

CHARGING STEEDS OR MAIDENS PERFORMING GOOD DEEDS

Charging Steeds or Maidens Performing Good Deeds: In Search of the Original Qur'ān brings an important contribution to understanding the development of the Qur'ānic corpus.

Through a selection of meaningful case studies, the author convincingly argues for a different interpretative approach to the Qur'ānic text. Taking as a starting point the consonantal skeleton of the holy text, known as the 'Uthmānic *rasm*, and offering a critical reading of the Muslim interpretive tradition, such an approach produces a clearer understanding of parts of the Qur'ān which have defied Muslim and non-Muslim scholars since the early days of Islam.

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CHARGING STEEDS OR MAIDENS PERFORMING GOOD DEEDS

In Search of the Original Qur'ān

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Munther Younes

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*This book is dedicated to my mother, Latifi,
and to my sisters Zakiyyi, Ra'isi,
Mis'adi and Tahani,
victims of a system that has robbed them of their
dignity and happiness*

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PREFACE

My journey with the Qur'ān started very early, at the age of three or four years. I used to hear my father recite it when he prayed. My father had left school before finishing the first grade, but he could read and write and he had memorized some of the short *sūras*, like *al-nās*, *al-falaq*, *al-ikhhlāṣ*, *al-masad*, *Quraysh*, and *al-tīn* that he used to recite in his prayers.

There were many words in these *sūras* that I understood, like *al-nās* (people), *mālik* (king), *tīn* (figs), and *zaytūn* (olives). But there were many other words that I did not and was not expected to understand, and I never dared ask anyone what they meant. To my young mind at the time, the language of the Qur'ān belonged to another world, mysterious, and unfathomable.

My father used to recite *Quraysh* (Q106) as follows:

li-īlāfi qurayshin īlāfihim
riḥlata l-shitā'i wa-l-ṣayf
fa-l-ya 'budū rabba hādhā l-bayt
alladhī aṭ'amahum min jū'in wa-āmanahum min khawf

My young mind connected the word *īlāf* with a certain rough, scratchy fiber that my older sister used to wash me with, and I connected *īlāfihim* with *fihim*, which has something to do with understanding. I never understood the point of the *sūra* or the connection between fiber and understanding, but I knew that I was too young to comprehend such mysteries and too afraid to ask the adults around me for explanations.

At the age of six I started school. My classmates and I had to read and memorize several short *sūras*. I memorized what I was expected to

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memorize and I read what I was expected to read, but I did not expect to understand what I read or memorized.

I remember that our elementary school teacher once asked the class to memorize *sūrat al-tīn* (Q95) and to recite it in class the following day. One of the students had a lot of trouble memorizing it. When his turn came, he recited:

<i>bi-smi llāhi l-rahmāni l-rahīm</i>	In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful
<i>wa-l-tīni wa-l-zaytūn</i>	By the fig and the olive
<i>wa-ṭūri sīnīn</i>	And Mount Sinai
<i>wa-hādhā l-baladi l-amīn</i>	And this safe place
<i>la-ḡad khalaḡnā l-insāna fī aḡsani taḡwīm</i>	We created man in the best stature
<i>inna llāha aḡfala sāfilīn</i>	Truly God is the lowest of the low

Concerned that one member of his class had insulted the Almighty, the teacher raised his hands and looked upwards, praying for forgiveness, before whipping the offending seven-year old boy. I remember the bewildered look on the boy's face. He had no idea why he was being whipped.

Subsequently, I had the opportunity to study linguistics and to learn some Hebrew and some Syriac because of my interest in languages and because of their similarity to Arabic. As it happened, I ended up teaching Arabic at an American university. Among my students there were a few with a Muslim background who asked me to teach a course that would help them understand the language of the Qur'ān because they had been reciting it since childhood without understanding it. In choosing the material for this course, I decided to focus on the short *sūras*, those of *Juz' 'Amma* (Part 30 of the Qur'ān), for a few reasons. First, I had memorized a good number of them, so they were familiar to me and easier to recite without reference to the text. Second, most of their verses are short and rhythmic, which makes them easier for students to learn and remember. Third, they were familiar to my students, who recited them in their prayers. Fourth, there is a certain amount of ambiguity and challenge about these *sūras* that had always fascinated me and that I had a strong desire to figure out.

I approached the course with the hope that I would understand these *sūras* better after introducing them to my students. I consulted the readily available references – dictionaries, translations and interpretations – but none of these sources provided a satisfactory explanation for words and phrases in these *sūras* like *ṭāf*, *al-'ādiyāt*, and *kanūd*. So I dug a little deeper and looked at earlier Muslim interpretations of the Qur'ān, such as al-Ṭabari's *Tafsīr*, as well as some works written by non-Muslim scholars.

The results of my investigation are presented in this book.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my warmest thanks and deepest appreciation to my friend and colleague David Powers. Without David, this book would simply not have been written. Although I had been reading the Qur'ān since my childhood, it was David who introduced me to the most fascinating and exciting aspects of its language. Since my first publication in the field over ten years ago, David has generously deployed his superb editing skills and extensive knowledge to help me expand my own knowledge of the field, deepen my understanding of the issues at hand and sharpen the arguments of my publications. Thank you, David.

Andrea Hartill, Senior Publisher at Routledge, has been instrumental in the publication of this book. Her enthusiasm for the project since I first proposed it two years ago and her commitment to seeing it through the publication process have been inspiring. I am truly grateful to Andrea for her unwavering support of yet another of my many projects.

I am also grateful to my colleagues Gabriel Said Reynolds, Guillaume Dye and Tommaso Tesei, who have read the manuscript and made a number of valuable comments. My colleague, Bilal Al-Omar, who disagrees with the conclusions of my study, posed some challenging questions that made me rethink some of my arguments. I hope the comments and questions raised by these colleagues have contributed to improving the quality of the final product.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Claire Margerison, Editorial Assistant at Routledge, for her patience, professionalism and dedication in ensuring the successful completion of the project.

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INTRODUCTION

The Islamic tradition teaches that the Prophet Muḥammad received revelations and recited them to his scribes, who memorized them and then wrote them down. The third caliph, ‘Uthmān, who ruled from 23 to 35 AH/644 to 656 CE, charged a committee led by Zayd b. Thābit to produce a complete codex of the Qur’ān. Copies of this codex, known as *mushaf* ‘Uthmān, were sent to the main centers of the emerging Muslim state and other “unauthorized” copies were destroyed. The ‘Uthmānic codex “established the consonantal *rasm*, i.e. the writing of the consonantal structure but without the diacritics and vowel signs added at a later stage”.¹ These diacritics and vowel signs were added over a period of two centuries following the establishment of the consonantal codex.²

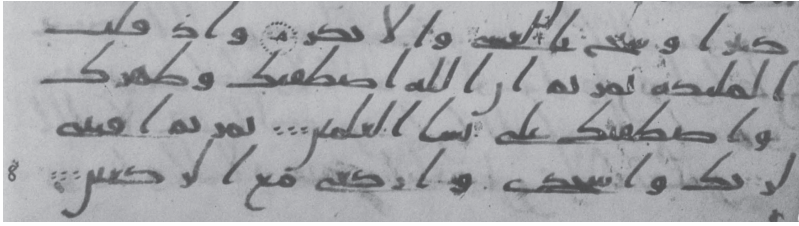
In the Qur’ānic *rasm*,

- a Sets of letters that were later distinguished by dots, such as *rā’* and *zāy*, *sīn* and *shīn*, and *bā’*, *tā’* and *thā’*, looked alike,
- b *Hamza* (the glottal stop) was not written,
- c Diacritics, like *ḍamma*, *kasra*, and *fatha* were not written, and
- d Long *alif* was often not written inside a word.

Consider the following sample from one of the earliest Qur’ān manuscripts:³

Q3: 41–43

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In modern Arabic script, the text above appears as follows, without dots and vowel signs:

- 1 . . . كبروا وسبح بالعسى والانكر . . . واد فلب
- 2 الملكة مريم اد الله اصطفك وطهرک
- 3 واصطفك على نسا العلمد . . . مريم افسى
- 4 لربک واسجدى وارکعى مع الرکعد . . .

This is how it appears in standard copies of the Qur’ān:

- 1 . . . كَثِيرًا وَسَبِّحْ بِالْعَسَىٰ وَالْإِنكَارِ (41) وَإِذْ قَالَتِ
- 2 الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَا مَرْيَمُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَاكِ وَطَهَّرَكِ
- 3 وَاصْطَفَاكِ عَلَىٰ نِسَاءِ الْعَالَمِينَ (42) يَا مَرْيَمُ اقْنُتِي
- 4 لِرَبِّكِ وَاسْجُدِي وَارْكَعِي مَعَ الرَّاكِعِينَ (43)

Ibn Mujāhid and variant readings

The “defective” script described above allowed for different readings of the same consonantal skeleton. Between the time the script was fixed during Uthmān’s rule and the first quarter of the 4th century AH/10th century CE “a vast number of variant readings developed that interpret identical consonantal forms in different ways”.⁴ The credit in limiting the number of the canonical readings to seven goes to Ibn Mujāhid (d. 324/935), who, according to Nöldeke, was “the most successful of all the teachers of the reading of the Koran, and the founder of strict orthodoxy in the field of the science of variant readings”.⁵ The seven canonical readers approved by Ibn Mujāhid are Nāfi’, Ibn Kathīr, ‘Āṣim, Ḥamza, al-Kisā’ī, Ibn ‘Āmir, and Abū ‘Amr b. al-‘Alā’.

Ibn Mujāhid was instrumental in delegitimizing the readings of certain scholars, notably those of Ibn Shannabūdh (d. 328/939), who “was summoned before a special court of justice, consisting of *qāḍīs*, *fuqahā*”, and

qurrā . . . who demanded repentance (*tawba*). When he refused, he was subjected to corporal punishment until he finally signed the reverse (*maḥḍar*),⁶ promising to respect the ‘Uthmānic text’.⁷

In Ibn Mujāhid’s *Kitāb al-Sab‘a fī l-Qirā’āt*, we find hundreds of examples of words that were read differently by the seven canonical readers, depending on their dotting schemes. One example is the word فسورا (Q4:94 and Q49:6), which was read as *fa-tabayyanū* by Ibn Kathīr, Nāfi‘, Abū ‘Amr, ibn ‘Āmir, and ‘Āṣim, but as *fa-tathabbatū* by Ḥamza and al-Kisā’ī.⁸ As long as words shared the same consonantal skeleton, alternative readings were accepted as canonical, as in *ya‘malūn* “they do”/ *ta‘malūn* “you, m.pl., do” (Q2:74),⁹ *kabīr* “big”/ *kathīr* “plentiful” (Q2:219),¹⁰ and *nanshuruhā* “we spread them”/ *nunshizuhā* “we bring them to life” (Q2:259).¹¹

As Nöldeke notes, “only very few and rather unimportant deviations from the ‘Uthmānic text in their canonical form found their way into the system of the ‘Seven Readers’ ”.¹²

Al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*

Around the same time that Ibn Mujāhid produced *Kitāb al-Sab‘a*, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922) produced his well-known *tafsīr*, described by Nöldeke as “the turning point in the history of interpretation”.¹³ Nöldeke adds: “Given its scope, versatility, and the reliability of its content, it is indeed the most instructive work of its type that the Muslim world produced”.¹⁴ Al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*, a systematic interpretation of the entire Qur’ān, became the foundation for the Muslim understanding of the text. One must be careful, however, in considering this *tafsīr*, or other *tafsīrs*, as objective scholarly studies. As Nöldeke points out: “[although] it is indeed the most instructive work of its type that the Muslim world produced . . . we must immediately voice our reservation that, for us, it is only useful as a collection of data, since it is completely under the spell of dogmatic prejudice and therefore cannot reach the heights of an objective historical approach. Historical criticism was also foreign to Muslims in subsequent times – even down to the present day”.¹⁵

The goal of Ibn Mujāhid was to limit the number of possible readings of the defective ‘Uthmānic *muṣḥaf* by tying it to a clear dotting scheme and a system of vowel signs, particularly signs for the short vowels. His work has resulted in “freezing” the text of the Qur’ān in a specific form.¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarī tied these readings to particular meanings. Any dotting scheme and interpretation that did not win the approval of these two authorities was excluded and/or delegitimized. There is strong evidence that some of these excluded and delegitimized readings may have been the ones intended in the original,

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‘Uthmanic edition. I will illustrate with two examples: *madh’ūm^{an}* (Q7:18) and *īnāhu* (Q33:53).

Madh’ūman

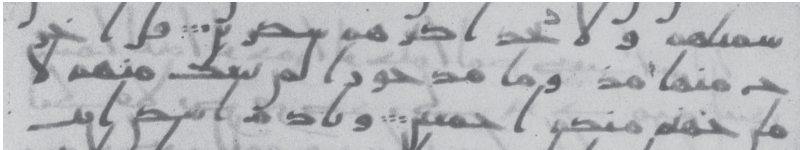
Ibn Mujāhid does not report any variation among the seven canonical readers in their reading of the word *madh’ūm^{an}* in Q7:18.¹⁷ There is good reason to believe that this word is a corruption of another, i.e. *madhmūm^{an}*. *Madh’ūm^{an}* is a *hapax legomenon*, occurring in Q7:18, in combination with the word *madhūr^{an}*.

qāla ukhruj minhā madh’ūm^{an} madhūr^{an} la-man tabi’aka minhum la-amlā’anna jahannama minkum ajma’īn

Droge translates the combination *madh’ūm^{an} madhūr^{an}* as “detested (and) rejected”:¹⁸

He said, ‘Get out of here, detested (and) rejected! Whoever of them follows you – I shall indeed fill Gehenna with you – all (of you)!’

Examination of Q7:18 in BNF 328 a, Folio 30b clearly shows a space the size of a letter between the *dhāl* and *wāw* of *madh’ūman*.¹⁹

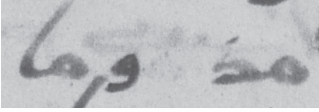


Q7:18 (BNF 328a, folio 30b)

In modern Arabic script, this consonantal skeleton would appear as follows:

- 1 سملهم ولا تحد اكثر هم سكرند . . . فل اجر
- 2 ح منها مد وما مدحورا لمد نبعك منهم لا
- 3 ملد حهم منكم احمعد . . . وبادم اسكد اد

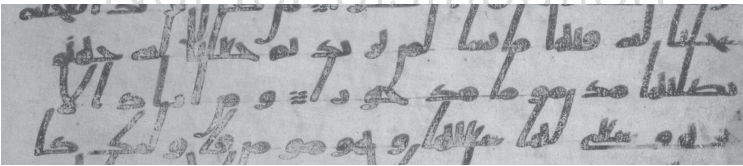
In line 2, a letter is missing in the word *madhmūm^{an}*, perhaps the result of a scribal error, an erasure, water damage or some other factor, as is shown in the following enlarged image of the manuscript page:



A *hamza* was later added in that same space, which became part of the standard text.²⁰ Compare the manuscript text of the image above with the printed text in the Cairo edition:

شَمَائِلِهِمْ وَلَا تَجِدُ أَكْثَرَهُمْ شَاكِرِينَ ﴿١٧﴾ قَالَ
 أَخْرَجَ مِنْهَا مَذَّةً وَمَا مَذْحُورًا لَمَنْ يَتَّبِعَكَ مِنْهُمْ لِأَمْلَآنَ جَهَنَّمَ مِنْكُمْ
 أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿١٨﴾ وَيَتَنَادَمُ أَشْكُنَ أَنْتَ

My claim that *madh'ūm*^{an} was originally *madhmūm*^{an} is supported by a comparison of Q7:18 shown above with an image of Q17:18 found in another old manuscript (BM 2165, folio 39b).²¹



Using modern Arabic script, the text here would be:

- 1 عُلْنَا لَهُ فِيهَا مَا سَا لَمَذ بَرِيد نَم حَعْلْنَا لَهُ جَهَنَّمَ
- 2 نَصَلْبُهَا مَذْمُومًا مَذْحُورًا . . . وَمَذَّارَادِ الْإِلَهِ
- 3 حَرَّهُ وَسَعَى لَهَا سَعْبُهَا وَهُوَ مَوْمَدٌ فَأُولَئِكَ كَانُوا

In line 2 we see the word *madhmūm*^{an} right before the word *madhūr*^{an}, the same word that follows *madhūm*^{an} in Q7:18.



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Droge translates *madhmūm^{an} madhūr^{an}* as “condemned (and) rejected”.²²

I propose that the original word in Q7:18 was *madhmūm^{an}* and that it was abandoned and replaced by another, previously non-existent, word *madh’ūm^{an}*, which made its way into the standard text.

The claim that *madh’ūm^{an}* was an invention is supported by the fact that the meanings given to it in Arabic lexicons are tied to its usage in Q7:18 and all revolve around the definition of *madhmūm^{an}*.²³ Furthermore, there is uncertainty about its pronunciation; it can be pronounced with *hamza* and without and the *dhāl* can be replaced by *dāl*.²⁴

Īnāhu/ināthahu

Ibn Mujāhid reports variation in the reading of *īnāhu* of Q33:53: whereas Ḥamza and al-Kisā’i read *īnēhu* (with *imāla*), the other five read *īnāhu*.²⁵ Such variation is minor and common among readers, although the *ā/ē* variation generally involves *alif* (l) not *yā*’, represented in the Uthmānic *muṣḥaf* by the ligature ٰ.

Luxenberg argues that the original reading of ٰ in the *muṣḥaf* was *ināthahu* “his wives” rather than *īnāhu* “cooked food”. He adds that “the Arab commentators have even deliberately interpreted the unambiguous Arabic verb نظر (*naẓara*) (to look) as انتظر (*intaẓara*) (to wait) to justify the misreading . . .”²⁶

Several pieces of evidence support Luxenberg’s hypothesis. Before providing this evidence, it will be useful to elaborate on the word and its context in the Qur’ān.

Īnāhu/ināthahu appears only once in the Qur’ān, in Q33:53. In what follows, the word in question is left as it would have appeared in the ‘Uthmānic *muṣḥaf*, untransliterated.

yā-ayyuhā lladhīna āmanū lā tadkhalū buyūt al – nabīyi illā an
 yu’ dhana la-kum ilā ʿa ʿim^m ghayra nāzirīna ٰ wa-lākin idhā du ʿitum
 fa-dkhalū fa-idhā ʿa ʿimtum fa-ntashirū wa-lā musta ʿniṣīna li-ḥadīth^m
 inna dhālikum kāna yu ʿdhī l-nabīya fa-yastahyī minkum wa-llāhu lā
 yastahyī min al-ḥaqq wa-idhā sa ʿaltumūhunna matā ʿan fa-s ʿalūhunna
 min warā ʿi ḥijāb^m dhālikum aḥaru li-qulūbikum wa-qulūbihinna wa-
 mā kāna lekum an tu ʿdhū rasūla llāhi wa-lā an tankihū azwājahū min
 ba ʿdhi abad^{an} inna dhālikum kāna ʿinda llāhi ʿazīm^{an}

Droge translates the verse as follows:

You who believe! Do not enter the houses of the Prophet to (attend) a meal without waiting (until it) is ready, unless permission is given to

you. But when you are invited, enter, and, when you have eaten, disperse and do not linger for conversation. Surely that is hurtful to the Prophet, and he is ashamed of you but God is not ashamed of the truth. When you ask them for anything, ask them from behind a veil. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts. It is not for you to hurt the messenger of God, nor to marry his wives after him – ever. Surely, that is a great (offense) in the sight of God.²⁷

Why **انه** should be read as *ināthahu*

First, without the pronominal suffix *hu*, the word, according to the traditional interpretation, would be *inā*. One wonders what the root of such a word is. Even if we assumed that **انه** is derived from 'y-n or 'n-y, such roots do not convey the meaning of food, cooking, completion or readiness. Richard Bell writes about *ināhu*: “As it stands in the text, this is usually taken as referring to the meal. But the grammatical construction of the phrase is difficult, as is also that of the phrase which follows”.²⁸

Second, as Luxenberg points out, the verb meaning “to wait” that is derived from the root *n-z-r* follows Form VIII; the Form I derivation signifies “to look, see”. There are numerous occurrences of both verbs and their derivatives in the Qur’ān. The Form VIII verb and its derivatives center around the meaning of “waiting”, while the Form I verb and its derivatives center around “looking” and “seeing”. The only exception is *nāzirīna*, the active participle of the Form I verb *nāzara*, which combines with *ināhu* to give the standard Qur’ānic meaning “waiting for the proper time” or “waiting for its completion”. Third, although there is mention of food, the focus of the verse is clearly the wives of the Prophet. Thus, Luxenberg’s proposal provides a clear, straightforward and grammatically sound reading of the verse:

O you who believe, do not enter the dwellings of the Prophet unless you are given permission to eat, without *looking (staring) at his wives*. If you are invited, enter, and, when you have eaten, disperse and do not linger for conversation. That would hurt the Prophet and he is shy of you, but God is not shy of the truth. If you ask them (i.e. the Prophet’s wives) for anything, ask them from behind a screen, that is purer for your and their hearts. It is not for you to hurt the messenger of God or to ever marry his wives after him. That would be an enormity with God.

Finally, whereas *ināhu* is a hapax, the Qur’ān contains six occurrences of *ināth*.

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Again, a word that appears to have existed in the original text, *ināthahu*, was discarded and an invented, previously non-existent word, *ināhu*, became part of the standard text.

Insistence on an exclusively Arabic character of the Qur'ān

Although al-Ṭabarī sometimes mentions that certain words in the Qur'ān are of foreign origin, he seems to be mostly unaware that many other words may have their origins in other languages or that their meanings in the Qur'ān are those found in these languages. For example, about the word *qaswara* in Q74:51 he writes: “When Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687) was asked about His (Allah’s) saying: *farrat min qaswara*, he said: It is *asad* in Arabic, *shār* in Persian, *aryā* in Nabatean and *qaswara* in Abyssinian”.²⁹ However, such references to the foreign origins of words are rare and often contradictory in Ṭabarī, which belies an ignorance or lack of interest in these origins. In his interpretation of the same word (*qaswara*), he cites a report attributed to ‘Ikrima (d. 105/723) in which, when asked if *qaswara* refers to ‘lion’ in Abyssinian, he replied: “Lion in Abyssinian is ‘*anbasa*’”.³⁰

Knowledge of the usage and meanings of foreign words or their cognates in the languages from which they are likely to have been borrowed and applying this knowledge to certain parts of the Qur'ān helps achieve a clearer understanding of numerous passages and explains what appear to be grammatical irregularities according to the rules of Arabic grammar. I will give two examples, one lexical and another syntactic.

Al-jibt

This hapax legomenon is found in Q4:51 in combination with the word *al-tāghūt*: *a-lam tara 'ilā llaḏīna ūtū naṣīb^{an} min al-kitābi yu'minūna bi-l-jibti wa-l-tāghūti wa-yaqūlūna li-llaḏīna kafarū hā'ulā'i ahdā min alladhīna āmanū sabīl^{an}* (Do you not see those who have been given a portion of the Book? They believe in al-Jibt and al-Tāghūt, and they say to those who disbelieve, ‘These are better guided (as to the) way than those who believe’).³¹

Here is a summary of Ṭabarī’s long interpretation of the two-word combination *al-jibti wa-l-tāghūt*.³²

Some interpreters said that they are two idols that the idolators used to worship. Others said, *al-jibt* refers to idols and *tāghūt* to those who claim to speak for the idols (*tarājimat al-aṣnām*) to lead people astray. Other

men claimed that *al-jibt* is a soothsayer (*al-kāhin*) and *al-ṭāghūt* a Jewish man called Ka‘b b. al-Ashraf. Others said, *al-jibt* is magic and *al-ṭāghūt* is the devil (*al-shayṭān*). Others said, *al-jibt* refers to a magician and *al-ṭāghūt* is the devil. Others said *al-jibt* is a magician and *al-ṭāghūt* [is] a soothsayer. According to Sa‘īd b. Jubayr, *al-jibt* is a magician in Abyssinian and *al-ṭāghūt* is a soothsayer. Others claimed that *al-jibt* refers to Ḥuyayy b. Akḥṭab and *al-ṭāghūt* to Ka‘b b. al-Ashraf. Others said, *al-jibt* is Ka‘b b. al-Ashraf and *al-ṭāghūt* [is] the devil.

Al-Ṭabarī’s conclusion is that the correct interpretation is that they believe in two worshipped beings other than God whom they take as two gods because *al-jibt* and *al-ṭāghūt* are two names for anything that is glorified with worship, obedience, or submission, other than God, whether it is a stone, a human, or the devil.³³

Al-Ṭabarī’s account is contradictory, highly speculative, and shows no clear understanding of the word *al-jibt*.

The key to recognizing the real meaning and usage of the word in the Qur’ān may lie in knowledge of its cognate in Ge‘ez, where *gəbt* means ‘new, recent’ and *amālekta gəbt* means ‘new gods, recent gods’.³⁴ Such meanings fit the context of the verse well and provide a much clearer interpretation than al-Ṭabarī’s.

Hanīf^{an}

The word *hanīf^{an}* occurs ten times in the Qur’ān; five times in combination with the proper noun Ibrāhīm: Ibrāhīma *hanīf^{an}*. The accusative case in *hanīf^{an}* is generally explained by grammarians as the ‘accusative of condition’ (*hāl*).³⁵ Elaborating on this case assignment, al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923) writes, “we follow the faith of Ibrāhīm (*millata Ibrāhim*) in the state of his *hanīfa* (*fi hāli hanīfatih*). *Hanīfa* means ‘to incline’, i.e. Ibrāhīm is inclined (*hanīf^{an}*) to the religion of God, i.e. Islam”.³⁶ Al-Nahḥās quotes ‘Alī b. Sulaymān, who declares that this case assignment is wrong and that the accusative is the result of the implied verb *a‘nī* ‘I mean’.

