

9 Angels, stars, death, the soul, horses, bows – or women?

The opening verses of Qur'ān 79

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Introduction

In a previous publication, building on the work of Günter Lüling¹ and Christoph Luxenberg,² I proposed a reconstruction of the first five verses of Qur'ān 100 (*wa-l-‘ādiyāt*) as follows:³

Standard form		*Reconstructed form			
By the runners snorting,	<i>wa-l-‘ādiyāti dabḥā</i>	والعاديات ضبحا	Those going out early in the morning,	<i>wa-l-ghādiyāti ṣubḥā</i>	والغاديات صباحا
And lighting a spark,	<i>fa-l-mūriyāti qadhā</i>	فالموريات قدحا	And kindling a flame,	<i>fa-l-mūriyāti qadhā</i>	فالموريات قدحا
And raiding in the morning,	<i>fa-l-mughīrāti ṣubḥā</i>	فالمغيرات صباحا		Addition	
And they stirred up dust in it,	<i>fa-atharna bi-hi naq‘ā</i>	فأثرن به نقعا	By which they chose to render a good deed,	<i>fa-ātharna bi-hi naq‘ā</i>	فأثرن به نقعا
And they went with it into the middle of a gathering.	<i>fa-wasaṭna bi-hi jam‘ā</i>	فوسطن به جمعا	Which they extended to the multitudes.	<i>fa-wasaṭna bi-hi jam‘ā</i>	فوسطن به جمعا

As can be seen from the above table, the reconstructed version appears to be a hymn about women doing good deeds, rather than a description of horses charging into battle or camels running during the pilgrimage, as the standard Muslim interpretations assert.

- 1 G. Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation: The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of a Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in the Koran under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretations*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2003 (translated from the 2nd [1993] German edition of the author's book *Über den Ur-Koran*, 1st edition 1974).
- 2 C. Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, 2nd edition, Berlin: H. Schiler, 2007.
- 3 M. Younes, "Charging steeds or maidens doing good deeds? A reinterpretation of Qur'ān 100 (al-‘ādiyāt)," *Arabica* 55, 2008, 362–86.

In this essay, I examine the introductory verses of Qur'ān 79 (*wa-l-nāzi 'āt*) and suggest a new interpretation using the same method as the one used in the reconstruction of Qur'ān 100.

First, I present the verses according to the standard interpretation, as detailed in Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), whose account is the earliest comprehensive and systematic *tafsīr* available.⁴

1	<i>wa-l-nāzi 'āti gharqā</i>	أقرغ تا عزان ل او
2	<i>wa-l-nāshīṭāti nashṭā</i>	أطشن ت اطشان ل او
3	<i>wa-l-sābiḥāti sabḥā</i>	والسباحات سبحا
4	<i>fa-l-sābiqāti sabqā</i>	فالسابقات سيقا
5	<i>fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā</i>	فالمديرات أمرا

Ṭabarī cites differences among the Qur'ān commentators in the first four verses, but not the fifth. The five verses contain two words each, an active participle and a verbal noun. The ten words are derived from seven different roots. In the first and fifth verses, the two words are derived from two different roots, but in the remaining three, the active participle and the verbal noun share the same root and basic meaning, with the active participle referring to an attribute of an actor and the verbal noun to the action itself. The disagreements among the commentators revolve around the reference of the active participles, particularly the active participle of the first verse *al-nāzi 'āt*. Ṭabarī's account, which presents the views of earlier commentators, is summarized in the following table:

1	<i>al-nāzi 'āt</i>	angels, death, stars, bows, the soul
	<i>gharqā</i>	drowning
2	<i>al-nāshīṭāt</i>	angels, death, stars, lassos, the oryx
	<i>nashṭā</i>	removing, untying quickly, moving swiftly
3	<i>al-sābiḥāt</i>	death, angels, stars, ships
	<i>sabḥā</i>	swimming
4	<i>al-sābiqāt</i>	angels, death, horses, stars
	<i>sabqā</i>	racing, overcoming in a race
5	<i>al-mudabbirāt</i>	angels (managing)
	<i>amrā</i>	command, affair

Problems with the traditional account

General problem: the reference of the active participles

The fact that there is so much uncertainty about the reference or references of the five active participles is sufficient to raise questions about the value of the

4 Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī. *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī al-musammā Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl 'āy al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Baydūn, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2005, 12, 420–24.

