An Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Najm* (Q. 53)

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Introduction

Sūrat al-Najm (Q. 53) has received a comparatively generous amount of scholarly attention for two reasons: firstly, it is said to have been the original literary context of the so-called Satanic verses, a passage supposedly excised from the Qur'an after having been mistakenly promulgated by Muḥammad as divine revelation; and secondly, Sura 53 includes the most elaborate Qur'anic account of a visionary encounter between the Prophet Muḥammad and the Qur'an's divine speaker.[1] While the debate around the Satanic verses has centred on the question of their authenticity,[2] the vision account in Q. 53 is significant for the insights it provides into the Qur'anic understanding of prophecy and because its chronological relationship to another early Qur'anic allusion to a visionary experience of the messenger, Q. 81:19–23, has not yet, in my view, been conclusively determined.[3] The present article will revisit both issues in the course of a holistic reading of the entire sura. The main theses that will be presented below are taken from a German-language commentary on the Qur'an on which I have recently been working.[4] In broad agreement with the sequence of methodological steps followed in this commentary, I will first deal with preliminary matters such as the dating of the sura and redactional considerations (i.e. does the sura exhibit traces of secondary additions or omissions?), then take a summary look at the text's overall structure and its main themes, and finally attempt a microstructural analysis of its most important sections in the light of relevant intertexts, from both within and without the Qur'an.[5] In order to allow for convenient access to the text of the sura itself, I will preface my interpretation with a transcription of the Arabic original accompanied by an English translation.[6] Please note that the bold-faced Latin and Arabic numerals that in some cases precede the superscript verse numbers refer to the three main parts (Latin numerals) and eight subsections (Arabic numerals) into which I propose to divide the sura below. Verses that in my view are likely to have been inserted into the text at a secondary stage are

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indented; the *basmala* is omitted.[7] Although a truly comprehensive treatment of any Qur'anic sura would of course require discussion of the transmitted textual variants, in the present context I will simply follow the Ḥafs *ʿan* ʿĀṣim reading of the text.

Text of *Sūrat al-Najm*

I 1 [1] *wa'l-najmi idhā hawā*	**I 1** [1] *By the star when it sets!*
[2] *mā ḍalla ṣāḥibukum wa-mā ghawā*	[2] *Your companion has not strayed nor is he deluded;*
[3] *wa-mā yanṭiqu ʿani'l-hawā*	[3] *he does not speak from his own desire.*
[4] *in huwa illā waḥyun yūḥā*	[4] *It is nothing but an inspiration revealed to him.*
[5] *ʿallamahu shadīdu'l-quwā*	[5] *It was taught to him by one with mighty powers*
[6] *dhū mirratin fa'stawā*	[6] *and great strength, who stood straight,*
[7] *wa-huwa bi'l-ufuqi'l-aʿlā*	[7] *while He was on the highest horizon,*
[8] *thumma danā fa-tadallā*	[8] *and then approached and came down*
[9] *fa-kāna qāba qawsayni aw adnā*	[9] *until He was two bow-lengths away or even closer,*
[10] *fa-awḥā ilā ʿabdihi mā awḥā*	[10] *and revealed to His servant what he revealed.*
[11] *mā kadhaba'l-fuʾādu mā raʾā*	[11] *The heart did not make up what he saw.*
[12] *a-fa-tumārūnahu ʿalā mā yarā*	[12] *Are you going to dispute with him what he saw?*
2 [13] *wa-la-qad raʾāhu nazlatan ukhrā*	**2** [13] *He saw Him at another descent*
[14] *ʿinda sidrati'l-muntahā*	[14] *by the lote tree at the boundary,*
[15] *ʿindahā jannatu'l-maʾwā*	[15] *near the garden of the abode,*
[16] *idh yaghshā'l-sidrata mā yaghshā*	[16] *when the tree was covered by that which covered it.*
[17] *mā zāgha'l-baṣaru wa-mā ṭaghā*	[17] *The eye did not turn aside nor did it pass its limit.*
[18] *la-qad raʾā min āyāti rabbihi'l-kubrā*	[18] *He saw some of the great signs of his Lord.*
3 [19] *a-fa-raʾaytumu'l-Lāta wa'l-ʿUzzā*	**3** [19] *Consider al-Lāt and al-ʿUzzā,*
[20] *wa-Manāta'l-thālithata'l-ukhrā*	[20] *and the third one, Manāt –*
[21] *a-lakumu'l-dhakaru wa-lahu'l-unthā*	[21] *are you to have the male and He the female?*

[22] *tilka idhan qismatun ḍīzā*

[23] *in hiya illā asmāʾun sammaytumūhā*

antum wa-ābāʾukum
mā anzala'llāhu bihā min sulṭānin
in yattabiᶜūna illā'l-ẓanna

wa-mā tahwā'l-anfusu
wa-la-qad jāʾahum min rabbihimu'l-hudā
[24] *am li'l-insāni mā tamannā*

[25] *fa-li'llāhi'l-ākhiratu wa'l-ūlā*

[26] *wa-kam min malakin fī'l-samāwāti*
lā tughnī shafāᶜatuhum shayʾan illā min baᶜdi an yaʾdhana'llāhu
li-man yashāʾu wa-yarḍā

[27] *inna'lladhīna lā yuʾminūna bi'l-ākhirati*
la-yusammūna'l-malāʾikata tasmiyata'l-unthā
[28] *wa-mā lahum bihi min ᶜilmin*
in yattabiᶜūna illā'l-ẓanna

wa-inna'l-ẓanna lā yughnī mina'l-ḥaqqi shayʾā
[29] *fa-aᶜriḍ ᶜan man tawallā ᶜan dhikrinā*
wa-lam yurid illā'l-ḥayāta'l-dunyā
[30] *dhālika mablaghuhum mina'l-ᶜilmi*

[22] *That would be a most unjust distribution!*

[23] *These are nothing but names you have invented yourselves,*
you and your forefathers.
God has sent no authority for them.
They merely follow guesswork
and the whims of their souls,
even though guidance has come to them from their Lord.
[24] *Is man to have what he wishes for,*
[25] *when the present life and the life to come belong only to God?*

[26] *How many an angel is there in heaven*
whose intercession will be of no use

unless God has given permission to whom He wishes and is well-pleased with.

[27] *Those who deny the life to come give the angels female names.*

[28] *They have no knowledge about it:*
they merely follow guesswork.
Guesswork is of no value against the truth.
[29] *So ignore him who turns away from our reminder*
and only desires the life of this world.
[30] *That is the extent of their knowledge.*

inna rabbaka huwa aʿlamu	*Your Lord knows best who strays*
bi-man ḍalla ʿan sabīlihi	*from His path*
wa-huwa aʿlamu bi-mani'htadā	*and who lets himself be guided.*
[31] *wa-li'llāhi mā fī'l-samāwāti*	[31] *To God belongs everything in*
wa-mā fī'l-arḍi	*the heavens and on the earth,*
li-yajziya'lladhīna asāʾū bi-mā	*that He may repay those who do*
ʿamilū	*evil according to their deeds*
wa-yajziya'lladhīna aḥsanu bi'l-	*and reward those who do good*
ḥusnā	*with what is best.*
[32] *alladhīna yajtanibūna*	[32] *As for those who avoid grave*
kabāʾira'l-ithmi wa'l-	*sins and foul acts, though*
fawāḥisha illā'l-lamama	*they may commit small*
	things,
inna rabbaka wāsiʿu'l-	*your Lord is ample in*
maghfirati	*forgiveness.*
huwa aʿlamu bikum idh	*He has been aware of you from*
anshaʾakum mina'l-arḍi	*the time He produced you*
	from the earth
wa-idh antum ajinnatun fī	*and when you were embryos in*
buṭūni ummahātikum	*your mothers' wombs,*
fa-lā tuzakkū anfusakum	*so do not declare yourselves to be*
	justified:
huwa aʿlamu bi-mani'ttaqā	*He knows best who is god-*
	fearing.
II 4 [33] *a-fa-raʾayta'lladhī tawallā*	**II 4** [33] *Have you considered him*
	who turns away,
[34] *wa-aʿṭā qalīlan wa-akdā*	[34] *gives only a little and is mean?*
[35] *a-ʿindahu ʿilmu'l-ghaybi*	[35] *Does he have knowledge of*
	what is hidden,
fa-huwa yarā	*so that he sees?*
[36] *am lam yunabbaʾ bi-mā fī*	[36] *Has he not been told what is*
ṣuḥufi Mūsā	*contained in the scriptures of*
	Moses
[37] *wa-Ibrāhīma'lladhī waffā*	[37] *and of Abraham, who was*
	faithful?
5 [38] *allā taziru wāziratun wizra*	**5** [38] *That no soul shall bear the*
ukhrā	*burden of another;*
[39] *wa-an laysa li'l-insāni illā mā*	[39] *that man will only have what he*
saʿā	*has striven for,*
[40] *wa-anna saʿyahu sawfa yurā*	[40] *that his striving will be seen,*
[41] *thumma yujzāhu'l-jazāʾa'l-*	[41] *and that he will then be*
awfā	*repaid in full for it;*
[42] *wa-anna ilā rabbika'l-muntahā*	[42] *that the final goal is your Lord;*

