed his admiration for the God of the Jews (in the case of *Daniel* 4, even converting to Judaism) upon witnessing God’s miracles.

Might Q 85: 4–10 be reflecting the Christian exception?

Bearing in mind the Jewish, Iranian and Arabian evidence from Late Antiquity, it would seem that martyrdom in fire as a sign of piety was a particularly Christian concept.⁷⁴ The experiences of Jesus and of early Christians, and in the context of Late Antiquity, the Christian martyrologies from Sasanid Persia, all contribute to the impression that Christian thought can accommodate stories of the innocent/righteous/virtuous being tortured for their faith in a positive way, rather than interpreting such episodes as evidence for the religion's futility. Accordingly, Q 85:4–10 may derive from Christian accounts and the verses may refer to believers who were burned in the *Ukhdūd*, but who will be rewarded in the Hereafter for their martyrdom (while their tormentors will be punished).

There are two problems with this reading of the episode. First, it is not so simple that 'Christianity' (in its many varieties) preferred martyrdom in fire over miraculous extrication from it. Second, Q 85 in particular, and Meccan sūrahs in general, largely convey a message of reward and punishment in this world, rather than delayed compensation in the next one. We will address each of these points in turn.

Christian sources are not unanimous in conveying the message of 'martyrdom' over 'miracle'. In the case of the Romans' persecution of Polycarp (d. 155), the Bishop of Smyrna, for instance, we hear the following:

And when [Polycarp] had offered up the 'Amen' and finished his prayer, the men [attending] the pyre lit the fire. And when a great flame blazed forth, we – to whom it was granted to see – saw a *miracle*. And we were preserved in order to announce to the rest the things that happened.

For the fire made the form of a vault, as a ship's sail filled by the wind, walling around the body of the martyr. And it was in the middle not as flesh burning, but as bread baking, or as gold and silver refined in a furnace. For we also experienced such strong fragrance, like a waft of incense or some other of the precious spices.

Eventually, when the lawless ones saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they ordered an executioner who had approached him to plunge a dagger...⁷⁵

⁷⁴ This is not, of course, to say that the concept does not exist in Judaism. In fact, the distinction between 'Jewish' and 'Christian' attitudes to martyrdom (generally) is complex. On this, see e.g. D. BOYARIN, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Judaism and Christianity*, Stanford, Ca., 1999.

⁷⁵ P. Hartog (ed.), *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text and Commentary*, Oxford, 2013, sections 15.1 – 16.1 (261ff.); and see Hartog's analysis on pp. 311–312 (emphasis mine).

Interestingly, while Polycarp *was* a martyr, as he died willingly for his faith, his persecutors are *not* able to harm him with fire, from which he is protected through divine intervention. We thus have both martyrdom *and* miracle, but crucially the latter refers to imperviousness to immolation. Another Christian account, which dates from the eve of Islam, is related by Evagrius (d. 594), as follows:

It is an old custom in the imperial city, that, when there remains over a considerable quantity of the holy fragments of the immaculate body of Christ our God, boys of tender age should be fetched from among those who attend the schools, to eat them. On one occasion of this kind, there was included among them the son of a glass-worker, a Jew by faith; who, in reply to the inquiries of his parents respecting the cause of his delay, told them what had taken place, and what he had eaten in company with the other boys. The father, in his indignation and fury, placed the boy in the furnace where he used to mould the glass. The mother, unable to find her child, wandered over the city with lamentations and wailings; and on the third day, standing by the door of her husband's workshop, was calling upon the boy by name, tearing herself in her sorrow. *He, recognizing his mother's voice, answered her from within the furnace, and she, bursting open the doors, saw, on her entrance, the boy standing in the midst of the coals, and untouched by the fire. On being asked how he had continued unhurt, he said that a woman in a purple robe had frequently visited him, that she had offered him water, and with it had quenched that part of the coals which was nearest to him; and that she had supplied him with food as often as he was hungry.* Justinian, on the report of this occurrence, placed the boy and his mother in the orders of the church, after they had been enlightened by the laver of regeneration. But the father, on his refusal to be numbered among the Christians, he ordered to be impaled in the suburb of Sycae, as being the murderer of his child. Such was the course of these occurrences.⁷⁶

As in the case of Polycarp's story, this account does not fit our categories neatly: On the one hand, it seems to be another 'Jewish' story of miraculous survival in a furnace. On the other hand, clearly this boy's Judaism is not the reason for his survival – on the contrary, the miracle is attributed to his partaking in *Christian* rituals, and the unbelieving persecutor is his *Jewish* father (who is killed at the end of the story). The boy and his mother are converted to Christianity following his miraculous survival and it is thus a sort of Christian version of *Daniel 3*, complete with the mysterious figure who joins the youth in the furnace.

A third example of a Christian's miraculous salvation from a tyrant's immolation comes from the cycle of stories regarding St. George. The Coptic accounts of this popular saint's martyrdom include reference to his being cast for his faith into a boiling cauldron by the unbelieving ruler, only to survive the torture.⁷⁷ In

⁷⁶ Evagrius (d. 594), *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. E. Walford, London, 1846, book 4, chapter 36 (emphasis mine).

⁷⁷ E. Wallis Budge (ed./trans.), *The Martyrdom and Miracles of Saint George of Cappadocia: The Coptic Texts*, London, 1888, 208 and 214 ff.

this text, however, the trial by burning is only one in a series of tortures that St. George survives, having refused to ‘offer a sacrifice ... to the gods and to Apollo’. It is interesting, therefore, that in al-Ṭabarī’s version of this story, ‘Jirjis’ is Daniel-ised: here we are told that the tyrant demanded that Jirjis bow (*sajada*) to his idol, or be cast into a fire (*nār*), echoing *Daniel* 3.⁷⁸ In any event, in both the Christian versions and in al-Ṭabarī’s account, the hero is indeed eventually martyred, but not before miraculously surviving a tyrant’s attempt to burn him.