traditional interpretation. The reference to angels seems to make the most sense and is the only one with any consistency among the five verses, since none of the other possible references (i.e. death, stars, etc.) can be understood to be *pulling* or *drawing*, *drowning*, *moving* or *removing swiftly*, *swimming*, *racing*, and *managing affairs*.⁵ However, there is strong evidence in the Qurʾān itself for excluding even angels from being the reference of these participles, since the Qurʾān associates naming angels with unbelief: *inna alladhīna lā yuʾminūna bi-l-ākhirati la-yusammūna al-malāʾikata tasmiyat al-unthā* (“Lo! it is those who disbelieve in the Hereafter who name the angels with the names of females” [Q 53:27]).⁶

wa-l-nāziʾāt gharqā

The root *n-z-* is found twenty times in the Qurʾān, with several meanings ranging from “pulling” to “desire” to “controversy.”⁷ The Form I verb *nazaʾ*, the source of the active participle *nāziʾ* (fem. *nāziʾa*), is used with seven meanings all revolving around the theme of pulling or taking away: 1) to pull out, take out; 2) to remove; 3) to withdraw, take away; 4) to sweep away; 5) to peel off; 6) to select; 7) to pluck out.⁸

The word *nāziʾāt*, which occurs only once in the Qurʾān, is translated as “those who strive,” “those who pull out,” “those who discard.”⁹ The meanings of “striving” and “discarding” are clearly tied to the context of the verse as traditionally understood, and not to the usage of the word outside of this verse. The root *gh-r-q* occurs twenty-three times.¹⁰ It is found in two verbal nouns (*gharq* and *gharaq*), in the Form IV verb *aghraqa*, and the passive participle of the latter, *mughraq*. Following are the meanings provided by Badawi and Abdel Haleem for these four words:¹¹

- gharq*: going to the extreme, all the way, violently, strongly, energetically
- gharaq*: drowning
- aghraq*: to cause to drown
- mughraq*: drowned

5 Bint al-Shāṭiʿ suggests “raiding horses” (*al-khayl al-mughhira*) rather than angels as the reference of these participles (*al-Taḥsīn al-bayānī li-l-Qurʾān al-karīm*, Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1977, 1:124). However, an interpretation in which horses would be “managing the affair” (Q 79:5) is highly problematic. Bell offers yet another possibility. After stating that the meaning of Q 79:1–5 is “quite uncertain,” he writes: “If they must be interpreted, it seems best to take them as referring to the eager business life of Mecca.” R. Bell, *A Commentary on the Qurʾān*, C.E. Bosworth and M.E.J. Richardson (eds), Manchester: University of Manchester, 1991, 2:485.

6 See also Qurʾān 6:9 and 37:150–52. The English translations of Qurʾānic verses cited in this essay are taken from Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall’s *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, New York: New American Library, 1972.

7 E.M. Badawi and M. Abdel Haleem, *Arabic–English Dictionary of Qurʾānic Usage*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008, 926–27.

8 *Ibid.*, 927.

9 *Ibid.*, 927–28.

10 *Ibid.*, 663–64.

11 *Ibid.*

The word *gharq* violates a basic morphological rule of the language. According to Ibn Manzūr, who quotes al-Azhari, it is “a noun built in place of the true verbal noun.”¹² The word does not seem to have an independent existence in the language outside of this verse. In addition, an examination of the meanings of the four words listed above shows that, as in the case of *nāzi āt*, a new and quite different meaning is assigned to *gharq*, which is not related to drowning, the basic meaning of the root.

Leaving aside the elaborations created by the interpreters on extra-linguistic grounds (the angels pulling out the souls from the chests of the unbelievers . . . like the puller goes deep in [pulling] the bow),¹³ we simply have a combination of two words, one meaning “those that pull” and the other “drowning”. In terms of its syntactic structure, the verse consists of an active participle and a verbal noun in the accusative case. The accusative case assignment does not follow the standard rules of Arabic syntax: *gharqā* is not the object of a verb, the predicate of *kāna* and its sisters, the subject of *inna* and its sisters, *tamyīz* (accusative of specification), *hāl* (circumstantial accusative), or *maf‘ūl muṭlaq* (accusative of the absolute). Rather, the case assignment is typically explained as the result of *gharqā* being a verbal noun (*maṣdar*).

In explaining the case assignment, Al-Naḥḥās (d. 338/950) writes: “The souls are pulled out, drowned, burned, and then thrown into the fire . . . and the meaning is the souls are drowned so they drown [a drowning]” (*tunza ‘ nufūsuhum thumma tughraq thumma tuhraḡ thumma yulqā bihā fī al-nār . . . wa-l-ma ‘ nā fa-tughraq al-nufūs fa-taghraḡ gharqā*).¹⁴ He cites Qur’ān 71:17 *wa-allāhu anbatakum min al-arḡ nabātan* as a comparable case.

Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 577/1181) simply states that *gharqā* is accusative by virtue of being a verbal noun: *maṣṣūb ‘ala al-maṣdar*.¹⁵ Al-‘Ukbarī (d. 616/1219) gives a more elaborate account, but with the same conclusion. He writes: *gharqā: maṣdar ‘alā al-ma ‘ nā li-anna al-nāzi ‘ al-mughriḡ fī naz ‘ al-sahm aw fī jadhb al-rūḡ, wa-huwa maṣdar maḡdhūf al-ziyāda ay iḡhrāqan (gharqā: a verbal noun on the basis of the meaning, because the puller is drowning [or going deep into] the pulling of the arrow, or extracting the soul. It is a verbal noun, with the addition deleted, i.e. gharqā instead of iḡhrāqā)*.¹⁶ In the last part of his statement, ‘Ukbarī is making the claim that *gharq*, a Form I verbal noun, is taking the place of *iḡhrāq*, the verbal noun of Form IV.

12 *Al-gharq ism uqīm maḡām al-maṣdar al-ḡaḡīḡ min aḡhraḡtu iḡhrāqan*. Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh al-Kabīr, Muḡammad Ḥasaballah and Ḥāshim al-Shādhilī, Cairo: Dār al-Ma ‘ ārif (not dated), 3245.

13 Yaḡyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā’, *Ma ‘ ānī al-Qur ‘ ān*, ‘Abd al-Fattāḡ Shalabī (ed.), Cairo: Markaz Taḡḡīḡ al-Turāth, 2002, 3:230.

14 Abū Ja ‘ far Aḡmad b. Muḡammad b. Ismā ‘ īl al-Naḥḥās, *I ‘ rāb al-Qur ‘ ān*, ed. Zuhayr Zāhid, Beirut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1985, 5:139.

15 ‘Abd al-Raḡmān b. Muḡammad Ibn al-Anbārī, *Al-Bayān fī ḡharīb i ‘ rāb al-Qur ‘ ān*, ed. Ṭāḡā ‘ Abd al-Ḥamīd Ṭāḡā and Muṣṡafā al-Saḡḡā, Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-‘Arabī, 1970, 2:492.

16 Abī al-Baḡā’ ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Ḥusayn al-‘Ukbarī, *Al-Tibyān fī i ‘ rāb al-Qur ‘ ān*, ed. ‘Alī Muḡammad al-Bajāwī, Cairo: ‘Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1976, 2:1269.

The three grammarians attempt to explain the case assignment as an instance of the absolute accusative. There are at least two problems with this explanation. First, the absolute accusative requires a verb as the source of the verbal noun to be present in the sentence, as in the example given by al-Nahhās: *anbatakum nabātan*. No such verb exists in Qur’ān 79:1 or in any of the following verses. Second, there is no basis for the claim that *gharq* can be a substitute for *ighrāq*. It is simply brought in because the context requires a verbal noun derived from the root *gh-r-q* but with a transitive meaning: the angels have to be drowning an object, not themselves.

wa-l-sābihāti sabhā

The root *s-b-ḥ* occurs eighty-nine times in the Qur’ān in seven different forms.¹⁷ Three of these are the Form II verb (*sabbah-yusabbiḥ*), its verbal noun *tasbiḥ*, or its active participle *musabbiḥ*. The meaning of Form II and its derivatives generally revolves around glorifying God. The other four forms are the Form I verb *sabah-yasbah* and three forms related to it: the two nouns *sabhā* and *subḥān*, and the active participle *sābiḥ*. These derivatives have the following meanings:¹⁸

<i>sabah-yasbah</i> :	trail, pass along, trail in space
<i>sabhā</i> :	range, scope; opportunity for action, toiling, work; the act of swimming, floating, sailing, gliding, fast running, sweeping ahead
<i>sābiḥ(āt)</i> :	swimmers, floaters, gliders, fast-running horses
<i>subḥān</i> :	praise and glory be to . . .

The word *sabhā* is found in the Qur’ān twice, in 73:7 and the one occurrence in this verse. In 73:7, its meaning seems to have been unclear to the commentators. Ṭabarī lists *free time*, *sleep*, and *enjoyment*.¹⁹ He adds that Yaḥyā b. Ya‘mar (d. 129/747) read it with a *khā* ‘ in place of the *ḥ*, with the same meaning.²⁰

This absence of clarity in the meaning of *sabhā* is reflected in Ibn Manẓūr’s explanation of the word. Citing a number of authorities, all commenting on the usage of the word *sabhā* in Qur’ān 73:7 (al-Layth, Abū ‘Ubayda, al-Mu‘arrij, Abū al-Duqaysh, al-Farrā’, Abū Ishāq and Ibn al-‘Arābī), Ibn Manẓūr lists the following meanings: *free time to do things*, *free time to sleep*, *scope for action*, *free time*, *coming and going*, *free time at night*, and *the opportunity to do what needs to be done during the day*.²¹ Ibn Manẓūr adds that, according to Abū Ishāq, for those who read *sabkhā*, the meaning is close to that of *sabhā*; according to Ibn al-‘Arābī, for those who read *sabhā* the meaning is *confusion* or *life’s activities*, while for those who read *sabkhā* the meaning is *rest* and *relief of the body (from toil)*.