6 [43] *wa-annahu huwa aḍḥaka wa-abkā*	**6** [43] *that it is He who makes laugh and weep;*
[44] *wa-annahu huwa amāta wa-aḥyā*	[44] *that it is He who gives death and life;*
[45] *wa-annahu khalaqa'l-zawjayni'l-dhakara wa'l-unthā*	[45] *that He created the two sexes, male and female,*
[46] *min nuṭfatin idhā tumnā*	[46] *from an ejected drop of sperm;*
[47] *wa-anna ᶜalayhi'l-nashᵓata'l-ukhrā*	[47] *that to Him belongs the second creation;*
[48] *wa-annahu huwa aghnā wa-aqnā*	[48] *that it is He who makes rich and gives possessions;*
[49] *wa-annahu huwa rabbu'l-shiᶜrā*	[49] *and that He is the Lord of Sirius;*
7 [50] *wa-annahu ahlaka ᶜĀdani'l-ūlā*	**7** [50] *that He destroyed ancient ᶜĀd*
[51] *wa-Thamūda fa-mā abqā*	[51] *and Thamūd, leaving nothing behind,*
[52] *wa-qawma Nūḥin min qablu*	[52] *and before them the people of Noah –*
innahum kānū hum alama wa-aṭghā	*they were even more unjust and insolent;*
[53] *wa'l-muᵓtafikata ahwā*	[53] *that it was He who brought down the overturned [city];*
[54] *fa-ghashshāhā mā ghashshā*	[54] *they were overwhelmed by that which overwhelmed them.*
[55] *fa-bi-ayyi ālāᵓi rabbika tatamārā*	[55] *So which of your Lord's blessings do you deny?*
[56] *hādhā nadhīrun mina'l-nudhuri'l-ūlā*	[56] *This is a warning like the warnings of former times.*
III 8 [57] *azifati'l-āzifa*	**III 8** [57] *The imminent hour has drawn near;*
[58] *laysa lahā min dūni'llāhi kāshifa*	[58] *no one but God can turn it away.*
[59] *a-fa-min hādha'l-ḥadīthi taᶜjabūn*	[59] *Do you marvel at this*
[60] *wa-taḍḥakūna wa-lā tabkūn*	[60] *and laugh instead of weeping,*
[61] *wa-antum sāmidūn*	[61] *proudly swaggering about?*
[62] *fa'sjudū li'llāhi wa'ᶜbudū*	[62] *Bow down before God and worship!*

The Chronological Position of *Sūrat al-Najm*

Before actually turning to *Sūrat al-Najm*, I should like to identify three fundamental assumptions on which my reading of the text will be based. Although these assumptions have occasioned considerable scholarly disagreement during the past three decades, the scope of the present article does not allow me to put forward a detailed defence of them, which I have attempted to do elsewhere.

My first assumption is that the Qur'an does indeed constitute the earliest piece of Islamic literature, that is, that the Qur'an is historically prior to the earliest *tafsīr* and *sīra* works. Although this opinion has generally been considered self-evident by earlier generations of Islamic and Western scholars alike, it was called into serious doubt by John Wansbrough's two seminal monographs *Qur'anic Studies* (1977) and *The Sectarian Milieu* (1978). In spite of the unquestionable significance of Wansbrough's contributions, however, the extended debate to which they have given rise has, in my view, shown that a late dating of the Qur'an after the Arab conquest of the Middle East ends up creating more explanatory difficulties than it solves.[8]

My second assumption is that the attempt made by the German scholar Theodor Nöldeke to draw up a relative chronology of suras on the basis of criteria immanent to the text – rather than on the basis of the extra-Qur'anic *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports – remains generally valid. Although a proper assessment of Nöldeke's approach to dating requires significantly more space,[9] for our present purpose its underlying rationale may be concisely restated as follows: if such diverse criteria as verse length, overall text length, literary structure, introductory and other formulae, rhyme profile, and religious and ethical terminology converge in a classification of the Qur'anic corpus into largely consistent textual clusters, and if these clusters can plausibly be viewed as chronologically consecutive stages of development, then we are in fact entitled to do so.[10]

Nöldeke has been criticised for using entire suras as the basic building blocks of his relative chronology, whereas scholars such as Richard Bell, W. Montgomery Watt and Alford T. Welch have argued that the 'basic unit of revelation' was in fact the small passage – the paragraph of Qur'anic discourse, as it were.[11] Although a similarly fragmentary understanding of the Qur'anic corpus is characteristic of much of the Islamic tradition, I accept the view – and this is my third assumption, which may be labelled 'default holism' – that at least those suras classed by Nöldeke as 'Meccan', including *Sūrat al-Najm*, are by and large literary unities and not secondary compilations of originally unconnected fragments.[12] Of course this does not a priori rule out that a particular text may have been expanded at a later date; as a matter of fact, I will claim below that this is precisely what has happened in the case of Q. 53. Default holism does however mean that I consider the burden of proof to rest with the

person who is claiming that a given Meccan sura is *not* a genetic unity. Thus, the hypothesis that a certain passage was not part of the original version of the text stands in need of corroboration by means of substantial evidence for subsequent redactional intervention, such as an abrupt rise in verse length, the use of terminology that is otherwise only attested in later suras, the possibility of lifting a passage from its literary context without creating a non sequitur, or the presence of a plausible theological or exegetical motive for inserting the supposed addition.

Let us now turn to *Sūrat al-Najm*'s chronological position in the Qur'anic corpus. Nöldeke assigns it to the 'early Meccan' period,[13] that is, to a cluster of about 50 relatively short texts (with less than 50 verses) most of which are thematically centred on the Last Judgement. They display a wide range of rhyme schemes and frequent changes of rhyme (cf. Q. 99 with two different rhyme schemes in just eight verses, and Q. 100 with three rhymes in eleven verses),[14] and consist of generally short verses that usually contain only one main or subordinate clause, and sometimes merely a single syntagm;[15] most of the suras in question have no more than an average of ten syllables per verse, although in a few cases the average verse length rises to fifteen and even sixteen syllables.[16] Like Q. 53, many suras within this class are introduced by oaths, and they generally contain less Biblical narrative than other Qur'anic texts. *Sūrat al-Najm* clearly ought to be placed somewhere towards the end of Nöldeke's early Meccan period, as it is in many respects a transitional text: while it shares important features with other early Meccan suras – above all, an introductory oath and relatively short verses[17] – its length already approaches that of middle Meccan texts; its tripartite structure, too, anticipates the make-up of later Qur'anic revelations. Also, rhyme changes are used as a structural device only towards the very end of the sura, whereas the first 56 verses resemble later suras in employing one and the same rhyme throughout. As a matter of fact, the chronological position of Q. 53 within the early Meccan textual cluster can be determined more precisely. As I have argued elsewhere, the set of Nöldeke's 'early Meccan' suras is amenable to a more finely grained subdivision into four distinct subgroups (I, II, IIIa, and IIIb) on the basis of their average verse length, their overall textual length, and the admittedly somewhat fuzzy parameter of their structural complexity.[18] At least if it is accepted that these three parameters carry chronological implications also *within* the early Meccan period, then Q. 53 is to be assigned to the third of these four consecutive text sets, namely, to Group IIIa.

One of the reasons why the chronological position of *Sūrat al-Najm* within the early Meccan period is crucial to our understanding of the text is that my dating of the text implies that it is posterior to Q. 81, which, on stylistic grounds, must be assigned to the second of the four subgroups of the early Meccan period (Group II). As noted above, Suras 53 and 81 both contain accounts of visions

ascribed to the Qur'anic messenger, and the relevant passage from Q. 81 bears quoting in full:

19 *innahu la-qawlu rasūlin karīm*	19 *It is the speech of a noble messenger,*
20 *dhī quwwatin ᶜinda dhī'l-ᶜarshi makīn*	20 *who possesses great strength and is held in honour by the Lord of the Throne;*
21 *muṭāᶜin thamma amīn*	21 *he is obeyed there and worthy of trust.*
22 *wa-mā ṣāḥibukum bi-majnūn*	22 *Your companion is not possessed by demons:*
23 *wa-la-qad raᵓāhu bi'l-ufuqi'l-mubīn*	23 *after all, he saw him on the clear horizon;*
24 *wa-mā huwa ᶜalā'l-ghaybi bi-ḍanīn*	24 *he does not withhold what is hidden.*

Apart from the general similarity in content, there are two conspicuous cases of terminological overlap between both vision accounts: Q. 53:5 (*ᶜallamahu shadīdu'l-quwā*) and Q. 81:20 (*dhī quwwatin ᶜinda dhī'l-ᶜarshi makīn*) mention the 'strength' of the supernatural being seen by the Messenger, and Q. 53:7 (*wa-huwa bi'l-ufuqi'l-aᶜlā*) and Q. 81:23 (*wa-la-qad raᵓāhu bi'l-ufuqi'l-mubīn*) describe this being as appearing on the 'horizon.' There are also important differences, however: not only is the vision account in Sura 53 considerably more detailed and longer (as a matter of fact, it explicitly speaks of two different visions, cf. Q. 53:13), but closer scrutiny also reveals an important discrepancy in the identity of the being encountered by the messenger: whereas the object of the vision in Sura 81 appears to be some elevated angelic figure (the suffix in Q. 81:23 – *wa-la-qad raᵓāhu* – must refer back to the *rasūl karīm* in verse 19, who on account of verses 20 and 21 is to be construed as an angel), in Sura 53 it is in all likelihood God Himself.[19] Richard Bell has interpreted this discrepancy as evidence that Sura 81 is the theologically more prudent and therefore later text, a toning down of the earlier claim that Muḥammad had seen God,[20] and more recently Josef van Ess has also espoused this position.[21]

It is important to notice, however, that this is only one possible account: it might well be the case that the more restrained claim that the Qur'anic messenger had seen an angel *preceded* the stronger claim that he had seen God Himself – i.e. the development might not have been one of dogmatically motivated attenuation but rather one of radicalisation. As already intimated above, I believe that this latter view is strongly supported by the literary features of both suras. In addition, the vision account in Q. 53 is conceptually much more developed: while Q. 81:19–27 only describes the message received during the vision as *the speech of a noble messenger* (*qawlu rasūlin karīm*), Q. 53:4 and Q. 53:10 for the first time in the Qur'an employ the concept of 'inspiration' (*waḥy*, *awḥā*) as a technical term for the Qur'anic revelations.[22] And finally, as will be explained in more detail below, the vision

account in Q. 53 also goes beyond Q. 81 by suggesting parallels between the visionary experience ascribed to Muḥammad and the initiation of Moses. All of this, I believe, suggests that Q. 53 is the later text of the two, and that we have good reason to postulate a development from the angelic vision account in Sura 81 to the vision of God himself described in Sura 53.[23]