One also encounters Christian anecdotes about holy men using holy items miraculously to repel a persecutor’s fire, just as the two rabbis in South Arabian stories use their scriptures in a similar way. An example of this comes from the Persian martyrology of Gubarlaha and Qazō, which relates how two of the Sasanid ruler’s children converted from Zoroastrianism to Christianity in the fourth-century CE.⁷⁹ In this case, a Mobed threatened the two converts’ teacher, Dado, with a fire, but Dado made the sign of a cross and the fire retreated nine cubits from him. Again, as in the case of Polycarp, the heroes of the story are eventually martyred, but here too it is not before miracles saving the Christians from fire are effected.

‘Martyrdom’ vs. ‘Miracle’ in Meccan Sūrahs

The fact that virtually all the relevant cultural and religious traditions in the Near East on the eve of Islam tended to favour a theological message of ‘miraculous extrication of believers from fire’ rather than their martyrdom through immolation, and that even Christian accounts of martyrs could also include vignettes of this nature, does not necessarily mean that the Qur’ān, too, seeks to convey the same theological point. After all, much of the Qur’ān argues against prevalent religious beliefs and practices, including those of Jews, Christians, ‘Arabian’ pagans, and perhaps even Zoroastrians. Why, then, are we to assume that Q 85:4–10 is following, rather than bucking, Near Eastern religious trends in this case? The answer to this comes both from post-Qur’ānic Muslim traditions that continue to relate stories of the virtuous surviving in fire ordeals, through divine intervention, and from the Qur’ān’s message – at least in the Meccan period – which generally stresses that punishment of unbelievers takes place in this world, rather than being delayed to the Hereafter.

Beginning with post-Qur’ānic traditions, two examples will suffice to demonstrate the point. The first concerns Abū Muslim al-Khawlānī (d. 684), a well-known

⁷⁸ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’riḫ*, vol. 1, 796.

⁷⁹ In P. BEDJAN, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, Paris and Leipzig, 1890–1897, vol. 4, 143–144.

Muslim ascetic of Yemeni origin. The story is told that al-Khawlānī was in Yemen during the reign of Abū Bakr (r. 632–634), when false prophets emerged throughout Arabia following the death of Muḥammad. In this case, the false prophet al-Aswad al-ʿAnsī demanded that al-Khawlānī accept his prophethood, which he refused to do. Al-ʿAnsī thus cast al-Khawlānī into a fire, but the latter emerged from it unscathed and fled to Medina. There, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb is said to have met him, heard his story, and taken him to meet the caliph Abū Bakr. Al-Khawlānī explained that he managed to survive the fire by uttering the same verses that Abraham uttered when cast into Nimrod’s furnace.⁸⁰ That the fire ordeal took place in South Arabia (Yemen) brings this story into line with the earlier materials discussed, from Yoqṭan’s casting of Abraham in the furnace onwards.

The second example comes not from Sunni sources pertaining to Arabia in the Rāshidūn period, but from Shiʿa sources from early ʿAbbāsīd times. The Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq is said to have effected a number of miracles, some of which bear tantalizing similarities to the stories of Daniel and his companions related in *Daniel* 1–6. One such miracle is described as follows:

Sahl b. Ḥasan al-Khurāsānī asked the Imam why he did not go to war to obtain his rights, although there were many Shiites who would be willing to fight for him. Al-Ṣādiq did not answer this question directly, and asked Sahl to sit down and told his servant to heat the oven. *When the oven was very hot, he told Sahl to sit inside it.* Sahl was frightened and asked the Imam to forgive him for his question. Al-Ṣādiq forgave him and while the two were speaking, Hārūn al-Makkī arrived at the Imam’s house. *Al-Ṣādiq then told him to sit in the oven and he obeyed. After some time, al-Ṣādiq told Sahl to look inside the oven. He did this and saw Hārūn alive and well sitting inside the oven.*

This is followed by a related story, this time involving the Imam’s own resistance to fire:

[The Caliph] al-Manṣūr sent Ḥasan b. Zayd (d. 784–785), the governor of Mecca and Medina, to burn down al-Ṣādiq’s house. The fire spread through the house and al-Ṣādiq came out, walking among the flames saying, ‘I am the son of *A ʿrāq al-tharā*,⁸¹ I am the son of Ibrāhīm the friend of God (*Khalīl Allāh*).’⁸²

⁸⁰ On this see al-Tamīmī, *Kitāb al-miḥan*, Beirut, 1988, 358–359; A.M. AL-SALLAABI, *Umar ibn al-Khattab: His Life and Times*, Riyadh, 2007, vol. 1, 146–147; G.H.A. JUYNBOLL, *EP* s.v. ‘al-Khawlānī, Abū Muslim’, vol. 4, 1135.

⁸¹ This phrase (sing. *ʿirq al-tharā*) has been used since pre-Islamic times with reference to forefathers such as ‘Adam’ and ‘Ishmael’ (see E. W. LANE, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, London, 1863, 2019 (s.v. ʿ-*r-q*)).

⁸² J. LOEBENSTEIN, “Miracles in Ṣīʿī Thought: A Case-Study of the Miracles Attributes to the Imam Gaʿfar al-Ṣādiq”, *Arabica* 50 (2003): 199–244 at pp. 236–237 (emphasis mine).

Other such stories abound in later Arab-Islamic literature,⁸³ and the point is that the revelation of the Qur'ān, and the rise of Islam more generally, did not represent a shift away from a theology of fire-miracles and towards fire-martyrdom.

The situation of the Q 85:4–10 episode in sūrah 85, and in the context of the Meccan revelations more broadly, also supports the interpretation of this episode in terms of worldly reward and punishment; accordingly, it is those who persecute believers who are burned in the verses, whereas the believers are miraculously saved, as in *Daniel* 3.