Of the five occurrences of the phrase ‘Ibrāhīma *hanīf^{an}*’, four are part of a larger structure: *millata Ibrāhīma hanīf^{an} wa mā kāna min al-mushrikīn*, generally translated as “the creed of Abraham the *hanīf^{an}*. He was not one of the idolaters”.³⁷ As Luxenberg and others have shown, it makes better sense to treat *hanīf^{an}* as an epithet for Abraham and not an accusative of condition: the creed of Abraham the *hanīf^{an}*, rather than the creed of Abraham when he is a *hanīf^{an}*. Luxenberg writes: “As concerns the attribute حنيفا (*hanīfā*), in whose ending the Arabic Koran readers saw an accusative of condition . . . this again

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has nothing to do with the Arabic accusative; on the contrary, it is a question here too of the Syro-Aramaic *status emphaticus* *ḥanpā*, whose ending in this case is a sign of determination: *ḥanpā* = الحنيف (*al-ḥanīf*)³⁷.³⁸ Luxenberg adds: The fact that in the Koran this expression is regularly in the *Arabic accusative* proves precisely that it had been taken up in its Syro-Aramaic form and become an established epithet for Abraham.³⁹

The role of the grammarians

The case assignment of *ḥanīf^{an}* discussed above leads us to the important role the Arabic grammarians played in freezing the Qurʾānic text and limiting our understanding of it. According to Versteegh, the earliest scholarly efforts of these grammarians concerned Qurʾān exegesis.⁴⁰ Al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (d. 170/786), one of the main founders of the Arabic grammatical tradition, is credited with developing the vowel markers of the Qurʾān.⁴¹ These markers, whose purpose was to ensure correct reading, formed the beginnings of Arabic grammar codification, particularly the system of cases and moods (*iʿrāb*). This codification was accomplished by al-Khalīl's student, Sībawayh (d. 180/796), the author of *al-Kitāb*, the earliest and most authoritative Arabic grammar book of all time.

Arabic grammar, particularly, *iʿrāb*, played a role similar to that of Ibn Mujaḥid's, by defining which forms are acceptable and which are not. Consider the following example, discussed by Nöldeke, who writes, "[S]ūra 5:8. . . reads: *fa-ghsilū wujūhakum wa-aydiyakum ilā l-marāfiqi wa-mṣahū bi-ruʾūsikum wa-arjulikum* [genitive] *ilā l-kaʿbayni*; though it is required, it suffices when the feet are wiped off. From an early time the stricter practice was favored, namely that the feet be washed. This could be read into the verse by adopting the strained reading, *wa-arjulakum* [accusative] and by considering *wa-mṣahū bi-ruʾūsikum* a parenthesis".⁴²

The grammarians also worked with Muslim jurists to introduce certain meanings that were not supported by the original Qurʾān text, through the manipulation of grammar rules. A good example of such manipulation is the treatment of the word *kalāla* and its grammatical context by the grammarians and commentators. The word is found twice in the Qurʾān, in Q4:12 and Q4:176. What concerns us here is its occurrence in Q4:12, where it is found in the following sentence:

wa-in kāna rajul^{um} yūraṭu kalālat^{an} ʿaw imraʿat^{um} wa-lahu ʿakh^{um} ʿaw ʿukht^{um} fa-li-kulli wāḥidⁱⁿ minhumā as-sudus (If a man or a woman has no direct heir, but has a brother or sister, then to each of them the sixth).⁴³

The word *kalāla*, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, has been the subject of controversy since the early days of Islam.⁴⁴ In this section, I will consider only its case assignment and the case assignment of the word *imra'a*, with which it is conjoined by *aw*. As David Powers argues (see Chapter 6), *kalāla* (originally **kalla*, ‘daughter-in-law’) and *imra'a* ‘wife’ formed one phrase conjoined by *aw*, which, according to Arabic case assignment rules, would receive the same case. But since someone decided that **kalla* should be replaced by *kalāla* and given a new meaning, and that *imra'a* should be conjoined with *rajul* rather than with *kalāla*, a grammatically awkward, contorted structure was created: *rajul^{um} yūrathu kalālat^{an} 'aw imra'at^{um}* instead of *rajul^{um} yūrithu kallat^{an} 'aw imra'at^{an}*. The connection between the original **kalla* and *imra'a* was disrupted by assigning them two different cases: *kalla*, now *kalāla*, was assigned the accusative case, and *imra'a* the nominative case in order to agree with *rajul^{um}*.⁴⁵

The freezing of the Qur'ān text and tying it to a limited set of readings and meanings has had an influence on other words and expressions in the Qur'ān, where certain meanings were abandoned in favor of others. As was shown in the case of *ināhu/ināthahu* above, recovering the older, abandoned meaning arguably improves our understanding of the Qur'ān text.

In this book, I will consider the text of the Qur'ān in its un-dotted, unvocalized, pre-Ibn Mujāhid form. I will show that the difficulty in understanding certain ambiguous, obscure or contradictory parts of the Qur'ān is often due to a secondary dotting and vocalizing scheme or to the failure to identify the original meanings of certain words and phrases. My investigation will be informed first, by an examination of the Qur'ān interpretation (*tafsīr*) literature, particularly the comprehensive work of al-Ṭabarī, and second, by a search for alternative meanings of certain Qur'ānic terms in Arabic sources and by comparing them with their cognates in Syriac and Hebrew. These two languages, which are closely related to Arabic, are known to have had a direct influence on the language of the Qur'ān.⁴⁶

Notes

- 1 Frederik Leehmuis, “Codices of the Qur'ān”, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 6 vols. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001–2006, 1 (A–D), 347–351.
- 2 Beatrice Gruendler, “Arabic Script”, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 6 vols. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001–2006, 1 (A–D), 135–144.

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- 3 François Déroche and Sergio Noja, *Source de la Transmission Manuscrite du Texte Coranique I, Les Manuscrits de Style Hijāzī, Volume 1, Le Manuscrit Arabe 328 (a) de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (BNF 328a). (Les: Fondazione Ferni Noja Nosedà, 1998), folio 3b.
- 4 Theodor Nöldeke, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträßer and Otto Pretzl, *The History of the Qur'ān*, ed. and trans. by Wolfgang H. Behn (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 474.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 468.
- 6 *Maḥḍar* is the record of a verdict issued by a judge and signed in the presence of witnesses.
- 7 Nöldeke, *History*, 468.
- 8 Aḥmad b. Mūsā Ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb al-Sab'ah fī al-Qirā'āt*, ed. Shawqī Ḍayf (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1972), 236.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 160.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 182.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 12 Nöldeke, *History*, 468.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 353.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 354.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, 278.
- 17 'Umar and Mukarram report the variant reading *madhūm^{am}* مذموماً (without *hamza*) by a number of readers outside of the seven of Ibn Mujāhid (Ahmad M. 'Umar and 'Abdel-'Āl Mukarram, *Mu'jam al-Qirā'āt al-Qur'ānīya*, 6 vols. (Cairo: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1997), 2, 162.)
- 18 A. J. Droge, *The Qur'ān: A New Annotated Translation* (Sheffield-Bristol: Equinox, 2013), 92.
- 19 François Déroche and Sergio Noja, *Sources de la Transmission Manuscrite du Texte Coranique I, Les Manuscrits de Style Hijāzī, Vol. 1, Le Manuscrit Arabe 328 (a) de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (Les: Fondazione Ferni Noja Nosedà, 1998), folio 30b.
- 20 The fact that *madh'ūm^{am}* was not corrected to *madhmūm^{am}* suggests that later generations of Muslims were not able to change the 'Uthmanic text. The addition of *hamza* was acceptable because, as noted, it was not part of the 'Uthmanic *rasm*.
- 21 François Déroche and Sergio Noja, *Sources de la Transmission Manuscrite du Texte Coranique I, Les Manuscrits de Style Hijāzī, Vol. 2, tome 1, Le Manuscrit Or. 2160 (f. 1 à 61) de la British Library* (Les: Fondazione Ferni Noja Nosedà, 1998), folio 39b.
- 22 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 177.
- 23 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, ed. 'Abdallah al-Kabīr, Muḥammad Ḥasaballah, and Hāshim al-Shādhili, 6 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 3, 1482.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb al-Sab'a*, 523.
- 26 C. Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran* (Berlin: H. Schiler, 2007), 246.
- 27 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 279.
- 28 Richard Bell, *The Qur'ān, Translated, with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Sūrahs*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1939), 2, 417.

- 29 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 Bayḍūn, 13 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 2005), 12, 322.
- 30 Ibid., 321.
- 31 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 51.
- 32 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 4, 133–136.
- 33 Ibid., 136.
- 34 Wolf Leslau, *Concise Dictionary of Ge'ez* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1989), 167. See also Guillaume Dye, “Traces of Bilingualism/Multilingualism in Qur'ānic Arabic”, in *Arabic in Context*, ed. Ahmad al-Jallad (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 343.
- 35 Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. al-Sarī al-Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān wa-l'rābuh*, ed. Aḥmad Faḥrī 'Abdul-Rahmān, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 2007), 1, 168.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 14.
- 38 Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading*, 55.
- 39 Ibid. See also Dye, “Traces of Bilingualism/Multilingualism”, 352–353 and Devin J. Stewart, “Notes on Medieval and Modern Emendations of the Qur'ān”, in *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel S. Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008), 238–240. Both agree with Luxenberg.
- 40 Kees Versteegh, *The Arabic Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 58.
- 41 Michael Carter, “Grammatical Tradition: History”, in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, ed. K. Versteegh, M. Eid, A. Elgibali, M. Woidich, and A. Zaborski, 5 vols. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 2 (Eg-Lan), 182–192.
- 42 Nöldeke, *History*, 491. Al-Anṣārī confirms this statement by citing as an example Q4:1, where the word *al-arḥām* had been read in either the nominative, accusative, or genitive case before the grammarians imposed the accusative case (Aḥmad Makkī al-Anṣārī, *al-Difā' 'an al-Qur'ān ḍidda al-Nahwiyyīn wa-l-Mustashriqīn* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1973), 1–2). See also Baalbaki on the grammarians' role in restricting certain previously acceptable readings (Ramzi Baalbaki, “The Treatment of *Qirā'āt* by the Second and Third Century Grammarians”, in *Studies in the History of Arabic Grammar I* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1985), 11–32.)
- 43 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 48.
- 44 David S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), Chapter 9. See also David S. Powers, *Studies in Qur'ān and Hadīth* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1986), 22–49.
- 45 Addressing this type of manipulation by the grammarians, Nöldeke observes, “A progressive technique of interpretation made it now possible to interpret the standard text differently or, by way of acrobatic interpretations, achieve the same end for which one had abandoned the most obvious vocalization . . .” (Nöldeke, *History*, 490–491).
- 46 Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 19–26. See also Guillaume Dye, “Traces of Bilingualism/Multilingualism in Qur'ānic Arabic”, in *Arabic in Context*, ed. by Ahmad al-Jallad (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 337–371.

2

BLESSING, CLINGING, FAMILIARITY, CUSTOM – OR SHIP: A NEW READING OF THE WORD *ĪLĀF* IN Q106 (QURAYSH)

The word إيلاف (*īlāf*) in Q106 (*sūrat Quraysh*) has been the subject of debate among Qur’ān commentators and scholars since the first centuries of Islam. There is uncertainty about the spelling, reading, and meaning of the word. In standard editions of the Qur’ān, it is written ايلف (*alif-yā’-lām-fā’*) in the first verse and الف (*alif-lām-fā’*) in the second. The following is the Arabic text of the *sūra* as it appears in the Cairo edition of the Qur’ān, together with an English translation by Droge.¹

1	For the uniting of Quraysh	<i>li-īlāfi quraysh</i>	لايلف قريش
2	For their uniting for the caravan of the winter and the summer	<i>īlāfihim riḥlata l-shitā’i wa-l-ṣayf</i>	الفهم رحلة الشتاء والصيف
3	Let them serve God	<i>fa-l-ya ‘budū rabba hādhā l-bayt</i>	فليعبدوا رب هذا البيت
4	Who has fed them on account of (their) hunger and secured them on account of (their) fear	<i>alladhī aṭ‘amahum min jū‘in wa-āmanahum min khawf</i>	الذي اطعمهم من جوع وامنهم من خوف

As expected, some differences of interpretation in the *tafsīr* literature are ignored in the translation, and one interpretation, considered more appropriate for one reason or another, is chosen. The following summary of al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* of the *sūra* presents a fuller version of the traditional interpretation.²

Q106:1 *li-īlāfi quraysh*

Al-Ṭabarī states that the Qurʾān readers disagreed over the reading of the verse: all of them read *yā*ʾ after hamza in both *īlāfi* (of the first verse) and *īlāfihim* (of the second), except Abū Jaʿfar, who had a different reading of the second, i.e. *ilfihim*. Others said that Abū Jaʿfar read it *ilāfihim*, without *yā*ʾ. Ṭabarī adds that ʿIkrima read *li-taʿallufi Quraysh ilfihim riḥlata sh-shitāʾi wa-ṣ-ṣayf*.

Arabic grammarians (*ahl al-ʿArabīya*) disagreed over the meaning and function of the *lām* in *li-īlāf*. Some Baṣran grammarians said that it is related to *fa-jaʿalahum ka-ʿasfⁱⁿ maʾkūl*, the last verse of Q105 (and he made them like chewed-up husks [of straw]).³ In this case, the *lām* would mean *ilā* (to). Ṭabarī cites a report attributed to Mujāhid (d. 104/722), who interpreted *īlāfihim* as “making it familiar to them so a journey in the winter or the summer will not be hard on them, which is a blessing from God to Quraysh”.

The grammarians of Kūfā said that the *lām* here signifies wonder (*taʿajjub*), that God made his Prophet wonder about His blessings to Quraysh by making them familiar with the the winter and summer journey. Then he said they should not make themselves too busy to believe and follow him [Muḥammad].

Some exegetes understood *li-īlāfi quraysh* to mean that they, i.e. the people of Quraysh, become familiar with one another so that they will not be divided.

Ṭabarī states that the correct meaning is that the *lām* signifies wonder: *Wonder about familiarizing Quraysh with the winter and summer journey and their abandonment of worshipping the Lord of this house who satisfied their hunger and secured them from fear.*⁴

Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687) glossed *īlāf* as ‘abiding’ (*luzūm*). God told them, i.e. the people of Quraysh, not to take the journey and ordered them to worship the Lord of this house, so He provided them with enough food. [Previously] they undertook a winter and a summer journey and did not rest either in winter or summer. God saved them from hunger and made them safe from fear and they became accustomed to the journey. They took the trip or stayed where they were, according to their desire. That was one of God’s blessings upon them.⁵

According to a report attributed to ʿIkrima, Quraysh used to go to Buṣrā in the winter and to Yemen in the summer, so He (God) ordered them to stay in Makka.⁶

In a report attributed to Qatāda, *li-īlāfi quraysh* refers to “the custom of Quraysh, the custom of journeying in the winter and the summer”.⁷

Q106:2 *līlāfihim riḥlata sh-shitā'ī wa-ṣ-ṣayf*

According to the rules of Arabic syntax, the first two words of the verse function as a subject (*mubtada'*) and a predicate (*khabar*) and should be assigned the nominative, *līlāfuhum riḥlatu*, not *līlāfihim* (genitive) and *riḥlata* (accusative).

Ṭabarī explains the genitive in the first word as a result of its being in opposition to the first verse: as if He (God) said: *li-ṭlāfi Qurayshin li-ṭlāfihim*. *Riḥlata* is in the accusative because it is the object of the verbal noun *līlāfihim*.

Ṭabarī explains the two journeys as a trip to Syria in the summer and another to Yemen in the winter. However, Ibn 'Abbās said that the two journeys refer to [the Quraysh] spending the winter in Makka and the summer in Ṭā'if.

Q106:3 *fa-l-ya'budū rabba hādihā l-bayt*

God says, they should reside in their homeland in Makka and worship the Lord of this house, which means the Ka'ba. Some [interpreters] said: They [viz., the people of Quraysh] were ordered to accustom themselves to worshipping the Lord of Makka, as they accustomed themselves to the two journeys.

Q106:4 *alladhī aṭ'amahum min jū'in wa-āmanahum min khawf*

[The Lord of this house] who satisfied the hunger of Quraysh by answering Abraham's call: "And provide them with fruits" (Q14:37). The interpreters disagreed over the meaning of *wa-āmanahum min khawf*. Some said, "He made them safe from raids, wars and fighting, which caused the Arabs to fear one another". According to Qatāda, the people of Makka were merchants who alternated trips between winter and summer. They were safe from the Arabs, who used to raid one another. . . . When one of them (the people of Makka) found himself in an area of the Arabs and said he is a *ḥaramī* (from the *ḥaram*) his possessions would be left alone in recognition of the security God gave them. Others said He made them safe from leprosy.

Ṭabarī concludes that the correct meaning of *wa-āmanahum min khawf* is that the enemy is feared and leprosy is feared. God did not distinguish between the two and made them (the people of Quraysh) safe from both.⁸

In summary: according to **Ṭabarī**, the key word *līlāf* is reported to have been read in four different ways: *līlāf*, *ilāf*, *ta'alluf*, and *ilf*,⁹ and signifies a blessing (*ni'ma*), familiarity and intimacy (*ulfa*), clinging to or abiding (*luzūm*), or custom ('*āda*).¹⁰ The initial *lām* in *li-ṭlāf* was understood to mean 'to' or 'for' or as a particle expressing wonder (*ta'ajjub*).¹¹

Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), gives a different account of the *sūra*. He explains that the Quraysh were merchants who traveled to Jordan and Palestine in the winter and to Yemen in the summer. When these journeys became difficult for them, God caused the Abyssinians to bring them food on ships to Makka. Accordingly, *li-īlāf* means that the people of Quraysh do not need to travel for commerce any longer.¹² Muqātil treats the initial *lām* of *li-īlāf* as a negative particle.

A number of studies of *īlāf* have appeared in the last sixty years. In a detailed analysis of Q106, Birkeland argues that the word must have been connected to the protection of Quraysh's caravan trade and must have signified "an alliance or a covenant granting Quraysh protection and security in their trade". Thus, "when Muḥammad mentioned *īlāf* (or *ilāf* or *ilf*) in connection with Quraysh and their caravans, a contemporary listener could not possibly have misunderstood its meaning: it could only be 'protection', or the like".¹³ According to Birkeland, changing political circumstances forced Muslim exegetes like al-Ṭabarī to introduce the meanings found in the standard *tafsīr* literature.¹⁴

Irfan Shahid argues that the difficulty with Q106 and, in particular, "the interpretation of the crucial word *īlaf*, to which a bewildering variety of meanings has been given in *tafsīr* works,"¹⁵ can be resolved if it is combined with Q105 (*al-fīl*). In Q105 God destroyed the companions of the elephant in order "to bring Quraysh together" (*li-īlāfi Quraysh*).

Crone discusses the "bewildering variety of meanings" given to *īlāf* in *tafsīr* works, including "pacts" and "protection".¹⁶ She concludes that "the exegetes had no better knowledge of what this *sūra* meant than we have today", and that "[t]he original meaning of these verses was unknown to them".¹⁷ She adds that the disagreement among Muslim scholars about the meaning and pronunciation of the word and whether it is singular or plural "shows clearly enough that this was a word that they had never encountered before".¹⁸

In a review of Crone's book *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Serjeant ridicules her methods and conclusions, pointing out that "the *īlāf* system of security pacts accords with well-known Arabian patterns".¹⁹ He refers to a previous study in which he "pointed out that the Yemeni caravan traveling to Mecca in the mediaeval period could be protected by the presence of a small boy belonging to the family of the Yemeni saint Ibn 'Ujayl".²⁰ He continues: "So also Hāshim used to escort caravans to al-Sha'm [*sic*]"²¹

Uri Rubin accepts the traditional account according to which the journey (*riḥla*) mentioned in Q106 refers to northbound journeys made by the Meccans for the purpose of trade.²² The message of the *sūra*, he argues, is to denounce the ingratitude (*kufr*) of the Meccans: "Instead of being grateful to God for the prosperity and security derived from the position of Mecca as

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a pilgrimage center, Quraysh are immersed in trade journeys outside the city, while the Ka‘ba and its lord are not their primary concern”.²³ He treats the prefixed preposition *li* in the first verse as *lām al-ta‘ajjub* (*lām* of wonder), like *wayl^{um} li* ‘woe to’.²⁴

Rubin accepts two of the meanings of *lāf* attested in the *tafsīr* literature and in historiographical and lexicographical works: (1) “the habitual engagement of Quraysh in the winter and summer journey”,²⁵ and (2) a pact of security given to Quraysh traders when passing through the territory of other tribes.²⁶ He mentions at least three accounts in which Quraysh were said to have been involved in travel and trade by sea. He quotes a tradition attributed to Ibn Abī Hātim, on the authority of ‘Ikrima, according to which the Qurashis “used to travel by sea to Ayla and thence to Palestine [in the winter], seeking warmth, and in the summer they betook themselves to Buṣrā and Adhri‘āt for coolness”.²⁷ He quotes al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822), who reported that “the Yemenites . . . carried their food supplies to Jeddah”.²⁸ The third account, found in a tradition reported by al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), relates that people from “the Yemenite coastal towns of Tabāla and Jurash . . . brought provisions by sea to Jeddah”.²⁹

To summarize: it is clear that the Qur’ān commentators based their interpretation on the different meanings of the root ‘-l-f (*alif-lām-fā*)’ rather than on their understanding of the specific meaning of the word. One can also make the case that they saw a connection between *lāf* and travel, although none of its root meanings known to them is related to travel. We may also conclude that modern scholars base their understanding of the word on the traditional Muslim interpretation.

An alternative account

I will now propose a new interpretation *lāf/ilāf/ilf*, based on a close examination of Q106 and certain verses in the Qur’ān that may help shed light on its main message. I also consider evidence from Syriac.

If we bracket the key word *lāf* and focus on those elements of the *sūra* that are clear we have:

- a. Quraysh, the well-known Arab tribe in Mecca to which the Prophet belonged,
- b. A winter and a summer journey,
- c. (So, as a result) they (a reference to Quraysh) should worship the Lord of this house,
- d. Who fed them when they were hungry,
- e. And made them secure from fear.

Fulk, food, and fear of drowning

One often gets the impression in discussions of the early history of Islam that the Qurʾān reflects a desert environment in which the main means of transporting food supplies is camel caravans. But the initial audience of the Qurʾān must have been familiar with sea travel. The word *fulk* ‘ship’, for example, is mentioned 22 times in the Qurʾān, often in connection with obtaining food supplies and fear of drowning.³⁰ Providing food and saving people from the danger of drowning are examples of God’s significant favors to man, who should acknowledge those favors. Consider, for example, Q2:164, which includes a statement about ships carrying provisions for people.

inna fī khalqī l-samāwāti wa-l-arḍi wa-khtilāfī l-layli wa-l-nahāri wa-l-fulki llatī tajrī fī l-baḥri bi-mā yanfaʿu l-nās . . .

(Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of the night and the day, and the ship which runs on the sea with what benefits the people. . .)³¹

Q10:22 refers to people’s fear when traveling on a ship:

huwa lladhī yusayyirukum fī l-barri wa-l-baḥri ḥattā idhā kuntum fī l-fulki wa-jarayna bi-him bi-rīḥⁱⁿ tayyibatⁱⁿ wa-jariḥū bi-hā jā’athā rīḥ^{um} ‘āṣif^{um} wa-jā’ahumu l-mawju min kulli makānⁱⁿ wa-ẓannū annahum uḥīṭa bi-him da’awu llāha mukhliṣīna la-hu d-ḍīna la-in anjaytanā min hādhīhī la-nakūnanna min al-shākirīn.

He (it is) who enables you to travel on the shore of the sea, until, when you are on the ship, and they sail with them by means of a fair wind, and they gloat over it, a violent wind comes upon it and the waves come at them from every side, and they think they are encompassed by them. (Then) they call on God, devoting (their) religion to Him. ‘If indeed you rescue us from this, we shall indeed be among the thankful’.³²

Q106 clearly deals with dangerous sea travel undertaken in an effort to bring food to satisfy hunger. Among God’s favors is to make this travel secure. Those who receive this favor, i.e. Quraysh, should acknowledge it and worship the Lord of this House, who assures the safety of the ships and the supply of food.

Sea travel must have been common in the Hijāz in pre-Islamic times. According to Mikhail Bukharin, “The Hijāzi Arabs traded with East Africa

20 New Reading of *lāf* in Q106 (*Quraysh*)

via the sea routes. Some sources seem to indicate the presence of an Axumite population in the Hijāz in the first and second centuries CE, and maybe even earlier”.³³

To sum up: According to the traditional understanding of the *sūra*, Quraysh was involved in trade, by sea or land, to bring provisions.³⁴ There was an element of fear in this activity, which, according to some, was addressed through security arrangements called *lāf* / *ilāf* / *ilf*. The main problem with connecting *lāf* / *ilāf* / *ilf* to a “pact” or “pact of protection” is that none of the meanings of the root *-l-f* supports such a interpretation. The meanings assigned to the word by the exegetes on the basis of its root do not fit the context in which the word is used. Hence the “bewildering variety of meanings”.

Syriac elaf

It is well-known that the Qur’ān contains many words from foreign languages, including Syriac.³⁵ In Syriac, the word *elaf*, which has the same root consonants as Arabic *lāf* / *ilāf* / *ilf*, means ‘ship’ or ‘galley’. *Elfo dpagro* signifies “the body [is] the vehicle of the soul”. The Virgin Mary is called *elfo mšabatota* ‘the adorned vessel’.³⁶ In a context of sea trade, the meaning of ‘ship’, ‘vessel’, or ‘shipping fleet’ for the first word of Q106 fits well.

Lām al-ta’ajjub

There is general agreement among commentators and modern scholars that the initial *lām* of *li-ilāf* has one of two meanings:

- 1 A preposition, ‘to’ or ‘for’. This meaning is advocated by commentators and scholars who contend that Q106 is a continuation of Q105 (*al-fīl*) and that the two form one literary unit.³⁷
- 2 *Lām al-ta’ajjub* or ‘*lām* of wonder’. This meaning was accepted by al-Ṭabarī, following the grammarians of Kūfa, as the correct interpretation.³⁸ Although there are no other instances of such a use of *lām* in the Qur’ān, I will follow al-Ṭabarī and consider its usage in Q106:1 as the ‘*lām* of wonder’.

ilf

None of the studies discussed above seems to attach any significance to the difference in the spelling in the ‘Uthmānic **rasm** of االف of v. 1 and الف in v. 2. All assume that the two are the same word, spelled differently. But why

should it be spelled differently if it is the same word? Given the proximity of the two words, a scribal error is unlikely.