Secondary Additions to *Sūrat al-Najm*

Let us now consider another important preliminary question, namely, whether the sura might contain material that was added to the main body of the text at a later stage. For although I would advocate a much more cautious and methodologically disciplined use of the words 'addition' and 'insertion' than Richard Bell, it remains distinctly possible that an existing Qur'anic text might have subsequently been expanded in order to preserve its relevance and validity under circumstances different from its original context of promulgation.[24] As the indentations in the parallel Arabic-English text above suggest, I agree with the opinion expressed by Nöldeke and Schwally that verses 23 and 26–32 should be regarded as subsequent expansions of the sura.[25] Although Nöldeke and Schwally characteristically do not provide further justification for their judgement, the relevant evidence can easily be filled in: the verses in question stand out from the rest of the sura by dint of their length and their much more dialectical and argumentative style; they can be lifted from the text without creating a gap; and the meticulous distinction of three moral classes of persons in verses 31 and 32 (*alladhīna asāʾū bi-mā ʿamilū*, *alladhīna aḥsanu bi'l-ḥusnā* and *alladhīna yajtanibūna kabāʾira'l-ithmi wa'l-fawāḥisha illā'l-lamam*) fits the trend towards legalistic precision that is observable in late Meccan and early Medinan suras. Moreover, the phrase *li'llāhi mā fī'l-samāwāti wa-mā fī'l-arḍ* (verse 31) otherwise only appears in later suras (cf. the two late Meccan verses Q. 14:2 and Q. 16:52). Finally, the sura displays a temptingly neat disposition if the verses in question are removed (see the structural analysis below): the length of the first part would shrink to 24 verses, which exactly equals the length of the second part of the sura and is a multiple of the length of the final part (six verses).[26] It is likely that verse 23 and verses 26–32 constitute two distinct and consecutive insertions into the sura, with the later and more extensive addition in verses 26–32 consciously picking up on the terminology of the earlier insertion in verse 23 (the phrase *in yattabiʿūna illā'l-anna* from verse 23 is repeated in verse 28).

The *gharānīq* Verses

With respect to Q. 53, the Islamic tradition uniquely transmits two extra verses which according to certain reports had once been part of *Sūrat al-Najm* but are said to have been subsequently removed from the text because the Prophet recognised that they had in fact been an insinuation of Satan rather than a genuine revelation.[27] These

verses are reported to have originally followed Q. 53:19–20 (*Consider al-Lāt and al-ᶜUzzā / and the third one, Manāt*) and to have run: 'those are the high-flying cranes / whose intercession is to be hoped for' (*tilka'l-gharānīqu'l-ᶜulā / wa-shafāᶜatuhunna turtajā*).[28] In crediting the three pagan deities al-Lāt, al-ᶜUzzā and Manāt with the ability to intercede on behalf of their worshippers, the passage evidently adopts a much more conciliatory stance towards these three goddesses than the sura in its present shape. Hence, the question of whether the passage was actually uttered by Muḥammad or not has captivated Western scholars from the time of William Muir onwards. The majority of them, including Muir himself, W. Montgomery Watt and Maxime Rodinson, incline towards cautious acceptance of the incident's historicity on account of the fact that it contradicts the doctrine of God's protection of Muḥammad from mistakes (*ᶜiṣma*) and was therefore dogmatically inopportune: 'the makers of Muslim tradition would never have invented a story with such damaging implications for the revelation as a whole';[29] 'at one time Muḥammad must have publicly recited the satanic verses as part of the Qur'an; it is unthinkable that the story could have been invented later by Muslims or foisted upon them by non-Muslims';[30] 'it is impossible to suggest a motive that would induce them [the early Muslims] to write such a story about the prophet unless it were true.'[31]

Although such a line of reasoning may at first seem persuasive, the emergence of partly or entirely unhistorical traditions about the life of Muḥammad may not have obeyed the requirements of theological dogma.[32] Further evaluation of the *gharānīq* incident beyond the prima facie argument just presented therefore remains necessary. One way of conducting such an appraisal would be to subject the various reports about the episode to a rigorous *isnād*-cum-*matn* analysis, as Gregor Schoeler has done for other traditions about key events in the life of Muḥammad.[33] What I would like to do here, however, is simply to ask whether there is any way of meaningfully fitting the *gharānīq* verses into the place they supposedly occupied before they were excised from *Sūrat al-Najm*.[34] As the verses are said to have originally followed verse 20, two hypothetical reconstructions are possible: either the *gharānīq* verses preceded verses 21 and 22, or verses 21 and 22 were not originally part of the sura and were only added later in order to replace the *gharānīq* verses:

Reconstruction A:

19 *Consider al-Lāt and al-ᶜUzzā*
20 *and the third one, Manāt.*
Those are the high-flying cranes
whose intercession is to be hoped for.
21 *Are you to have the male and he the female?*
22 *That would be a most unjust distribution!*
…

[24] *Is man to have everything he wishes for,*
[25] *when the present life and the life to come belong only to God?*

Reconstruction B:

[19] *Consider al-Lāt and al-ᶜUzzā*
[20] *and the third one, Manāt.*

Those are the high-flying cranes	[21] *Are you to have the male and he the female?*
whose intercession is to be hoped for	[22] *That would be a most unjust distribution!*

…
[24] *Is man to have everything he wishes for,*
[25] *when the present life and the life to come belong only to God?*

Does any one of these hypothetical reconstructions make sense? In my opinion, the answer must be negative. Reconstruction A is clearly contradictory: verses 21 and 22 can only be interpreted in the sense that God does *not* have female offspring, while the *gharānīq* verses admit the existence of these deities and even credit them with the authority to intercede with God. Reconstruction B, which eliminates verses 21 and 22 from the original text, does not stand up to scrutiny much better. For the verses that immediately follow the *gharānīq* verses in this reconstruction are verses 24 and 25 (since verse 23 was identified as a later addition above), and their castigation of man's presumption to have *whatever he wishes* can only be fitted into the overall context by construing it to refer to the opponents' belief in the three goddesses: this belief, verses 24 and 25 imply, is nothing but one of man's idle wishes. Yet such a scathing denouncement is hardly reconcilable with the conciliatory attitude of the *gharānīq* verses, rendering the second reconstruction, too, highly unlikely.[35]

One must therefore conclude that the *gharānīq* verses are apocryphal and were not originally part of the sura. This conclusion is also confirmed by the fact, stressed previously by John Burton,[36] that in the *tafsīr* tradition the *gharānīq* verses exhibit a strong connection with Q. 22:52 (*We have never sent any messenger or prophet before you into whose wishes Satan did not insinuate something, but God removes what Satan insinuates and then God affirms His message. God is all knowing and wise*), which is said to have been revealed as a divine reassurance in the wake of the *gharānīq* incident. Thus, it makes sense to accept Burton's explanation as the *gharānīq* incident as a fictitious 'occasion of revelation' for Q. 22:52 – albeit one that proved to be a grave liability for later and more theologically conscientious Muslims.[37]

The Structure of *Sūrat al-Najm*

As a conclusion of these extensive preliminary discussions, let me propose a structuring of the text that attempts to refine an earlier form-critical analysis given in

1981 by Angelika Neuwirth.[38] Please note that the bold-faced numerals correspond to those in the parallel Arabic-English text of the sura given above.

Rhyme Profile[39]	*Form-critical Analysis*
[1–56] *3(K)Kā*	**I 1** [1] oath
	[2–6] statements
	[2–3] accreditation of messenger (negative)
	[4–6] affirmation of revelation (positive), beginning of vision account
	[7–12] first vision account
	2 [13–18] second vision account
	3 [19–22] polemical question (about goddesses)
	[24–25] polemical question (implicit denunciation of man)
	[[23] first addition]
	[[26–32] second addition]
	II 4 [33–34] negative character sketch
	[35–37] polemical questions (inter alia about the previous *ṣuḥuf*)
	5 [38–42] content of the *ṣuḥuf:*
	[38–39] warnings
	[40–41] promises
	[42] theological predication
	6 [43–49] content of the *ṣuḥuf:* affirmations of divine works and theological predications
	7 [50–54] content of the *ṣuḥuf:* evocation of punishments
	[55–56] concluding question and affirmation of revelation
[57–58] *āKifah*	**III 8** [57–58] warning
[59–61] *2n/m*	[59–61] polemical question
[62] *aᶜbudū*	[62] concluding directive to the addressees

As briefly observed above, if the later insertions verses 23 and 26–32 are disregarded, the sura's original version displays striking quantitative proportions:

Part I: 24 verses (12 + 6 + 6)	Part II: 24 verses (5 + 5 + 7 + 7)	Part III: 6 verses

Before delving into a microstructural analysis of the sura, to which the remainder of this article will be devoted, it may be useful to complement this structuring of the text with a synopsis of its main themes, especially since its thematic cohesion is easy to miss when working through the sura on an verse-by-verse or even section-by-section basis. The first part, which in its original form can be subdivided into four sections,[40] is largely devoted to the two visions with which the Qur'anic messenger is credited, to which section 4 then appends a passing condemnation of three pagan goddesses.[41]

The second part, starting in verse 33, is opened by what may be labelled a 'negative character sketch' that depicts a paradigmatic opponent of the Qur'anic revelations. This portrayal concludes with the rhetorical question *Has he not been told what is contained in the scriptures of Moses and Abraham?* (verses 36 and 37), which is then followed by an extended epitome of the contents of these scriptures. The brief final part – the beginning of which is signalled by a change in rhyme – consists of an eschatological warning that articulates the moral of the preceding evocations of past divine punishment (namely, that if God has been able to chastise certain human collectives in the past He will be able to do so in the eschatological future) and concludes by requesting the addressees to *bow down before God and worship*.