Both Noeldeke-Schwally and Muslim tradition agree that Q 85 is a Meccan sūrah, and a relatively early one at that. Meccan sūrahs are characterized, amongst other things, by their frequent reference to 'punishment stories', narratives concerning past nations who were punished for their disbelief. Most of these stories include reference to a messenger, sent to warn the sinning nation, only for that messenger to be shunned and the nation destroyed, although some (particularly the earliest such accounts) do not mention a messenger and simply allude cursorily to a past nation of unbelievers whom God had destroyed.⁸⁴ In the middle- and late-Meccan period the punishment stories are referred to more frequently and in greater detail, often presented in a chain of consecutive punishment stories. Related to this is the frequent reference to God's having destroyed past generations (without specifying who they were), and to the expectation that people travel throughout the lands and see for themselves the remnants of those unbelieving peoples whom God has destroyed.

All this is meant to stress the fact that the message repeatedly stressed in the Meccan period to which Q 85 belongs is that disbelievers have been and are punished physically, in this world. Indeed, Q 85 contains two halves: the first deals with the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd* with whom we have been concerned; the second

83 See, e. g. L. JAYYUSI, *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan: An Arab Folk Epic*, Bloomington, 1996, 143–144, where Sayf's wife lived in a dome, tending to a sacred sheep. Having been told that she gave birth to a son, we then hear that, "One night, as she sat nursing her baby, the candle she had lit burned through and she fetched another; but the old one she had cast out through the window struck some dry alfa grass setting it ablaze. There were barrels of oil beside them and piles of lumber, and so the fire blazed until it engulfed the city. The place was in an uproar as people fought the flames, and many places were destroyed and much devastation wrought. But the dome that housed the sheep remained untouched." Other examples come from M. C. LYONS, *The Arabian Epic: Volume 3, Texts: Heroic and Oral Storytelling*, Cambridge, 1995, 275–276, 419, and 476 (fire-ordeals in the context of inter-religious rivalries); and idem, *The Arabian Epic: Volume 2, Analysis: Heroic and Oral Story-telling*, Cambridge, 1995, 188 (where a Muslim woman manages to pass a 'Magian' fire-ordeal by praying).

84 Such early, allusive accounts include Q 105; 91:11–5; 85:17–20; 73:15–6; 79:15–26; 89:6–14; 53:50–4; 69:4–12; 51:24–46. And see, generally, *EQ*, s. v. 'Punishment stories'.

(Q 85:17–22) with the people of “Pharaoh and Thamūd”, who disbelieved and were punished by God (in this world).⁸⁵ Bearing all this in mind, the Meccan context generally and the Q 85 context particularly combine to advocate for understanding Q 85:4–10 as the story of unbelievers who were punished (‘slain’, *qutila*) for seeking to persecute those who believe in God.

To this may be added the fact that disbelievers from the Bible to the Qur’ān are often punished specifically by means of fire. In the Hebrew Bible, we hear of Aaron’s sons being killed by a divine fire for sinning with their sacrifices (*Leviticus* 10:1–2); of the people of Sodom and Gomorra destroyed by ‘brimstone and fire’ (*Genesis* 19; and cf. *Luke* 17:28–30); and of the 250 rebels who supported Korah against Moses being devoured by a Heavenly fire (*Numbers* 16:35). The Qur’ān, too, refers to fire of many sorts as a common divine punishment: the people of ‘the Thicket’ (*al-Ayka*), of Thamūd, of Lot, of Noah, and of Pharaoh – to name but a few examples – are all said to have been destroyed by ‘fire’, with the waters that killed Noah and Pharaoh in the Bible being given the secondary feature of being ‘burning’ (*ujāj*; Q 25:53 and 35:12) in the case of Pharaoh, and fired-up in an oven (*tannūr*; Q 23:27) in the case of the Deluge. In Jewish law, *serefa* (‘burning’) is one of four means of capital punishment, and in the various Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Arabian materials surveyed above, a guilty party is one who does not emerge unscathed (if at all) from a fire-ordeal. Indeed, a Ḥadīth attributed to the Prophet has it that only God can punish with fire,⁸⁶ an apparent reference to the fact that some on earth practice capital punishment through burning,⁸⁷ and to the fact that God burns those who deserve punishment (not martyrdom).

85 For an astute analysis of Q 85, see A. NEUWIRTH, *Der Koran, vol. 1: Poetische Prophetie: Frühmekkanische Suren*, Berlin, 2011, 330–344; and eadem, *Studien*, 222–223 (for reference to the sūrah’s “complex composition”).

86 “Only the Lord of fire punishes with fire”, in e.g. *Sunan Abī Dā’ūd*, Beirut, 1985, § 2673. On this, see Ch. SAHNER, *Christian Martyrs under Islam*, Princeton, 2018, 176 ff., esp. 178 and 187. For a modern debate over the use of fire in early Islamic executions, despite this ḥadīth’s stipulation, see: <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/227776/why-did-the-sahaabah-use-burning-with-fire-as-a-punishment-for-some-crimes> (last accessed December 11, 2018).

87 On the use of immolation as a punishment during the Umayyad period, see A. MARSHAM, “Attitudes to the Use of Fire in Execution in Late Antiquity and Early Islam: The Burning of Heretics in Umayyad Iraq”, in R. Gleave and I. T. Kristo-Nagy (eds.), *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Qur’an to the Mongols*, Edinburgh, 2015, 106–127, esp. p. 108 n. 4. For immolation in the context of other punishments in Early Islamic history, see A. MARSHAM, “Public Execution in the Umayyad Period: Early Islamic Punitive Practice in its Late Antique Context”, *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 11 (2011): 101–136, esp. nos. 2, 4, 14, and 39 in the Appendix. It is worth pointing out that the Umayyads employed immolation specifically in cases of heresy, that is to say, what they deemed to be incorrect religious belief, just as Dhū Nuwās and others before them.