The root '-l-f in the Qur'ān and in Arabic

Ibn Manẓūr lists the following meanings for the root '-l-f: *alf* 'thousand', Form I *alafa* 'to give a thousand', 'to abide by, cling to' (*lazima*), 'to be familiar or to feel comfortable with' (*anisa*); Form II *allaf* 'to render something into a thousand, to reconcile (*jam 'ba'da tafarruq*)'; Form IV *ālaf* 'to become a thousand, to trade'; Form III and IV 'to become familiar with, comfortable in'; Forms II (*allaf*) and V (*ta'allaf*) 'to show amiable behavior'; *ta'alluf* (Form V verbal noun) 'flattery or amiable behavior'.³⁹

The Form II verb *allaf* is used five times in the Qur'ān with the following meanings: 'to join together, to gather together, to compile, to reconcile'. The passive participle, *mu'allaf*, as in *al-mu'allafa qulūbuhum*, 'those whose hearts are reconciled or whose hearts are inclined towards Islam', is used once.⁴⁰

In addition, Form II verbs often signify the causative of their Form I counterparts. Thus, a possible meaning of *allaf* is 'to make someone abide by, cling to' or 'to make someone familiar with or feel comfortable with'. Q106:2 can then be read, following the 'Uthmānic *rasm*, as *allafahum riḥlata l-shitā'i wa l-ṣayf*, "He made them familiar or comfortable with the winter and summer journey". Significantly, a transitive/causative verb in this position provides a more straightforward explanation for the accusative case assignment in *riḥlata*, which, according to al-Ṭabarī, is the direct object of the verbal noun *īlāfihim*.⁴¹

It is worth mentioning that the D-stem (Form II) Syriac verb *allef*, derived from the root *y-l-f* and the equivalent of Arabic *allafa*, means "to teach, inform, train".⁴² Such a meaning would, in my opinion, improve our understanding of the *sūra*. Why is God's teaching important? Sea travel requires not only the mastery of special skills, but also knowledge of wind patterns that control such travel at different times. The summer and winter journeys might be sea journeys determined by wind patterns that only God controls, knows about, and can teach sea merchants.⁴³

It should be pointed out that the meaning 'pact of protection' is most likely the result of a contextual reading of Q106:1–2 and not related to the other meanings of the root '-l-f.

If *īlāf* in Q106:1 is understood as 'ship(s)', 'vessel(s)' and if the particle *lām* is treated as *lām al-ta'ajjub*, and if *ilf* in the second verse is read as *allaf*

22 New Reading of *līlāf* in Q106 (*Quraysh*)

and understood to mean ‘he accustomed, made comfortable’, then the *sūra* may be understood as follows:

1	Wonder at the ships of Quraysh	<i>li-īlāfi quraysh</i>	لايلاف قريش
2	He (God) made them familiar/ comfortable with the winter and summer journey,	<i>allafahum riḥlata l-shitā'i wa-l-ṣayf</i>	أفهم رحلة الشتاء والصيف
3	Therefore let them worship the Lord of this House	<i>fa-l-ya 'budū rabba hādhā l-bayt</i>	فليعبدوا ربّ هذا البيت
4	Who fed them against hunger and secured them from fear.	<i>alladhī aṭ'amahum min jū'in wa-āmanahum min khawf</i>	الذي أطعمهم من جوع وامنهم من خوف

In this chapter I have proposed an alternative interpretation of Q106 based on a new reading of the key term *īlāf*, which I argue to be related to the Syriac word *elaf* ‘ship’. In the context of travel, obtaining provisions, and offering people security from fear, the idea of sea travel by ship fits well and offers a coherent interpretation of the *sūra*. The issue of whether *īlāf* with the meaning of ‘ship’ and words like it is a direct borrowing from Syriac or whether it is an old Arabic word that had lost such meaning by the time the [Qur'aan](#) commentators wrote their commentaries will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Notes

- 1 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 451.
- 2 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 700–704.
- 3 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 450.
- 4 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 701.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 702.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, 704.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 700.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 700–702.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 700–701.
- 12 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīya, 2003), 3, 525.
- 13 Harris Birkeland, *The Lord Guideth* (Oslo: I kommisjon hos H. Aschehoug (W. Nygård), 1956), 107.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 107–108.
- 15 Irfan Shahīd, “Two Qur’ānic *sūras*: *al-fīl* and *Quraysh*”, in *Studia Arabica et Islamica, Festschrift for Iḥsān ‘Abbās*, ed. W. Al-Qādi (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981), 429–436.

- 16 Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 209.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 210. See also the comment in Nöldeke, *History*, on “the habit [of the Islamic Exegesis of the Koran] of attributing every single revelation to a definite event of contemporary history when in fact this attribution is based on a misunderstanding of the general sense of most of the Koranic passages” (Nöldeke, *History*, 341).
- 18 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 212.
- 19 R. B. Serjeant, “Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam: Misconceptions and Flawed Polemics”. *Review of Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* by Patricia Crone. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 110: 3 (1990), 472–486, at 479.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Uri Rubin, “Quraysh and their winter and summer journey: On the interpretation of Sura 106”, in *Muhammad the Prophet and Arabia, Variorum Collected Studies Series*, ed. Uri Rubin (Farnham, Surrey, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), no. 13, 5.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 30 ~~Three words are used to refer to camels in the Qur’ā: *ibil*, *ba’ir*, and *jamal*. *Ibil* occurs twice, one of which may be in reference to ‘clouds’ (Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 5), *ba’ir* also occurs twice and means ‘camel, donkey’ or ‘beast of burden’ (Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 102), and *jamal* occurs once in the phrase *wa-lā yadkhulūn al-jannata hattā yalij al-jamalu fi sammi-l-khiyāṭ* (Q7:40) (E. M. Badawi and M. Abdel-Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’ānic Usage* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 171–172) ‘nor will they enter the garden, until the camel passes through the eye of the needle’ (Droge, *The Qur’ān*, 94).~~
- 31 Droge, *The Qur’ān*, 17.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 126.
- 33 Mikhail Bukharin, “Mecca on the Caravan Routes in Pre-Islamic Antiquity”, in *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu*, ed. by Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), 115–134, at 125. See also Crone, who writes: “It is so surprising that everything the Messenger says to the *Mushrikūn* is based on the assumption that they were agriculturalists or seafarers not traders”, Patricia Crone, *The Qur’ānic Pagans and Related Matters*, ed. by Hanna Siurua, 3 vols. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 1, xiv.
- 34 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 700–704.
- 35 Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 19–26; Alphonse Mingana, “Syriac Influence on the Style of the Koran”, in *What the Koran Really Says*, ed. Ibn Warraq (Amherst and New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 171–200, at 173–174.
- 36 R. Payne-Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary Founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne-Smith*, ed. J. Payne-Smith (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 18. In Akkadian, *eleppum* means “ship, boat” (Jeremy

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- Black, Andrew George, and Nicholas Postgate, *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), 69.)
- 37 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 700–701; Shahid, “Two Qur’ānic *sūras*”, 431.
- 38 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 701.
- 39 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 1, 107–109.
- 40 ~~Badawi and Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’ānic Usage*, 36–37.~~
- 41 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 702.
- 42 Payne-Smith, *Syriac Dictionary*, 192–193.
- 43 On the “timetable for the departure of trading ships from Roman ports on the Red Sea”, which was influenced by major wind patterns, see Bukharin, “Mecca on the Caravan Routes”, 119–120.

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3

THE MOTHER'S BREASTS OR THE PATH OF GOOD AND EVIL: A NEW READING OF Q90 (*AL-BALAD*)

Introduction

Upon careful examination of the language of Q90 one cannot help but notice that certain verses are well written, while others are repetitive, vague, or lack rhythmic structure, as is shown by a comparison of Q90:1–4 with Q90:5–7 and Q90:8–16 with Q90:17–20.

Another striking feature of the *sūra* is the presence of elements that show God's favors to man in a generally positive context, side-by-side with a strongly negative portrayal of man as an arrogant braggart. In addition, good deeds are followed by a threat of severe punishment.

The goal of this chapter is three-fold. First, I will cite evidence from the Muslim tradition that shows that a number of words and phrases in Q90, particularly the phrase *fī kabad* in verse 4 and the word *al-najdayn* in verse 10 were associated by some early Qur'ān commentators with certain meanings that were abandoned in favor of what came to be the standard interpretation. Second, I will argue that the *sūra* consists of two layers, one original and one added at a later stage, with the first layer containing the original meanings of these words and phrases. Finally, I will show how a new interpretation of the two key terms *fī kabad* and *al-najdayn*, and the removal of the added second layer contribute to a new, clearer understanding. Whereas according to the standard interpretation the *sūra* introduces the threat of punishment, the original theme was a statement of the miracles of God's creation and a call to do good work.

26 New Reading of Q90 (*al-Balad*)

The standard interpretation

The following is a presentation of Q90 as it is understood in the standard Muslim account. The English translation is Droge's.¹

1	<i>lā uqsimu bi-hādhā l-balad</i>	I swear by this land
2	<i>wa-anta ḥill^{um} bi-hādhā l-balad</i>	and you are a lawful (resident) in this land
3	<i>wa-wālid^{im} wa mā walad</i>	by a begetter and what he begot!
4	<i>la-qad khalaqnā l-insāna fī kabad</i>	Certainly We created the human in trouble.
5	<i>a-yaḥsabu an lan yaqdir^a</i> <i>'alayhi aḥad</i>	Does he think that no one has power over him?
6	<i>yaqūlu ahlaktu mā^{an} lubad^{an}</i>	He says, 'I have squandered vast wealth!'
7	<i>a-yaḥsab^u an lam yarahū aḥad</i>	Does he think that no one has seen him?
8	<i>a-lam naj'al lahu 'aynayn</i>	Have We not made two eyes for him
9	<i>wa-lisān^{an} wa-shafatayn</i>	And a tongue, and two lips,
10	<i>wa-hadaynāhu l-najdayn</i>	And have We not guided him to the two ways?
11	<i>fa-lā qtaḥama l-'aqaba</i>	Yet he has not attempted the (steep) ascent
12	<i>wa-mā adrāka mā l-'aqaba</i>	Ah, what will make you know what the (steep) ascent is?
13	<i>fakku raqaba</i>	The setting free of a slave,
14	<i>aw iṭ'ām^{um} fī yawmⁱⁿ dhī masghaba</i>	Or feeding on a day of hunger
15	<i>yaṭīm^{an} dhā maqraba</i>	An orphan who is related
16	<i>aw miskīn^{an} dhā matraba</i>	Or a poor person (lying) in the dust
17	<i>thumma kāna mina lladhīna āmanū wa tawāṣaw bi-l-ṣabrⁱ</i> <i>wa-tawāṣaw bi-l-marḥama</i>	Then he has become one of those who believe, and (who) exhort (each other) to patience, and (who) exhort (each other) to compassion.
18	<i>ulā'ika aṣḥāb^u l-maymana</i>	Those are the companions on the right.
19	<i>wa-lladhīna kafarū bi-āyātīnā hum aṣḥāb^u l-mash'ama</i>	But those who disbelieve in Our signs, they are the companions on the left
20	<i>'alayhim nār^{um} mu'ṣada</i>	A fire (will be) closed over them.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, a Qur'ān translation, such as that of Droge's, by necessity reflects only part of the traditional Muslim interpretation. Consequently, and as I did in the that chapter, I will present a fuller version of the interpretation of Q90 according to the Muslim tradition, based on al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*.

The interpretation of Q90 according to al-Ṭabarī²

Q90:1 *lā uqsimu bi-hādhā l-balad*

The standard reading of the ~~first~~ word is *uqsimu* ‘I make an oath’, with the first person pronoun referring to God. The place (*balad*) that is the subject of the oath is Makka, or the holy, forbidden place (*al-Ḥarām*).

~~Al-Ṭabarī provides a variant reading of *uqsimu* *aqsim* with the verse addressing the Prophet Muḥammad: “Make an oath (*aqsim*) O Muḥammad by this holy land, which is Makka!”²~~

It should be noted here that the particle *lā* at the beginning of the verse is not the negative *lā* but the emphatic *la*. The *alif* seems to have been an addition. According to al-Sijistānī (d. 316/928),³ Yazīd b. ‘Ubaydallāh (d. 67/686) added two thousand letters to the *muṣḥaf*. As examples, al-Sijistānī gives the words *قلو* (*qāf-lām-wāw*) ‘they said’ and *كنو* (*kāf-nūn-wāw*) ‘they were’, which were changed to *قالوا* (*qāf-alif-lām-wāw-alif*) and *كانوا* (*kāf-alif-nūn-wāw-alif*), respectively.⁴ The *lā/la* of Q90:1 is often translated as ‘nay’, ‘no’, or ‘not’ in English translations of the Qur’ān.⁵

Q90:2 *wa-anta ḥill^{un} bi-hādhā l-balad*

It is permitted (*ḥalāl*) for you, Muḥammad, to kill or take captive in Makka whom you want. This is a reference to the Prophet’s conquest of the city. Al-Ṭabarī does not mention any disagreement among the commentators over this interpretation.

Q90:3 *wa-wālidⁱⁿ wa mā walad*

God swore by the father (*wālid*) and by the offspring that he begat. The interpreters disagreed over the meaning of the verse. Some thought that the phrase *mā walad* refers to an infertile person. Others interpreted the phrase as a reference to Adam and his offspring. Still others thought it referred to Abraham and his offspring. Al-Ṭabarī concludes that the verse refers to every father and his offspring.

Q90:4 *la-qad khalaqnā l-insāna fī kabad*

Interpreters disagreed over the meaning of this verse. Some said: We (God) created man in difficulty, trouble and fatigue (*shidda wa ‘anā’ wa naṣab*). Others said it refers to the struggles of man in this life and the Afterlife. Still

28 New Reading of Q90 (*al-Balad*)

others said man was created like no other creature. According to a report attributed to Mujāhid, it refers to the difficulty of having the first teeth. Others said that he (man) was created upright and straight (*muntaṣib^{an} mu'tadil al-qāma*). Al-Daḥḥāk reportedly said that *fī kabad* [means that man] was created upright on two legs, like no other living creature. Others said that it means that man was created in the heavens. Al-Ṭabarī concludes as follows: “The closest to the truth among these reports in my judgment (*wa awlā al-aqwāl 'indī*) are those that say that it means he (man) was created to struggle with the affairs of life and deal with them. *Fī kabad* means ‘in difficulty’ (*fī shidda*). We hold that this is closer to the truth because this meaning is known in the speech of the Arabs as one of the meanings of *kabad*”. Al-Ṭabarī then cites a verse by the poet Labīd b. Rabī'a (d. 41/661) in which the word *kabad* is used with the meaning of ‘difficulty’ or ‘suffering’.

Q90:5 a-yaḥṣabu an lan yaqdira 'alayhi aḥad

According to al-Ṭabarī, this verse was revealed about a man called Abū al-Ashaddayn (the doubly strong man). God said: “Does this strong man, with his endurance and strength, think that no one can conquer and defeat him? God will defeat and conquer him”.

Q90:6 yaqūlu ahlaktu mā^{an} lubad^{an}

This powerful and steadfast man (referred to in the previous verse) says, “I spent a lot of money in hostility towards Muḥammad (*fī 'adāwati Muḥammad*)”, which is a lie. *Lubad^{an}* means ‘plenty’. Some readers read *lubbād^{an}* in place of *lubad^{an}*.

Q90:7 a-yaḥṣabu an lam yarahu aḥad

Does this person who says, “I wasted a lot of money” think that no one saw him spend the money he claims to have spent? In a report attributed to Qatāda, man is responsible for his wealth, where he earned it and how he spends it.

Q90:8 a-lam naj'al lahu 'aynayn

Al-Ṭabarī interprets this verse as God saying to the man introduced in verse 5, “Did we not provide the man who says this with two eyes with which he sees the proofs of God against him?”

Q90:9 *wa-lisān^{an} wa-shafatayn*

And a tongue with which he expresses himself anyway he wants, and two lips as a gift from us to him.

Q90:10 *wa-hadaynāhu l-najdayn*

Al-Ṭabarī has a long section about this verse. He starts by defining *najdayn* as ‘the two ways’ (*ṭarīqayn*), *najd* is an ascending road or path. He then states that the interpreters disagreed over the meaning of *najdayn*. Some said it refers to the path of good and the path of evil (*ṭarīq al-khayr wa ṭarīq al-sharr*). Curiously, after he starts his interpretation, al-Ṭabarī states that, based on a long chain of authorities reaching to al-Rabī‘ b. Khuthaym (d. before 65/684) [*najdayn*] does not mean ‘two breasts’. He then cites authorities who said *najdayn* means ‘the path of good and the path of evil’ or ‘the path of guidance and the path of error’. He then reiterates al-Rabī‘ b. Khuthaym’s statement that [*najdayn*] ~~does not mean the two breasts. He then cites~~ more reports stating that [*najdayn*] is a reference to the path of good and the path of evil. ~~Then al-Ṭabarī writes, “and others said,~~ we guided him to the two breasts, the two paths to the milk which nourishes him”. Among those who said it is a reference to the breasts are Ibn ‘Abbās and al-Ḍaḥḥāk. Al-Ṭabarī concludes by saying: “the closer to the truth of the two interpretations is that it is a reference to the path of good and the path of evil. . . . However, the two breasts, even though they are the paths of the milk, they are mentioned as gifts to man in order that God will guide him to the path of good, as in, ‘Surely We created the human being from a drop, a mixture – We test him – and We made him hearing (and) seeing. Surely We guided him to the way . . .’” (Q76:2–3).⁶

Q90:11 *fa-lā qtaḥama l-‘aqaba*

This means he did not ride the obstacle so he did not cross and gain it. It is mentioned that *al-‘aqaba* is a mountain in Hell (*jabal fī Jahannam*). Some people interpreted *al-‘aqaba* as Hell. In a report attributed to Qatāda, *al-‘aqaba* is defined as a great danger (*qaḥma shadīda*). In a report attributed to Ka‘b, it is described as 70 steps or stages in Hell (*sab‘ūn daraja fī jahannam*).⁷

Al-Ṭabarī sees a grammatical irregularity in the use of *lā* in *fa-lā*, which does not occur alone in the sentence but is accompanied by another *lā*. He reports that Ibn Zayd glossed *fa-lā* as *a-fa-lā*. The verse should then be

30 New Reading of Q90 (*al-Balad*)

understood as: “would he not take the path through which there is safety and goodness?” (*a-fa-lā salaka l-ṭarīq allatī minhā l-najātu wa l-khayr?*).

Q90:12 *wa-mā adrāka mā l-‘aqaba*

God says addressing Muḥammad: “What taught you what *al-‘aqaba* is?”

Q90:13 *fakku raqaba*

God here explains what *‘aqaba* is, how to escape from it, and how to cross it, i.e. by releasing a slave (literally, untying a neck).

Al-Ṭabarī cites three reports that anyone who frees a *Muslim* (or believer, *Mu‘min*) slave will be saved from the fire of Hell. He then discusses disagreements among the Qur’ān readers over this and the following verse. Some readers read *fakka raqaba aw aṭ‘ama* “he untied a neck or fed”, with verbs in the perfect tense in place of verbal nouns. Others read *fakku raqaba aw iṭ‘ām^{un}* “the untying of a neck or the feeding”. Al-Ṭabarī accepts both readings as correct, although he states that the reading with the verb is better in Arabic because Arabs prefer conjoining nouns with nouns and verbs with verbs, and the following verse (Q90:15) has the verb *kāna* ‘he was’.

Q90:14 *aw iṭ‘ām^{un} fī yawmⁱⁿ dhī masghaba*

Feeding [someone] on a day of hunger or famine. The commentators are in agreement over this interpretation and the interpretation of the following verse.

Q90:15 *yatīm^{an} dhā maqraba*

[Feeding] an orphan who is a relative.

Q90:16 *aw miskīn^{an} dhā matraba*

Interpreters (*ahl al-ta‘wīl*) disagreed over the meaning of *dhā matraba*. Some said it means someone who is stuck to the ground (or the dirt, *turāb*), someone whose only refuge is the ground, someone thrown to the ground, someone who is not protected from the ground by anything, someone stuck to the ground because of extreme poverty, a poor person thrown on the ground, or a person in need, whether stuck to the ground or not. Others said *dhā matraba* refers to a person with many children, with no other relations,

or a person with children who is stuck to the ground because of extreme poverty and effort. Al-Ṭabarī proposes that the correct interpretation is that *dhā matraba* refers to a person who is stuck to the ground because of poverty and need, because that is the literal meaning.

Q90:17 *thumma kāna mina lladhīna āmanū wa tawāṣaw bi-l-ṣabri wa-tawāṣaw bi-l-marḥama*

According to al-Ṭabarī, this is a reference to the person who said “I wasted a lot of money” in verse 6. That man is among those who believed in God and his Prophet, and he is therefore considered to be one of them as they urge one another to be patient in what befell them from God and to be merciful towards other people.

Q90:18 *ulā’ika aṣḥābu l-maymana*

Those who performed the deeds mentioned previously, e.g., the freeing of slaves and feeding the orphan are the people of the right, who are taken on the Day of Judgment to Paradise (*al-Janna*).

Q90:19 *walladhīna kafarū bi-āyātīnā hum aṣḥābu l-mash’ama*

Those who denied our arguments and proofs in the form of books and prophets are the people of the left on the Day of Judgment, who are taken to the left. Al-Ṭabarī states that he had previously explained the meaning of *mash’ama* and why the left is called *mash’ama*,⁷ and there is no need to repeat that here.

Q90:20 *’alayhim nār^{un} mu’ṣada*

The fire of Hell (*Jahannam*) is closed upon them. Al-Ṭabarī elaborates on the meaning of *mu’ṣada* by stating that there is no light in it, no relief and no exit, forever.

The two parts of Q90

In terms of its theme, the *sūra* can be divided into two main parts: vv. 1–10 and 11–20. The first part lists God’s favors to man, while the second lists acts that lead to salvation and [paradise](#) (*al-janna*) or Hell (*jahannam*).

Q90:1–10

There is strong evidence that vv. 5–7 were added to an original, coherent text. A comparison of the language of these verses to that of the previous and following ones shows a clear weakness of composition in terms of meaning and form.

In terms of form, they include one verse, v. 6, that does not follow the rhyme of the preceding and following verses: vv. 1–5 and v. 7 end in *-ad*, while v. 6 ends in *-adan* (or *-adā*).

In terms of meaning, there is no progression of a thought and no clear idea of what is being said. If v. 4 means that man was created for toil and suffering, does it make sense that in the following two verses he should boast about his abilities and strength and the squandering of wealth? Furthermore, the partial repetition of v. 5 in v. 7 does not serve any clear purpose. The introduction of the verb *yarahu* ‘he sees him’ in v. 7 seems to be an attempt to connect v. 7 to ‘*aynayn* ‘two eyes’ in v. 8, but the attempt is unsuccessful since the *sūra* includes a listing of body parts, not their functions. Finally, vv. 5–7 are a non-sequitur in relation to vv. 1–4, and are not related semantically to vv. 8–10. The only reason for their presence here seems to be an attempt to show man as an arrogant braggart.

If vv. 5–7 are removed, vv. 8–10 would be a natural progression from vv. 1–4, particularly if the words *kabad* and *al-najdayn* are understood in the meanings suggested below.

fī kabad

In his discussion of *fī kabad*, al-Ṭabarī presents two main interpretations: “upright and straight” (*muntaṣib^{an} mu’tadil al-qāma*) and “in difficulty, trouble and fatigue” (*fī shidda wa ‘anā’ wa naṣab*). There is reason to believe that the first interpretation, ‘upright and straight’, was the meaning intended in the *sūra*. We find support for this conclusion in Q95:4 (*la-qad khalaqnā al-insān fī aḥsan taqwīm*), which Ṭabarī interprets as “in the most perfect form and in the best image”, “as a strong, patient, youth”, or “unlike animals, his face is not directed at the ground”.⁸ The third interpretation is identical to that of *fī kabad* as “upright”.

The identity of the phrase *la-qad khalaqnā l-insāna* in Q90 and Q95 and the identity of one interpretive opinion in the meanings of *fī kabad* in Q90 and *fī aḥsani taqwīm* in Q95, strongly point to a positive meaning of *kabad* as ‘upright’, or ‘unlike animals’, and not ‘in difficulty and suffering’.

al-najdayn

In his interpretation of Q90:10 al-Ṭabarī states twice that *al-najdayn* does not refer to the two breasts (*al-thadyayn*) before citing Ibn ‘Abbās and al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 105/723), who said that the word does refer to breasts. This makes one suspect that he is trying hard to counter a certain view, perhaps the prevailing one. As we saw above, al-Ṭabarī concludes by choosing ‘the two paths of good and evil’ as the meaning of *al-najdayn*, and as for the two breasts, he states that ‘even though they constitute the paths of milk, they are simply one of the blessings God gave to man’.

The miracle of guidance to the [mother’s] breasts

In fact, “two breasts” makes better sense in the context of the *sūra* than ‘the path of good and the path of evil’. Here is why.

According to the standard interpretation, when listing His blessings to man, God mentions the two eyes, the tongue and two lips, and the path of good and evil. How can the path of good and evil qualify as one of God’s favors in the same way that the eyes and the tongue and lips do? A mother’s two breasts make better sense in this context, particularly since the blessings listed are parts of the body. In addition, do humans not wonder about the miracle of the infant searching and finding its mother’s breasts right after it is born?

As for the verb *hadā* ‘to guide’, it occurs 114 times in the Qur’ān,⁹ always in the sense of guiding to one path or destination, such as the Straight Path (*sirāṭ^{an} mustaqīm^{an}*, Q4:68, Q6:161, Q16:121), or the Path (*al-sabīl*, Q76:3), not two opposing paths, one good and one evil, as in the standard interpretation of Q90:10.

Abū al-Ashaddayn and El Shaddai

In his interpretation of Q90:5, al-Ṭabarī writes: “It was mentioned that that [verse] was revealed specifically about a man from the tribe of Jumah, who was called Abū al-Ashaddayn (the one with the two intensities or two strengths). He was intense (*shadīd*). God said, ‘Does this person, who is intense in his patience and strength, think that no one can conquer and defeat him? God will defeat and conquer him’ ”.¹⁰

It is not a coincidence in my view that the name Abū al-Ashaddayn is used here. It is quite likely a reference to El Shaddai or the God of the Mountain in the Hebrew Bible, whose identity has been a subject of

34 New Reading of Q90 (*al-Balad*)

controversy.¹¹ The name has an association with mountains, breasts and fertility.¹² Albright states: “Words for ‘breast’ often develop the meaning ‘elevation, mound, hill, mountain’; mountains shaped somewhat like breasts are frequently called ‘breast, two breasts’ in Arabic”.¹³ Note that El is the Hebrew word for ‘God’ or ‘a god’ and Shaddai is the word for ‘breasts’. Q90:10 may in fact have been composed with El Shaddai in mind and the connection was known. Subsequently, this connection was dropped or largely forgotten, although elements of the story remained in some people’s memories.