The two major themes of the sura are thus the visions of God experienced by the Qur'anic Messenger that are described in the first part, and the scriptural tradition associated with Abraham and Moses that is summarised in the second part. Both thematic strands obviously complement each other: the subjective revelatory experiences of the Messenger entitle him and his adherents to lay claim to the 'objective' scriptural heritage represented by Abraham and Moses. The interconnection between the first and the second part of the sura is also underscored by the various recurrences of the verb *raʾā* that can be found throughout the text (see verses 11, 12, 13, 18 in Part I, and verses 33, 35 and 40 in Part II).

A Close Reading of the First Part of *Sūrat al-Najm*

Like other early Meccan texts, the sura opens with an oath featuring a cosmic phenomenon: *By the star when it sets!* (*wa'l-najmi idhā hawā*).[42] While there are early Qur'anic passages (for example Q. 100) where an introductory oath cluster can be interpreted as prefiguring part of the message that follows it,[43] the relationship between Q. 53:1 and the subsequent oath statement affirming the sincerity of the Qur'anic Messenger (verses 2–3) and the divine origin of his proclamations (verse 4) is difficult to discern. Neuwirth has suggested that oaths featuring heavenly bodies visible at night or at dawn should be construed as allusions to nocturnal vigils, which are explicitly mentioned in the opening section of the slightly later sura Q. 73 (verses 1–9).[44] Due to the brevity of the oath opening Q. 53, however, the applicability of her hypothesis to the present sura is difficult to evaluate. In any case, it is striking that the earlier vision account from Q. 81 is also introduced by an oath alluding to celestial bodies (Q. 81:15–16 probably refer to the planets[45]) and to the break of day (Q. 81:17–18). Whatever the reason for the connection between such cosmic phenomena and the vision account following them may be there, the similar sequence of motives in Q. 53 was surely bound to recall the earlier passage from Q. 81. Such an 'anaphoric' reading of Q. 53:1 is corroborated by the fact that in other instances, too, Q. 53:1–12 picks up on the diction of Q. 81: see the explicit mention of the 'strength' of the being encountered by the Messenger in Q. 53:5 and Q. 81:20, as well as the

specification that it appeared at the horizon provided in Q. 53:7 and Q. 81:23; less surprisingly, of course, both accounts also employ the verb *raʾā*.

As already remarked above, Q. 53 differs from the earlier and conceptually less developed vision account in Q. 81 inter alia by introducing the noun *waḥy* and the verb *awḥā* (occurrences of which become very frequent in later suras) as technical terms for designating the phenomenon of divine revelation to man. Altogether, the substantive and the corresponding verb appear four times (twice in verse 4 and twice in verse 10) and hence give the impression of being deliberately foregrounded. While the Arabic verb *awḥā*, up until the Qur'an and occasionally even within it, has the general meaning of conveying something in a non-verbal fashion,[46] the noun *waḥy* appears to have had a more circumscribed pre-Qur'anic usage: as Izutsu has observed, it seems to have been primarily connected with the opening section of ancient Arabic poems, where the deserted campsites encountered by the poets are sometimes compared to illegible traces of writing (*waḥy*, or *wuḥiyy* in the plural).[47] It is surely significant that in order to refer to the phenomenon of revelation, a notion that for Muḥammad's audience must have been intimately connected to the Judaeo-Christian scriptural tradition, the Qur'an employs, and in so doing significantly re-aligns the semantics of, a term that before had served as a stock motive of ancient Arabic poetry, rather than making use of a calque of existing Greek or Syriac terminology.[48]

That *Sūrat al-Najm* is in conversation with the literary conventions of ancient Arabic poetry is evident not only from its employment of the term *waḥy*, but also in the fact that God is not directly referred to by name, but rather by the use of metonymic periphrases such as *shadīdu'l-quwā* and *dhū mirra* (verses 5–6), which convey a highly poetical resonance.[49] As a matter of fact, the view that these epithets are calculated poeticisms is further confirmed by the fact that the phrase *shadīd al-quwā* is also employed in a poem by Ṭufayl b. ᶜAwf al-Ghanawī and therefore appears to have been part of the established lexicon of ancient Arabic poetry: 'Yet when a far distance separated her [the poet's former beloved, Jamīla], you displayed mighty powers (*kunta … shadīda'l-quwā*), paying no heed to the words of the mischief-maker.'[50] The monotheistic God encountered by the Qur'anic Messenger, it seems, is intentionally presented as an *Über*-hero, whose supreme power dwarfs the strength and boldness of which ancient Arabic poets conventionally brag.

Apart from this selective appropriation of motives from ancient Arabic poetry, however, there are also clear Biblical subtexts underlying the sura. They begin with verse 10 where the Qur'anic prophet is referred to as God's 'servant' (*ᶜabd*). Even though the word *ᶜabd* may be used merely to denote a pious believer, as is for example the case in Q. 96:9 and in the self-designation of the Christians of al-Ḥīra as the *ᶜibād*,[51] in the present context it might specifically convey prophetological

connotations: for in the Hebrew Bible, the title 'servant of God' is used primarily for Moses, the personified benchmark of prophethood.[52]

In the second vision account, the concern with creating a sense of affinity between the Qur'anic Messenger, a newcomer on the scene of prophecy, and the Biblical prophet *par excellence*, Moses, becomes even more pronounced.[53] Q. 53:14 locates the vision *at the lote tree at the boundary* (*ʿinda sidrati'l-muntahā*), very possibly a reference to some isolated tree at the far periphery of the Meccan settlement. The fact that the vision experienced by the Qur'anic Messenger takes place at a tree recalls the fact that the site of the initiation of Moses, too, was characterised by a conspicuous plant, namely, the famous burning bush mentioned in Exodus 3, which – just like the *sidra* tree – becomes a locus of divine presence (cf. Q. 53:16):

> [1] Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb.
> [2] And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.
> [3] And Moses said, 'I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.'
> [4] And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here am I …'

A third reference to the figure of Moses is contained in Q. 53:18, the culmination of the second vision, where the Qur'anic Prophet is said to have seen *some of the great signs of his Lord* (*la-qad raʾā min āyāti rabbihi'l-kubrā*). This statement openly echoes the roughly contemporary Moses narrative from Q. 79:15–20,[54] where Moses is said to have been shown 'the great sign', which most likely refers to the confirmatory miracles with which Moses is sent to Pharaoh:

[15] *hal atāka ḥadīthu Mūsā*	[15] *Have you heard the story of Moses?*
[16] *idh nādāhu rabbuhu*	[16] *When his Lord called out to him*
bi'l-wādi'l-muqaddasi Ṭuwā	*in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā:*
[17] *idhhab ilā Firʿawna*	[17] *'Go to Pharaoh,*
innahu ṭaghā	*for he has exceeded all bounds,*
[18] *fa-qul hal laka ilā an tazakkā*	[18] *and ask him, "Do you want to purify yourself?*
[19] *wa-ahdiyaka ilā rabbika*	[19] *Do you want me to guide you to your Lord,*
fa-takhshā	*so that you may fear Him?"'*
[20] *fa-arāhu'l-āyata'l-kubrā*	[20] *And He* [*God*] *showed him* [*Moses*] *the great sign.*

While the immediate background to Q. 53:18 must have been Q. 79:20, this latter passage in turn reflects the fact that the Biblical Moses narrative repeatedly accentuates the divine 'signs' granted to Moses by God.[55] Hence, by emphasising that the Qur'anic Messenger had been granted a vision of divine 'signs',[56] *Sūrat al-Najm* hints at a clear correspondence between Muḥammad's experience and the initiation of Moses.[57] While one might discount the observations made above about the term *ʿabd* and the alleged correspondence between the burning bush and the lote tree as being much too vague to provide conclusive evidence for a conscious linking of Muḥammad and Moses, the fact that in the case of Q. 53:18 the link passes through another Qur'anic text that explicitly deals with Moses (Q. 79) makes it very difficult, at least with regard to Q. 53:18, to deny that such a connection is in fact being made. But if this is so, then it may be adduced as additional confirmation for the interpretation of the *sidra* tree from verses 14 and 16 that has been set out above.