Summary of Part I

Taking all of this together, it is unlikely that the Qurʾān would associate the ‘believers’ of Q 85:4–10 with burning (which is reserved for sinners), and it is more probable that in an early Meccan sūrah God would describe a worldly punishment for unbelievers than otherworldly retribution, though references to the latter do of course exist.⁸⁸ Given the choice between the *Daniel* 3 and Martyrs of Najrān episodes as the historical events referenced in Q 85:4–10, it seems clear that it is the former that conforms to the Qurʾān’s theological message in the Meccan period, and the various linguistic connections drawn earlier between *Daniel* 3 and Q 85:4–10 strengthen the association between the two texts.

Part II: The Eschatological reading and the Etymology of *al-Ukhdūd*

Although the overwhelming majority of classical Muslim and modern Western scholars have read Q 85:4–10 as referring either to the Martyrs of Najrān episode or that of the three youths in *Daniel* 3, over the past century, support has grown for a different reading of the passage, according to which the ‘Pit’/*Ukhdūd* does not refer to an earthly location but to Hell. Accordingly, the passage is to be read as a reference to the sinners (who are ‘the Men of the Pit’, v. 4) who are destined to be burned (in the ‘fire abounding in fuel’, v. 5) for having tormented believers (vv. 7–8). While this reading is no later than HOROVITZ,⁸⁹ Marc PHILONENKO has strengthened the argument for this interpretation of the passage by pointing out that ‘Men of the Pit’ (*aneshey ha-Shaḥat* or *beney ha-Shaḥat*) is a phrase used in the Qumran scrolls with reference to those bound for hellfire.⁹⁰ Moreover, PARET has pointed out that the combination of ‘fire’ (*nār*) and ‘fuel’ (*waqūd*), which appear together in Q 85:5, occurs elsewhere in the Qurʾān with reference to

⁸⁸ E.g. Q 92:14 ff.; 82:13 ff.; 89:25 f.; and some others. Indeed, with reference to Q 85 itself, verses 10–11 specify punishment in hellfire (*‘adhāb Jahannam* and *‘adhāb al-ḥarīq*) and reward in “gardens beneath which the rivers flow” (*jannāt tajrī min taḥtihā al-anhār*). That said, there are reasons (word choice and verse length, in particular) to suspect that these verses are later additions (on which see A. NEUWIRTH, *Der Koran: vol. 1*, 330 ff.). I owe this reference and the ideas more generally to Nicolai Sinai.

⁸⁹ HOROVITZ, “Jewish Proper Names”.

⁹⁰ M. PHILONENKO, “Une expression qumranienne dans le Coran”, *Atti del Terzo Congresso di Studi Arabi e Islamici, Ravello 1–6 settembre, 1966*, Naples, 1967, 553–556.

sinners in hellfire (Q 2:24; 66:6; and 3:10).⁹¹ This reading of the episode is gaining supporters and has now all but replaced earlier, ‘historical’ interpretations of the passage in reference works.⁹² Few are the scholars who engage with this interpretation but choose to reject it.⁹³

Despite the progress made in understanding the meaning of *al-Ukhdūd*’s eschatological context, the etymology of the word has confounded scholars. In this section, we will offer some points of relevance to our understanding of the origins of this word, following which the connection between the word’s etymology and the question of Q 85:4–10’s meaning will be established. It will be argued that this passage does, indeed, refer to the punishment of sinners in hellfire, but that it does so by employing a *historiola* from *Daniel* 3.

Do Qumran texts refer to the ‘Men of the Pit’?

The recent trend to re-read our passage as referring to an eschatological pit is based, as noted, on PHILONENKO’s marshalling of Qumran evidence for the existence of just such a phrase in Second Temple Judaism. The key phrase is *beney* or *aneshey ha-Shaḥat*.⁹⁴ Strictly speaking, however, this phrase literally means ‘men/people of Destruction’, or ‘men/people of Corruption’.⁹⁵ (In the latter sense, the term parallels the Qur’ānic *fasād*, with those who spread such corruptions (*mufsidūna*) being destined for Hell.) The double meaning of the Hebrew root *sh.ḥ.t* features in Biblical wordplay when introducing the Deluge. *Genesis* 6:10–13 reads as follows:

⁹¹ R. PARET, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, Stuttgart 1971, 506. It must, however, be noted that all three examples cited by PARET refer to Medinan sūrahs that are later than Q 85. See also, M. KROPP, “Koranische Texte als Sprechakte, am Beispiel der Sure 85”, in M. Gross and K-H Ohlig (eds.), *Vom Koran zum Islam*, Berlin, 2009, 483–491, at p. 489.

⁹² *EF* s.v. ‘Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd’ (R. PARET); *EQ* s.v. ‘al-Ukhdūd’ (Ch. ROBIN); A. DROGE, *The Qur’an: An Annotated Translation*, 429 ad Q 85:3; G.S. REYNOLDS, *The Quran and the Bible*, New Haven, 2018, . 899.

⁹³ One example is Sh. AL-HASAN, “Fresh Looks at Ancient Christians of Najrān and Present Religious Dialogues”, *Islamic Studies* 16iv (1977): 367–375, at pp. 368–370. AL-HASAN follows Muslim exegetical traditions in interpreting Q 85:4–10 as a reference to the Martyrs of Najrān episode. See also, SAHNER, *Christian Martyrs under Islam*, 185.

⁹⁴ The phrase occurs in e.g. *The Damascus Document* 4:12–19; 6:11 – 7:1; and 13:14; and *The Community Rule* 10:19.

⁹⁵ The closest equating of *shaḥat* with a ‘pit’ is in *Psalms* 94:13, where *shaḥat* is ‘dug’ for the wicked.