If Q90: 5–7 are removed, and if the meanings of *fī kabad* and *al-najdayn* proposed here are chosen, the result is a coherent, well-written statement about God’s blessings to man. This is shown in the following table:¹⁴

1	<i>la uqsimu bi-hādhā l-balad</i>	I truly swear by this city (or land)
2	<i>wa-anta ḥill^{um} bi-hādhā l-balad</i>	And you are a dweller of this city (or land)
3	<i>wa-wālid^{um} wa mā walad</i>	And the begetter and what he begat,
4	<i>la-qad khalaqnā l-insāna fī kabad</i>	Verily We have created man upright (or in perfect form)
8	<i>a-lam naj' al lahu 'aynayn</i>	Did We not make for him two eyes?
9	<i>wa-lisān^{um} wa-shafatayn</i>	And a tongue and two lips?
10	<i>wa-hadaynāhu l-najdayn</i>	And guide him to his mother’s breasts?

Q90:11–20

Two features of these verses merit attention: first, vv. 17–19 are much longer than the other verses in the *sūra*. For example, v. 16 consists of 8 syllables, while v. 17 consists of 27 syllables. Second, certain verses that clearly include a call to do good, such as the freeing of slaves or the feeding of orphans and the hungry, are followed by verses that include a threat of severe punishment.

Commenting on vv. 17–20, and their difference from other verses in the *sūra*, Bell writes that these verses “are a scrap from some other context”.¹⁵ If these verses are excluded, the second half of the *sūra* would be a clear call to perform good deeds.

Al-‘aqaba: Jahannam or the rough mountain path?

According to Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311), *al-‘aqaba* means ‘a rough or difficult mountain path’ (*tarīq fī-l-jabal, wa‘r*).¹⁶ We saw above al-Ṭabarī’s report about Ibn Zayd, who interpreted the word as “the path through which

there is safety and goodness”. Linguistically, there is no justification for associating *al-‘aqaba* with *Jahannam*, as al-Ṭabarī does.¹⁷

A better understanding of the intended meaning of the word can be obtained by examining vv. 13–16.¹⁸ They clearly stand for good deeds that can be performed to obtain salvation or God’s reward, and not a rock or a steep place in *Jahannam*. Consequently, “the difficult path to salvation” or “the path to obtain God’s rewards”, which is similar to the meaning proposed by Ibn Zayd for *‘aqaba*, fits well in this context.

More negativity, violence and suffering

Turning “the path to salvation” or “the path in which there is safety and goodness” into “*Jahannam*” is not the only instance in the *sūra* where a positive meaning is turned into a negative or threatening one in al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr*. There is reason to believe that the Qur’ān commentators imposed meanings on at least two other words in the *sūra*: *hill^{um}*, and *matraba*, which have resulted in more violent or threatening connotations.

hill^{um}

This word is unanimously understood as referring to God’s giving the Prophet the freedom, when he conquered Makka, to kill or to abstain from killing whomever he wanted for a certain period of time.¹⁹ However, there is no reason to think that the word itself signifies violence. The first meaning of the root *h-l-l*, from which the word is derived, is *to stop* or *to stay in a place*, the opposite of *to leave* or *to depart*.²⁰ The second meaning is *permission*, the opposite of *ḥarām* (prohibition). It is clear from the context that the meaning of *hill^{um}* intended in Q90:2 is based on the first meaning of the root, i.e. a visitor, dweller or inhabitant. This makes sense in light of the mention of the word *balad* (city, land, country) in vv. 1–2.

matraba

One of the main significations of the root *t-r-b* is dust, earth, or soil.²¹ The standard interpretation of the word *matraba* in Q90:16 focuses on the relationship of this word to ‘dust’. However, another meaning strongly supported by the context is poverty.²² According to al-Ṭabarī, *dhā matraba* signifies a man stuck to the ground or having his face in the dirt. In my view, the phrase should be understood as simply meaning *poor*.

The proposed original version of Q90

If we incorporate my proposed rereading of the words *kabad* and *al-najdayn* and remove the verses that I have argued were added, the result is as follows (my translation):²³

I truly swear by this land!	<i>la-uqsimu bi-hādhā l-balad</i>	لأقسم بهذا البلد
And you are a rightful dweller in this land,	<i>wa-anta ḥill^{um} bi-hādhā l-balad</i>	وأنتَ جِلٌّ بهذا البلد
And by the begetter and what he begat,	<i>wa-wālidⁱⁿ wa mā walad</i>	ووالد وما ولد
Truly We have created man in a unique form,	<i>la-qad khalaqnā l-insāna fī kabad</i>	لقد خلقنا الإنسان في كبد
Have We not made two eyes for him?	<i>a-lam naj' al lahu 'aynayn</i>	ألم نجعل له عينين
And a tongue, and two lips?	<i>wa-lisānan wa-shafatayn</i>	ولساناً وشففتين
And guided him to [his mother's] breasts,	<i>wa-hadaynāhu l-najdayn</i>	وهديناه النجدين
Should he not take the path to salvation?	<i>a-fa-lā qtaḥama l-'aqaba</i>	أفلا اقتحم العقبة
And who taught you what the path to salvation is?	<i>wa-mā adrāka mā l-'aqaba</i>	وما أدراك ما العقبة
The freeing of a slave,	<i>fakku raqaba</i>	فكُّ رقبة
Or the giving of food on a day of hunger,	<i>aw iṭ'ām^{um} fī yawmⁱⁿ dhī masghaba</i>	أو إطعامٌ في يومٍ ذي مسغبة
(To) an orphan close to you,	<i>yatīm^{am} dhā maqraba</i>	يتيماً ذا مقربة
Or a poor person in need.	<i>aw miskīn^{an} dhā matraba</i>	أو مسكيناً ذا متربة

Additions and the threat of punishment

If my reconstruction of Q90 is correct, then the reinterpretations and additions were clearly made with a specific goal in mind: showing man in a negative light, frightening him with graphic images of Hell, and threatening him with punishment. The threat of punishment carries more weight if man is shown in a negative light.

A similar process seems to be at work in Q95 (*al-tīn*). According to Bell, Q95:6 is likely to have been a later addition, as suggested by its length, relative to the other verses in the *sūra*.²⁴ A careful examination of the *sūra* supports

treating vv. 5–6 as additions. Without these two verses, the *sūra* forms a coherent unit that flows naturally: evidence of God’s miraculous creations, followed by a call to belief.²⁵

1	<i>wa-l-tīni wa-l-zaytūn</i>	By the fig and the olive,
2	<i>wa-ṭūri sīnīn</i>	By Mount Sinai,
3	<i>wa-hādhā l-baladi l-amīn</i>	By this secure land;
4	<i>la-qad khalaqnā l-insāna fī aḥsani taqwīm</i>	Certainly We created the human in the finest state.
5	<i>thumma radadnāhu asfala sāfilīn</i>	Then we returned him to the lowest of the low,
6	<i>illā lladhīna āmanū wa-‘amilū l-ṣāliḥāti fa-lahum ajrun ḡhayru mamnūn</i>	except for those who believe and do righteous deeds. For them (there is) a reward without end.
7	<i>fa-mā yukadhhibuka ba‘du bi-l-dīn</i>	What will call you a liar after (that) in (regard to) the judgment?
8	<i>a-laysa llāhu bi-aḥkami l-ḥākimīn</i>	Is God not the most just of judges?

The addition of Q95:5–6 mirrors that of Q90:5–7 and Q90:17–20. Both sets of verses start with a negative portrayal of man, which sets the stage for great rewards for those who believe and do good deeds and severe punishment for those who do not.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that the original meaning of two key elements in Q90, the phrase *fī kabad* in v. 4 and the word *al-najdayn* in v. 10 were abandoned in favor of other meanings that became part of the standard understanding of the *sūra*. The original meaning of *fī kabad* was *upright* and *straight* and that of *al-najdayn* was *the mother’s breasts*. In addition, I have cited evidence from the *sūra* itself which demonstrates that it consists of two layers of text, the first including vv. 1–4 and 8–16 and the second vv. 5–7 and 17–20. The first layer is a statement of God’s blessings to man: two eyes, a tongue and two lips, and guiding the newborn to its mother’s breasts. The second layer is of a different nature, with the first part (vv. 5–8) showing man as an arrogant braggart, and the second (vv. 17–20) a threat of severe punishment. The shift in the interpretation of *fī kabad* from upright and straight to *in suffering*, and of *al-najdayn* from the mother’s breasts to *the paths of good and evil*, combined with this portrayal of man and the threat of punishment, contribute to giving the *sūra* a decidedly negative, threatening meaning, which, in my view, was not present in its original form.

Notes

- 1 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 435.
- 2 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 584–598.
- 3 Abū Bakr b. Abī Dawūd al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, ed. Muḥammad b. 'Abduh (Cairo: Al-Farūq al-Hadītha li-l-Tibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 2002), 271.
- 4 For an interesting examination of the addition of the *alif* to the Qur'ān's consonantal skeleton, see Gerd Puin's rereading of 110, in "Vowel Letters and Orthographic Writing in the Qur'ān", in *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context 2*, ed. by Gabriel Said Reynolds (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), <http://www.arts.utoronto.ca/~gspuin/puin2011.pdf>.
- 5 See for example the translations by Pickthall, Shakir, Sarwar, and Arberry at <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=90&verse=1>
- 6 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 413.
- 7 See al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of Q56:9 in al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 11, 626.
- 8 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 636–637.
- 9 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 981.
- 10 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 589.
- 11 W. F. Albright, "The Names Shaddai and Abram", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 54: 4 (1935), 173–204. See also Harriet Lutzky, "Shadday as a Goddess Epithet", *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 48: 1 (January, 1998), 15–36.
- 12 Lutzky, "Shadday", 18.
- 13 Albright, "Shaddai and Abram", 184.
- 14 More about *la'uqsimu* below.
- 15 Bell, *The Qur'ān, Translated*, 2, 657.
- 16 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 4, 3028.
- 17 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 4, 3022–3030.
- 18 Abū 'Ubaydah makes the same point. He writes *thumma-fassara l-'aqaba fa-qāl* (He (God) explained al-'aqaba by saying) *wa-mā adrāka mā al-'aqaba, fakku raqaba, aw iṭ'āmun fī yawmin dhī masghaba*. Ma'mar b. al-Muṭannā al-Taymī Abū 'Ubaydah, *Majāz al-Qur'ān*. Ed. Muḥammad Fu'ād Sezgin, 2 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1981), 2, 299.
- 19 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 584–586.
- 20 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 2, 972.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 1, 423.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 424, al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 596.
- 23 I have not addressed two problems in this reconstruction. First, the reference of the personal pronouns. It is generally understood that God is the speaker in both v. 1 and v. 4, but there is an inconsistency in that He uses the first person singular in v. 1 and the first person plural in v. 4. Second, the particle *lā* generally negates verbs in the imperfect tense, but the verb (*iqtahama* in v. 11) is in the perfect tense. Al-Farrā' (d. 207/822) notices the irregularity and writes, "The Arabs do not use one *lā* without repeating it in another phrase, as in *fa-lā ṣaddaqa wa-lā ṣallā* (Q75:31) and *lā khawf^{um} 'alayhim wa lā hum yaḥzanūn* (Q10:62)" (Abū Zakariyā Yahyā b. Ziyād Al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abdel-Fattāh Shalabī, 3 vols. (Cairo: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīya, 2002), 3, 264–265.
- 24 Bell, *The Qur'ān, Translated*, 2, 665.
- 25 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 440.

4

ANGELS, DEATH, THE SOUL, STARS, BOWS – OR WOMEN: THE OPENING VERSES OF Q79 (AL-NĀZI'ĀT)

Among the parts of the Qur'ān that have defied Muslim interpreters and modern scholars alike are the introductory verses of some Makkan *sūras* which take the form of “oath clusters”. The introductory oaths of Q37, Q51, Q77, Q79, and Q100 are particularly enigmatic.¹ Nöldeke describes these oaths as the most difficult for “Muslim exegetes as well as for us”.²

The first word in each of these *sūras* is a participle (four active and one passive) with the feminine plural ending *āt*: *al-ṣāffāt*, *al-dhāriyāt*, *al-mursalāt*, *al-nāzi'āt*, *al-'ādiyāt*. Acknowledging the difficulty of identifying the reference of these participles, Muslim exegetes have speculated that they may refer to horses, camels, angels, messengers, stars, the wind, death, the soul, bows, or ships.

The feminine plural suffix *āt*

There are numerous occurrences of the feminine plural suffix *-āt* attached to active and passive participles in the Qur'ān, such as *mushrikāt* (disbelieving women), *ma'dūdāt* (numbered), *muttakhidhāt* ([women] taking), and *musakhkharāt* (subjected, governed). In the majority of instances, the participle clearly refers to women; in a small minority, the reference seems to be to a non-human entity, such as days, verses, or gardens. A careful examination of these participles reveals a pattern that distinguishes those with a human reference from those with a non-human one: with very few exceptions, participles with a human reference are used substantively, generally not accompanied by a noun that they modify, while those with a non-human

40 The opening verses of Q79 (*al-Nāzi'āt*)

reference are used adjectivally and are accompanied by such a noun. The following examples demonstrate this pattern.

- 1 Human reference, used substantively and not modifying a noun: *mushrikāt* (disbelieving women, Q2:221), *muṭallaqāt* (divorced women, Q2:228), *wālidāt* (women who have given birth, Q2:233), *dhākirāt* (women who remember, Q33:35).
- 2 Non-human reference, used adjectivally, always in connection with a noun: *āyāt muḥkamāt* “clear, precise verses” (Q3:7); *ayyām^{an} mā 'dūdāt* “(a few) numbered days” (Q3:24); *al-shamsa wa-l-qamara wa-l-nujūma musakhkharāt* “the sun and the moon and the stars subservient, subjected” (Q7:54).

The participles in Q37, Q51, Q77, Q79, and Q100

The participles in the introductory verses of Q37, Q51, Q77, Q79, and Q100 are all used substantively. Consequently, one expects a human reference, particularly women, to be the first thing that comes to mind. The total absence of any mention of women in the *tafsīr* literature in explaining the meanings of these participles is surprising.

In addition to the syntactic evidence, i.e., the patterns of usage of the active participles with a feminine reference described above, there are clear indications that the verses in question refer to women performing or associated with religious functions, as the following words show: *tāliyāt* (reciting), *dhikr* (remembrance, the Qur'ān, a revealed book) (Q37:3), *mursalāt* (those sent, compare with *mursalīn* “messengers”) (Q77:1), and *'urfā* (goodness, good deeds) (Q77:1).

Musaylima al-Kadhdhāb

Maslam b. Ḥubayb al-Ḥanafī (d. 12/633), known in Muslim sources as Musaylima al-Kadhdhāb (Musaylima the Liar), was a self-declared prophet who was a contemporary of Prophet Muḥammad. According to these sources, he was the author of sets of verses with a structure similar to certain Qur'ānic verses. Of particular relevance here is a coherent set addressed to women farmers who seem to be favored over tent- and city-dwellers:³

wa-l-mubadhdhirāti zar'ā
wa-l-ḥāṣidāti ḥaṣdā
wa-l-dhāriyāti qamḥā
wa-l-tāḥīnāti ṭahnā

(And/by) those sowing seeds,
 And those harvesting,
 And those winnowing wheat,
 And those milling (or grinding),

<i>wa-l-khābizāti khubzā</i>	And those baking bread,
<i>wa-l-thāridāti thardā</i>	And those making <i>tharīd</i> (cooking pieces of bread in meat sauce),
<i>wa-l-lāqimāti laqmā</i>	And those giving food,
<i>ihālatan wa sumnā</i>	Pouring generously and to make others healthy,
<i>laqad fuḍḍiltum 'alā ahl al-wabar</i>	You have been favored over the people of the (animal) hair
<i>wa-mā sabaqakum ahlū l-madar</i>	And the city-dwellers did not surpass you,
<i>rīfukum fa-mna 'ūh</i>	Protect your countryside,
<i>wa-l-mu 'tarr fa-āwūh</i>	And give shelter to those in need,
<i>wa-l-bāghī fa-nāwi 'ūh,</i>	And oppose the oppressor.

The active participles in Musaylama's verses (*mubadhahirāt*, *ḥāsidāt*, *dhāriyāt*, *ṭāḥināt*, *khābizāt*, *thāridāt*, *lāqimāt*) clearly refer to women.

In this chapter, which focuses on the first five verses of Q79 (*wa l-nāzi'āt*), I will argue that they most likely refer to women in connection with religious functions. In the next chapter, I will examine the whole of Q100. I will propose alternative readings for both texts.

Q79:1–5

I will start my examination of these verses by presenting an English translation, followed by al-Ṭabarī's commentary.

English translation⁴

1	<i>wa-l-nāzi 'āti gharqā</i>	By the ones who snatch violently,
2	<i>wa-l-nāshīṭāti nashṭā</i>	By the ones who draw out completely,
3	<i>wa-l-sābiḥāti sabḥā</i>	By the one who slide smoothly,
4	<i>fa-l-sābiqāti sabqā</i>	And race swiftly
5	<i>fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā</i>	And those who direct the affair,

Each of the five verses contains two words, an active participle and a verbal noun. These ten words derive from seven different roots. In vv. 1 and 5, the two words are derived from two different roots, but in the remaining three verses, 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.

Al-Ṭabarī⁵

According to al-Ṭabarī, disagreements among the exegetes revolve around the reference of the active participles.

42 The opening verses of Q79 (*al-Nāzi'āt*)

Q79:1 *wa-l-nāzi'āti gharqā*

The exegetes disagreed over the meaning of *nāzi'āt*. Some said it refers to the angels that pull the souls of humans. According to one report attributed to Sa'īd, the angels pull their souls, drown them, then throw them into the fire (of hell). Others said *nāzi'āt* refers to death, which pulls the souls. Other exegetes said it refers to the stars that pull (move fast) from one end of the horizon to the other. Still others said it is a reference to the bows being pulled to shoot arrows. Al-Ṭabarī concludes by stating that God swore by *al-nāzi'āti gharqā* and did not specify one *nāzi'a* (puller) to the exclusion of the others. All of the pullers mentioned are included in the oath, whether they above are angels, death, star, bow, or something else.

Q79:2 *wa-l-nāshiṭāti nashṭā*

Exegetes also disagreed over the meaning of *nāshiṭāt*. Some said it is a reference to the angels briskly removing the souls of the believers, as a knot of a rope tied to a camel is removed. Other exegetes said it refers to death, which removes souls swiftly. Another group said it is a reference to the stars moving swiftly from one end of the horizon to the other. Another group said it refers to lassos (*awhāq*). Al-Ṭabarī adds that it could also refer to antelopes.

Q79:3 *wa-l-sābiḥāti sabḥā*

The exegetes disagreed over the meaning of *sābiḥāt* as well. Some said it refers to death swimming in the souls of mankind. A report attributed to Mujāhid states that *al-sābiḥāt* refers to death and that he [Mujāhid] found it this way in his book (*hākadhā wajadtuhu fī kitābī*). In another report also attributed to Mujāhid, he says it refers to the angels and that he found that in his book too (*hākadhā wajadtu hādhā ayd^{an} fī kitābī*). Others said it refers to the stars swimming in their orbits. Still others said it refers to ships. Again, al-Ṭabarī accepts all interpretations.

Q79:4 *fa-l-sābiqāti sabqā*

Here too the exegetes disagreed over the meaning of *sābiqāt*. Some said it refers to the angels, while others said it refers to death, to horses, or to stars. As with the previous verses, al-Ṭabarī accepts all interpretations.

Q79:5 *fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā*

No disagreement among the exegetes is reported for *al-mudabbirāt*. They agree that it refers to the angels that manage what they are commanded to do by God.

Al-Ṭabarī's account may be summarized as follows:

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

Problems with the traditional account***General problem: the reference of the active participles***

The Qur'ān declares itself to be a clear Arabic Qur'ān (Q12:2, Q20:13, Q39:28, Q41: 3, Q42:7, Q43:3) written in clear Arabic (Q16:103, Q26:195). As shown above, the level of uncertainty associated with the reference or references of these five active participles raises serious questions about this claim. Among all the references listed above, only the reference to angels seems to make good sense since none of the other candidates can pull or draw, rush, swim, race, or manage affairs; the angels, as supernatural beings can do anything. However, there is strong evidence in the Qur'ān itself for excluding even angels as the reference of these participles.⁶ At least three Qur'ānic verses clearly state that angels cannot be female (Q6:9, Q37:150–152, and Q53:27):

Q6:9

wa-law ja 'alnāhu malak^{am} la-ja 'alnāhu rajul^{am} wa-labasnā 'alayhim mā yalbisūn (Even if We had made him an angel, We would indeed have made him a man, and have confused for them what they are confusing.)⁷

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Q37:150–152

am khalaqnā al-malā'ikata ināth^{am} wa-hum shāhidūn. A-lā innahum min ifkihim la-yaqūlūn. walada allāhu wa-innahum la-kādhībūn (Or did We create the angels female while they were witnesses? Is it not a fact that out of their own lie they indeed say, God has begotten? Surely they are liars indeed.)⁸

Q53:27

inna alladhīna lā yu'minūna bi-~~al~~-āakhirati la-yusammūn al-malā'ikata tasmiyat al-unthā (Surely those who do not believe in the Hereafter indeed name the angels with the names of females.)⁹

Problems with the individual verses

wa-l-nāzi'āt gharqā

The root *n-z-* is found 20 times in the Qur'ān, with meanings ranging from 'pulling' to 'desire' to 'controversy'.¹⁰

The Form I verb *naza'a*, from which the active participle *nāzi'a* (f. *nāzi'a*) is derived, is used in 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.¹¹

The word *nāzi'āt*, which occurs only once in the Qur'ān, is translated as 'those who strive', 'those who pull out', 'those who discard'.¹² The meanings of 'striving' and 'discarding' are clearly tied to the context created by the standard interpretation and not to the usage of the word outside the verse.

The root of the other word in the verse, *gh-r-q* occurs 23 times in the Qur'ān.¹³ It is found in two verbal nouns (*gharq* and *gharaq*), in the Form IV verb *ashraq*, and the passive participle of the latter, *mughraq*. The meanings of these four words are as follows:¹⁴

gharq: going to the extreme, all the way, violently, strongly, energetically

gharaq: drowning

ashraq: to cause to drown

mughraq: one who is drowned

The word *gharq* violates a basic morphological rule of the language. According to Ibn Manzūr, who quotes al-Azhari, it is "a noun that takes the

place of the true verbal noun *ighrāq*” (*al-gharq ism uqīma maqām al-mašdar al-ḥaqīqī min aghraqtu ighrāq^{an}*).¹⁵ In other words, the true verbal noun should have been *ighrāq*, not *gharq*, because it is derived from the Form IV verb *aghraq*.

The word *gharq* does not seem to have an independent existence in the language outside of this verse.

In addition to the morphological violation, there is also a semantic violation. A look at the meanings of the four words listed above (*gharq*, *gharaq*, *aghraq*, *mughraq*) shows that, as in the case of Q79:1 a new, and quite different, meaning is assigned to *gharq*, which is not related to drowning, the basic meaning of the root.

The meaning dictated by the context, which was created by the commentators on extra-linguistic grounds, is “the angels pulling the souls from the chests of the unbelievers . . . like the puller goes deep in [pulling] the bow”.¹⁶ If we ignore this understanding, then we have a combination of two words, with one meaning ‘those that pull’ and the other ‘drowning’.

Syntactically, 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. According to these rules, a noun or an adjective is assigned the accusative case marked by *fatha* or *tanwīn al-fath* (*an*), *īn* (plural), or *ayn* (dual), if found in one of the following positions:¹⁷ 1) verb objective complement, 2) verb adverb complement, 3) the absolute object (*al-maf'ūl al-muṭlaq*), 4) warning, inducing, or specifying, 5) the subject of *inna* and its sisters, 6) the vocative, 7) after *lā al-nāfiya li l-jins* (*lā* of absolute negation), 8) predicate of *kāna* and its sisters, 9) adverbial of time, place, or condition (*ḥāl*), 10) after *kam*, *ka-ayy* and *kadhā* of comparison.

The case assignment of *gharqā* in the phrase *wa-l-nāzi'āt gharqā* does not fall under any of the above categories. It is typically explained as the result of *gharqā* being a verbal noun (*mašdar*). However, the verbal noun category is a morphological classification, not a syntactic one. A noun does not receive the accusative case, or any other case for that matter, simply because it is a verbal noun.

Al-Nahḥās (d. 338/950) explains the verbal noun case assignment as follows: Their souls are pulled out, drowned, burned, and then thrown into the fire . . . and the meaning is [that] the souls are drowned so they drown [a drowning] . . . (*tunza' nufūsum thumma tuḡhraḡ thumma tuḡhraḡ thumma yulqā bi-hā fi l-nār . . . wa-l-ma'nā fa-tuḡhraḡ al-nufūs fa-taghraḡ gharqā . . .*)¹⁸ He cites Q71:17 *wa-allāhu anbatakum min al-arḡi nabāt^{an}* as a comparable case.

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Ibn al-Anbārī (577/1181) states that *gharq^{an}* is in the accusative because it is a verbal noun: *manṣūb 'alā al-maṣḍar*.¹⁹

Al-'Ukbarī (d. 616/1219) gives a more elaborate explanation, albeit with the same conclusion. He writes: *gharqā: maṣḍar 'alā al-ma'nā, li-anna l-nāzi' al-mughriq fī naz' al-sahm aw fī jadhb al-rūḥ, wa-hwa maṣḍar maḥdhūf al-ziyāda, ay ighrāq^{an}* (*gharq^{an}*: a verbal noun based on the meaning, because the one who pulls [is the one] who causes to drown (or goes far or deep into) the pulling of the arrow, or extracting the soul. It is a verbal noun, with the addition deleted, i.e. *ighrāq^{an}*).²⁰ In the last part of his statement, al-'Ukbarī is making the claim that *gharq*, the verbal noun of the basic Form I verb *ghariqa*, replaces *ighrāq*, the verbal noun of the derived or *mazīd* (augmented) Form IV verb.