A Close Reading of the Second Part of *Sūrat al-Najm*

The second part of the sura opens with a polemical question that introduces the figure of a paradigmatic opponent of the Qur'anic message (verse 33, *he who turns away*) who is also accused of avarice (verse 34); as in other early Meccan suras (for example Q. 107), ethical and religious vices are here presented as closely intertwined. Two additional rhetorical questions then follow. The first reproaches the typified opponent with a lack of 'insight' into 'what is hidden' (verse 35, *a-ʿindahu ʿilmu'l-ghaybi fa-huwa yarā*). At first glance, the question of how one may gain 'insight into what is hidden' may seem to refer back to the visionary experiences described in the sura's first part, especially since the verb *raʾā* had been so prominent in the first part (cf. verses 11, 12, 13 and 18). The following question, however, gives the sura a new turn: *Has he not been told what is contained in the scriptures of Moses/and of Abraham, who was faithful?*[58] While the first part of the sura has emphasised the Qur'anic Messenger's visual encounter with God (cf. the use of the verb *raʾā* in verses 11, 12, 13 and 18), the possession of 'insight' into the supernatural is now tied to acquaintance with the Biblical tradition; the theme of revelation, which was at the heart of the first part, is thus complemented by an evocation of the record of previous revelations, scripture. The thematic coherence of the first and second part of the sura is also shown by the fact that Moses, with whom the Qur'anic messenger has been closely connected in the preceding vision accounts, is now explicitly singled out as one of the two representatives of the preceding scriptural tradition. The text's second part may therefore be said to demonstrate that the Qur'anic revelations conform to the Mosaic paradigm not only in the circumstances of their reception but also in their content.[59]

Before examining more closely the remainder of the second part, the phrase *the scriptures of Moses / and of Abraham, who was faithful* requires an additional

comment, as its wording is bound to trigger speculation that it ought to be read as an allusion to the considerable corpus of pseudepigraphic revelations ascribed to Abraham and Moses, such as the Apocalypse of Abraham,[60] the Testament of Abraham,[61] the Book of Jubilees (which is framed as a revelation to Moses),[62] or the Assumption of Moses.[63] However, due to the fact that the intertextual overtones of verses 38–56, as far as I have been able to identify them on the basis of an earlier contribution by Hamilton Gibb,[64] are almost entirely Biblical, it is much more likely, I think, that the designation *the scriptures of Moses and Abraham* is simply to be construed as a loose way of referring to the Biblical corpus – including the New Testament, as will presently become clear – via two of its most prominent protagonists.[65]

The remaining three sections of the sura's second part then consist of an extended series of short statements, most of which are introduced parallelistically by *wa-anna*. Thematically, the passage can be divided into eschatological warnings (verses 38 to 42), statements about God's omnipotence (verses 43 to 49) – most of which are related to creation – and allusions to divine interventions into history, namely, the punishment of ᶜĀd (verse 50), of Thamūd (verse 51), of the people of Noah (verse 52), and of Sodom and Gomorrah (verses 53 and 54).[66] The thematic centre of the whole series is therefore eschatological; God's omnipotence as evinced by the natural course of things in the present, as well as his castigation of certain collectives in the past both serve the function of corroborating the claim that there will be an eschatological reckoning in the future. The eschatological moral of the passage is further underscored by the sura's concluding part, a brief paraenesis that emphasises the imminence of the coming Judgement (verse 57) and concludes by summoning the listeners to *bow down and worship* (verse 62).

In view of the preceding question about *the scriptures of Moses and Abraham* (verses 36 and 37), the fifth to seventh section of the sura (verses 38–56) are obviously meant to epitomise the essential content of the Mosaic-Abrahamic tradition. Hence, whatever Biblical or post-Biblical intertexts one may discover in the following sections, the almost citation-like reference to *the scriptures of Moses and Abraham* clearly signals that such intertextual overlaps are not to be mistaken for instances of covert cribbing but rather as purposeful allusions that the sura's original audience was expected to be able to recognise as such. As has been observed by Hamilton Gibb, verses 38 to 42 appear to be closely modelled on two passages from the letters of St Paul. The dictum *allā taziru wāziratun wizra ukhrā* in verse 38 is an eloquent Arabisation of the Pauline statement 'everybody will carry his own load' from Galations 6:5; the fact that the formula was still used in post-Biblical Eastern Christianity is demonstrated by two passages that Tor Andrae has located in the Greek corpus of texts ascribed to Ephrem.[67] The second Pauline reference comes immediately afterwards in verses 39–41 (*wa-an laysa li'l-insāni illā mā saᶜā / wa-anna saᶜyahu sawfa yurā / thumma*

yujzāhu'l-jazāʾa'l-awfā), which revolve around two terms that are also at the centre of the First Letter to the Corinthians 3:13–4,[68] with *mā saᶜā* and *saᶜy* corresponding to ἔργον in the Greek text, and *jazāʾ* (verse 41) corresponding to the 'reward' (μισθὸς) that Paul promises the faithful. Two further Biblical allusions, this time to the Old Testament, have been pinpointed by Gibb in the next section: verses 44 (*wa-annahu huwa amāta wa-aḥyā*) and 48 (*wa-annahu huwa aghnā wa-aqnā*) echo two successive statements from the Hymn of Hannah from 1 Samuel 2:6–7: 'The Lord kills, and makes alive: He brings down to the grave, and brings up. / The Lord makes poor, and makes rich: He brings low, and lifts up.'

It is important to emphasise that the intersections identified by Gibb do not necessarily point to familiarity with the written text of the Bible itself. The Hymn of Hanna is used in liturgy,[69] and the passage from the Greek Ephrem mentioned above demonstrates that the Pauline dictum was current in homiletic literature. Among the channels through which the Qur'anic community could have come to know Biblical materials, liturgy and paraenesis may therefore possess a peculiar importance. The hypothesis of a primarily oral, and not necessarily literal, transmission of Biblical knowledge may also explain the striking fact that none of the passages evoked in the second part of the sura involve Moses and Abraham, who in verses 36–7 are nevertheless singled out as the most prominent Biblical personages, while Paul, to whom two of the intertexts reviewed above go back, is nowhere mentioned in the Qur'an. This indicates a considerable blurring of the perception of the internal architecture of the Biblical canon, as a result of which a Pauline maxim could be presented to the Qur'anic audience as part of the content of the 'scriptures of Moses and Abraham.' Such a blurred perception of the Bible is best explicable, I believe, if seen as addressing listeners whose unquestionable familiarity with the Biblical tradition is largely of an oral nature.[70]

As I hope to have made clear, the reorganisation of Biblical material in the second part possesses a high degree of thematic consistency; it is not an arbitrary accumulation of diverse bits and pieces, but a coherent integration of scriptural references into a primarily eschatological recapitulation of what the Biblical tradition is about. The same applies to the sura as a whole: in juxtaposing accounts of Muḥammad's revelatory experiences (part I) – which are presented as repeating and even outclassing the initiation of Moses – with an almost exegetical exercise in establishing the fundamental agreement between the Qur'anic message and the existing scriptural tradition (part II), the sura credits the Qur'anic Prophet and his followers with two complementary avenues of 'insight into the unseen' (verse 35). Undoubtedly, the interplay of both of these ways of access, revelation and tradition, is crucial to the claim to authority that is staked by the Qur'anic recitations. On the one hand, they describe themselves as the result of genuine personal revelation, thereby claiming to override the merely exegetical and mediated grasp that contemporary Jews

and Christians have of the revelations that define their religious identities. On the other hand, the sura is concerned to establish that Muḥammad's subjective revelatory experiences fit a Biblical mould both in their circumstances and in their content, thus deploying the full weight of a prestigious religious tradition in a local context (the Arabian sanctuary of Mecca) where the majority of listeners did not adhere to one of the established Biblical confessions, yet must have possessed a considerable degree of eclectic familiarity with them.

A Reading of the Added Verses: Q. 53:23 and 26–32

In conclusion, let us take another look at the later expansion of the sura in verses 23 and 26–32. The brief passage about the three goddesses anticipates two slightly later passages from the early Meccan period that reject the existence of other deities than Allāh, namely, Q. 73:9 (*there is no God but Him*) and Q. 51:51 (*do not set up any other god alongside God!*).[71] The passage Q. 53:19–22 and 24–5 thus belongs to a cluster of texts from the end of the early Meccan period that first puts the issue of monotheism on the agenda, whereas previous Qur'anic recitations had primarily been concerned with affirming and fleshing out the reality of the Last Judgement rather than with refuting the existence of other divine beings. If one makes the likely assumption that the additions to Q. 53 were made after the promulgation of Suras 73 and 51, then one arrives at the following sequence of texts:

(i) Q. 53:19–22 and 24–5,

(ii) Q. 73:9 and Q. 51:51, and

(iii) the additions to Q. 53, namely, verse 23 and verses 26–32, which are probably to be regarded as two consecutive additions.[72]

When reading through the passages in this order, it is hard to avoid the impression that the tone of voice becomes increasingly strident. While Q. 53:19–22 and 24–5 essentially present an argument pointing out the unlikelihood that God would be content with female offspring while humans commonly desire male children, the two passages from cluster (ii) adopt a much more categorical register: Q. 73:9 generalises the implicit conclusion of the argument in Q. 53:19–22 (namely, that *there is no God but Him*, a statement later incorporated into the Islamic profession of faith), and Q. 51:51 translates this theological position into a straightforward command: *Do not set up any other god alongside God!* Q. 53:23 then inserts an unequivocal affirmation of the non-existence of other gods into *Sūrat al-Najm* itself: al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā and Manāt are *nothing but names* that the listeners and their forefathers have arbitrarily invented; whoever worships them is guilty of preferring *guesswork and the whims of their souls* to God's guidance. The considerable rhetorical energy that the second half of the verse (starting with *in yattabiʿūna*; *they merely follow …*) expends on denouncing the followers of the three deities shows that what had first

been merely a cursory jab at the regional pantheon had by now escalated into a heated dispute.

This polemical escalation continues in the second and much more extensive addition to Q. 53, verses 26–32. What is especially noteworthy, however, is the fact that this second insertion appears to be directed not simply against undeterred devotees of the three goddesses who had remained unimpressed by previous Qur'anic comments, but rather against adherents of a compromise position seeking to integrate the three goddesses into a monotheistic world view by giving them the status of 'angels' (verses 26 and 27) who possess the authority to provide 'intercession' (*shafāʿa*, verse 26) in favour of their human worshippers. Such reinterpretation of originally pagan deities as angels is of course not without precedent in the history of religions,[73] and to parts of Muḥammad's audience it might have appeared as a viable reconciliation of Qur'anic monotheism with traditional cultic practices. It is specifically such a compromise position that seems to be targeted by the second addition. In an as yet unpublished typescript, Angelika Neuwirth has drawn attention to the fact that such a position is very close to the view of the three goddesses that emerges from the *gharānīq* verses; even if the latter must, on the reasoning laid out above, be considered spurious, the theological stance that they express nevertheless appears to lurk somewhere in the background of the second addition to the sura. Hence, there might after all be something like a 'historical core' to the *gharānīq* affair consisting in the emergence of such a compromise view among the Qur'an's audience. It is possible that the later *gharānīq* tradition, while certainly the immediate product of exegetical speculation about the Medinan verse Q. 22:52, could also draw on vague memories that some such sort of theological compromise had been formulated as a response to Q. 53, but had subsequently met with emphatic rejection in a further Qur'anic comment on the subject.