And Noah begot three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And the earth was corrupt (*sh.h.t*) before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold it was corrupt (*sh.h.t*); for all flesh had corrupted (*sh.h.t*) their way upon the earth. And God said unto Noah: “The end of all flesh is come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy (*sh.h.t*) them with the earth.”

The ‘men of *shaḥat*’ are indeed evil, and they will indeed be punished, but they are not literally men of ‘the Pit’. Interestingly, in the Babylonian Talmud (*Eruvin* 19a) it is mentioned that Hell has seven names, two of which, *be’er shaḥat* and *bor she’on*, are of interest to us. The former means ‘the well of destruction/corruption’, the latter means ‘the tumultuous pit’.⁹⁶ What emerges here is that although *Shaḥat* is associated with a well, and although a synonym for Hell that occurs alongside the ‘well of *Shaḥat*’ refers to a ‘pit’, the *beney* or *aneshey ha-Shaḥat* are not necessarily the ‘Men of the Pit’ at all.

Does *Ukhdūd* mean ‘Pit’?

The literal meaning of *Ukhdūd* is problematic in a number of ways. First, as seen, even the classical Muslim tradition that assumes that the phrase refers to pit(s) is unsure as to whether the word is singular (pl. *akhādīd*) or plural (sing. *khadd*). Second, as mentioned, the vocalization of the word is uncertain: While the initial ‘u’ is usually taken as a given, HAYAJNEH has argued, on the basis of South Arabian philology, that an initial ‘a’ is more likely. Hence, the word would be *Akhdūd*. Third, the word is a *hapax legomenon* in the Qur’ān, it does not appear to be attested in Jāhili poetry,⁹⁷ nor does it have clear cognates in other Semitic languages.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ The ‘tumultuous pit’ is a reference to *Psalms* 40:3, “He brought me up out of the tumultuous pit”.

⁹⁷ I base this sweeping and, in the absence of thorough concordances, unprovable assertion on the fact that classical Arabic dictionaries do not cite such verses in explaining this relatively rare term. The earliest reference to *Ukhdūd* in poetry that I have found appears in verses attributed to the Umayyad-era Dhū al-Rummaḥ (in Ibn Hishām, *The Life of Muhammad*, 695 n. 30), where *ukhdūd* means ‘canal’.

⁹⁸ Attempts to relate it to an Akkadian verb *ḥadādum* meaning ‘to cut deeply’ (HAYAJNEH, “Arabian Languages”, 135) are unconvincing, not least because making an incision – deep though it may be – does not seem to be the sort of activity that produces trenches or pits (for which there are much better suited Akkadian verbs, such as *ḥarāṣu*, *ḥarāṣu*, or *ḥepēru*). *The Assyrian Dictionary (CAD)*, Chicago, 1956, vol. 6, p. 22, s. v. ‘ḥadādu’ actually renders this verb as ‘to roar, rumble, chatter’. Interestingly, the latter range of meanings might suit ancient Jewish and Christian descriptions of Hell, and perhaps also Qur’ānic descriptions of the Day of Judgment in general (e. g. Q 101, *al-Qāri’ah*).

Serjeant’s assertion that a clue to the word’s meaning comes from Yemeni farmers with whom he spoke, who use the word ‘*khadūd*’ to mean ‘narrow fields’,⁹⁹ is hardly useful to us: These twentieth-century Yemenis were Muslims who had been exposed to the Qur’ān, and ‘narrow fields’ would not fit the Qur’ānic context anyway.

In fact, allowing – as Hayajneh suggests – a vocalization of *Akhdūd* opens up to us a number of plausible etymologies for the term. In her study of the origins of the *Daniel* 1–6 stories, Tawny HOLM has argued persuasively that the episode of the trial-by-fire in *Daniel* 3 is based on Egyptian court tales in which a king punishes/tests rebellious enemies in a furnace.¹⁰⁰ Crucially, the word for ‘furnace’ in all of the relevant texts is ‘*akh*’.¹⁰¹ This word entered Hebrew in Biblical times – it appears for instance in *Jeremiah* 36, where it refers to the furnace into which Jeremiah’s scrolls were cast (as discussed above), and the term has survived with the meaning of furnace or brazier until modern times. There is, therefore, no need to envisage the transition of an Egyptian word into the Qur’ān, as the word was already established in Hebrew, and in contexts of direct relevance to our passage.

Even if we assume that the word ‘*akh*’ is related to the Qur’ān’s *Akhdūd*, however, we must account for the second half of the compound, ‘*dūd*’. This word is also prevalent in Hebrew and Aramaic in pre-Islamic times, with the meaning of ‘pot’, or ‘large kettle’.¹⁰² In *2 Kings* (10:7), for instance, the heads of 70 enemies are placed in *dūds*. This word appears to have become used increasingly in Late Antiquity, and in contexts that are relevant to us. *Zechariah* 5:5–11 describes the vision of ‘the woman in the *ephah*’ (a large measuring-urn). The prophet describes an evil woman being cast into this urn, and it being sealed with a lead seal (just as *Daniel* 6:18 describes Daniel being cast into the Lion’s Den, which was sealed with a large stone). Then, the seal was removed and instead of one woman emerging, *two* women did so. This closely resembles *Daniel* 3, where the three Jews were cast into the furnace, but when the king checked he saw four men walking in it. Significantly, in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 64a), when the

⁹⁹ R. SERJEANT, “Ukhdūd”, *BSOAS* 22i (1959): 572–576.

¹⁰⁰ T.L. HOLM, *Of Courtiers and Kings: The Biblical Daniel Narratives and Ancient Story-Collections*, Winona Lake, Ind., 2013, esp. pp. 331–479; and eadem, “The Fiery Furnace in the Book of Daniel and the Ancient Near East”, *JAOS* 128i (2008): 85–104. See also, P-A. BEAULIEU, “The Babylonian Background of the Motif of the Fiery Furnace in Daniel 3”, *JBL* 128ii (2009): 273–290, at p. 279–80, where Egyptian parallels are cited (despite the author’s argument in favour of a Babylonian context for the *Daniel* 3 story).