17 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 415–16.

18 *Ibid.*, 416.

19 Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12:285–86.

20 *Ibid.*, 286.

21 Ibn Manẓūr, 1914.

It is clear that these meanings, contradictory at times, are determined by the context of the word *sabḥā* in Qur'ān 73:7 and not by its basic or general usage in the language. The confusion is further deepened by the reports that the word was also read as *sabkhā*. In Qur'ān 79:3 *sabḥā* is explained simply as “swimming,” with no hint at a relationship to its meaning in 73:7.

The peculiarities of fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā

Qur'ān 79:5 has no grammatical problems: the active participle *al-mudabbirāt* acts as the verb and subject of the sentence, i.e. those who manage, and *amrā* is the direct object. However, in addition to the uncertainty about the reference of the active participle *al-mudabbirāt*, which is a problem in all five verses, there is a striking peculiarity about this particular verse.

The root *d-b-r* is used in the Qur'ān with three basic meanings, according to the traditional interpretation: (1) back, behind, or end; (2) to manage (an affair); 3) to contemplate.²²

The meaning of “to manage (an affair)” is expressed by the Form II verb *dabbar*, the source verb of the active participle *mudabbir*, and is found in the following five verses: 10:3, 31; 13:2; 32:5; and 79:5. The meaning “to contemplate” is expressed by the Form V verb *tadabbar* (sometimes assimilated to *dabbar*) and is found in the following four verses: 4:82; 23:68; 38:29; and 47:24.

The root *'-m-r* is common, with 248 occurrences.²³ It has the following meanings: (1) to order; (2) to appoint as ruler; (3) to consult; (4) one who gives a lot of orders; (5) affair, matter; (6) strange and evil (deed).

One striking feature characterizing the occurrences of the Form II verb *dabbar* and the Form V verb *tadabbar* in the Qur'ān is the exclusive association of the former with the noun *amr* and of the latter with something that is said or recited (Qur'ān, *āyāt*, *qawl*).

dabbar:

- 10:3 Then He sat on the Throne, managing the affair(s) (*yudabbiru al-amr*)
 10:31 And who manages the affair (*yudabbiru al-amr*)
 13:2 He manages the affair (*yudabbiru al-amr*)
 32:5 He manages the affair(s) from the heaven and the earth (*yudabbiru al-amr*)
 79:5 And those managing affairs (*fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā*)

²² Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 297.

²³ *Ibid.*, 44.

tadabbar:

- 4:82 Do they not contemplate the Qur'ān (*yatadabbarūna al-Qur'ān*)
 23:68 Do they not ponder what is said (*yaddabbarū al-qawl*)
 38:29 A blessed book that we sent down so that they contemplate its verses/
 signs (*li-yaddabbarū āyātih*)
 47:24 Do they not contemplate the Qur'ān (*yatadabbarūna al-Qur'ān*)

Problems with the traditional understanding of the verb *dabbar* and its derivatives, such as the active participle *mudabbir*, are highlighted by an examination of its relationship to its Form V counterpart *tadabbar* as used in the Qur'ān. In general, Form II verbs are semantically related to Form V verbs. The relationship is that of reflexivity or transitivity: Form V verbs are the reflexive or intransitive counterparts of Form II verbs. In some cases, where a verb is clearly based on a noun, no such relationship exists in spite of a shared stem, as in *ṣaddaq* (“to believe the truth of”) and *taṣaddaq* (“to give to charity”). The absence of a relationship in this case is due to the fact that *taṣaddaq* has its origins in the noun *ṣadaqa* (“charity”). The case of *ṣaddaq/taṣaddaq* is the exception; in other occurrences of Form II verbs and their Form V counterparts in the Qur'ān, the reflexive/transitive relationship can be clearly discerned, as in *baddal/tabaddal* (“change/exchange”),²⁴ *bayyan/tabayyan* (“to show/be shown”),²⁵ and *dhakkar/tadhakkar* (“to remind/remember”).²⁶ The case of *dabbar/tadabbar* seems to be unique. On the one hand, neither can be described as a denominative verb, like *taṣaddaq*, and, on the other hand, there are no traces of a reflexive/transitive relationship between the two verb forms: *dabbar* (“to manage”) and *tadabbar* (“to ponder”).