NOTES

1 Although the provenance and transmission of the Qur'anic recitations and the status of Muḥammad are also addressed elsewhere, Q. 53:1–18 is certainly the most detailed description of the Qur'anic Messenger's experience of revelation.

2 See the overview in Shahab Ahmad, art. 'Satanic Verses' in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, with references to the numerous previous discussions of the issue by William Muir, John Burton, Uri Rubin and others.

3 An attempt to use the vision account from Q. 53 to tease out the Qur'anic concept of prophethood is undertaken, for example, in Alford T. Welch, 'Muḥammad's Understanding of Himself: The Koranic Data' in Richard G. Hovannisian and Speros Vryonis (eds), *Islam's Understanding of Itself* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1983), pp. 15–52, at pp. 25–33. The same question also underlies a classic article by Richard Bell, that pays particular attention to the chronological relationship between Q. 53 and Q. 81 (on which see below); see Richard Bell, 'Muhammad's Visions', *The Muslim World* 24 (1934), pp. 145–54. Here this latter article will

be cited according to the reprint contained in Rudi Paret (ed.), *Der Koran* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), pp. 93–102.

4 This commentary is part of the research project *Corpus Coranicum*, which is based at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of the Sciences and Humanities and directed by Angelika Neuwirth.

5 Although the first installment of the *Corpus Coranicum* commentary, which treats the early Meccan suras and is to be published online in the near future, was written by the present author, the general approach of the undertaking is particularly indebted to the paradigmatic groundwork done by Angelika Neuwirth, above all the form-critical analyses of the Meccan suras developed in her *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, 2nd edn (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007). I have also profited from having seen a preliminary version of Neuwirth's own commentary on the early Meccan suras that will be published independently of the *Corpus Coranicum* project. Where my interpretation of Q. 53 draws on ideas developed in her typescript, this will be appropriately signalled in the endnotes.

6 The English rendering of Q. 53, as of all the other Qur'anic passages cited in this article, is a modified version of the recent translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

7 It is probable that the *basmala*, too, has been subsequently added to the early Meccan suras, since the divine name *al-raḥmān* only comes into use in the middle Meccan period. A *terminus ad quem* is provided by Q. 27:30, where the *basmala* occurs inside a Qur'anic narrative and is presupposed as an established introductory formula (see Theodor Nöldeke and Friedrich Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1: *Über den Ursprung des Qorāns* (Leipzig: Dieterichsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1909), p. 117).

8 The most detailed critique of Wansbrough's late dating of the Qur'an has been developed by Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), pp. 25–63. For a conspectus of the variegated objections that may be raised against Wansbrough, see Nicolai Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung: Studien zur frühen Koraninterpretation* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), pp. 23–58.

9 On Nöldeke's approach to dating see Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, pp. 59–73, and Nicolai Sinai, 'The Qur'an as Process' in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds), *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 407–39.

10 I also feel enough confidence in the historical soundness of the general framework of the *sīra* narrative to accept the topographical labelling of these stages as 'Meccan' and 'Medinan', although this is not essential to my reading of the sura. On the issue see also Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, pp. 30–2 and pp. 72–3. The most recent contribution on the topic of chronology is Behnam Sadeghi, 'The Chronology of the Qurʾān: A Stylometric Research Program', *Arabica* 58 (2011), pp. 210–99. Sadeghi's article establishes, with considerable statistical sophistication, that a division of the Qur'anic suras into briefer passages of 'smoothly' increasing verse length, as put forward by the Iranian scholar Mehdi Bazargan, also yields a 'smooth' variation in the lexical make-up of these passages, as reflected in various frequency counts. Hence, Sadeghi's findings strongly suggest that the criterion of verse length does indeed have chronological implications, as it tends to converge with several independent lexical markers. I should emphasise that this general statistical result does not as such justify Bazargan's tendency to consider many short and mid-length suras as redactional composites; it is very well possible that average verse length displays some fluctuation even within genetically unitary texts.

11 W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qurʾān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), p. 111. Possibly the most pointed rejection of holism is Alford T. Welch, art.

'al-Ḳurʾān' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn, section 5; cf. the remarks in Sinai, 'Process', pp. 417–18, n. 21.

12 This is the main thesis established in Neuwirth, *Studien*. The most important evidence for its correctness is the fact that many of the Meccan suras are marked by recurring structural features: they are frequently tripartite, have similar introductions and conclusions, and in a significant number of cases have narrative middle parts. Also, the individual parts from which these suras are made up often exhibit numerical correspondences among themselves – as is the case with Sura 53 (see below): parts I and II have 24 verses each, and the third part has six verses, which is a divisor of 24 and corresponds to the length of the subsections of which part I is built up. Finally, as Neuwirth points out in *Studien*, pp. 9–10, the example of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* shows that at the time of the Qur'an's emergence there existed a precedent for polythematic textual structures.

13 See Nöldeke and Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, pp. 99–103.

14 Cf. Neuwirth, *Studien*, table 2.3.1 (follows p. 90).

15 Cf. the survey in Neuwirth, *Studien*, pp. 117–56.

16 For a numerically precise attempt at measuring verse length see Nora Katharina Schmid, 'Quantitative Text Analysis and its Application to the Qur'an: Some Preliminary Considerations' in Neuwirth et al., *The Qurʾān in Context*, pp. 441–60.

17 If later additions are discounted, the sura displays an average of 10.4 syllables per verse.

18 See Sinai, 'Process', pp. 420–5.

19 In verse 10 the Qur'anic Messenger is described as 'his servant', and since Muḥammad is the servant of God rather than of some angel, at least the suffix of *ʿabdihi* must refer to God. This however implies that the subject of the immediately preceding verb *awḥā*, too, as of all the other third person verbs and pronouns in verses 5–9, is God (Bell, 'Muhammad's Visions', p. 96). The view that Q. 53 does *not* describe a vision of God entails that the possessive suffix of 'his servant' does not have the same reference as the subject of the verb that precedes it, 'surely an unnatural use of language', as Bell puts it.

20 Cf. Bell, 'Muhammad's Visions', p. 102: Muḥammad 'thought at first that he had seen Allah. As he came to realise better the sublimity of Allah, he perhaps felt that was impossible.'

21 Josef van Ess, 'Vision and Ascension: *Sūrat al-Najm* and its Relationship with Muḥammad's *miʿrāj*', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1 (1999), pp. 47–62.

22 There is only one prior Qur'anic usage of *awḥā*, in Q. 99:5, yet there the word does not function as a synonym for the notion of a divine revelation addressed to man; just as in ancient Arabic poetry, in Q. 99:5 *awḥā* merely designates a non-verbal mode of communication (see Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), pp. 156–65).

23 Fairness requires that it be pointed out that both Bell's argument and the thesis he seeks to demonstrate are slightly more complicated. According to him, it is not Sura 81 in its entirety, but only specific verses – namely, verses 20, 21, 23 and 24 – that postdate Q. 53. Since Bell assumes that the notion that the Qur'anic revelations were conveyed to Muḥammad by an angel is only attested in the Medinan stratum of the Qur'an, he dates these verses to after the Hijra: Q. 81:19–27, in Bell's view, is 'probably composite, having been adapted to Muhammad's later theory of how the revelation came to him by the addition vv. 20, 21, and perhaps 23, 24' (Bell, 'Muhammad's Visions', pp. 97–8, n. 10). There are however grave problems with this position. Firstly, middle and late Meccan passages such as Q. 26:193, Q. 16:2 and Q. 40:15 already document the belief that the Qur'anic revelations are communicated to the Prophet by the Spirit, *al-rūḥ* (who is identified with Gabriel in the Medinan verse Q. 2:97); consequently, Bell's statement that it is only in Medina that an angel comes to play a role in the transmission of

revelation would require that the verses just cited be dated to Medina, which would mean that a preconceived theory about the development of the Qur'anic understanding of revelation is in effect allowed to determine the dating of specific passages. Also, Bell's understanding that it is not the entirety of Sura 81, but only specific verses – namely verses 20, 21, 23 and 24 – that postdate Q. 53 is hardly more than an ad hoc postulate, as it is not borne out by any conspicuous changes in verse length, style, terminology or theological content. In support of his view that the notion of an angelic carrier of the Qur'anic revelations only appears in Medina, Bell also appeals to Q. 6:8, where the polemical question *Why was no angel sent down to him?* is countered, not with the assertion that an angel had actually been sent down to Muḥammad, but with the seemingly counterfactual statement *Had We sent down an angel, their judgement would have come at once with no respite given.* The context of the verse, however, makes it probable that the opponents' question is about a *public* appearance of an angel that would incontrovertibly establish the truth of Muḥammad's claim to prophethood. To react by claiming that Muḥammad had in fact been in *private* contact with the *rūḥ* would thus not have been a convincing rejoinder.

24 Although the possibility that the Qur'anic corpus continued to be expanded after the death of the Prophet can of course not be ruled out from the start, I personally have not so far encountered any addition that cannot be plausibly held to date from Muḥammad's lifetime.

25 Nöldeke and Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, p. 103.

26 This observation is already made in Neuwirth, *Studien*, p. 207.

27 See, for example, the traditions cited in the commentary of al-Ṭabarī on Q. 22:52, nos. 25,327–35 (the version from Ibn Isḥāq is translated in Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 165–7). On the significance of the fact that the *gharānīq* incident is usually adduced as an occasion of revelation for Q. 22:52, see below.