¹⁰¹ See e.g. R.K. RITNER, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, Chicago, 1993, 185 ff.

¹⁰² In Syriac, *dūd* means “a kettle, a great iron pot” (J. PAYNE-SMITH, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, Oxford, 1903, 85, s.v.).

rabbis recount this episode in *Zechariah*, rather than using the word *ephah* for the urn into which the woman was cast, they render it *dūd*. Moreover, as we will see below, in Second Temple texts, Satan is said to be cast to a place called *Dūdael*, literally “God’s cauldron”. Bearing in mind the possible relevance of both *’akh* and *dūd* to *Daniel* 3-type contexts, it may be that when combined in a compound, these words would mean ‘the furnace (*’akh*) of *Dūdael*’.¹⁰³

Alternatively, the meaning of *dūd* may come from Middle Persian: already in Sasanid times, if not earlier, *dūd* meant ‘smoke’,¹⁰⁴ which would suit the context of burning furnaces well. That the Jews of Sasanid Babylonian employed numerous Persianisms in their otherwise Semitic texts on the eve of Islam makes this option possible if not plausible. Accordingly, *Akh-dūd* would be a smoking furnace.¹⁰⁵

Thus, taking *Daniel* 3 as the historical backdrop for Q 85:4–10, we may read Q 85:4–5 as follows: “[Slain were/shall be] the men of the smoking furnace, [of] the fire abounding in fuel”, with the Arabic [*Qutīla Aṣṣḥāb*] *al-Akhdūd al-nār dhāt al-waqūd* mirroring *Daniel* 3’s set phrase *atūn nūrā yaqidetā*, just as a ninth-century Christian translator rendered the *atūn* of *Daniel* 3 as *ukhdūd*.

‘Azazel in *Beth Ḥadūdo*

The tendency to read Q 85:4–10 eschatologically, as referring to hellfire in which sinners will burn, and not as a reference to an earthly fire in which they already have been punished by the flames, has two weaknesses. First, as discussed, it is far from certain that *A/Ukhdūd* actually means ‘Pit’, nor is it clear that the phrase “people of the *Shaḥat*” in the Qumran scrolls refers to men in the ‘Pit’ either. Second, it is curious that the entirety of the early Islamic exegetical tradition is unaware of the eschatological resonances of this passage, choosing instead to see it as referring to the Martyrs of Najrān or some other historical event. Admittedly, the latter point is not critical as there are numerous examples of the exegetes misremembering the original meaning of a Qur’ānic word, phrase, or entire passage,

103 That the ‘el’ suffix was dropped is hardly unprecedented: hence, for instance, Isaac’s name, *yīshaq*, is assumed to be shortened from *yīshaq-el* (with God as the subject), bringing it into line with the names of his brother Ishmael (*yishma’-el*) and son Jacob/Israel (*yisra-el*), and explaining why the verb is in the masculine even though it is on account of *Sarah*’s laughter that the name was supposedly formed (*Genesis* 18:12).

104 D.N. MACKENZIE, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*, London, 1971, 28, s. v. *dūd*.

105 The word would be read as a construct (*idāfa*), with the literal meaning ‘a furnace of smoke’.

or of their anecdotalising otherwise general statements in the Qur'ān.¹⁰⁶ But the combination of these two weaknesses, with the strong evidence presented above in favour of a *Daniel 3* context for the passage, militates against translating the passage's context from an earthly furnace to a heavenly one.

In fact, the mundane and eschatological approaches may be reconciled by recognizing that descriptions of Heaven and Hell largely draw on earthly scenes, which are described in exceedingly attractive terms (Heaven) or terrifying ones (Hell). For instance, there are gardens with rivers on earth; what Heaven has to offer is a version of this earthly scene magnified in its beauty.¹⁰⁷ This point is not merely a theoretical one in our case as there are examples in which the earthly scenes of torment in a fiery furnace have been translated to Hell (or vice versa).¹⁰⁸ A striking example of this comes from al-Dīnawārī's description of Dhū Nuwās's conversion story, encountered above. In that text, we are told that the people of Yemen had a fire from which a 'neck' three parasangs long would emerge. This may be compared to the numerous *ḥadīths* that describe hellfire as having a monster whose neck extends from the fire to interrogate (or, in some versions, consume) sinners.¹⁰⁹ Related to this idea is the case of the famous ascetic Rabbi Zera who, according to the Babylonian Talmud, used to climb inside a lit oven every month to ensure that he retained a high enough level of spirituality to make him impervious to hellfire.¹¹⁰ The point is that the earthly furnace was thought to simulate the one found in the Afterlife.¹¹¹

106 Hence, Q 103:2 *inna l-insāna la-fī khusr* ("Indeed, mankind is in loss"), which appears to be a general statement, is taken in some exegetical works to be a specific reference to Abū Lahab (drawn to my attention by Nicolai Sinai).

107 J. HOROVITZ (*Das koranische Paradies*, Jerusalem, 1923) has shown that Qur'ānic descriptions of Paradise draw on pre-Islamic banquet scenes portrayed in Jāhīlī poetry (drawn to my attention by Nicolai Sinai).

108 This is hinted at already in the Qur'ān, where the furnace (*bunyān*) into which Abraham is cast by the idolaters of his father's circle is referred to as being (or possessing) a *jaḥīm*. This term is generally rendered as a mundane fire, but out of the twenty-six times when it features in the Qur'ān in all but three cases it refers to hellfire.

109 On the neck emerging from hellfire, see C. LANGE, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions*, Cambridge, 2016, 110–111 (esp. sources in n. 93) and 127 (esp. sources in n. 42). See also idem "Revisiting Hell's Angels in the Quran" in idem (ed.), *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions*, Leiden, 2015, 74–99 at p. 86.