Gharqā cannot be considered the absolute accusative (*maf'ūl muṭlaq*) for the simple reason that this type of accusative requires a verb from which the verbal noun is derived, as in the example given by al-Naḥḥās: *anbatakum nabāt^{an}* (He made you grow a growing). No such verb occurs in Q79:1 or in any of the following verses.

wa-l-sābiḥāti sabḥā

The root *s-b-h* occurs eighty-nine times in the Qur'ān in seven different forms.²¹ Three of these seven forms are the Form II verb (*sabbah/yusabbih*), its verbal noun *tasbīḥ*, and its active participle *musabbih*. The meanings of the Form II verb *sabbah/yusabbih* and its derivatives generally revolve around glorifying God. The other four forms are the Form I verb *sabah/yasbah* and three forms related to it: the two nouns *sabḥā* and *subḥān*, and the active participle *sābiḥ*. These derivatives have the following meanings:²²

sabah/yasbah: trail, pass along, trail in space

sabḥā: range, scope; opportunity for action, toiling, work; the act of swimming, floating, sailing, gliding, fast running, sweeping ahead

sābiḥāt: swimmers, floaters, gliders, fast running horses

subḥān: praise and glory be to . . .

The word *sabḥā* occurs twice in the Qur'ān, in Q73:7 and in Q79:3, our present concern. In Q73:7, its meaning seems to have been unclear to the exegetes. Al-Ṭabarī lists 'free time', 'sleep', and 'enjoyment'.²³ He adds that Yaḥyā b. Ya'mar read it with a *khā*, with the same meaning.²⁴

This ambiguity in the meaning of *sabḥā* is reflected in Ibn Manẓūr's explanation of the word. Citing a number of authorities, who comment on

its usage in Q73:7 (al-Layth, Abū 'Ubayda, al-Mu'arrij, Abū al-Duqaysh, al-Farrā', Abū Ishāq, and Ibn al-A'rābī), he lists the following meanings: 'free time to do things', 'free time to sleep', 'long repose', 'free time for coming and going', 'free time at night', 'the ability to do what one needs to do during the day'. "For those who read *sabkhā*, the meaning of *sabḥā* is 'confusion' or 'action and life' and the meaning of *sabkhā* is 'rest and relief of the body (from toil)'".²⁵

AuQ1

It is clear that these meanings are determined by the context of the word and not by its basic or general usage in the language. The confusion is deepened by the reports that the word was also read as *sabkhā*.

In Q79:3 *sabḥā* is explained simply as 'to swim', with no hint at a relationship to its meaning in Q73:7.

fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā

On the face of it, Q79:5 poses no grammatical problems:²⁶ the active participle *al-mudabbirāt* serves as the subject of the sentence, i.e. those (f.) who manage, and *amrā* is the direct object. However, there are some striking peculiarities about this verse.

To start with, in order to express the concept of "those who manage the affair", Arabic would use the definite article *al-* to define the word 'affair', as reflected in English translations of the verse.²⁷ No such *al-* is found in *amrā*. The reader may recall the treatment of the word *ḥanīf*^{am} in Chapter 1. I concluded then, following Luxenberg, that this type of accusative is a reflection of the Syriac "emphatic state" (*status emphaticus*), where the final *ā* has a function similar to that of the Arabic definite article.

As traditionally understood, the root *d-b-r* is used in the Qur'ān with three basic meanings: 1) back, behind, or end, 2) to manage (an affair); 3) to contemplate.²⁸

The meaning of 'to manage (an affair)' is expressed by the Form II verb *dabbar*, from which the active participle *mudabbir* is derived, and is found in five verses: Q10:3, 31; Q13:2; Q32:5; and Q79:5. 'To contemplate' is expressed by the Form V verb *tadabbar* (sometimes assimilated to *ddabbar*) and is found in four verses: Q4:82, Q23:68, Q38:29, and Q47:24.

The root *'-m-r* occurs 248 times in the Qur'ān. It has the following meanings: 1) to order; 2) to appoint as ruler; 3) to consult; 4) one who gives many orders; 5) affair, matter; 6) strange and evil (deed).²⁹

One striking feature about the occurrences of *dabbar* (Form II) and *tadabbar* (Form V) in the Qur'ān is the exclusive association of the former with the noun *amr* (Q10:3, 31, Q13:2, Q32:5, Q79:5) and of the latter with something

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that is said or recited (Qur'ān, *āyāt* 'verses', *qawl* 'saying') (Q4:82, Q23:68, Q38:29, Q47:24). In general, however, Form II verbs are semantically related to Form V verbs derived from the same root. The relationship is that of reflexivity or transitivity: Form V verbs are the reflexive or intransitive counterparts of Form II verbs. In some cases, when a verb is clearly based on a noun, no such relationship exists, in spite of a shared stem, as in *saddaqa* 'to believe the truth of' and *taṣaddaqa* 'to give to charity'. The absence of a relationship in this case is due to the fact that *taṣaddaqa* has its origins in the noun *ṣadaqa* 'charity'. The case of *ṣaddaqa/taṣaddaqa* is the exception; in other occurrences of Form II verbs and their Form V counterparts in the Qur'ān, the reflexive/transitive relationship is clear, as in *baddala/tabaddala* 'change/exchange',³⁰ *bayyana/tabayyana* 'to show/be shown',³¹ and *dhakkara/tadhakkara* 'to remind/remember'.³² The case of *dabbar/tadabbar* seems to be unique. On the one hand, it cannot be described as a denominative verb, like *taṣaddaqa*, and, on the other, there are no traces of a reflexive/transitive relationship between the two verb forms: *dabbar* 'to manage' and *tadabbar* 'to ponder'.

Alternative interpretation of Q79:1–5

The preceding discussion suggests that the verses in which I have identified problems or peculiarities (Q79:1, 3, 5) may have been misread or misunderstood by the early Muslim exegetes. I will now offer an alternative reading that eliminates these problems.

As noted, there was a period when the written text of the Qur'ān was represented by a consonantal skeleton in which sets of letters that were later distinguished by dots looked alike, such as *b/t/th/n/y*, *f/q*, and *'gh*, and when the diacritics, representing short vowels, the doubling of letters and the absence of vowels, were not written.

It is possible that some of the words in Q79:1–5, written in such a defective script, were misunderstood and misinterpreted because they were assigned the wrong dots and short vowels when such elements were introduced into the writing system.³³

Q79:1 *wa-l-nāzi'āt gharqā*

Without dots, the first verse of 79 would have appeared as follows:

والرعد عرفا

These two words may be read in a number of ways, the first as *wa-l-bāri'āt*, *wa-l-bāzighāt*, *wa-l-tāri'āt*, *wa-l-nāzighāt*, and *wa-l-yāri'āt*, and the second

as *'arqā*, *'azfā*, *'urfā*, *'azqā*, and *gharfā*. Which reading or readings should be chosen?

In reconstructing what I believe to be the original form, I have followed three principles. First, I respect the integrity of the consonantal skeleton; second, the reconstructed word must occur elsewhere in the Qur'ān and; third, the resulting text must have a clear meaning within the cluster of the five verses.

Keeping these principles in mind, two possibilities present themselves for each of the two words in Q79:1: for the first word, *bāzighāt* and *nāzighāt*, and for the second, *ghurafā* and *'urfā*. Other possibilities, such as *bāri'āt* and *'arqā*, may be excluded because they, and forms related to them, are not found in the Qur'ān, although they are found in other Arabic language texts.

nāzighāt and bāzighāt

The root *n-z-gh* occurs six times in the Qur'ān. The verb *nazagha/yanzagha* occurs four times and the verbal noun *nazgh* twice. All these occurrences are associated with the word *shayṭān* 'Satan'. The verb signifies 'to sow dissension, to plant hatred, to insinuate evil thoughts', and the verbal noun signifies 'the act of insinuating evil in the hearts of people'.³⁴

b-z-gh

The root *b-z-gh* occurs two times in the Qur'ān: *bāzigh* and its feminine form *bāzigha*. *Bāzigh* occurs in Q6:77 with reference to the moon and *bāzigha* is used in the next verse with reference to the sun, both meaning 'rising', 'breaking forth'.³⁵

At least three early commentators, Mujāhid (d. 104/722),³⁶ Abu 'Ubayda (d. 210/825),³⁷ and 'Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/826),³⁸ link *nāzi'āt* to 'stars'. While it is difficult to imagine any of the meanings associated with the verb *naza* cited above (to pull, take out), in association with stars, it is easy to see the connection between those meanings and the verb *bazagh* (to rise).

Let us assume that the original reading was *bāzighāt*. This hypothesis finds support in a statement made by Abū 'Ubayda. He writes: *wa-l-nāzi'āti gharqā* [means] 'the stars pull [which means] rise then set in it' (*al-nujūm tanza* ' *taṭla* ' *thumma taghīb fih*).³⁹ Abū 'Ubayda glosses *tanza* ' as *taṭla* ' 'to rise'. Clearly, he must have been referring to *tabzugh*, not *tanza* '.

Ibn Manzūr defines *bazagh* as follows: *bazaghat al-shams . . . bada'a minhā ṭulū^{um} aw ṭala'at wa sharaqat . . . ka-annahā tushaqqu bi-nūrihi al-zulmatu shaqq^{am}* (The sun appeared: it started to rise or it rose and shone . . . as if darkness was broken by its light).⁴⁰

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gharqā vs. 'urfā

Both of the roots *gh-r-q* and *'-r-f* are found in the Qur'ān. We have seen the problems associated with *gharqā* above. As for *'urfā*, ten derivatives of the root *'-r-f* occur a total of seventy times. The meanings associated with the root are: 'to know', 'recognize', 'to make known', 'to point out an error', 'to make fragrant', 'to get to know one another', 'to confess'; 'norm', 'goodness'; 'mane of a horse'; 'in succession'; 'recognized norms'; 'in goodness', 'fairness', 'virtue', and 'good deeds'.⁴¹

The word *'urfā* in the sense of 'goodness, in goodness, virtue' fits well semantically and syntactically with *bāzighāt*. It occurs twice in the Qur'ān,⁴² in one instance as the opening verse of Q77, which is structurally similar to *wa-al-nāzi'āti gharqā*. About the meaning of *'urf*, Ibn Manzūr writes: "it is the opposite of evil" (*nukr*), *'urf* and *ma'rūf* mean "generosity" (*jūd*).⁴³

I would like to propose, on the basis of the above discussion, the reading *wa-al-bāzighāti 'urfā* instead of *wa-l-nāzi'āt gharqā* for Q79: 1. The proposed reading would mean 'Those (women) who rise or shine through generosity or good deeds'.

wa-l-sābiḥāti sabḥā

The key to a clear and consistent account of *sabḥā* and to understanding its meaning in both Q79:3 and Q73:7 may lie in a quote by Ibn Manzūr attributed to Tha'lab, who states that *subḥān* "glorifying, glorification" is not the *maṣdar* of the Form II verb *sabbah*, but of the Form I verb *sabah* (*wa-'indī anna subḥāna laysa bi-maṣdar sabbaha, innamā huwa maṣdar sabaḥa*).⁴⁴ The verbal noun of the verb *sabah* 'to swim' is *sibāḥa*. *Sabḥ* in the sense of swimming occurs only in Q79:3. As in the case of *gharqā* above, a special meaning for *sabḥā* was coined by the Qur'ān 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 reader may recall the variety of meanings given to *sabḥā* as used in Q73:7, which I pointed out were determined by its context. None of these meanings is related to 'swimming' or 'glorifying', the two basic meanings of the root. Understanding *sabḥā* as 'glorifying' removes the uncertainty about its meaning in Q73:7. It would then mean 'there are many opportunities for you to glorify (God) during the day'.⁴⁵

Consequently, I propose that Q79:3 be understood as: And those (women) who glorify (God).

fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā

It is highly unlikely that the exclusive juxtaposition of the Form II verb *dabbar* and its derivatives with the word *amr*, and of the Form V verb *tadabbar* with something that is read or recited, is a coincidence. In my judgment, such juxtaposition is a strong indication that *dabbar* and its reflexive counterpart carry meanings that are different from the traditional interpretation of 'to manage' and 'to ponder'. If the meaning of *dabbar* is 'to manage', why is it 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 'to ponder', namely *tafakkara* which occurs thirteen times in the Qur'ān.⁴⁶ It is used in association with 'the madness of their companion' (Q7:184), 'themselves' (Q30:8), 'God's creation' (3:191), 'stories' (Q7:176), 'verses, signs' (Q10:24, Q13:3, Q16:11, Q16:69, Q30:21, Q39:42, Q45:13), 'remembrance' (Q16:44), and 'examples' (Q59:21).

I would like to propose a new reading for the phrase *al-mudabbirāti amrā* based on evidence from old Arabic usage and a comparison with its cognates in Hebrew and Syriac.

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'.⁴⁷ Although usage of Arabic *dabbar* in a sense similar to that of Hebrew seems to have escaped the Qur'ān commentators, there are indications that the word was used in this sense in the language before the advent of Islam and for some time afterwards. For example, Ibn Manẓūr lists 'to tell, narrate' as one of the meanings of the verb. He writes,

wa dabbar al-ḥadīth 'an-hu rawāhu . . . wa dabbartu l-ḥadīth ay ḥaddathu bi-hi 'an ghayrī . . . wa rawā al-Azharī bi-sanadihi ilā Sallām b. Miskīn qāl: sami'tu Qatāda yuḥaddithu 'an fulān, yarwīh 'an abī al-Dardā' yudabbiruh 'an rasūli illāh . . .

(And *dabbar al-ḥadīth 'anhu* [means] he narrated it from him. And *dabbartu l-ḥadīth* means, I narrated it from others. . . . Al-Azharī narrated in his *isnād* (chain of transmission) from Sallām b. Miskīn, "I heard Qatāda relate, on the authority of so and so, narrating from Abū al-Dardā", narrating (*yudabbir*) from the Prophet . . .")⁴⁸

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amr

In both Hebrew and Syriac one of the primary meanings of the root 'm-r is "to say".⁴⁹ In Hebrew, the primary meaning of the two nouns derived from the root 'm-r, namely *emer* and *imra*, is 'utterance, speech, word'.⁵⁰

Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889) lists 'speech' or 'saying' (*al-qawl*) as one of the meanings of *amr*.⁵¹

Finally, in discussing the word *amr*, as used in the Qur'ān, 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*.⁵²

Assigning the meanings suggested above to *mudabbirāt* and *amrā* would result in the following alternative translation for Q79:5:

And those (f.) who speak the Word.

In terms of its syntax, what appears to be an accusative in *amrā* must be a relic of the Syriac "emphatic state", similar to *ḥanīf^{an}* in the phrase *Ibrāhima ḥanīf^{an}* (see Chapter 1). Just as *ḥanīf^{an}* is understood as *al-ḥanīf* (the *ḥanīf*), *amrā* is understood as *al-amr* "the word". Such a reading and understanding of *amrā* may be applied to the word *dhikrā* in Q37:3 and 51:5 and to the three words *wiqrā*, *yusrā* and *amrā* in Q77:1, 2, and 3, respectively.

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

These two verses do not have any syntactic problems or linguistic irregularities, but the meanings attributed to them by the exegetes are not warranted by their roots or usage, such as angels, death, and stars. If the words *al-nāshitā* and *al-sābiqāt* refer to women, then they fit well in my proposed reinterpretation of Q79:1, 3, and 5, according to which these verses refer to females who perform good deeds. However, an even stronger association with the theme of women doing good deeds emerges from an examination of their relationship with the language of the Qur'ān and with Syriac.

wa-l-nāshīātī nashṭā

Without dots, *wa-l-nāshīāt nashṭā* would appear as follows:

والسبط بسطا

Another set of words based on the same consonantal skeleton is *wa-l-bāsiṭāt bastā*. Whereas only two forms of the root *n-sh-ṭ*, *nāshīāt* and *nashṭā* are found in the Qur'ān, six forms of the root *b-s-ṭ*, occur twenty-five times.⁵³ The meanings of the verb *basaṭa/yabsiṭu* include 'to give', 'to give plentifully', 'to be generous', and 'to be virtuous'.⁵⁴ Consequently, the verse *wa-l-nāshīātī nashṭā* may be reread as *wa-l-bāsiṭātī bastā*, with the meaning: "And those (women) who give generously".

fa-l-sābiqāti sabqā

The verb *sabaqa* means 'to go past, go before',⁵⁵ 'to surpass in generosity'.⁵⁶ Ibn Manẓūr cites the *ḥadīth*: I (the Prophet) am first among the Arabs (i.e. to become Muslim), Ṣuhayb is the first among the Romans, Bilāl is the first among the Ethiopians, and Salmān is the first among the Persians (*anā sābiqu al-'Arab, ya 'nī ilā l-Islām, wa-Ṣuhayb sābiqu l-Rūm, wa Bilāl sābiqu l-Habasha, wa-Salmān sābiqu l-Furs*).

The Syriac cognate of the Arabic root *s-b-q* is *sh-b-q*. Among the meanings of the basic verb (equivalent to Arabic Form I verbs) *shbaq* in that language is 'to forgive', including to 'forgive a sin'.⁵⁷

If considered with the basic meaning of the verb *sabaqa* in Arabic, Q79:4 can be understood as: Those who are first, surpass others (as in doing good), and if considered with the Syriac meaning of 'to forgive', the verse would mean: "And those women who forgive".

On the basis of the above discussion, I would like to propose the following rereading of Q79:1–5. Compare this rereading with the traditional interpretation shown above.⁵⁸

By those (women) who rise/shine through good works,	<i>wa-l-bāzighāti 'urfā</i>	والبازغات عُرفا
And those who give generously,	<i>wa-l-bāsiṭātī bastā</i>	والباسطات بسطا
And those who glorify (God)	<i>wa-l-sābiḥāti sabḥā</i>	والمسبحات سبحا
And those who surpass others (in doing good) or those who forgive,	<i>fa-l-sābiqāti sabqā</i>	فالسابقات سبقا
And those who speak the Word (of God)	<i>fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā</i>	فالمديرَات أمرا

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Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the Qur'ān exegetes did not have a clear idea of the reference of the active participles in Q79:1–5 and speculated that ~~these participles~~ may refer to angels, death, stars, bows, lassos, antelopes, ships, or horses. For some reason, these exegetes avoided any mention of women as references to these participles, although 'women' should be one of the first things that comes to mind when the morphological structure of these participles is considered and compared to the usage and meanings of other participles in the Qur'ān. In addition to the problem of the reference of the participles, Q79:1–5 were shown to have a number of syntactic and lexical problems.

I have proposed a new reading of Q79:1–5 in which the participles are understood to refer to women. This new reading also involves changing the dotting scheme of four words in these verses and considering alternative meanings for all ten words on the basis of evidence from the Qur'ān, the *tafsīr* literature, older meanings of Arabic words, and the meanings of cognates in Hebrew and Syriac. The resulting reading presents a picture of women performing good deeds in a religious context.

Notes

- 1 Angelika Neuwirth, "Images and Metaphors in the Introductory Sections of the Makkan *sūras*", in *The Koran: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies*, Vol. 3 (*Style and Structure*), ed. Colin Turner (London and New York: Routledge-Curzon, 2004), 244–273, at 245.
- 2 Nöldeke, *History*, 64.
- 3 Al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja'far b. Jarīr, *Tārīkh al-Umam wa-l-Mulūk*, 10 vols. (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2008), 3, 174.
- 4 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 419.
- 5 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 420–424.
- 6 Bint al-Shāṭi' argues that the active participles refer to "raiding horses" (*al-khayl al-mughīra*) rather than to angels. ('Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥman (Bint al-Shāṭi'), *Al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī li-l-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (in two parts) (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1977), 1, 124. However, it is hard to imagine horses "snatching" (79:1) or "managing the affair" (79:5).
- 7 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 77.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 298.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 361.
- 10 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 926–927.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 927.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 927–928.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 663.
- 14 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 663–664.
- 15 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 5, 3245.

- 16 Al-Farrā', *Ma 'ānī al-Qur 'ān*, 3, 230.
- 17 W. Wright, *Arabic Grammar* (Translated from the German of Caspari and edited with Numerous Additions and Corrections), Third Edition, rev. W. Robertson Smith and M. J. de Goege, 2 vols. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 2, 45–129.
- 18 Abū Ja'far Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Naḥḥās, *I'rāb al-Qur 'ān*, ed. Khālid al-'Alī (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 2008), 1264.
- 19 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Anbārī, *al-Bayān fī Gharīb I'rāb al-Qur 'ān*, ed. Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Ṭāhā and Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabī, 1969–1970), 2, 492.
- 20 Abū al-Baqā' 'Abd Allāh b. al-Ḥusayn al-'Ukbarī, *al-Tibyān fī i'rāb al-Qur 'ān*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bajāwī (Cairo: 'Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1976), 2, 1269.
- 21 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 415–416.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 416.
- 23 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 285–286.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 286.
- 25 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 3, 1914.
- 26 One would expect to find the definite article attached to the second word. While English translations usually render the verse as 'those managing the affair or the event', the literal translation is in fact 'those managing an affair or an event'.
- 27 Droge, *The Qur 'ān*, 419. See also the seven English translations at <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=79&verse=5>
- 28 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 297.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 80–81.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 123–124.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 329–330.
- 33 Al-Munajjid claims that the first copies of the Qur 'ān had dots that were removed by the Prophet's Companions after his death. Dots were reintroduced towards the end of the first century AH. (S. Al-Munajjid, *Dirāsāt fī Tārīkh al-Khaṭṭ al-'Arabī mundhu Bidāyatih ilā Nihāyat al-'Aṣr al-Umawī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1972), 127.
- 34 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 928.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 36 Abū al-Ḥajjāj Mujāhid b. Jabr al-Qurashī al-Makhzūmī, *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, ed. Abū Muḥammad al-Asyūfī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 2005), 337.
- 37 Abū 'Ubaydah, *Majāz al-Qur 'ān*, 2, 284.
- 38 'Abd al-Razzāq b. Hammām al-Sana'ānī, *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad 'Abduh (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1999), 3, 387.
- 39 Abū 'Ubayda, *Majāz al-Qur 'ān*, 2, 284.
- 40 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 1, 275.
- 41 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 613–614.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 4, 2899.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 1914–15.
- 45 A different dotting scheme would produce *wa-l-sā'ihāti sayhā*. The root *s-y-h* is found three times in the Qur 'ān in the words *fa-sīhū*, *sā'ihūn*, and *sā'ihāt*, 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

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- proposing an alternative interpretation of 79: vv. 1–5: And those (f.) who wander the earth devoting themselves to the worship of God.
- 46 Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī, *al-Mu'jam al-Mufahras li-Alfāz al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2007), 635–636.
- 47 F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 180–182.
- 48 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 2, 1321. See also Lüling, who argues that the Arabic verb *dabbar* means “to speak”, which, he states, “occurs very seldom in old Arabic so it therefore seems to be a loan from Hebrew”. Günter Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Eformation: 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). 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).
- 49 Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Lexicon*, 55–56; Payne-Smith, *Syriac Dictionary*, 20.
- 50 Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Lexicon*, 57.
- 51 'Abd Allāh b. Muslim Ibn Qutaybah, *Ta'wīl Mushkil al-Qur'ān*, ed. Al-Sayyid Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 1973), 514.
- 52 Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 69.
- 53 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 91.
- 54 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 1, 282–283.
- 55 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 418.
- 56 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 3, 1928–1929.
- 57 Payne-Smith, *Syriac Dictionary*, 557.
- 58 Note that an alternative to *wa-l-sābihāti sabḥā* is *wa-l-sā'ihāti sayḥā* (see note 45 above).

5

CHARGING STEEDS OR MAIDENS PERFORMING GOOD DEEDS: A RE-INTERPRETATION OF Q100 (AL-‘ĀDIYĀT)

Introduction

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, the introductory “oath clusters” of Q37, Q51, Q77, Q79, and Q100 were particularly challenging to the Qur’ān commentators, who were unsure about the reference of the participle that begins each *sūra*. They speculated that the participles refer to a variety of objects or natural phenomena, e.g., angels, messengers, stars, the wind, death, the soul, bows, ships, horses or camels.

Some scholars treated such ambiguity as evidence of the superior nature of the language of the Qur’ān. For example, Hajjaji-Jarrah declares that,

sūrat al-‘ādiyāt (Q100) offers an excellent example of how the Qur’ānic *‘Arabīya* brings forth a dazzling assembly of word meaning and sound, defying the conventions of both the Arabian *saj‘* and the literary rules of classical Arabic literature. It represents the persuasive, arresting construction, pervasive rhythm, and important message of the Qur’ānic *‘Arabīya*, which has selected and expressed these materials in just this way.¹

Bint al-Shāti’ writes about Q100:

Every word, no, every letter, has its own brilliant rhetorical secret in what the Qur’ān intended in presenting the scene of the Day of Judgment, real and material, emphasizing its occurrence and warning of what awaits humankind in terms of severe and exact accounting.²

58 Re-Interpretation of Q100 (*al-Ādiyāt*)

As in previous chapters, I begin here by presenting the *sūra* in its traditional interpretation, first in an English translation,³ then a summary of al-Ṭabarī's account.⁴

1	<i>wa-l-ādiyāti ḍabḥā</i>	By the runners panting
2	<i>fa-l-mūriyāti qadhā</i>	and the strikers of fire
3	<i>fa-l-mughīāti ṣubḥā</i>	and the chargers at dawn,
4	<i>fa-atharna bi-hi naq 'ā</i>	when they kick up a (cloud of) dust
5	<i>fa-wasatṇa bi-hi jam 'ā</i>	and pierce through the midst of it all together
6	<i>'inna l-insāna li-rabbiḥī la-kanūd</i>	Surely the human is indeed an ingrate to his Lord
7	<i>wa-innahū 'alā dhālika la-shahīd</i>	and surely he is indeed a witness to that
8	<i>wa-innahū li-ḥubbi l-khayri la-shadīd</i>	And surely he is indeed harsh in (his) love for (worldly) goods
9	<i>a-fa-lā ya 'lamu idhā bu 'thira mā fī l-qubūr</i>	Does he not know? When what is in the graves is ransacked,
10	<i>wa-ḥuṣṣila mā fī l-ṣudūr</i>	And what is in the hearts is brought out,
11	<i>inna rabbahum bi-him yawma 'idhḥin la-khabūr</i>	surely on that Day their Lord will indeed be aware of them.