28 The traditions cited by al-Ṭabarī also give variants like *tilka'l-gharānīqu'l-ᶜulā / wa-shafāᶜatuhunna turtaḍā* and *tilka'l-gharānīqu'l-ᶜulā / wa-shafāᶜatuhunna turjā/mithluhunna lā yunsā*.

29 Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, tr. Anne Carter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), p. 106.

30 W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 103.

31 Alfred Guillaume, *Islam* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 187.

32 Ahmad, art. 'Satanic Verses', draws attention to the 'widespread acceptance of the incident by early Muslims' and concludes that it can therefore not have been viewed as incompatible with Muḥammad's status as a prophet.

33 Cf. Gregor Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), and more recently Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte über das Leben Muḥammads: Das Korpus ᶜUrwa ibn az-Zubair* (Princeton, New Jersey: Darwin Press, 2008).

34 My argument, which builds upon and expands the way in which Neuwirth approaches the matter in her commentary typescript, presupposes that even if Muḥammad's first recital of the sura did include the *gharānīq* verses, it also included the rest of the sura (except for verses 23 and 26–32, on which see above). As a matter of fact, most traditions about the *gharānīq* incident do suggest that Muḥammad then continued to recite the rest of the text, cf. al-Ṭabarī on Q. 22:52, no. 25,327: 'then he continued to read the whole sura, and then he bowed down at the end of the sura, and all the people bowed down with him.'

35 To Angelika Neuwirth I owe the awareness that the reconstruction proposed in van Ess, 'Vision and Ascension', although it also argues in favour of the historicity of the Satanic verses,

assumes a different scenario of the sura's textual growth than the one that has just been criticised. According to van Ess, the vision accounts in the first part of Q. 53 are a later introduction that is meant to offset the embarrassment caused by Muḥammad's recitation and subsequent repudiation of the *gharānīq* verses; thus, according to van Ess, the passage about al-Lāt, al-ᶜUzzā and Manāt seems to have been an originally self-contained piece of revelation around which subsequently the remainder of *Sūrat al-Najm* grew. Yet such a reconstruction, sophisticated as it is, can be challenged on two counts: on the one hand, most of the traditions about the *gharānīq* incident – which van Ess does after all consider to reflect a real historical event – suggest that the Satanic verses were recited in the context of the rest of *Sūrat al-Najm*. On the other hand, and more importantly, any hypothesis about the textual growth and the redactional evolution of a given Qur'anic sura must in my view be backed up by internal evidence from the respective sura itself: redactional hypotheses only escape the accusation of arbitrary dissection if the seams and warpages of later editorial activity can be shown to be still visible in the present shape of the text.

36 John Burton, 'Those are the High-flying Cranes', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 15 (1970), pp. 246–65, at p. 249.

37 It should be noted that this position can be held independently from Burton's own explanation why the *gharānīq* verses were invented (namely, in order to back up certain aspects of the emerging Islamic theory of *naskh*). In her commentary typescript on Q. 53, Neuwirth observes that the *gharānīq* verses and the added verse 26 both involve the concept of intercession (*shafāᶜa*). On this basis, Neuwirth herself inclines towards reading verse 26 as a reaction to the *gharānīq* verses. However, the terminological overlap could be explained just as adequately by assuming that when the tradition about the *gharānīq* incident crystallised in later Islamic tradition, the passage that came into being was influenced by verse 26 of the sura to which it was held to have originally belonged. Since there can be no doubt that the *gharānīq* verses cannot have been part of Q. 53, the hypothesis that verse 26 presupposes the *gharānīq* verses rather than the other way around creates a rather challenging explanatory situation: the inserted verse 26 would the repudiation of a statement about the three goddesses that would have had to be known to the Qur'anic audience yet can never actually have been part of the Qur'anic text. Although it is certainly possible to develop a textual scenario where these seemingly contradictory hypotheses are both true – namely, by assuming that the *gharānīq* verses together with verses 19 and 20, without which they are not intelligible, circulated independently of the Qur'an – I feel that the result would be much too complicated to be convincing. It remains nevertheless true that the view of the three goddesses against which verses 26 and 27 appear to be directed does to a certain extent resemble that which is expressed in the *gharānīq* verses. This issue will be briefly taken up again at the end of the article.

38 Cf. Neuwirth, *Studien*, p. 207. Although I agree with the way Neuwirth marks off the sura's three main parts, I depart from her internal structuring of the first part by not dividing verses 1–12 into two *Gesätze* (a decision that is apparently motivated by her desire to ascribe to the first part a symmetric makeup of four sections containing six verses each). It is beyond the scope of this article to give a detailed explanation of the form-critical terminology used in this analysis ('accreditation of messenger', 'affirmation of revelation', 'negative character sketch', etc.), which is in part based on the terminology developed in Neuwirth, *Studien*, pp. 187–203, and rendered into English in Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 2nd edn (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), pp. 99–124. The first installment of the *Corpus Coranicum* commentary will be accompanied by a detailed register of literary forms that provides proper definitions for each of these form-critical terms and lists all the relevant early Meccan passages.

39 The rhyme schemes are specified in accordance with Neuwirth, *Studien*, Table 1 (follows p. 115).

40 'Section' is meant to translate the German *Gesätz*, on which see Neuwirth, *Studien*, pp. 175–8.

41 As Neuwirth's commentary typescript emphasises, it is important to recognise the substantial structural recalibration which the sura has undergone as a result of the extensive additions identified above: while in its original version, the goddesses are discussed only very briefly in four verses, in the present version of the sura they take up fourteen verses, some of them displaying the length of five regular verses; in my regular print edition of the Qur'an, their length amounts to sixteen out of 37 lines, i.e. they occupy almost half of the text.

42 The verse might also be translated as *By the star when it falls!*, but as other Qur'anic oaths frequently name particular times of day and night or heavenly bodies associated with them, such as the sun and the moon (see Q. 84:16–18, Q. 86:1, Q. 91:1–4 and Q. 74:32–4), it is more probable, I think, to interpret the verse as referring to some sort of heavenly occurrence that is cyclically repeated. It is tempting to identify the star referred to in the opening verse with Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky, which is mentioned in verse 49.

43 This 'literary' approach to Qur'anic oaths was pioneered in Angelika Neuwirth, 'Der Horizont der Offenbarung. Zur Relevanz der einleitenden Schwurserien für die Suren der frühmekkanischen Zeit' in Udo Tworuschka (ed.), *Gottes ist der Orient, Gottes ist der Okzident: Festschrift für Abdoljavad Falaturi zum 65. Geburtstag* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1991), pp. 3–39. For an English translation, see Angelika Neuwirth, 'Images and Metaphors in the Introductory Sections of the Meccan Suras' in G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds), *Approaches to the Qur'an* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 3–36.

44 Neuwirth, 'Horizont', p. 23. Although Sinai, 'Process', p. 423 assigns Q. 73 to Group II of the early Meccan suras, the sura rather ought to be classed as belonging to Group IIIb.

45 See Paul Kunitzsch, art. 'Planets and Stars' in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*.

46 As remarked above, this holds true for example for the first Qur'anic appearance of *awḥā* in Q. 99:5 (cf. n. 22).

47 Izutsu, *God and Man*, pp. 159–60.

48 In my view, this points to a more general characteristic of the Qur'anic corpus. As has most recently been underscored in Thomas Bauer, 'The Relevance of Early Arabic Poetry for Qur'anic Studies: Including Observations on *Kull* and on Q 22:27, 26:225, and 52:31' in Neuwirth et al., *The Qurʾān in Context*, pp. 699–732, it would be lopsided to submit to the strong temptation to read the Qur'anic recitations exclusively against the background of the Biblical tradition, for in spite of their very considerable difference in form and content from pre-Islamic poetry, they do selectively incorporate at least some of the diction and the rhetorical devices of ancient Arabic literature, while in other cases these are perhaps just as deliberately eschewed. The most obvious example for such continuity is the use of introductory oaths – reportedly a characteristic formal element of pre-Islamic oracles – in many early Meccan suras. A less conspicuous example consists in the fact that metonymic periphrasis, arguably the most characteristic trope of ancient Arabic poetry (for example, the description of a sword as 'a sharp white one'; see in general Thomas Bauer, *Altarabische Dichtkunst: Eine Untersuchung ihrer Struktur und Entwicklung am Beispiel der Onagerepisode* (2 vols, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992) vol. 1, pp. 172–80) is specifically employed in the Qur'an as way of emphasising the unfathomable terror of Judgement Day, which in most cases is referred to by metonymic periphrases such as *al-qāriᶜa*, *al-wāqiᶜa*, *al-ṭāmma*, etc. (although the more straightforward designations *yawm al-dīn* and *yawm al-faṣl* also occur). Hence, when the Qur'anic recitations describe themselves as being 'in clear Arabic language' (*bi-lisānin ᶜArabiyyin mubīn*, Q. 16:103, Q. 26:195), they may not merely be putting forward a linguistic classification of themselves, but perhaps also allude to the fact that in spite of their departure from the

established patterns of Arabic literary production, they are nevertheless in some sort of recognisable touch with them.

49 See the previous note. This observation is also made in Neuwirth's commentary draft.

50 '*Wa-kunta idhā bānat bihā gharbatu'l-nawā / shadīda'l-quwā lam tadri mā qawlu mushghib*'. For the Arabic text accompanied by an English translation (which I have slightly modified) see Fritz Krenkow (ed. and tr.), *The Poems of Ṭufail Ibn ᶜAuf al-Ghanawī and aṭ-Ṭirimmāḥ Ibn Ḥakīm aṭ-Ṭāʾyī* (London: Luzac & Co., 1927), no. 1, v. 2. The epithet *dhū mirra* also seems to have been used in poetry, at least according to the CD-ROM *al-Mawsūᶜa al-shiᶜriyya*, which includes a pre-Islamic verse where the expression is applied to the poet's bow. I have not yet managed to locate this verse in a reliable print edition, however.