110 *Baba Meṣī'a* 85a. The story goes that he would ordinarily withstand the fire but on one occasion some rabbis cast an 'evil eye' on him and Rabbi Zera's leg was singed, for which reason he came to be known as "short and of singed-leg".

111 Similarly, as seen, the Targumic elaborations on the *Genesis 38* story of Judah and Tamar make a direct connection between the 'extinguishable' fire in this world and the 'inextinguishable' fire in the next world.

Moreover, in the apocryphal addition to *Daniel*, “The song of the three children”, the three youths praise God, saying “For he has rescued us from Hades, and saved us from the power of death; and delivered us from the midst of the burning fiery furnace, even out of the midst of the fire has he delivered us” (v. 66). In this case, salvation from the earthly furnace and from ‘Hades’ are equated.¹¹² Other examples of the association between burning (or salvation from) earthly fires and from hellfire abound, including in Islamic sources.¹¹³

For our purposes, the most important example of the close association between earthly fire and hellfire comes from the Second Temple *1 Enoch*, in which descriptions of Hell are seen to echo earthly scenes, and – in particular – to reflect the language of *Daniel* 3. Two chapters of *1 Enoch* contain passages that deserve our attention. Chapter 10:4–6 relates that,

To Raphael [God] said, “Go Raphael, and bind Asael (var. Azazel); fetter him hand and foot and cast him into darkness; make an opening in the desert which is in [the desert of] Dūdael, and there go and cast him in. And place upon him jagged and rough rocks, and cover him with darkness and let him abide there for all time, and cover his face that he may not see the light. And on the day of the great judgement he will be led off to the blazing fire.”¹¹⁴

This passage, which opens the five-chapter description of the Fall of the Angels on the eve of the Deluge (as per *Genesis* 6:1–2) in the section of *1 Enoch* known as the ‘Book of the Watchers’, refers to Asael or Azazel being cast into an opening in ‘Dūdael’. Azazel came to be equated with Satan already in ancient times: the pseudepigraphical *Apocalypse of Abraham* (early Christian era) equates Azazel with Satan (23:7), as does Origen (*Contra Celsum* 6:43), while *1 Enoch* itself (8:1) states that all sins are due to Azazel, thereby implicitly making the equation with

112 CHARLES, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 637.

113 One particularly interesting example comes from Ibn al-Munādi’s (d. 947) *Kitāb al-Malāḥim*, which contains a lengthy *Daniel*-apocalypse in which the Anti-Christ (*dajjāl*) will test people by presenting them with earthly versions of Heaven and Hell: “He had already taken kettles of brass with coal under them, and whoever refuses to believe in him, he will order him to be sent to ‘hell’ (*Jahannam*). He has a house with sheets of iron, the foundations of which are plates of iron like beds. Over the sheets there is a gigantic kettle like a cupola over these sheets, and it becomes a house of iron. Whoever he wants, he sticks in there, and orders it to be fired up below him until it becomes red-hot and is like fire. Then he orders those kettles to be filled with water and then set to a boil...Then he brings whoever does not believe in him and says to his followers: ‘Put him in hell!’ So he will be put in this house, and it will be heated up, and it will be fired up...” (In D. COOK, “An Early Muslim Daniel Apocalypse”, *Arabica* 49i (2002: 55–96 at pp. 85 ff.).

114 M. BLACK, *The Book of Enoch or 1 Enoch: A New English Edition*, Leiden, 1985, 30.

Satan.¹¹⁵ Once Azazel is in the chasm of Dūdael, we are told, jagged rocks will be piled upon him. The significance of this will be made clear below.

The second passage from *1 Enoch* comes from Chapter 54 (verses 1–6), where Enoch states:

And I turned and looked to another part of the earth, and saw there a *deep valley with burning fire*. And they brought the kings and the potentates, and cast them into this deep valley. And there my eyes saw that their fetters were being fashioned, iron chains of incalculable weight. And I asked the angel of peace who went with me, saying: ‘For whom are these fetters being prepared?’ And he said to me: ‘Those are being prepared for *the host of Azazel*, so that they may take them and cast them into the depths of hell, *and they shall cover over them with rough stones*, and the Lord of spirits commanded.’ And Michael, and Gabriel, and Raphael and Phanuel – they shall take hold of them on that great day, and *cast them on that day into the burning furnace*, that the Lord of spirits may exact *retribution* from them for their unrighteousness in becoming subject to Satan and leading astray those who dwell on earth.¹¹⁶

Unlike *1 Enoch* 10:4–6, this passage relates to an eschatological scene, in which tyrants will be tormented in hellfire. In this case, Azazel’s abode in an earthly chasm, covered with jagged rocks, is translated to Hell, where there is a ‘deep valley with burning fire’, and where the host of Azazel will cover the evil tyrants with rough stones. Also of interest is the fact that these sinners will then be cast, by four angels, into a ‘burning furnace’, where God will get ‘retribution’ from them for their unrighteousness.

Unsurprisingly, scholars have connected these two scenes in *1 Enoch*,¹¹⁷ a connection that – once again – demonstrates the fluidity between Heavenly and earthly scenes. Moreover, scholars have shown that the phrase ‘burning furnace’ in 54:6 is rendered (in Greek and Aramaic) by phraseology drawn from *Daniel* 3.¹¹⁸ Accordingly, the descriptions of hellfire in *1 Enoch* employ a *historiola* from *Daniel* 3, and it is precisely such a situation that may be envisaged for Q 85:4–10, thereby allowing for a description of sinners being burned in hellfire, albeit one

115 For what it is worth, the modern Hebrew equivalent of the colloquial phrase ‘Go to Hell!’ is ‘Go to Azazel!’ (*lekh le-‘Azazel*), thereby equating Azazel not with Satan but with his abode.