Alternative interpretation

The preceding discussion strongly suggests that the verses in which problems or peculiarities were shown to exist (Q 79:1, 3, 5) may have been misread or misunderstood by the early Muslim exegetes. A reading in which these problems are avoided should be preferable to the traditional one. Such a rereading will be attempted in the following paragraphs.

wa-l-nāzi'āt gharqā

As I have pointed out elsewhere,²⁷ there was a period in which the written text of the Qur'ān was represented by a consonantal skeleton where certain letters, which

24 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 80–81.

25 *Ibid.*, 123–24.

26 *Ibid.*, 329–30.

27 Younes, “Charging steeds,” 373.

later came to be distinguished by dots, were written identically. It is possible that some of the words in Qur'ān 79:1–5, including those in the first verse, were misunderstood and misinterpreted because they were assigned the wrong dots when dots were introduced (or reintroduced).²⁸

There is also evidence which demonstrates that the early commentators were dealing with a written text and that errors were made in its reading.²⁹ If we accept that Qur'ān 79:1 was misread, then a number of possibilities present themselves. For *nāzi'āt*, possibilities include *bāri'āt*, *bāzighāt*, *tāri'āt*, *nāzighāt* and *yāri'āt*; and for *gharqā*, possibilities include *'arqā*, *'azfā*, *'urfā*, *'azqā* and *gharfā*, among others. However, there is evidence for selecting one reading in each case.

naza' and the stars

Three of the earliest commentators, namely Mujāhid (d. 104/720),³⁰ Abū 'Ubayda (d. 210/824)³¹ and 'Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827/), explain the reference of *nāzi'āt* as the stars.³² It is difficult to imagine any of the meanings associated with the Form I verb *naza'*, cited above, being associated with stars. What could the stars be pulling out or taking out? In addition, how would *gharqā* (“drowning”) fit with *nāzi'āt*? The verb *naza'* simply does not work in this context no matter how hard one tries to stretch the meanings of *naza'* and *gharq*. Changing the dotting from *عزغ* to *عزغ* results in the verb *bazagh* (“to break through, rise, shine”). This fits perfectly with the word “stars.”

One piece of evidence provided by Abū 'Ubayda supports this conclusion. He writes: “The stars ‘pull,’ that is, rise then set in it (*al-nujūm tanza' taṭla' thumma taghīb fih*).”³³ Abū 'Ubayda is interpreting *tanza'* as *taṭla'* (“to rise”). *Tabzugh* – not *tanza'* – clearly fits better with this interpretation.

The root *b-z-gh* occurs twice in the Qur'ān (6:77–78; 14:64), with the meaning of the sun and the moon rising. Elaborating on the meaning of the verb *bazagh*, Ibn Manzūr states: *bazaghat al-shams . . . bada'a minhā ṭulū'u aw ṭala'at wa sharaqat . . . ka'annanhā tushaqqu bi-nūrihi al-dhulmatu shaqqan* (“The sun

28 Al-Munajjid claims that the first copies of the Qur'ān had dots which were removed by the Prophet's companions after his death, and then reintroduced towards the end of the first century AH. Salāh al-Dīn al-Munajjid, *Dirāsāt fī tārikh al-khaṭ al-'Arabī mundhu bidāyatih ilā nihāyat al-'aṣr al-'umawī*, Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1972, 127.)

29 M. Younes, “Ungrateful or honorable: A re-examination of the word *kanūd* in Qur'ān 100 (*al-'ādiyāt*),” *Arabica* 56, 2009, 274–85.

30 Abū l-Ḥajjāj Mujāhid b. Jabr al-Qurashī al-Makhzūmī, *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, ed. Abū Muḥammad al-Asyūṭī, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2005, 320.

31 Ma'mar b. al-Muthannā al-Taymī Abū 'Ubaydah, *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Fu'ād Sazgin, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1981, 2:284.

32 'Abd al-Razzāq b. Hammām al-Ḥimyarī al-San'ānī, *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad 'Abduh, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1999, 3:387.