51 Cf. the helpful survey in Isabel Toral-Niehoff, 'The ᶜIbād of al-Ḥīra: An Arab Christian Community in Late Antique Iraq' in Neuwirth et al., *The Qurʾān in Context*, pp. 323–47.

52 As an illustration, cf. Deuteronomy 34:5, 'So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord.' (Biblical quotations in this article are taken, sometimes in slightly revised form, from the King James Version.) In juxtaposing Qur'anic passages with particular Biblical intertexts, it is necessary to call attention to a number of important caveats in order to avoid the accusation of anachronism. Firstly, the version of the Bible that probably circulated most widely in the wider Late Antique context of the Qur'an's emergence was the Syriac Pshitta rather than the Hebrew or Greek versions of the Bible. Secondly, although considerable acquaintance with Biblical concepts and narratives can in my view be assumed even within the Arabic Peninsula, such knowledge very likely spread orally, and must have become intermingled with post-Biblical lore. This last assumption is borne out both by the shape that Biblical traditions display within the Qur'an and in the Biblically influenced poetry ascribed to Muḥammad's contemporary Umayya b. Abī'l-Ṣalt, which, in spite of the general scepticism with which it has been regarded during the last decades, is likely to contain an authentic core; see most recently Tilman Seidensticker, 'The Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Umayya b. abī ṣ-Ṣalt' in Jack R. Smart (ed.), *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Language and Literature* (Richmond: Curzon, 1996), pp. 87–101. All of the above implies that when the present article quotes Biblical intertexts, this ought to be understood as a kind of shorthand: the audience of the Qur'an might have been acquainted with the respective Biblical passage in the guise of fluctuating oral retellings, whether in Syriac or Arabic, and it remains a pressing desideratum to study the aspects in which Qur'anic appropriations of Biblical traditions bespeak a cultural fluency in post-Biblical Rabbinic and Christian, in particular Syriac, traditions.

53 Such a parallelisation is also suggested by some of the Qur'anic Moses narratives, for a comprehensive survey of which see Angelika Neuwirth, 'Erzählen als Kanonischer Prozeß: Die Mose-Erzählung im Wandel der koranischen Geschichte' in Rainer Brunner, Monika Gronke, Jens Peter Laut and Ulrich Rebstock (eds), *Islamstudien ohne Ende – Festschrift für Werner Ende zum 65. Geburtstag* (Würzburg: Harrassowitz, 2002), pp. 323–44.

54 See Sinai, 'Process', where Q. 79 is also assigned to Group IIIa of the early Meccan suras.

55 Cf. Exodus 3:12: 'And He said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a sign unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.' See also Exodus 4:4–9: '[4]And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand: [5]That they may believe that the Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee. [6]And the Lord said furthermore unto him, Put now thine hand into thy bosom. And he put his hand into his bosom: and when he took it out, behold, his hand *was* leprous as snow. [7]And He said, Put thine hand into thy bosom again. And he put his hand into his bosom again; and plucked it out of his bosom, and, behold,

it was turned again as his *other* flesh. [8]And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe thee, neither hearken to the voice of the first sign, that they will believe the voice of the latter sign. [9]And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe also these two signs, neither hearken unto thy voice, that thou shalt take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land: and the water which thou takest out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land.'

56 The use of *āya* in Q. 53 and Q. 79 is unusual in the Qur'an: normally, *āya* denotes a manifestation of God's powers in the working of nature or in history that is publicly accessible rather than being imparted only in revelatory experiences.

57 The overlap between Q. 53:18 and Q. 79:20 is also noted in Neuwirth, 'Erzählen als Kanonischer Prozeß', p. 329. While Neuwirth seems to assume that the notion of a prophet's vision of God's 'great sign' or 'signs' is first introduced in Q. 53 and that Q. 79 then alludes to this earlier passage, the opposite order of texts is actually more likely. For if the phrase *al-āya al-kubrā* first appears in Q. 79:20 as an echo of the prominence that the concept of divine signs possesses in the Biblical Moses narrative, Q. 53:18 is explicable as a transfer of the idea to Muḥammad. If however one were to put Q. 53:18 first, one would in fact be suggesting that the reference to a vision of God's 'greatest signs' in Q. 53:18 is explicable in some other way than by connecting it to the use of the notion of God's signs in the Book of Exodus. This challenge, which is not addressed by Neuwirth, is all the more pressing as the visionary use of *āya* in Q. 53 and Q. 79 is rather unusual within the Qur'an (see the previous note).

58 The relative clause characterising Abraham as 'having been faithful' (*alladhī waffā*) has a parallel in a poem ascribed to Umayya b. Abī'l-Ṣalt, where Abraham is described as '*muwaffī bi-nadhrin*', 'fulfilling a vow', namely, to sacrifice his son; see Friedrich Schulthess (ed.), *Umajja ibn Abi ṣ Ṣalt: Die unter seinem Namen überlieferten Gedichtfragmente* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1911), p. 33, no. 29:9. Since the poem does however display various overlaps with later Islamic reimaginings of the Qur'an's description of the sacrifice of Isaac, or perhaps Ishmael, in Q. 37, the authenticity of the passage ascribed to Umayya is doubtful and will not be further discussed in the present context. For an overview of the relevant *tafsīr* material, interpreted from the vantage point of Wansbrough's late dating of the Qur'an, see Norman Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture: The Sacrifice of Abraham in Early Islamic Tradition', *Le Muséon* 101 (1988), pp. 375–402.

59 Cf. Hamilton Gibb, 'Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia', *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962), pp. 269–80, at p. 299, reprinted with the original pagination in F.E. Peters (ed.), *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999): 'the evident object of the passage is to demonstrate the identity of Muḥammad's preaching with the content of previous revelations.'

60 For an English translation of the existing Slavonic version, see R. Rubinkiewicz, 'Apocalypse of Abraham' in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1983), pp. 681–705. A possible relationship between Q. 53 and the 'Apocalypse of Abraham' is briefly considered in Gibb, 'Monotheism', p. 274, n. 4.

61 See the English translation by E.P. Sanders, 'Testament of Abraham' in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1983), pp. 872–902.

62 See the study by James C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

63 For an English translation of the existing Latin text, see J. Priest, 'Testament of Moses' in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1983), pp. 919–34.

64 Gibb, 'Pre-Islamic Monotheism'.

65 In the syncretistic milieu from which the Qur'an emerged it is of course likely that no clear boundary was drawn between the canonical books of the Biblical canon, on the one hand, and extra-Biblical interpretations and reimaginings of the content of the former, on the other (see the caveats in n. 52 above).

66 As Hartwig Hirschfeld (*Beiträge zur Erklärung des orân* (Leipzig: Schulze, 1886), p. 37) has suggested, the expression *al-muʾtafika* from verse 53 is probably to be derived from the Hebrew *mahpēk̲ā*, a noun meaning 'overturning' that in the Hebrew Bible describes the destruction wrought by God on Sodom and Gomorrha (see, for example, Isaiah 13:19). Since the Targumic literature, contrary to the Syriac Pshitta, retains nominal derivatives of the verb *hfak*, the Qur'anic epithet apparently has a Rabbinic rather than a Christian background (cf. Josef Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin and Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1926), pp. 13 f.; Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), p. 274, is more sceptical and considers this explanation to be 'a little difficult').

67 Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1926), p. 144, who quotes (somewhat cryptically for a contemporary reader) Ephraem Syrus, *Sancti patris nostri Ephraem Syri Opera omnia quae exstant Graece, Syriace, Latine* (6 vols, Rome 1732–46, *Graece et Latine*, vol. 2, p. 211: ἀλλ' ἕκαστος τὸ ἴδιον φορτίον βαστάζων ἵσταται ἐκδεχόμενος τὴν ἀπόφασιν τὴν μέλλουσαν ἐξελθεῖν κατ' αὐτοῦ ('carrying his own load, everybody will stand there awaiting the future judgement that will overcome him'); see also vol. 1, p. 29: ἕκαστος τὸ ἴδιον φορτίον βαστάσει ('everybody will carry his own load').

68 'Every man's work (ἔργον) shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. / If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward (μισθὸν λήμψεται).'

69 In the Western tradition, it is part of the *Laudes matutinae* that is sung at daybreak.

70 Gibb, 'Monotheism', p. 277, also points out another feature of the Biblical material appropriated in the second part of the sura: 'there would be an almost deliberate avoidance of the distinctive confessional elements of either Judaism or Christianity, and an emphasis on the basic themes of a monotheistic faith divorced from both the rival creeds.' But perhaps the absence of any statement about the status of Christ, for example, is to be explained otherwise: not by an ecumenical impetus aiming to bypass controversial issues in favour of a 'common denominator' monotheism, but by the fact that the guiding perspective from which Biblical material is appropriated and organised is eschatological: just like in other early Qur'anic texts, the core of the sura's rereading of the Biblical tradition is the reality of the Last Judgement, which happens to be something that both Judaism and Christianity are agreed upon.

71 Together with Q. 52:39, where the argument from Q. 53:19–22 is concisely recapped, Q. 73:9 and Q. 51:51 belong to Group IIIb of the early Meccan suras, while Q. 53 belongs to Group IIIa. The mistaken assignment of Q. 73 to Group II in Sinai, 'Process', pp. 423–4, is to be revised accordingly.

72 Since it is difficult to give a precise relative date for the additions to Q. 53, other texts relevant to the issue of monotheism might have come between (ii) and (iii).

73 See many of the contributions to Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (eds), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).