Al-Ṭabarī on 100

Q100:1 *wa-l-ādiyāti ḍabḥā*

Al-Ṭabarī starts by stating that the interpreters (*ahl al-ta'wīl*) disagreed over the meaning of this verse. Some of them said that it means horses that run while neighing or that run until they neigh or bark. According to al-Ṭabarī, this interpretation is supported by reports attributed to the *ḥadīth* authority 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās. The word *ḍabḥ* signifies the barking of dogs.

Al-Ṭabarī points out that *ādiyāt* may also refer to camels. In this case *ḍabḥ* means 'to breathe'. He adds that 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās changed his view about the meaning of *ḍabḥ* after 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib told him that the word refers to camels. He concludes that he prefers interpreting *ādiyāt* as referring to horses, since camels do not bark but horses do (*wa dhālika anna l-ibil lā taḍbaḥ wa-innamā taḍbaḥ al-khayl*).

Q100:2 *fa-l-mūriyāti qadhā*

Al-Ṭabarī explains that the exegetes also disagreed over the meaning of this verse. Some said it refers to the horses lighting fire or making sparks with

their hooves. Another view is that the horses stirred up war between their riders and the enemy. A third view is that the phrase refers to warriors who light fires after leaving battle. A fourth group said it refers to the malice of men. A fifth group said it refers to tongues. Still other exegetes said it refers to camels that are walking and cause stones to hit one another, with the result that sparks fly. In an effort to harmonize all these views, al-Ṭabarī states that horses light fires with their hooves, people light fires with flint, the tongue lights fires with logic, and men can light fire with their malice. In addition, horses stir up war when they meet in battle. God did not specify which meaning is intended.

Q100:3 *fa-l-mughīrāti ṣubḥā*

The exegetes, al-Ṭabarī explains, also disagreed over the meaning of this verse. Some said it refers to horses raiding the enemy openly in the morning in the service of God. Others said it refers to people raiding their enemy in the morning. Still others said it refers to camels that push with their riders from Jamʿ to Mina on the Day of the Sacrifice (*yawm al-naḥr*). Al-Ṭabarī concludes by accepting all of these interpretations and adds that Zayd b. Aslam refused to interpret this verse, saying that “it is [only] an oath made by God”.

Q100:4 *fa-atharna bi-hi naqʿ ā*

Al-Ṭabarī interprets this verse as “they raised dust in the valley”. He explains that *naqʿ* means ‘dust’ or ‘dirt’. The *h* in *bi-hi* is a euphemism for the name of the place: the place is alluded to but is not mentioned because it is known that dust can be stirred only in a place. The audience’s understanding is sufficient for them to make it unnecessary to mention the place. If *ʿādiyāt* refers to camels, then *fa-atharna bi-hi naqʿ ā* refers to the ground on which they walk.

Q100:5 *fa-wasaṭna bi-hi jamʿ ā*

According to al-Ṭabarī, the first word may be read in three different ways with the same meaning: *wasaṭna*, *wassaṭna*, or *tawassaṭna*, all of which signify ‘to go into the middle of’. In this verse it signifies going into the middle of a gathering of people – the unbelievers, an enemy or a brigade. Others held that *bi-hi* refers to Muzdalifa.

60 Re-Interpretation of Q100 (*al-Ādiyāt*)

Q100:6 *inna l-insāna li-rabbihī la-kanūd*

This means that man is ungrateful for his Lord's blessings (*inna l-insāna la-kafūr^{um} li-ni 'ami rabbihī*). Soil that is *kanūd* is soil where nothing grows. [And the tribe of] Kinda got its name from denying its ancestor. According to some authorities, *kanūd* refers to a person who counts misfortunes and forgets his Lord's blessings. Others cited the Prophet as saying that *kanūd* refers to an ungrateful person who eats alone, beats his slave, and withholds giving. Al-Ṭabarī concludes by stating that Abū l-Yaqẓān said on the authority of Sufyān b. Hishām on the authority of al-Ḥasan that the word describes one who blames his Lord, counts misfortunes and forgets blessings.

Q100:7 *wa-innahū 'alā dhālika la-shahīd*

Al-Ṭabarī's treatment of this verse is short compared to his treatment of previous verses, e.g., almost one-fifth as long as his treatment of Q100:6. The verse means that God is a witness to man's ungratefulness to his Lord. Al-Ṭabarī cites a report attributed to Qatāda, who said that the verse was also read as: *wa-inna allāha 'alā dhālika la-shahīd*, "Verily God is a witness to that".

Q100:8 *wa-innahū li-ḥubbi l-khayri la-shadīd*

This means that 'man is intense in his love of money'. The grammarians (*ahl al-'Arabīya*) disagreed over the reference of the word intense (*shadīd*). Some Baṣran grammarians said *shadīd* means 'he is intense in his love of wealth, in other words, miserly (*bakhīl*)'. Some Kufan grammarians said: 'The right place for *li-ḥubb* is after *shadīd* and *shadīd* should be in construct with it (*an yudāfa shadīd ilay-hi*). *Khayr* may also signify 'this world' (*al-dunyā*)'.

Q100:9 *a-fa-lā ya lamu idhā bu thira mā fī l-qubūr*

Al-Ṭabarī mentions that in 'Abdallāh (b. Mas'ūd)'s *muṣḥaf* the word *buhitha* (something was searched) is used in place of *bu thira*. The Arabs also use *buhithira* as an alternative pronunciation of *bu thira*.

Q100:10 *wa-ḥuṣṣila mā fī l-ṣudūr*

Ḥuṣṣila signifies 'to be distinguished, to be shown, or to become obvious'. The verse would then mean 'whatever good or evil is in the hearts of people is made obvious'.

Q100:11 *inna rabbahum bihim yawma’ idhin la-khabīr*

Al-Ṭabarī explains that God is aware of people’s deeds, whatever secrets they have in their hearts or hide in them, and what they do with their limbs, nothing is hidden from him and He will give them their due for all of that on that day.

Problems of the *sūra*

One wonders why eleven verses, with a total of thirty-three different words, should require so much interpretation, with conflicting views and no satisfactory answers to some key questions: 1) to what does *al-‘ādiyāt* refer? 2) What do the words *ḍabḥā*, *naq’ā* and *kanūd* mean? 3) In Q100: 4–5, to what does the pronoun *h* in *bi-hi* refer? 4) Why does the word *khayr*, which occurs more than 180 times in the Qur’ān, mean ‘good’, ‘goodness’ or ‘good deed’ everywhere except in this *sūra*, where, in combination with *shadīd* ‘intense’, it is understood to mean ‘miserly’, and finally, 5) since the *sūra* presumably describes a battle scene, why is there nothing in it that, on its own, is clearly related to battle or fighting, with the exception of the word *mughīrāt*, ‘those (f. pl.) who raid’ (see below)?

Reflecting the commentators’ difficulty in understanding the first five verses of the *sūra*, Pickthall states in a footnote to his translation of Q100: “The meaning of the first five verses is by no means clear. The above is a probable rendering”.⁵ In the same vein, Droge writes in a footnote to his translation: “[T]he first five verses contain fem. plur. participles and verbs, which are usually said to refer to warhorses, but they are so cryptic that their precise meaning can only be guessed at”.⁶

In the following, I will discuss the problems of the *sūra* in detail. These problems will be divided into two main types: lexical/semantic and syntactic. By lexical/semantic I mean words and their meanings.

Lexical/semantic problems***al-‘ādiyāt***

The word *al-‘ādiyāt* is glossed as ‘horses’ or ‘camels’ because it is derived from the verb *‘adā/ya’dū* ‘to run’. The following words derived from the root *‘-d-w.* occur in the Qur’ān:⁷

- 1 *‘adā/ya’dū* (Form I), ‘to violate a command, transgress, turn away from, abandon’

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- 2 'ādā/yu 'ādī (Form III), 'to feud with, to treat or take as an enemy, to exchange hostility with'
- 3 ta 'addā/yata 'addā (Form V), 'to transgress, overstep the limits'
- 4 i 'tadā/ya 'tadī (Form VIII), 'to assault, commit an aggression; to violate a command, act unlawfully; to commit perjury'
- 5 'adw, 'aggression'
- 6 'ādī (plural 'ādūn), 'one who commits an aggression'
- 7 'ādiya (plural 'ādiyāt), 'one who charges, attacks, or raids'
- 8 mu 'tadī (pl. mu 'tadūn) 'aggressor'
- 9 'aduww, 'enemy or enemies, hostile or in a state of animosity'
- 10 'adāwa, 'animosity, enmity, hostility'
- 11 'udwān, 'aggression, transgression; blame, sanction, censure'
- 12 'udwa, 'side of the valley'

Derivatives of the root '-d-w clearly revolve around the meaning of aggression, transgression or treating someone as an enemy. The translation of 'ādiyāt in this sūra as 'those who charge, attack or raid' is clearly influenced by its context, which is assumed to be a raid. Nothing in the word itself or in other words in the Qur'ān that are derived from the same root indicates running, horses or camels. Following the rules of Arabic morphology, and taking into consideration the meanings of the words derived from the root '-d-w, particularly the active participle 'ādī, the word 'ādiya (pl. 'ādiyāt) should mean 'one (f.) who commits an aggression'.

ḍabḥā

The peculiar usage of this word in Q100 has generated a great deal of discussion among the Qur'ān commentators, as exemplified by al-Qurṭubī's account, summarized as follows:

His Most Exalted's saying *wa-l-'ādiyāt ḍabḥā* [means] horses running, according to the interpreters and linguists in general, i.e. they run in the cause of Allah and neigh or bark (*taḍbaḥ*). Qatāda said, 'They (i.e. the horses) bark, in other words, they neigh when they run (*taḍbaḥ idhā 'adat ay tuḥamḥim*)'. Al-Farrā' said that *ḍabḥ* is the sound made by horses when they run. Ibn 'Abbās [said]: 'No beast *yaḍbaḥ* except a horse, a dog, or a fox'. It is said: 'They [i.e. the horses] were muzzled so that they would not neigh, lest the enemy become aware of their presence, so they breathed

heavily. . . .’ The linguists said: ‘The words *dabḥ* and *dubāḥ* are used to refer to foxes, and the usage was extended to horses’. It is used by the Arabs, as in ‘the fire changed its color’ (*dabaḥathu l-nār*), but not by much . . . and [one says] *indabaḥa lawnuh* if its color changed slightly to black. . . . Animals *taḍbaḥ* if their condition changes from fright, fatigue, or greed. . . *dabḥ* also means ashes. . . . Abū ‘Ubayda said: ‘*dabaḥat al-khaylu ḍabḥā* is like [saying] *daba‘at*, which means *to go*’. Abū ‘Ubayda added that *ḍabḥ* and *dab‘* signify ‘running’ and ‘going’. Al-Mubarrad said: ‘*dabaḥa* means to extend the *aḍbā‘* (later explained as ‘necks’) when one moves. . . .’ Among those who said that the intended meaning of *al-‘ādiyāt* is horses are Ibn ‘Abbās, Anas [b. Mālik], al-Ḥasan [al-Baṣrī], and Mujāhid. . . . Another account says that *al-‘ādiyāt* refers to camels. Muslim said, “I had a disagreement about it with ‘Ikrima, who said, Ibn ‘Abbās said ‘horses’, and I said that ‘Alī said ‘camels at the time of the pilgrimage’, and my master is more knowledgeable than your master”. . . . For those who say it refers to camels, *ḍabḥā* means *dab‘ā*, where the *ḥā*’ is converted from *‘ayn*, because it is said *daba‘at al-ibil*, i.e. they extend their necks while walking. . . *dabḥ* is used with horses and *dab‘* with camels. . . . Abū Ṣāliḥ [said] “*dabḥ* [when used] with [reference to] horses is ‘*to neigh*’ and [when used] with [reference to] camels [it is] ‘*to breathe*’ . . .”⁸

Behind the different definitions and conflicting views on the word *ḍabḥā*, one discerns a clear attempt to link the verb *dabaḥa* ‘to bark’, to running horses. This attempt reaches absurd levels when the other meaning of *dabaḥa* ‘to change color as a result of burning’ is used to impose an alternative interpretation where a comparison is made between the change in the color of a burned object and the change that occurs [presumably in the condition of horses] as a result of fright, fatigue, and greed. Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. 501/1108) makes a similar attempt to accommodate the peculiar Qur’ānic usage of the word. He writes:

The word *dabḥ* refers to the sound of a horse’s breath, which is similar to the sound of a fox. It is said that it is the hissing produced by the act of running or it is the running itself. It is also said that *dabḥ* is like *dab‘*, which means ‘to extend the neck while running’. It is said that it [i.e. *dabḥ*] refers to the burning of a stick, since running is like fire, as both involve speed.⁹

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Most exegetes gloss this word as ‘sparks produced by running horses’. This interpretation becomes problematic when one takes into account the alternative interpretation that ‘*ādiyāt*’ refers to camels.¹⁰ No one would argue that the hooves of camels produce sparks.

naq‘ā

The usage of *naq‘* in the sense of *dust* is peculiar to Q100.¹¹ While there is general agreement among Qur’ān commentators that *naq‘* means ‘dust’, al-Rāzī, sensitive to the peculiar usage of the word, tries to relate ‘dust’ to other meanings of the root, such as ‘to raise the voice’ or ‘to soak in water’. He writes:

It is said that [*naq‘*] signifies soaking in water, as if the person associated with the dust plunges into it, like a man who plunges into the water (*wa-qīla huwa min al-naq‘ fī l-mā‘, fa-ka’anna šāhib al-ghubār ghāša fī-hi, kamā yaghūšu l-rajulu fī l-mā‘*).¹²

He adds, describing women wailing after a raid, “[the raiding horses] provoked in those who have been raided the shouts of wailing women, whose voices were raised (*ay fa-hayyajna fī l-mughār ‘alayhim šiyāh al-nawā’ih, wa-rtafa‘at ašwātuhunn*)”.¹³

Again, al-Rāzī assigns a meaning to a word that it does not really have in order to make it fit in the context of the *sūra*.

kanūd

The earliest commentators interpreted this word as *kafūr*, ‘a person who denies, or an ungrateful person’.¹⁴ As time went on, the interpretations became longer, and new elements were added, such as a person who eats alone, beats his slave, and withholds giving;¹⁵ a person who blames his Lord, counts misfortunes, and forgets blessings;¹⁶ land that does not grow anything;¹⁷ a person who remembers misfortunes and forgets blessings, disobedient (in the dialect of Kinda and Ḥadramawt), a person who cuts (i.e. a rope), a woman who denies intimacy to men, a person who appreciates a gift but not the giver, a person who is terrified in times of misfortune and is miserly in times of fortune, a malicious and envious person, and a person who is ignorant of his own worth.¹⁸

The lexicographers echoed the Qur’ān commentators. Under the root *k-n-d*, al-Khalil (d. 175/791) lists only the word *kanūd* with the meaning ‘ungrateful for a blessing’ and in Q100:6 “it is understood as one who eats alone, beats his slave, and withholds giving”.¹⁹

Ibn Sīda (d. 458/1066) lists six other derivatives of the root *k-n-d*: 1) *kanād* *yaknūd* ‘to deny a blessing’; 2) *kannād* (and *kanūd*) ‘ungrateful’ or ‘a person who eats alone, does not give others, and beats his slave’, 3) *kund* (and *kanūd*) ‘(said of a woman) one who denies intimacy to men’, ‘when referring to soil, *kanūd* means barren’; 4) ‘Kinda is the name of the father of an Arab tribe’, 5) *Kannād*, *Kunāda*, (and *Kanūd*) ‘are proper names’.²⁰

Ibn Manzūr, who took much of his material from Ibn Sīda, reproduces the latter’s list but adds two verses (*shawāhid*), in which the words *kanūd* and *kannād* are used, by two contemporaries of the Prophet, al-Namir b. Tawlab and al-A‘shā.²¹

With the exception of the proper name Kinda, the meanings associated with *kanūd* by both the Qur’ān commentators and lexicographers all revolve around the meaning *kafūr*, an ingrate.

Ibn Sīda adds to his definition of *kanūd*: *wa-lā a‘rifū la-hu fī l-lughati aṣl^{an}, wa-lā yasūghu ayd^{an} ma‘ qawlih li-rabbih²²* (I do not know of an origin for it in the language, and it is also not appropriate with the word *li-rabbih* ‘to his Lord’).

In my view the word *kanūd* does not have an independent existence in Arabic outside of Q100:6 and may have been introduced into the language for the first time through it. In support of this hypothesis, consider, first, Ibn Sīda’s comment above. Second, Arabic is the only Semitic language in which the root *k-n-d* exists; it is not found in Ge’ez, Epigraphic South Arabian, Syriac, Aramaic, Hebrew, Phoenician, Ugaritic, or Akkadian.²³ Third, the context in which the word *kanūd* is found makes the occurrence of a word with such a strongly negative meaning unlikely, as will be shown below.

Positive vs. negative interpretations: a close look at *khayr*

One feature of Q100 that is dissonant to the discerning ear is the abrupt transition from *inna al-insān li-rabbih la-kanūd* in Q100:6 ‘man is an ingrate to his Lord’, to *wa-innahu li-hubb al-khayr la-shadīd* in Q100:8 ‘his love of good is intense’, a clearly positive attribute.

The word *khayr*, or a form of it, e.g. *akhyār*, *khayrāt*, occurs 188 times in the Qur’ān.²⁴ In 185 of these occurrences, the meaning revolves around

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good, good deed(s), better, favorite (people), or preferred, all positive and desirable characteristics. In two cases (Q2:180 and Q33:19), it is interpreted as ‘wealth’ or ‘inheritance’. Only in Q100:8, and in combination with the word *shadīd*, does it have a decidedly negative interpretation as miserly (*bakhīl*).²⁵

Ibn Manẓūr lists the following meanings for *khayr*:

- 1 to be or become good (opposite of bad or evil), 2) better, best, 3) to prefer or be preferred, 4) of noble birth, 5) wealth, in Q2:180, 6) to choose, 7) to seek or pray for goodness, 8) to ask for compassion, 9) cucumbers (not of Arabic origin), 10) the name of a tribe.²⁶

For *shadīd*, he lists the following:

- 1 to be, become, or make hard, 2) strength, 3) to struggle, 4) to be tough, 5) a hard consonant, 6) famine, 7) hard time, 8) miserly, as in Q100:8: *innahu li-ḥubbi al-khayri la-shadīd*, 9) to hurry, run, 10) courage, 11) to attack (an enemy), 12) maturity (in people), 13) patience, 14) to reach a high point (day), 15) to tie up.

Neither al-Khalīl nor Ibn Sīda lists ‘wealth’ as a meaning of *khayr*,²⁷ and only Ibn Sīda lists ‘miserly’ as a meaning of *shadīd*.²⁸

The meaning assigned to the three-word phrase ~~*ḥubb al-khayr*~~ *la-shadīd* in Q100:8 is not warranted by the individual meanings of the words as typically used in Arabic, particularly the Arabic of the Qur’ān. If the typical meanings of these words are applied to this verse, it would mean: *And he (man) is intense/strong in his love of good, goodness or doing good.*

A positive reading of Q100:8 strongly suggests a positive reading of Q100:6: “Man is (positive attribute) to his Lord, AND he greatly loves to do good”. Such a reading is much more natural than one in which man is portrayed as an ingrate and he loves goodness or good deeds.

To sum up, there is no linguistic foundation in the language of the Qur’ān for the claims by the Qur’ān commentators that *‘ādiyāt* refers to horses or camels, that *ḍabḥā* is a sound made by horses or camels, that *qadhā* is a spark produced by running horses or camels, that *naq ‘ā* refers to dust, and that *kanūd* stands for an ungrateful person. These meanings are assigned to provide an explanation for which there is no linguistically sound basis.

Syntactic problems

The accusative case assignment in *ḍabḥā*

In terms of its syntactic structure, Q100:1 *wa-l-‘ādiyāti ḍabḥā* 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: *ḍabḥā* is not the object of a verb, a predicate of *kāna* and its sisters, a subject of *inna* and its sisters, *tamyīz* (accusative of specification), *ḥāl* (circumstantial accusative), or *maḥḥūl muṭlaq* (absolute accusative) or any of the other accusative categories. It is typically explained as the result of its being a verbal noun (*maṣḍar*), like *gharqā* (see Chapter 4), or as a *maṣḍar fī mawḍi‘ al-ḥāl* (verbal noun in the position of the circumstantial accusative).²⁹

The Reference of the Pronoun in Q100:4

The exegetes and grammarians do not offer a reasonable explanation for the referent of the third person masculine singular pronoun *h* in *bi-hi*. Al-Farrā’ states: “And [by] His saying, may He be exalted, *bi-hi naq‘ā*, he means ‘in the valley’ (*bi-l-wādī*). He did not mention it before that, which is permitted, because dust can only be stirred in a place even if that place is not mentioned. If the name of the thing is known, then it can be referred to, even if it is not mentioned”.³⁰

Some commentators suggest that the pronoun refers to the hooves of the horses.³¹ This suggestion is problematic, however, since the pronoun must have a masculine singular reference, while hooves (*ḥawāfir*) requires a feminine singular reference.

Al-Qurtūbī agrees with those commentators who understand the pronoun as referring to a place that is not mentioned, but adds that it can also refer to the act of running (*‘adw*), “The pronoun in *bi-hi* refers to the place or location in which the raid occurred. If the meaning is understood, it is permitted to refer to what has not been mentioned explicitly. . . . One also says, ‘they stirred up in it, i.e. in the running’ (*wa qāla fa-atharna bi-hi, ay bi l-‘adw*)”.³²

Ibn Kathīr suggests “the place where the horses fight”,³³ while, according to al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī, the pronoun refers to “the place of their [horses] running or [to] that time”.³⁴

All these explanations involve a great deal of speculation, and none of them addresses the syntactic difficulty in a convincing manner.

Although Muslim scholars have written thousands of pages to explain or interpret the eleven short verses of *sūrat al-‘ādiyāt*, in my view they have

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failed to provide a satisfactory explanation for what the text means. It is my view that no amount of interpretation will produce a meaningful and coherent explanation, because the original text has been misread and misinterpreted.

An alternative explanation

As was pointed out in Chapter 1, for much of the 1st century AH the written text of the Qur’ān was represented by a consonantal skeleton in which most vowels and the letter *hamza* were not written, and letters with similar shapes, which later were distinguished by dots, were written identically.

In the following, I will attempt to reconstruct what might have been an older version of Q100 by starting with the un-dotted text. I will assign four words of the *sūra* a dotting scheme different from the one assigned traditionally, and substitute one symbol of the *hamza* diacritic by another.

Q100:1

Changing the ‘*ayn* of *wa-l-‘ādiyāt* (والعاديات) to *ghayn* and the *dād* of *dābhā* (ضبحا) to *šād* produces the phrase *wa-l-ghādiyāti šubhā* (والغاديات صباحا).

The basic and most common meaning of the verb *ghādā/yaghdū*, of which *al-ghādiyāt* is the active participle, is ‘to go out or to perform an act in the morning, especially in the early morning’.³⁵ The basic and most common meaning of the noun *šubh* is ‘morning’, or ‘early morning’.³⁶ Syntactically, *šubhā* in the phrase *wa-l-ghādiyāti šubhā* is unambiguously an adverb of time. Semantically, the two words fit together perfectly: “Those (f.) who go out in the morning”. This perfect semantic and syntactic fit is clearly absent in the traditional interpretation of Q100:1.

In his *Kitāb Akhbār al-Muṣahḥifīn*, al-‘Askarī (d. 382/992) wrote about the famous narrator and transmitter of Arabic poetry Ḥammād al-Rāwīya:

I heard those who say that Ḥammād al-Rāwīya one day read *wa-l-‘ādiyāti šubhā*, and that Bashshār the Blind took him to ‘Uqba b. Salm [and told him that] he can narrate all the poetry of the Arabs but he knows only the first *sūra* of the Qur’ān. ‘Uqba tested him by having him read some of the Qur’ān. He [Ḥammād] distorted a number of verses.³⁷

Al-‘Askarī lists sixteen verses from different *sūras* that Ḥammād “distorted” (*ṣahḥaf*). A close look at these “distorted” readings shows that they

make more sense than the traditional readings. Indeed, they may have been the correct ones. His reading of the second word of Q100:1 as *ṣubḥā* was probably closer to the original form.³⁸

In his commentary on Q100:1, Muqātil uses the verb *ghadā* in connection with the horses going out to the raid in the morning. He writes: *wa-l-‘ādiyāti ḍabḥā, yaqūl: ghadat al-khayl ilā l-ghazw hattā aḍbaḥat* (as for *wa-l-‘ādiyāti ḍabḥā*, this means, ‘the horses went out to the raid in the morning until they barked. . .’).³⁹

Q100:4

If we change the shape of the *hamza* diacritic from *أ* to *إ* in فائرن (*fa-atharna*) and remove a dot from the *qāf* of نفا (*naq‘ā*), the result is the phrase فائرن به نفا (*fa-ātharna bi-hi naq‘ā*).

Again, syntactically and semantically, *fa-ātharna bihi naq‘ā* is a well-formed phrase: ‘And they (f.) preferred by (doing) it (to perform/render) a good deed’.⁴⁰ The verb *āthara* ‘to prefer’ occurs five times in the Qur’ān (Q12:91; Q20:72, Q59:9, 79:38, and 87:16) while *athāra* ‘to stir up’ occurs twice in the phrase *tuthīru saḥāb*^{am} ‘it, i.e. the wind, stirs up clouds’ (30:48, 35:9). However, while the root *n-q-* ‘occurs only once, in Q100, the root *n-f-* ‘occurs fifty times.’⁴¹

kanūd (كنود) → kabūd (كبود)

The problems associated with *kanūd* strongly suggest a misreading of the consonantal skeletal form that would have been found in the earliest copies of the Qur’ān. If so, what is the correct form likely to have been? The answer to this question lies in the context in which the word is found. As was argued above, that context supports a positive reading of it.

Such a reading is possible if, first, one starts with the un-dotted form of the word and applies another dotting scheme and; second, if the investigation is expanded to include closely related Semitic languages from which comparative information may be used to shed light on older, now obsolete, meanings of Arabic cognates.

Placing a dot under the second letter rather than above it results in the word *kabūd*. This word is not attested in Arabic in this form, but a related word is found elsewhere in the Qur’ān, in Q90:4 *la- qad khalaqnā l- insāna fī kabad*, which I suggested should be understood as *Verily We have created man upright [or in a unique form]*, and not as *Certainly We created man in trouble* (see Chapter 3).