33 Abū 'Ubaydah, *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, 2:284.

appeared: it started to rise or it rose and shone . . . derived from *al-bazgh* . . . as if darkness was broken by its light”).³⁴

gharqā vs. *ʿurfā*

One word that fits well semantically and syntactically with *bāzighāt*, and which has the same consonantal skeleton and syllable structure as *gharqā* is *ʿurfā*. It is found in the Qurʾān twice,³⁵ in one instance in the opening verse of Qurʾān 77, which is structurally similar to *wa-l-nāzi ʿāti gharqā*. Regarding the meaning of *ʿurf*, Ibn Manẓūr writes: it is the opposite of evil (*nukr*), *ʿurf* and *ma rūf* mean generosity (*jūd*).³⁶ Hence *wa-al-bāzighāti ʿurfā* would mean, “Those (f.) who rise [or shine] through generosity and good works.”

wa-l-sābihāti sabḥā

The key to a clear and consistent account of *sabḥā* and to understanding its meaning in both Qurʾān 79:3 and 73:7 may lie in a quotation by Ibn Manẓūr attributed to Thaʿlab, who states that *subḥān* is not the *maṣdar* of the Form II verb *sabbah*, but of the Form I verb *sabah*.³⁷ The verbal noun of the verb *sabah* (“to swim”) is typically *sibāḥa*. According to the traditional interpretation, *sabḥā*, in the sense of “swimming,” is found only in 79:3. It is quite possible, that, as in the case of *gharqā* above, this meaning was introduced by the commentators on the basis of the context and a shared root, while the original meaning may have been based on the verb *sabaḥa* “to glorify”.

The difficulty of reconciling the different meanings of *sabḥā* in Qurʾān 79:3 and 73:7, as well as the contradiction involved in the different meanings assigned to *sabḥā* by different commentators in the latter verse, is eliminated if the word is understood to mean “glorifying.” So 79:3 would mean “those [women] glorifying” and 73:7 as “there are many opportunities for you to glorify (Allah) during the day.”³⁸

fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā

It is highly unlikely that the exclusive occurrence of the Form II verb *dabbar* and its derivatives with the word *amr*, and of the Form V verb *tadabbar* with

34 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, 275.

35 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 613.

36 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, 289.

37 *Wa-ʿindī anna subḥān laysa bi-maṣdar sabbaha innamā huwa maṣdar sabaḥa*. Ibid., 1914–15.

38 A different dotting scheme would produce *wa-l-sāyihāti sayḥā*. The root *s-y-h* is found three times in the Qurʾān in the words *fa-sīḥū*, *sāʾihūn*, and *sāʾihāt*, all of which share the meaning of “traveling freely from one place to another, devoting oneself to the worship of God, particularly through fasting” (Badawī and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 470). This is also a possibility that should be considered in proposing an alternative interpretation of Qurʾān 79:1–5:

- a. And those (f.) who glorify Allah
- b. And those (f.) who wander the earth devoting themselves to the worship of God

something that is read or recited, is a coincidence. In my judgment, it is a strong indication that *dabbar* and its reflexive counterpart carry meanings that are different from the traditional interpretation of “manage” and “ponder.” If the meaning of *dabbar* is “manage,” why is it then associated exclusively with *amr* “affair”? Are there not other phenomena that are managed, besides “affair”? And are there not things to ponder besides the Qur’ān, speech and verses? Consider, for example, the usage of another verb with the meaning of “ponder,” namely *tafakkar*, which occurs thirteen times in the Qur’ān.³⁹ It is used in association with “the madness of their companion” (Q 7:184), “themselves” (30:8), “Allah’s creation” (3:191), “stories” (7:176), “verses, signs” (10:24, 13:3, 16:11, 16:69, 30:21, 39:42, 45:13), remembrance (16:44), and examples (59:21).

The meanings that I would like to propose for the words *al-mudabbirāti amrā* derive from their old Arabic usage as well as from a comparison with their cognates in Hebrew and Aramaic, two languages which are not only closely related to Arabic, but also are known to have had a direct influence on the language of the Qur’ān.⁴⁰

dabbar

In Hebrew the primary meaning of the *Pi‘el* verb form (the equivalent of Arabic Form II) derived from the root *d-b-r* is “to speak.”⁴¹ There is evidence that Arabic *dabbar* was used in a sense close to that of Hebrew. Although such usage seems to have escaped the Qur’ān commentators, there are indications that it existed in the language before the advent of Islam and for some time afterwards. For example, Ibn Manzūr lists one of the meanings of the verb as “to tell, narrate.” He writes,

wa-dabbar al-ḥadīth ‘anhu rawāhu . . . wa-dabbartu al-ḥadīth ay ḥaddathtu bih ‘an ghayrī . . . wa rawā al-Azharī bi-sanadih ilā Sallām b. Miskīn qāl: sami ‘tu Qatāda yuḥaddithu ‘an fulān yarwīh ‘an Abī al-Dardā’ yudabbiruhu ‘an rasūli llāh . . .