116 BLACK, *Book of Enoch*, 53 (emphasis mine).

117 *Ibid.*, 219. The connection is commonplace in commentaries on *1 Enoch*.

118 *Ibid.*, p. 219 *ad* verse 6. Furthermore, in his commentary on *1 Enoch* 98:3 (“your spirits ... into the furnace of fire”, *ibid.*, 301), BLACK again makes a connection to the language of *Daniel* 3, and distinguishes between the use of *Daniel* 3 terminology in *1 Enoch* in earthly and Hell contexts.

that draws on the language and imagery of the earthly furnace into which the youths were cast.¹¹⁹

Finally, we return to Dūdael, Satan's (lit. Azazel's) resting place, whose description in both Chapters 10 and 54 features rough or jagged stones. The location (and literal meaning) of Dūdael has been debated, with the most commonly proposed identification being that it refers to "Beth Ḥadūdo",¹²⁰ this being the place where, according to the Mishna (*Yoma*, 6:8),¹²¹ the Scapegoat of *Leviticus* 16 is to be cast away (off a cliff).¹²² Underpinning this identification is both the fact that Beth Ḥadūdo and Dūdael are the locations to which Azazel is sent, and the fact that the sharpness of the rocks would have been described in Hebrew or Aramaic with an adjective from the root *ḥ.d.d.* 'Ḥadūdo' would thus represent wordplay on the sharp rocks of Dūdael.¹²³

These and other descriptions of Hell in *1 Enoch* appear to have contributed to Early Islamic portrayals of Hell.¹²⁴ In Q 2:24 and 66:6, for instance, Hell is described as "the Fire, whose fuel is men and stones",¹²⁵ echoing *1 Enoch* 54, while the *ḥadīth* concerning a Hell-monster who consumes sinners may originate in *1 Enoch* 56:8, where Hell is said to have a mouth that swallows sinners.¹²⁶ With Q 85:4–10 in mind, *1 Enoch* describes Hell by employing the terminology and imagery of

119 The reference in *1 Enoch* 54:6 to God's exacting 'retribution' from the sinners is also echoed in Q 85:8 although in the latter text the implication is that it is the sinners who are exacting revenge from the believers, rather than vice versa.

120 The Hebrew *Ḥadūdo* is rendered using a *ḥeth*, which can represent either an Arabic *ḥā'* or a *khā'* (hence, *aḥad* = *ehad* but *akhadha* = *aḥaz*). Thus, *Ḥadūdo* could be connected to *A/Ukhdūd*.

121 The name is preserved in this form in Aramaic too (Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 68b).

122 Avi SASSON, "Darko shel ha-Se'ir ha-Mishtale'aḥ le-Or Meqorot Ḥazal" *Mehqarey Yehudah ve-Shomron* 5 (1996): 121–133 (in Hebrew). Note that the term 'Scapegoat' is literally "Azazel's goat" in both *Leviticus* 16 and *m. Yoma*.

123 K.C. BAUTCH, *A Study of the Geography of 1 Enoch 17–19: No One Has Seen What I Have Seen*, Leiden, 2003, 138–139: "The place, alternatively named Beth Ḥadudu, is described as a precipitous or rocky wilderness, located in the vicinity of Jerusalem, according to *m. Yoma* 6:8. Since *ḥ.d.d.* refers to that which is sharp or pointed, one can detect perhaps some word play in *1 Enoch* 10:5 as Azazel is to be tossed upon rough and jagged rocks." See also BLACK, *Book of Enoch*, 134; R.H. CHARLES, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament (Volume 2)*, Oxford, 1913, 193, esp. n. 4; and M. A. KNIBB, *Essays on the Book of Enoch and Other Early Jewish Texts and Traditions*, Leiden, 2008, 133–134.

124 See now also T. TESEI, "The Fall of Iblis and its Enochic Background" in A. Houtman, T. Kadari, M. Poorthuis, and V. Tohar (eds.), *Religious Stories in Transformation: Conflict, Revision, and Reception*, Leiden, Forthcoming.

125 The wording in these verses (*nār waqūduhā al-nās wa l-ḥijāra*) is similar to Q 85:5 (*nār dhāt al-waqūd*), though it should be pointed out that both verses are found in Medianan sūrahs and thus post-date Q 85.

126 This last point is mentioned in LANGE, *Hell and Paradise*, 60.

Daniel 3, and by referring to Azazel/Satan in ‘Dūdael’, a name that later – though still in pre-Islamic times – came to be Beth Ḥadūdo. It is the argument of this article that the *Aṣḥāb al-A/Ukhdūd* are those destined for [Beth] Ḥadūdo.

Conclusions

Three main conclusions emerge from this article. The first is that to comprehend fully the message imparted in Q 85:4–10, we must take *both* the historical and the eschatological readings of these verses into account. This is particularly important now that the eschatological reading has gained widespread support (justifiably, in my view), as those who champion such a reading may therefore be inclined to disavow the evidence that connects the verses to historical materials. The second is that the historical materials that are being referenced in Q 85:4–10 derive not from the story of the Martyrs of Najrān but from *Daniel* 3 and its retellings in Late Antiquity. The Qur’ānic passage draws on the contents and language of the three youths in Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace as a *historiola*, thereby conforming to well-established practices amongst Jews and Christians on the eve of Islam, who employed references to biblical episodes (including *Daniel* 3) in magical contexts and prayers. It is the precedent of the three youths miraculously surviving fire, and their tormentors being burned by it, that the Qur’ānic passage is channelling in calling for the destruction of the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*. The third conclusion is that the etymologies hitherto proposed for the key word *Ukhdūd* have not been satisfactory. Bearing in mind the eschatological reading of the Qur’ānic verses, a new etymology for this term – relating it to [Beth] Ḥadūdo – deserves consideration.

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