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If we replace *kanūd* with *kabūd*, a form derived from the same root as *kabad*, with the meaning of ‘honored’, ‘honoring’, ‘glorified’, ‘glorifying’, and if we replace the traditional negative interpretations of *khayr* and *shadīd* with the commonly used meanings of these two words, the result is a meaningful and coherent reading of Q100:6–8:⁴²

<i>Traditional Reading</i>		<i>Proposed Reading</i>	
6 inna l-insāna li-rabbihī la-kanūd	Surely the human is indeed an ingrate to his Lord	inna l-insāna li-rabbihī la-kabūd	Surely man honors [is honored by] his Lord,
7 wa-innahū ‘alā dhālika la-shahīd	And surely he is indeed a witness to that,	wa-innahū ‘alā dhālika la-shahīd	And surely he is a witness to that,
8 wa-innahū li-ḥubbi l-khayri la-shadīd	And surely he is indeed harsh in (his) love for (worldly) goods	wa-innahū li-ḥubbi l-khayri la-shadīd	And surely he is strong in his love of good deeds.

Q100:3 *fa-l-mughīrātī ṣubḥā: an interpolation?*

The third verse of the *sūra* is likely an interpolation, for the following reasons. First, unlike most other verses in the *sūra*, it does not require a great deal of interpretation. The only point that requires clarification is whether *al-mughīrāt* refers to horses or camels, which is a problem in v. 1. The reader may recall al-Ṭabarī’s statement that Zayd b. Aslam treated this verse as a simple oath that does not require further explanation. Simpler, straightforward language, that does not include obscure words may be taken as an indication of an interpolation. Second, the root *gh-w-r/gh-y-r*, from which *al-mughīrāt* is derived, does not occur in the Qur’ān with the meaning of ‘raiding’ or ‘attacking’. Third, *al-mughīrāt* is the only word in the *sūra* that refers to fighting or a battle. No other word can be related to such a theme on its own. Fourth, when we examine the meaning of the first three verses of the *sūra* as it is traditionally interpreted and understood, we find that they lack coherence and a logical progression of a thought. The first verse describes horses (or camels) panting, the second describes horses (or camels) making sparks with their hooves, and the third states that they are raiding in the morning. If this is the meaning intended, then it would make more sense to start with horses raiding in the morning, then making sparks with their hooves

and/or panting. The panting or the making of sparks should come after the horses go on the raid.

Once it was established that the beginning of the *sūra* refers to ‘charging steeds’, it was possible to continue with the same imagery. The addition of this verse reinforces the theme of the charging steeds at the expense of another older meaning, most probably a religious hymn about women in a religious context, as proposed in my analysis of Q79:1–5 (see Chapter 4).

An alternative meaning for *fa-wasatḥa bi-hi jam‘ā*

The traditional interpretation of this verse revolves around horses penetrating into the middle of the enemy. Consider some of the best-known English translations of the verse:⁴³

Sahih International: Arriving thereby in the center collectively.

Pickthall: Cleaving, as one, the center (of the foe).

Yusuf Ali: And penetrate forthwith into the midst (of the foe) *en masse*.

Shakir: Then rush thereby upon an assembly.

Muḥammad Sarwar: Which engulfs the enemy.

Mohsin Khan: Penetrating forthwith as one into the midst (of the foe).

Arberry: Cleaving there with a host!

However, a careful examination of the word *wasatḥa*, the use of its related forms in the Qur’ān, and the recurring theme in the *tafsīr* literature connecting the verse to Muzdalifa, all suggest a radically different interpretation.

Besides its occurrence in Q100:5, the root *w-s-ṭ* occurs four times in the Qur’ān: in Q2:143 and 238, Q5:89, and Q68:28.⁴⁴ None of these four occurrences is a verb and none can be related to the theme of battle. In Q2:143 (*wa-ka-dhālika ja ‘alnākum ummat^{an} wasaṭ^{an} li-takūnū shuhadā’ ‘alā l-nās*), *wasatḥ* is explained by al-Ṭabarī as either *best, more just, honest* (‘*adl*), or *not extreme* (*tawassuṭ wa-‘tidāl*).⁴⁵

The word *wuṣṭā* occurs in Q2:238 (*ḥāfiẓū ‘alā l-ṣalawāti wa-l-ṣalāti al-wuṣṭā*). In his explanation of this word al-Ṭabarī uses 5754 words and at the end of his long narrative the reader finds himself/herself where he/she was at the beginning: not knowing which of the five prayers *wuṣṭā* refers to. Each of the five daily prayers is offered as a possible candidate.⁴⁶ This suggests that al-Ṭabarī and other commentators did not know what the word actually meant.

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Awsaṭ occurs in Q5:89 (*fa-kaffāratuhu iṭ‘āmu ‘ashrati masākīna min awsaṭi mā tuṭ‘imūna ahlīkum*). Al-Ṭabarī’s explanation of this word is similar to his explanation of Q2:143, namely, ‘best’ or ‘not extreme’.⁴⁷ Finally, *awsaṭ* also occurs in Q68:28 (*qāla awsaṭuhum, a-lam aqul la-kum lawlā tusabbihūn*). For this word, al-Ṭabarī gives only one definition: *a ‘dal* ‘best, most honest, most just, upright’.⁴⁸

If we exclude the word *wusṭā* in *al-ṣalāti l-wusṭā* of Q2:238 because of the complete lack of agreement over its interpretation, we are left with three occurrences of the root *w-s-ṭ* (Q2:143, Q5:89, and Q68:28). In all three instances the context strongly suggests the meaning of *best, favored, preferred, or chosen*. In fact, an interpretation of Q2:143 and Q5:89 based on this meaning arguably makes more sense than one based on *middle: we made you a favored nation* (Q2:143), *feeding ten needy people from the best [food] that you feed your people* (Q5:89).

Muzdalifa and the pilgrimage

In his discussion of Q100:1, al-Ṭabarī reports that after ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib told Abdallāh b. Abbās: *al-‘ādiyāti ḍabḥā* [refers to their going] from ‘Arafa to Muzdalifa to Minā, he “stopped saying [that *al-‘ādiyāti ḍabḥā* refers to horses] and went back to that which ‘Alī, may God be pleased with him, said”. Al-Ṭabarī then cites several authorities who said that the word refers to camels.

The reference to camels is repeated in al-Ṭabarī’s commentary on Q100:2. In his commentary on ~~100:3~~ al-Ṭabarī states: Others said, “This is a reference to camels when they take their riders from the gathering (*jam*) on the day of the sacrifice to Mina”. About Q100:4 Ibn ‘Abbās is reported to have said that ‘Alī told him that *al-‘ādiyāti ḍabḥā* [refers to their going] from ‘Arafa to Muzdalifa and from Muzdalifa to Minā. Again, in Q100:5 al-Ṭabarī reports: “others said that the verse refers to Muzdalifa”.

This recurring reference to camels, ‘Arafa, Muzdalifa, Minā, and *jam*’ suggests that the gathering mentioned in Q10:5 is a religious gathering or a gathering of pilgrims or worshippers. Ibn Manzūr points out that *jam*’ is a name given to Muzdalifa because it was the meeting place of Adam and Eve after leaving Paradise.⁴⁹

Consequently, Q100:5 may be understood as follows: They (f.) gave or privileged with it the gathering of worshippers (or pilgrims).

Qadhā: a spark or a flame?

Like *ḍabhā*, *naq ʿā* and *kanūd*, *qadhā* is a *hapax legomenon* in the Qurʾān. It is generally understood to mean ‘to strike a fire’ or ‘to make a spark’.⁵⁰ Based on an examination of Biblical Hebrew and Syriac cognates, I would like to suggest a slightly different meaning that fits well with the reconstructed version of the *sūra*. In Biblical Hebrew the root *q-d-h* has the following meanings: 1) to be kindled, to glow, 2) feverish heat, 3) glowing precious stone, ruby, 4) to bore.⁵¹ In Syriac the same root has the following meanings: 1) to tear one’s hair, 2) to shave the head as a sign of grief, 3) to catch fire, blaze up (metaphorically, to rekindle, revive), 4) to set light, kindle, 5) to bore, pierce, 6) to make a cut when grafting, 7) to use a flint to strike a fire, 8) a perforation, incision, cut, 9) removal of a cataract from the eye, 10) a suture of the skull, 11) crying, wailing, 12) germination, 13) black pocks under the skin, 14) a receiver, mattress.⁵²

Based on these meanings, fire, flame or light is particularly appropriate: women who go out in the morning to do a good deed for a gathering are more likely to offer a flame or a (metaphorical) light to that gathering, than sparks made by their feet.

Inna or anna?

There is good reason to believe that the particle *inna* of Q100:11 should be read *anna*. In this position *inna* means ‘truly’ or ‘indeed’, but *anna* means ‘that’. Compare the two versions of vv. 9–11, the first the standard version with *inna* and the second an alternative version with *anna*:

With *inna* (truly)

Does he not know when what is in the graves was scattered (9), and what is in the breasts was obtained (10), truly (*inna*), their lord on that day is knowledgeable about them (11).

With *anna* (that)

Does he not know when what is in the graves was scattered (9), and what is in the breasts was obtained (10), that (*anna*) their lord on that day is knowledgeable about them (11).

This alternative reading with *anna* is attributed to Ibn Masʿūd, Abū al-Sammāl and al-Ḥajjāj.⁵³ It will consequently be chosen for the proposed reconstruction below.

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Putting it all together

According to the above discussion, here is the proposed reconstruction of Q100:⁵⁴

1	Those [women] who go out in the morning,	<i>wa-l-ghādiyāti ṣubhā</i>	والغاديات صُبْحَا
2	And who light a flame (or fire, light)	<i>fa-l-mūriyāti qadhā</i>	فالموريات قدْحَا
3	[addition]		
4	By which they (f.) chose to do a good deed	<i>fa-atharna bi-hi naf'ā</i>	فأثرنَ به نَفْعَا
5	And with which they favored the gathering [of pilgrims, worshippers],	<i>fa-wasatṭa bi-hi jam'ā</i>	فوسطنَ به جمْعَا
6	Truly man honors (or is honored by) his Lord,	<i>-inna l-insāna li-rabbihī la-kabūd</i>	إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لِرَبِّهِ لَكَبُودٌ
7	And truly he is a witness to that,	<i>wa-innahū 'alā dhālika la-shahīd</i>	وَأَنَّهُ عَلَىٰ ذَٰلِكَ لَشَهِيدٌ
8	And truly he is strong in his love of good deeds,	<i>wa-innahū li-ḥubbi l-khayri la-shadīd</i>	وَأَنَّهُ لَحَبَّ الْخَيْرِ لَشَدِيدٌ
9	Does he not know when the contents of the graves are scattered,	<i>a-fā-lā ya 'lamu idhā bu'thira mā fī l-qubūr</i>	أَفَلَا يَعْلَمُ إِذَا بُعْثِرَ مَا فِي الْقُبُورِ
10	And the secrets of the hearts are made known,	<i>wa-ḥuṣṣila mā fī ṣṣudūr</i>	وَحُصِّلَ مَا فِي الصُّدُورِ
11	That on that day their Lord will be knowledgeable of them?	<i>anna rabbahum bi-him yawma idhin la-khabīr</i>	أَنَّ رَبَّهُمْ بِهِمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ لَّخَبِيرٌ

Conclusion

In this chapter I have proposed a rereading of Q100 that involves re-dotting four letters and changing the shapes of *hamza* in two instances, as follows: in v. 1 والعاديات (*wa-l-ādiyāt*) → والغاديات (*wa-l-ghādiyāt*) and صبْحَا (*ṣubhā*) → صُبْحَا (*ṣubhā*); in v. 4 فَاثْرَنَ (*fa-atharna*) → فَأَثْرَنَ (*fa-ātharna*) and نَفْعَا (*naq'ā*) → نَفْعَا (*naf'ā*); in v. 6 كَنُودٌ (*kanūd*) → كَبُودٌ (*kabūd*); and in v. 11 إِنْ (*inna*) → أَنْ (*anna*).

I have also proposed that v. 3 was not part of an original text but an interpolation. The reconstructed version, which I believe was the original version of the *sūra*, forms a narrative that is more coherent and sounder semantically and syntactically than the traditional version.

Whereas the first half of the *sūra* in this traditional version portrays horses charging into battle or camels carrying pilgrims and the second half makes a statement about man's ingratitude and greed, the first half of the reconstructed version describes women performing acts of piety and the second half makes a statement that man is honored by his Lord and loves to do good.

Evidence for this reconstruction was provided from the *sūra* itself, from other parts of the Qur'ān, and from a comparison with cognates in Hebrew and Syriac.

Notes

- 1 Soraya M. Hajjaji-Jarrah, "The Enchantment of Reading: Sound, Meaning, and Expression in *Sūrat al-Ādiyāt*", in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān*, ed. Issa Boullata (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 228–251, at 229.
- 2 Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī*, 1, 103.
- 3 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 445.
- 4 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 665–674.
- 5 Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dar Al-Kitāb Al-Lubnanī, 1970), 817.
- 6 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 445.
- 7 Badawī and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 606–607.
- 8 Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabī, 1967), 20, 153–156.
- 9 Al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad known as al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallāh (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anglū al-Miṣrīyah, 1970), 2, 433.
- 10 See al-Ḥusayn b. Aḥmad Ibn Khālawayh, *I'rāb al-Qirā'āt al-Sab' wa 'Ilaluhā*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Sulaymān al-'Utaymīn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1992), 518; Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl wa-'Uyūn al-Aqwāl fī Wujūh al-Ta'wīl*, ed. 'Ādil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd and 'Alī Muḥammad Mu'awwad, 6 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-'Ubaykān, 1998), 6, 419.
- 11 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 4525–4528.
- 12 Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 32 vols. (Tehran: Shirkat Ṣaḥāfī Nawīn, 1980), 32, 66.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Mujaḥid, *Tafsīr*, 350; al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim, *Tafsīr al-Daḥḥāk*, ed. Muḥammad Shukrī Aḥmad al-Zāwītī (Cairo: Dār al-Salām li-l-Ṭibā'ah wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī' wa-l-Tarjamah, 1999), 983; Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, 3, 511.
- 15 Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, 3, 511.
- 16 Al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 3, 283.
- 17 Abū 'Ubaydah, *Majāz al-Qur'ān* 2, 307.
- 18 Al-Qurṭubī, 20, 158–159.
- 19 Al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-'Ayn*, ed. Dawūd Sallūm, Dawūd al-'Anbakī, and In'ām Sallūm (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 2004), 730.

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- 20 ‘Alī b. Ismā‘īl Ibn Sīda, *al-Muḥkam wa-l-Muḥīt al-A‘zam*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāh al-Sayyid Saīm and Faiṣal al-Ḥafyān, 12 parts in 2 vols. (Cairo: Ma‘had al-Makḥṭūṭāt al-‘Arabīyah, 2003), 2 (part 6), 471.
- 21 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 5, 3936.
- 22 Ibn Sīda, *al-Muḥkam*, 2, (part 6), 471.
- 23 Martin A. Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur’ānic Arabic* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002), 351–352.
- 24 ‘Abd al-Bāqī, *al-Mu‘jam al-Mufahras*, 306–309.
- 25 Al-Farrā’, *Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān*, 3, 285; Abū ‘Ubayda, *Majāz al-Qur’ān*, 2, 307; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 673.
- 26 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 2, 1298–1300.
- 27 Al-Khalīl, *Kitāb al-‘Ayn*, 232; Ibn Sīda, *al-Muḥkam*, 1 (part 5), 155–156.
- 28 Al-Khalīl, *Kitāb al-‘Ayn*, 402; Ibn Sīda, *al-Muḥkam*, 2 (part 7), 419.
- 29 Abū ‘Abdullāh b. Aḥmad al-ma‘rūf bi- Ibn Khālawayh, *I‘rāb Thalāthīn Sūra min al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīya, 1941), 155.
- 30 Al-Farrā’, *Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān*, 3, 285. See also al al-Zajjāj, *Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān wa-I‘rābuh*, 4, 354 and al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 670.
- 31 Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, 4, 802; Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 670; Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (Cairo: Dār al-Salām li-l-Tibā‘ah wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘ wa-l-Tarjamah, 2003), 1, 344; Abū Ṭālib Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Makkī, *Kitāb Qūt al-Qulūb*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Ḥifnī (Cairo: Dār al-Rashād, 1991), 1, 117.
- 32 Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, 20 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-‘Arabī, 1967), 158–159.
- 33 Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar b. Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, ed. Sāmī b. Muḥammad al-Salāma, 8 vols. (Riyadh: Dār Ṭībah, 1997), 8, 465.
- 34 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, ed. Abū Fāris al-Dahdāh (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān Nāshirūn, 2000), 818.
- 35 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 5, 3220–3221.
- 36 Ibid., 2388–2391.
- 37 Al-Ḥasan b. ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Askarī, *Kitāb Akhbār al-Muṣaḥḥifīn*, ed. Ibrāhīm Sāliḥ (Damascus: Dār al-Bashā’ir, 1995), 72.
- 38 Ibid., 72. See in particular al-‘Askarī’s reading of Q7:56, Q16:68, Q19:74, Q28:8 and Q31:32.
- 39 Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, 3, 510.
- 40 There was some uncertainty surrounding the correct form of the word أْثَرْن (*atharna*). It was read as أْثَرْن (*aththarna*) with a *shadda* by Abū Ḥaywa and Ibn Abū ‘Abla. See ‘Umar and ‘Abdel-‘Āl Mukarram, *Mu‘jam al-Qirā’āt al-Qur’ānīya*, 5, 455.
- 41 ‘Abd al-Bāqī, *al-Mu‘jam al-Mufahras*, 807–808.
- 42 The English translation in the Traditional Reading column is that of Droge, *The Qur’ān*, 445.
- 43 <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=100&verse=5>. This website, developed by Kais Dukes, is described as “an annotated linguistic resource for the Holy Quran” and offers seven parallel English translations of each verse.
- 44 ‘Abd al-Bāqī, *al-Mu‘jam al-Mufahras*, 841.
- 45 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 2, 8–10. When quoting his sources, Ṭabarī uses the word *‘adl*, but in his own narrative he uses the verb *faḍḍala* “to prefer, choose”: *ya ‘nī jalla thanā ‘uhu ka-dhālika khaṣaṣnākum fa-faḍḍalnākum ‘alā ghayrikum min ahl*

al-adyān (He means, May He be exalted: Thus we singled you out and preferred you over people of other religions.)

- 46 Ibid., 569–576.
 47 Ibid., 5, 17–22.
 48 Ibid., 12, 193.
 49 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 1, 678–683.
 50 Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 739.
 51 Matityahu Clark, *Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew: Based on the Commentaries of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch* (Jerusalem, New York: Feldheim Pub., 1999), 224. See also Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Lexicon*, 869.
 52 Payne-Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 489.
 53 ‘Umar and Mukarram, *Mu‘jam al-Qirā’āt*, 5, 457.
 54 The word *khābīr* occurs in the Qur’ān forty-five times with the meaning ‘the one who knows, all-knowing, all aware’ (Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 253). The word *laṭīf* ‘kind, gentle’ occurs seven times, five times in the phrase *laṭīf^{um} khābīr*. It is possible that the meaning of the word *khābīr* in Q100:11 is in fact related to that of the Syriac *ḥabrā* ‘companion, comrade, fellow, intimate friend’ (Payne-Smith, *Syriac Dictionary*, 125) and the Hebrew *ḥabēr* ‘associate, companion’ (Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Lexicon*, 288).

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CONCLUSIONS

Which came first, the written text or the oral recitation?

In his long introduction to *kitāb al-sab‘a fī al-qirā’āt* by Ibn Mujāhid, Shawqī Ḍayf provides a detailed account of the early history of the Qur’ān, which reflects the standard Muslim view of that history. He stresses that the recitation of the Qur’ān always depended on oral transmission. He writes:

Although the Qur’ān was recorded in ‘Uthman’s *muṣḥaf*, its recitation was never based on the written *muṣḥaf* but rather on the sound chain of transmission going back to the time of the Prophet. The basis (*al-asās*) has always been the narration from the Prophet, whose Companions received the revelation from him orally. Subsequently, their followers received it from them, and that continued through a chain of transmission from one generation to the next.¹

Ḍayf continues:

It is known that the writing of the ‘Uthman *muṣḥaf* does not include points and diacritics, which makes possible all the readings transmitted from the Prophet. It occurred to some orientalists and discreditors (*al-mustashriqīn wa al-ṭā’inīn*) of the Qur’ān that these readings are the result of the nature of the *rasm* of the ‘Uthmanic *muṣḥaf*. . . . So when some readers read *fa-tabayyanū* or *fa-tathabbatū* in Q4:94. . .

that is not a matter of individual judgment (*ijtihād*) in reading the ‘Uthmanic *muṣḥaf* but a reading transmitted by a successive chain of transmission (*tawātur*) from the Prophet. This means that these readings are older than the *rasm* and do not depend on it or have a connection with it.²

Dayf’s assertion that the reading of words such as *fa-tabayyanū* or *fa-tathabbatū* was transmitted by a successive chain of transmission (*tawātur*) from the Prophet cannot in fact be maintained. Upon careful examination of the hundreds of forms listed by Ibn Mujāhid as instances of variation among the seven canonical readers, one can only conclude that these readers were reading the same written form or *rasm*. Their readings differed in the way dots and vowel signs were assigned to it. The pronunciation of pairs of words like *fa-tabayyanū/ fa-tathabbatū* (Q4:94), *ya‘malūn/ta‘malūn* (Q2:74, 85, 144), *kabīr/kathīr* (Q2:219), *nanshuruhā/nunshizuhā* (Q2:259), and many others where variation is clearly the result of a dotting or vowelizing scheme cannot be the result of dialectal differences or the replacement of one word by a synonym. Why would *fa-tathabbatū* alternate only with *fa-tabayyanū*, with the same number of “hooks” but different letters, and not with *fa-tayaqqanū*, with the same meaning but a different *rasm*? Why would hundreds of words differ in the placement of the dots over or under the same letters, resulting in a pronunciation that changes the subject pronoun only from “they” to “you, pl.,” or from “he” to “we”, as in *ya‘malūn* “they do” to *ta‘malūn* “you, pl. m., do” (Q2:74)³ or *wa-yu‘allimuhu* “and he teaches him” to *wa-nu‘allimuhu* “and we teach him” (Q3:48),⁴ but not from *ya‘malūn* “they do” to *na‘mal* “we do” or from *wa-nu‘allimuhu* to *watu‘allimūnahu* “and you, pl., teach him”?

I would like to argue that, faced with a written text with no oral tradition to support it, different readers came up with different dotting and vowelizing schemes and thus different readings.

As Nöldeke notes, “[a] number of facts suggest that the oral distribution of the Koran during the early period was followed by a period when the study of the written text prevailed . . . a vast number of variant readings developed that interpret identical consonantal forms in different ways . . .”⁵ Elaborating on the same point, he adds:

There is a whole group of variant readings in which the origin from the consonantal text is made still more likely. . . . The half century that separates Ḥasan al-Baṣrī’s (d. 110/728) prime of life from ‘Uthmān’s recension (approximately 32/652) is likely to have been

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the period when the bulk of variant readings were created on the basis of the written text.

The evidence presented in the previous chapters suggests that the written text preceded its oral recitation. Otherwise, how can one explain the different readings of *li-īlāf* and *īlāfihim* (see Chapter 2)? If an oral reading tradition had preceded the written text, such variation would have been impossible.

Additional evidence in support of the view that a written text was the source from which the Qur'ānic word emerged is *madh'ūm^{an}* (see Chapter 1). As demonstrated, the word, which became part of the Qur'ānic vocabulary, was an invention created after the erasure of the letter *mīm* from the word *madhmūm^{an}*.

Arguing for a misreading of two Syriac words [*pūrqānā* and *pūqdānā*] on which the Qur'ānic word *furqān* is based, Donner writes:

The implication [of the derivation of the word *furqān* from two Syriac sources] is that some passages of the Qur'ān text must have been transmitted, at some point, only in written form without the benefit of a secure tradition of oral recitation, otherwise, the misreading of Syriac *pūqdānā* as *furqān* could not have occurred.⁶

A similar conclusion is reached by Luxenberg, who states:

The findings of this first study, however, force one to conclude that the previous thesis of a reliable oral transmission of the text of the Koran stemmed from a mere legend.

According to the examples presented here, if the Arab philologists and commentators have misread genuinely Arabic expressions, the only possible conclusion regarding the oral transmission of the Koran is obvious. If such a tradition existed at all, it must be assumed that it was interrupted fairly early on.⁷

In his *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* al-Sijistānī writes:

‘Abdullāh and ‘Īsā b. ‘Uthmān b. ‘Īsā said, my uncle Yaḥyā b. ‘Īsā, from al-A‘mash, from Thābit b. ‘Ubayd, from Zayd b. Thābit. He said, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said, I receive books that I do not want everyone to read. Can you learn Hebrew script? Or he said: Syriac. I said: Yes. So I learned it in seventeen days.⁸

If we consider the fact that ‘Uthmān put Zayd b. Thābit in charge of producing the authoritative copy of the Qur’ān, it follows that some parts of the Qur’ān were read before they were recited.

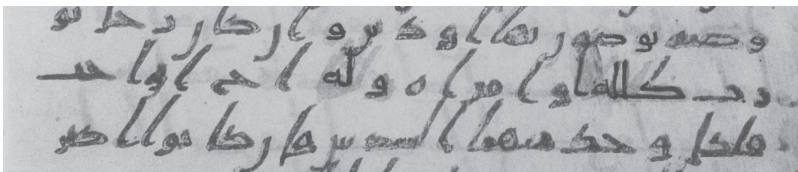
Innocent mistakes or deliberate manipulation?

In Chapter 2 I demonstrated that the Qur’ān commentators had trouble providing a clear definition of the word *ilāf*. They speculated on its meaning on the basis of the context and the meanings of its root. In such an instance, there is no reason to suspect that they deliberately misunderstood the word or tried to provide an interpretation to serve a certain agenda.