(And “*dabbar* the *ḥadīth* (saying) from him” [means] “he narrated it.” And “*dabbartu ḥadīth*” means “I narrated it from others” . . . Al-Azharī narrated in his own *isnād* (chain of transmission) to Sallām b. Miskīn, “I heard Qatāda

39 Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī, *Al-Mu‘jam al-mufahras li-alfāz al-Qur’ān al-karīm*, Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1988, 525.

40 See A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’ān*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938, 19–26.

41 F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, 180.

relate from so and so, narrating from Abī al-Dardā³, narrating (*yudabbir*) from the Prophet . . .),⁴²

amr

In both Hebrew and Syriac, one of the primary meanings of the root ³-*m-r* is “to say.”⁴³ In Hebrew, the primary meaning of the two nouns derived from the root ³-*m-r*, namely *emer* and *imra*, is “utterance, speech, word.”⁴⁴ In discussing the word *amr* as used in the Qur’ān, A. Jeffery writes: “In its use in connection with the Qur’ānic doctrine of revelation, however, it would seem to represent the Aramaic *memra* . . . The whole conception seems to have been strongly influenced by the Christian Logos doctrine, though the word would seem to have arisen from the Targumic use of *memra*.”⁴⁵

Finally, there is evidence that *amr* has a similar history to that of *dabbar* in Arabic. Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) cites “speech, saying” (*al-qawl*) as one of its meanings.⁴⁶ Assigning *mudabbirāt* and *amrā* the meanings suggested above yields the following alternative translation for Qur’ān 79:5:⁴⁷ “And those (f.) who speak the Word.”

wa-l-nāshīṭāti nashṭā; fa-l-sābiqāti sabqā

The proposed reinterpretation of Qur’ān 79:1, 3, and 5 establishes the theme of females doing good deeds in the same way that the reconstruction proposed for 100:1–5, referred to above, does. While there are other possible ways to redot the consonantal skeleton of vv. 2 and 4 such as *wa-l-bāsiṭāt bastā*⁴⁸ for *wa-l-nāshīṭāt nashṭā*, these two verses fit with the proposed interpretation as they are and the way their general usage in the language suggests.

42 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān*, 1321. Lüling argues for a meaning of the Arabic verb *dabar* as “to speak”, which, he states, “occurs very seldom in old Arabic so it therefore seems to be a loan from Hebrew” (*Challenge*, 499). He adds that the Form V verb *tadabbar* in the Qur’ān is used in the sense of “to discuss again and again and without aim and success” (Ibid., 502).

43 Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Lexicon*, 55–56; R. Payne-Smith, *A compendious Syriac dictionary founded upon the Thesaurus syriacus of R. Payne-Smith*, J. Payne-Smith (ed.), Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999, 20.

44 Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Lexicon*, 56–57.

45 Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 69.

46 ‘Abd Allāh b. Muslim Ibn Qutaybah, *Ta’wīl mushkil al-Qur’ān*, Al-Sayyid Aḥmad Ṣaqr (ed.), Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 1973, 514.

47 As I have pointed out elsewhere (Younes, “Charging steeds”, 379), it is quite possible that forms like *dabbar* and *amr*, in the sense of “to speak” and “word” or “utterance,” respectively, are not foreign borrowings but old Arabic usages that have died out. In this case Hebrew usage helps identify the old Arabic usage. I will comment further on *dabbar* below.

48 A case could be made for replacing *wa-l-nāshīṭāti nashṭā* by *wa-l-bāsiṭāt bastā*, since the only occurrences of the root *n-sh-ṭ* in the Qur’ān are in this verse, while the root *b-s-ṭ*, with the meaning of “giving,” “giving plentifully,” “spreading,” occurs 25 times (Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 91). A reading with “giving” would work well with the previous verse, in which the word *urf* involves generosity and giving.

The verb *nashiṭ*, its active participle *nāshiṭ*, and verbal noun *nashṭ* have the general meaning of “activity” as opposed to “laziness.”⁴⁹ Another meaning reported for the root *n-sh-ṭ* by Ibn Manẓūr is related to “pleasant” as opposed to “unpleasant” or “hateful.” He writes: *wa-fī ḥadīth ‘Ubāda bāya ‘tu rasūl allah ‘alā al-manshaṭ wa-l-makraḥ* (“The *ḥadīth* of ‘Ubāda has: ‘I pledged allegiance to the Prophet for pleasant and unpleasant situations.’”)⁵⁰

The verb *sabaq* means “to go past, go before,”⁵¹ “to surpass in generosity.”⁵² Ibn Manẓūr cites the *ḥadīth*: “I (the Prophet) am first (*sābiq*) among the Arabs (i.e. to become Muslim), ṣuhayb is the first among the Byzantines (*Rūm*), Bilāl is the first among the Ethiopians, and Salmān is the first among the Persians.” If considered with the basic meaning of the verb *sabaq*, Qur’ān 79:4 can be understood as: “Those who are first, surpass others (particularly in doing good).”