However, there is evidence of advocating a certain reading of a word or a phrase or even changing parts of the consonantal skeleton to produce a new reading. For example, in the discussion of *fī kabad* and *al-najdayn* of Q90 (see Chapter 3) we saw how al-Ṭabarī favored the meanings ‘in suffering’ and ‘the path of good and the path of evil’ over the old meanings ‘upright’ and ‘the two breasts’, respectively. In his commentary on *al-najdayn* (Q90:8) al-Ṭabarī repeats the phrase *laysā bi l-thadyayn* (they are not the two breasts) twice as a way of promoting the alternative meaning *sabīl al-khayr wa l-sharr* (the path of good and evil) and to disqualify what is likely to have been the original meaning.

The case of *kalāla*

As was pointed out in Chapter 1, in his study of the word *kalāla* (Q4:12, 176), Powers reached the conclusion that the old Semitic word *kalla* “daughter-in-law” was changed to *kalālat^{am}* with the meaning ‘the state of having no children, no parents, and no heirs from the father’s side’.⁹ Using paleographic evidence from BNF 328a, he demonstrates how the change took place.¹⁰ Here is the relevant part of Q4:12, which shows the change. Note also the change from *lahā* to *lahu* in the same verse.



Using modern Arabic script, the text above would be represented as follows, first reproducing the text without dots and vowel signs, and then as it

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appears in standard copies of the Qur'ān. The words in which a change was made, i.e. *kalla* to *kalāla* and *lahā* to *lahu*, both in the second line, are written in bold face.

- 1 وصنه بوصود بها او دندواد كان رجل نو
 2 رب كئله او امراه وله اح او احد
 3 فللكل وحد مبهما السدس فان كانوا اكبر

- 1 وَصِيَّةٌ تُوصُونَ بِهَا أَوْ دَيْنٌ وَإِنْ كَانَ رَجُلٌ يُؤ
 2 رَبْتُ كَلَائِلَةٍ أَوْ امْرَأَةٌ وَلَهُ أَحٌّ أَوْ أُخْتُ
 3 فَلِكُلِّ وَاحِدٍ مِنْهُمَا السُّدُسُ فَإِنْ كَانُوا أَكْثَرَ

At some point a well-formed syntactic unit existed that consisted of two nouns conjoined by **aw** 'or': *kalla aw imra'a* 'a daughter-in-law or a wife'. Then *kalla* was changed to *kalāla* and assigned the new meaning mentioned above. In order to separate the new word *kalāla* from *imra'a* and to force the desired meaning on the phrase, the grammarians/interpreters assigned them two different cases: the accusative in *kalāla* and the nominative in *imra'a*. Such case assignment where two adjacent nouns separated only by *aw* are assigned two different cases is alien to the Qur'ān.

The change from **kalla* to *kalāla* and *lahā* to *lahu* can be viewed as a deliberate manipulation of the Qur'ānic text with the goal of substituting an original meaning by a new one, which favors a certain social group. The change from **kalla* and *lahā*, which have a feminine reference, to *kalāla* and *lahu*, with a male reference, has the result of favoring males over females. This may be significant, as Q12 deals with inheritance laws.

The deliberate avoidance of associating women with the active participles in the opening verses of Q37, Q51, Q77, Q79, and Q100 in the traditional understanding of the Qur'ān constitutes, in my view, a "conspiracy of silence" whose goal is to sever the association of women with positive religious functions and to prevent them from being presented in a favorable religious light.¹¹

Madh'ūm^{an}

In Chapter 1 I argued that the word *madhmūm^{an}* was somehow corrupted. Instead of recognizing the corruption of *madhmūm^{an}*, a new word was invented, complete with a root, a conjugated verb with a definition, a *shāhid* (a poetic verse) by Aws b. Hajar, and a *ḥadīth* attributed to 'Ā'isha in which

she insults the Jews.¹² The root *dh-'-m*, the verb *dha'amalyadh'amu*, and the *maṣdar* (verbal noun) *dha'm^{an}* are undoubtedly all fabrications.

Additions and different types of language

I argued in Chapters 3 and 5 that Q90:5–7, 17–20, Q95:5–6 and Q100:3 were interpolations to already existing texts.

The idea of additions and different times of composition is not alien to the Qur'ān. For example, Q2:281 is considered a Makkan verse that was revealed shortly before the Prophet's death in Makka, while the rest of the *sūra* is considered Medinan. There are many Makkan *sūras* with Medinan elements and Medinan *sūras* with Makkan elements. This implies different times of composition or that a verse was added to an already existing text, as suggested by Bell, who assumes that many verses were added to existing texts.¹³ With regard to Q95:6, he writes: "Verse 6 is longer than the others, and does not fit in very well; it is a later addition . . ."¹⁴

Lüling lays out what he believes to be three distinct stages during which the Qur'ānic text was edited, without giving specific dates.¹⁵

[The first stage represents] the text of a pre-Islamic Christian strophic hymnody hidden in the ground layer (*rasm* without diacritical points and without strokes to indicate the vowels). . . . Second and historically later, there is a layer of the texts of the willful new Islamic interpretation pressed on the ground layer of the erstwhile Christian strophic texts. . . . We shall call them henceforth "second sense Koranic texts". . . . Third, and historically contemporary to this second layer, the texts which are . . . pure Islamic texts . . . texts the ground layer (*rasm*) of which have been written directly and solely for the expression of the revelations to the Prophet Muḥammad. . . . We shall call them henceforth "single sense Koranic texts". . . . These Islamic texts without an erstwhile Christian sense in the ground layer make up approximately about two-thirds of the whole Koran text. . .

In the discussion of Q90 I showed how verses 1–4 and 8–16 form a coherent text that is well written, has a clear message and a strophic structure. The same is true of Q100, if v. 3 is removed, and of Q95 if vv. 5–6 are removed. The additions disrupt a coherent text in order to introduce or reinforce a new interpretation generally focusing on portraying man in a negative light or emphasizing the threat of punishment.

84 Conclusions

The different layers of text suggest two or more periods that are sufficiently distant, temporally, to show distinct linguistic features. The first layer, of a historically earlier period, includes words and expressions that may not have been familiar to the interpreters and editors, e.g. *ilāf* (ship), *qadhā* (flame or fire), *kabūd* (respectful, honored or honoring), and *kalla* (daughter-in-law). It may be the type of text that the opponents of the Prophet referred to as *asāḥīru l-awwalīn* (tales of the ancients), a phrase that occurs nine times in the Qur'ān, clearly a recurrent claim.

Why is there so much *tafsīr* but so little understanding of the Qur'ān?

In my examination of Q100 (Chapter 5) I asked why eleven verses, containing thirty-three different words should require so much interpretation, with conflicting views and no satisfactory answers to some key issues. There are several possible answers to this question. One is lack of knowledge or familiarity with the material in question. As noted, Crone concluded that “the exegetes had no better knowledge [of what Q106 meant] than we have today”.¹⁶ The amount of interpretation and discordant and conflicting views concerning certain key elements of the *sūras* discussed in this book are a clear testament to the correctness of Crone’s conclusion. It is only natural that when the commentators did not know the meaning of a word, they speculated about what it might mean, often with different results.

Storytelling and pious fraud

Crone describes Qur'ān exegetes as storytellers, who made up their stories “in complete disregard. . . [of] the original meaning of the Qur'ān and history”.¹⁷

Qur'ān commentaries have many such “pious” stories. And it is easy to see how they develop and multiply. I was a witness to the development of many such stories. I will give one as an example.

I once attended a Friday sermon at a school mosque. The attendees were mostly school boys of all levels – elementary, middle, and high school, as well as their male teachers. The *imam* was an eloquent young man who had earned a B.A. in *Sharī'a* and Arabic from a highly respected university in the Arab world. During his sermon he told a story, no doubt for the benefit of the students, about the importance of honesty and telling the truth. It was the well-known story of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf”. He told the audience

that there was a boy who tended a flock of sheep. A boy like you. One day, wanting to have some fun, he decided to play a trick on the people of his village. He started crying: Wolf! Wolf! Come help me, a wolf is attacking the sheep. The villagers ran, and when they reached the boy, he started laughing and told them that it was a joke. Well, the next day, a real wolf came and attacked the sheep. The boy called out at the top of his voice, Wolf! Wolf! Help! Help! But no one came to help him because the villagers thought that it was a joke, as the day before. Well, the wolf ate not one sheep, not two sheep, but the whole flock, and he ate the boy too. So boys, . . .

Some of the students may have heard the story before; others probably were hearing it for the first time. Some of the teachers might have heard the story and knew a milder version of it, but none of them tried to stop the *imām* and correct him. The *imām*'s intentions were unquestionably noble: one should not tell lies to deceive people.

One can easily see how an *imām* who believes in the rewards of heaven and the torments of hell might be tempted to exaggerate the rewards of the one and the torments of the other for the benefit of his audience, without feeling guilty of exaggeration. He is convinced that by doing so he is saving the souls of his audience. The truth value of the narrative or its accuracy is irrelevant. Hence, the seventy stages of Hell (*ṣab 'ūn daraja fī jahannam*)¹⁸ and the pulling of the souls violently and drowning them and throwing them in the fire of Hell.¹⁹

Nöldeke claims that “Muslims of the second century admit to the existence and justification of false *ḥadīths*, and that it was legitimate for the moral benefit of the people and the advancement of piety to fabricate and circulate sayings of the Prophet”²⁰.

The creation of new words with new meanings and the assignment of new meanings to existing words are two reasons for the lengthy narratives in the *tafsīr* literature. Changing **kalla* to *kalāla* and *wa-tahā* to *wa-tahu* forced al-Ṭabarī to write over 2400 words in an attempt to explain the seven words: *wa- 'in kāna rajul^{un} yūrathu kalālat^{an} aw imra 'at^{un}* (Q4:12).

Another reason is the attempt to convince the reader of the validity of a certain case assignment to justify a new reading of a certain word to replace an older, more straightforward one. For example, al-Ṭabarī wrote 4314 words to convince the reader that in Q5:6 instead of *arjulikum* (with the genitive case) he should read *arjulakum* (with the accusative case). This was necessary to separate *arjulakum* from the immediately preceding word *ru 'ūsikum*, with which it is conjoined by *wa* ‘and’, and join it with *aydiyakum* in a preceding phrase.

As an example of an attempt to assign a new meaning to an existing word, consider the long, “dizzying” interpretation of Q100:8 by al-Ṭabarī, whose goal seems to be to make sure that the word *khayr*, discussed in Chapter 5, is not understood as *good*, *good deed* or *goodness*, its ordinary usage, but rather should be given a negative connotation, in order to fit with the newly created word *kanūd*, which had been assigned a negative meaning.²¹ Rather than accepting the obvious meaning of the word *khayr*, he had to find ways to “sell” the new meaning to the reader, by suggesting, for example, a different word order within the verse and a different order for Q100:6–8. As Nöldeke put it: “It is amazing how much spirit and sagacity mankind occasionally displayed in the name of warding off the plain sense of religious documents”.²²

Lack of knowledge of certain words in the Qur’ān, pious fraud, and the creation of new words and the assignment of new meanings to existing ones have contributed to the development of an “interpretation industry” in which Qur’ān interpreters and commentators let their imaginations run wild and in which stories multiplied with the goal of producing a pious society that is fearful of the torments of Hellfire and that understands the holy book, or parts of it, and views it as these interpreters and storytellers desired.

From the point of view of the interpreters, one advantage of lengthy narratives is overwhelming and intimidating the potential reader or listener by the amount of material he has to deal with, thus ensuring their privileged status as the experts who have exclusive possession of the keys to this vast knowledge. As Nöldeke points out, . . . “al-Ṭabarī and Abū Muḥammad ‘Abdallāh b. Ḥāmid al-Iṣbahāni would present all sorts of superfluous information, intimidating potential critics by sheer overload”.²³

Foreign borrowings, old Arabic, or a common Semitic stock?

The Qur’ān contains many words of non-Arabic origin. Some are easily identified, such as *sundus* “fine silk” and *istabraḡ* “silk brocade”. According to Jeffery, “Closer examination of the question [of foreign vocabulary in the Qur’ān] reveals even further and more detailed correspondences than those which appear on the surface, and forces on one the conviction that not only the greater part of the religious vocabulary, but also most of the cultural vocabulary of the Qur’ān is of non-Arabic origin”.²⁴

The first generation of Muslim exegetes apparently were not uncomfortable with the fact that the Qur’ān contained words of foreign origin;²⁵ it was only later that the influence of other languages on the language of the Qur’ān

came to be viewed less favorably or even denied. So, according to Abū ‘Ubayda (d. 210/825), “The Qur’ān was revealed in a clear Arabic tongue and whoever claims that it contains anything but Arabic has committed a grave sin” (*nazala l- Qur’ān bi-lisānⁱⁿ ‘Arabīyⁱⁿ mumbīn, fa-man za‘ama anna fī-hi ghayr al-‘Arabīya fa-qad a‘zama l-qawl*).²⁶

Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 501/1108) goes to great lengths to dismiss any foreign influence on the Qur’ān. Writing about the well-known borrowing *sirāt* ‘path’ (from Latin *strata*), he states that “*sirāt* is the road that is thought to be easy. It originates from *saraṭtu l-ṭa‘āma wa-zaradtuhu*, i.e. ‘I swallowed the food, I swallowed it’. Some say that *sirāt* is a metaphor, that the one walking on it swallows it, or it swallows the one walking on it”. (*al-sirāt: al-ṭarīq al-mustashal, aṣluhu min saraṭtu l-ṭa‘ām wa-zaradtuhu, ibtala‘tuhu, fa-qīla sirāt taṣawwur^{am} annahu yabtali‘uhu sālikuhu aw yabtali‘u sālikahu*).²⁷

Syriac accounts for the highest number of borrowings, followed by Hebrew.²⁸ In addition, borrowings from Greek, Persian, and Ethiopic are also attested.

In his short article “The Buddha Comes to China”, Michael Schub argues that the verb *yuhbarūn* in Q30:15 is a loan word from Hebrew that came to be treated as an Arabic verb. According to him, “Its [*yuhbarūn*] coincidence with the possibly indigenous Arabic root *h-b-r* . . . and its similarity in form and intended meaning to the two other Arabic roots [*h-d-r*; *h-sh-r*] catalyzed its infiltration into the Arabic system”.²⁹

The structural similarity and the shared history among Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, and Classical Ethiopic make it hard to determine whether a word or a phrase is a borrowing from one into another or that it shares a history with it. For example, consider the word *qadhā* discussed in Chapter 5. Arabic shares its root *q-d-h* with both Hebrew and Syriac. In all three languages the root has several meanings. In both Hebrew and Syriac it has the meaning ‘to kindle, be kindled, light a fire’, which is not found in Arabic lexicons. Had this meaning existed at some point in the history of Arabic and was not recognized when the Qur’ān commentators wrote their commentaries? Or did the word enter the language directly from Hebrew or Syriac? This is a question that may be impossible to answer, but it is not the crucial one here, as will be argued below.

Putting aside understandable cultural, nationalistic, and other motives for denying foreign influence in one’s language, if knowledge of such influences can improve one’s understanding of an important text, such as one’s holy book, then they should be welcome. Consider, for example, the word *burhān* in Q12:24.

wa-la-qad hammat bi-hi wa-hamma bi-hā law-lā an ra'ā burhāna rabbihī ka-dhālika li-naşriḫa 'anhu l-sū'a wa-l-faḫshā'a innahū min 'ibādinā l-mukhlaşīn (Certainly she was obsessed with him, and he would have been obsessed with her, if (it had) not (been) that he saw a proof of his Lord. (It happened) in this way in order that We might turn evil and immorality away from him. Surely he was one of Our devoted servants).³⁰

This verse is part of the story of Joseph, who was tempted by his master's wife. The word *burhān* occurs seven times in the Qur'ān and is generally glossed as 'proof' or 'evidence'. While in other occurrences the word may mean 'proof' or 'evidence', in Q12:24 a meaning based on Classical Ethiopic seems to fit better. Citing Nöldeke's *Neue Beiträge*, Jeffery suggests that this instance of *burhān* is related to Ethiopic *berhān*, "a common Abyssinian word, being found in Amharic, Tigre, and Tigrinia, meaning 'light', 'illumination'. It seems to have this original sense in 4:174 and 12:24, and the sense of *proof* or *demonstration* is easily derived from this".³¹

One's position on the history of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān certainly depends on the type of investigation undertaken. For our purposes, however, the issue of whether words like *ilāf*, *qadhā*, and *burhān* are old Arabic words that are shared with one or more Semitic languages, or whether they are borrowings from these languages is irrelevant. What is relevant and significant is that they help us gain a better understanding of the Qur'ānic text and its message.

Just as one must be cautious about attributing foreign origins to certain Qur'ānic vocabulary, one must be equally cautious about accepting evidence from ancient Arabic poetry to shed light on the meanings and usage of words in the Qur'ān. As noted in the discussion of *madh'ūm* (Chapter 1), Ibn Manzūr cites a poetic verse (*shāhid*, pl. *shawāhid*) by Aws b. Hajar using the previously non-existent verb *dha'ama*. Such a citation makes one suspicious of these *shawāhid*.

Serious doubt has been cast on the authenticity of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry. For example, in his *fi l-Shi'r al-Jāhili* (On pre-Islamic Poetry), the Egyptian scholar and literary figure, Tāha Ḥusayn (d. 1973) argues that most pre-Islamic poetry is not pre-Islamic at all but was created in the 2nd and 3rd century AH and attributed to the pre-Islamic era. He writes:

Another type of investigation that I believe is more indicative and more convincing than previous investigations is technical and linguistic. This investigation will lead us to [the conclusion] that this poetry, which is attributed to Imru' l-Qays or to al-A'shā, or to other

pre-Islamic poets, cannot possibly from the linguistic and technical perspective be their poetry or that it had been recited and had spread before the appearance of the Qur'ān. This investigation will lead us to an unexpected conclusion, namely, that this poetry should not be used as evidence for the interpretation of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*. Rather, the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* should be used to interpret this poetry. . . . This poetry does not prove anything or show anything and should not be used as it has been in [interpreting] the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*. It was invented so that the scholars might use it as evidence to prove what they wanted to prove.³²

On the legitimacy of alternative interpretations

My reconstruction of Q90, Q100 and Q106, and the partial reconstruction of Q79 and Q95 undertaken in this book may seem random or speculative. Certainly, alternative reconstructions are possible. It is also possible that the exact formulation of the reconstructed texts may never be known in their original form. However, these reconstructions are no more random or speculative than the traditional interpretations, as we saw above. Considering “the bewildering variety of meanings” proposed for the word *ṭilāf* in Q106, the level of uncertainty about the reference of the active participles in Q79, the lexical and syntactic problems in Q100, and the fact that the defective script caused misreadings of elements in the Qur'ān, a rereading based on the available linguistic material is neither illegitimate nor far-fetched. Modern students of the Qur'ān have as much right to investigate it and offer interpretations as the classical exegetes, who were often at a loss at what the text meant or were forced to speculate about what the meaning might be. In my judgment, there is no reason to exclude the reference to women in the active participles of Q79 and Q100 while a reference to angels, death, stars, bows, the soul, lassos, antelopes, ships, horses and camels is contemplated.

As traditionally understood, these *sūras* are highly problematic, and the countless interpretations and lengthy commentaries that have been written about them have failed to address their basic problems. In the absence of a convincing explanation, I believe that the account given here brings us closer to an understanding of the structure, meaning, and character of these *sūras*.

The real question is not the legitimacy of such reconstructions, but rather their logic, coherence, and meaningfulness, while taking into consideration the circumstances in which the Qur'ānic text emerged. It is clear that the traditional exegetes did not understand the verses discussed here. This failure is a strong argument in favor of a new way of thinking.

Notes

- 1 Ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb al-Sab'a*, 8.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 160.
- 4 Ibid., 206.
- 5 Nöldeke, *History*, 474.
- 6 Fred M. Donner, "Quranic Furqān", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. LII/2 (2007), 279–300, at 279.
- 7 Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading*, 332.
- 8 Al- Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, 34–36.
- 9 Powers, *Muḥammad*, 193. See also Badawi and Abdel-Haleem, *Dictionary*, 816.
- 10 Powers, *Muḥammad*, 162–196.
- 11 Nöldeke quotes Abdallāh b. Mas'ūd as saying: "dhakkir al-Qur'ān, i.e., in case of doubt . . . one ought to prefer the masculine to the feminine". Nöldeke, *History*, 477.
- 12 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 3, 1482.
- 13 Bell, *The Qur'ān*, Translated, 2.
- 14 Ibid., 665.
- 15 Lüling, *Challenge*, 11.
- 16 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 209.
- 17 Ibid., 216.
- 18 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 593.
- 19 Ibid., 420.
- 20 Nöldeke, *History*, 371.
- 21 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12, 673–674.
- 22 Nöldeke, *History*, 360.
- 23 Ibid., 354.
- 24 Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 2.
- 25 Ibid., 5.
- 26 Abū 'Ubaydah, *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, 17.
- 27 Al-Isfahānī, *al-Mufradāt* 1, 337.
- 28 Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 19–26. See also Mingana, "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Koran", 171–192, at 173–174, first published in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 11 (1927), 77–98. 80 Abū Bakr b. Abī Dawūd al-Sijistānī ('Abd Allāh b. Sulaymān al-Aṣ'at). *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*.
- 29 Michael Schub, "The Buddha Comes to China", in *What the Koran Really Says*, 391–393, at 392, first published in *Journal of Arabic Linguistics*, Vol. 29 (1995), 77–78.
- 30 Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 144.
- 31 Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 78. Pickthall translates *burhān* in Q12:24 as 'argument' (Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'ān*, 305). Droge writes in a footnote to his translation: "a proof of his Lord: reference obscure; one tradition says he saw the angel Gabriel" (Droge, *The Qur'ān*, 144.)
- 32 Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *fi al-Shi'r al-Jāhili*, ed. 'Abd al-Mun'im Tulaymah (Cairo: Dār al-Nahr li-l-Nashr wa l-Tawzī', n.d.), 20.

APPENDIX

Reconstructed Verses

النازعات/البازغات ١-٥ (Q79: Vv. 1-5)
والبازغات عُرفاً. والباسطات بسطاً. والسابحات سبحاً. فالسابقات سبقاً. فالمدبرّات أمراً.

wa-l-bāzighāti 'urfā. wa-l-bāsiṭāti bastā. wa-l-sābiḥāti sabḥā. fa-l-sābiqāti sabqā. fa-l-mudabbirāti amrā.

By those (women) who shine through good works. And those who give generously. And those who glorify (God). And those who surpass others (in doing good). And those who speak the Word (of God).

البلد (Q90)

لأقسم بهذا البلد. وأنتَ جَلَّ بهذا البلد. ووالد وما وُلِد. لقد خلقنا الإنسان في كبد. ألم نجعل له عينين. ولساناً وشففتين. وهديناه النجدين. أفلا اقتحم العقبة. وما أدراك ما العقبة. فكُ رقبة. أو إطعامٌ في يوم ذي مسغبة. يتيماً ذا مقربة. أو مسكيناً ذا متربة.

la-uqsimu bi-hādhā l-balad. wa-anta ḥill^{um} bi-hādhā l-balad. wa-wālid^{um} wa mā walad. la-qad khalaqnā l-insāna fī kabad. a-lam naj'al lahu 'aynayn. wa-lisānan wa-shafatayn. wa-hadaynāhu l-najdayn. a-fa-lā qtaḥama l-'aqaba. wa-mā adrāka mā l-'aqaba. fakku raqaba. aw iṭ'ām^{um} fī yawm^{im} dhī masghaba. yaṭīm^{um} dhā maqraba. aw miskīn^{um} dhā matraba.

I truly swear by this land! And you are a rightful dweller in this land. And by the begetter and what he begat. Truly We have created man in a unique form. Have We not made two eyes for him? And a tongue, and two lips? And guided him to [his mother's] breasts? Should he not take the path to salvation? And who taught you what the path to salvation is? The freeing of

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a slave. Or the giving of food on a day of hunger. (To) an orphan close to you. Or a poor person in need.

(Q95) التين

والتين والزيتون. وطور سينين. وهذا البلد الأمين. لقد خلقنا الإنسان في أحسن تقويم. فما يكذبك بعد بالدين. أليس الله بأحكم الحاكمين.

wa-l-tīni wa-l-zaytūn. wa-tūri sīnīn. wa-hādhā l-baladi l-amīn. la-qad khalaqnā l-insāna fī aḥsani taqwīm. fa-mā yukadhhibuka ba'du bi-d-dīn. a-laysa llāhu bi-'aḥkami l-hākīmīn

By the fig and the olive. And Mount Sinai. And this secure land. We certainly created man in the best form. Why then would you doubt the religion? Is God not the most just of judges?

(Q100) العاديات/الغاديات

والغاديات صُبحا. فالموريات قدحا. فآثرنَّ به نفعا. فوسطن به جمعا. إنَّ الإنسان لربَّه لَكَبُود. وإنَّه على ذلك لشهيد. وإنَّه لحبَّ الخير لشديد. أفلا يعلم إذا بُعِثَ ما في القبور. وخصَّل ما في الصدور. أنَّ ربَّهم بهم يومئذٍ لخبير.

wa-l-ghādiyāti ṣubḥā. fa-l-mūriyāti qadhā. fa-ātarna bi-hi naf'ā. fa-wasatḥa bi-hi jam'ā. inna l-insāna li-rabbihī la-kabūd. wa-innahū 'alā dhālika la-shahīd. wa-innahū li-ḥubbi l-khayri la-shadīd. a-fa-lā ya'lamu idhā bu'thira mā fī l-qubūr: wa-ḥuṣṣila mā fī l-ṣudūr: anna rabbahum bi-him yawmaidhin la-khabīr.

Those [women] who go out in the morning. And light a flame. By which they chose to do a good deed. And with which they favored the congregation. Truly man is honored by his Lord. And truly he is a witness to that. And truly he is strong in his love of good deeds. Does he not know that when the contents of the graves are scattered? And the secrets of the hearts are made known? That on that day their Lord will be knowledgeable of them?

فُرَيْش (Q106)

لأيلاف فريش. أفهم رحلة الشتاء والصيف. فليعبدوا ربَّ هذا البيت. الذي أطعمهم من جوع وامنهم من خوف.

li-īlāfi Quraysh. allafahum riḥlata l-shitā'i wa-l-ṣayf. fa-l-ya'budū rabba hādhā l-bayt. alladhī aṭ'amahum min jū'in wa-āmanahum min khawf.

Wonder at the ships of Quraysh! He made them familiar with the winter and summer journey. Therefore, let them worship the Lord of this House. Who fed them against hunger and secured them from fear.

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