On the basis of the above discussion, the following table shows the reinterpretation of 79:1–5 proposed here, side-by-side with the traditional interpretation, as presented in Ṭabarī:

Traditional interpretation			*Reconstructed version		
By the angels (death, stars, bows, or the soul) drowning	<i>wa-l-nāzi ‘āti gharqā</i>	والنازعات غرقا	By those who rise/shine through good works	<i>wa-l-bāzighāti ‘urfā</i>	والبازغات عرفا
By the angels (death, stars, lassos, or the oryx) moving fast	<i>wa-l-nāshihāti nashṭā</i>	والناشطات نشطا	And those who are lively/spirited	<i>wa-l-nāshihāti nashṭā</i>	والناشطات نشطا
By death (angels, stars, or ships) swimming	<i>wa-l-sābihāti sabḥā</i>	والسباحات سبحا	And those who glorify (God)	<i>wa-l-sābihāti sabḥā</i>	والسباحات سبحا
By the angels (death, horses, or stars) racing	<i>fa-l-sābiqāti sabqā</i>	فالسابقات سبقا	And those who surpass others (in doing good)	<i>fa-l-sābiqāti sabqā</i>	فالسابقات سبقا
By the angels managing the affair	<i>fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā</i>	ات أمرا فالمدبر	And those speaking the Word (of God)	<i>fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā</i>	ات أمرا فالمدبر

49 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, 4428.

50 Ibid., 4428.

51 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 418.

52 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, 1928–29.

Conclusion

Qur'ān 79:1–5, along with the opening verses of Qur'ān 37, 51, 77 and 100, are often viewed as particularly difficult to understand because they were meant to be deliberately vague. R. Bell describes them as “suggestive of the utterances of soothsayers”, which the Prophet’s listeners did not attach a definite meaning to.⁵³ A. Neuwirth describes them as particularly enigmatic.⁵⁴

A logical conclusion that follows from such a view is that there is no point in attempting to understand these verses fully. I would like to suggest that this view is in direct conflict with the Qur'ān’s emphasis on its comprehensibility by Muḥammad’s Arabic-speaking audience. It is a clear Arabic Qur'ān (Q 12:2; 20:13; 39:28; 41:3; 42:7; 43:3) revealed in a clear Arabic tongue (16:103; 26:195). Qur'ān 14:4 declares: *wa-mā arsalnā min rasūlin illā bi-lisāni qawmihi li-yubayyina lahum* (“And we never sent a messenger save with the language of his folk, that he might make [the message] clear for them”). Muḥammad’s many enemies in Mecca would undoubtedly have ridiculed him if he recited verses that his followers could not understand. A more likely scenario is that the people who heard him understood what he said, but later generations, working with a defective script, did not successfully reconstruct what he said.

I understand that the type of reconstruction undertaken here may seem speculative and that alternative reconstructions are possible. I also understand that the exact character of the verses that I am trying to reconstruct may never be known in their original form. However, the present attempt is no more speculative than the traditional interpretation. Considering the level of uncertainty about the reference of the active participles in Qur'ān 79:1–5, the number of linguistic problems in these verses, and our knowledge of other misreadings of the Qur'ān’s defective script, the idea of rereading this Sūra based on the available linguistic material is hardly inappropriate. There is no reason to exclude the proposal that these verses refer to women, while at the same time contemplating the traditional proposals that they refer to angels, death, stars, bows, the soul, lassos, the oryx, ships or horses.

The strongest argument in support of my reconstruction is that, as they stand now, the verses of Qur'ān 79:1–5 are highly problematic, and all the interpretations and commentaries that have been proposed have failed to address their problems. In the absence of an account that addresses these problems in a convincing manner, I believe that my proposed reconstruction brings us closer to an understanding of the original structure, meaning and character of these verses.

53 W.M. Watt, *Bell’s Introduction to the Qur’ān*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970, 78.

54 A. Neuwirth, “Images and metaphors in the introductory sections of the Makkan sūras,” in Colin Turner (ed.), *The Koran: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies*, London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004, (244–73) 246.

The real question is not the legitimacy of such reconstructions, but an assessment of the reconstructed version in terms of logic, coherence and meaning, an assessment that also takes into consideration the circumstances in which the Qur'ānic text emerged. It is clear that the traditional commentators failed to provide a satisfactory interpretation of the verses discussed here. This failure is a strong argument in favor of a new way of thinking.