

# Anti-Sasanian Apocalypse And The Early Qur'ān: Why Muḥammad Began His Career As A Prophet Who Genuinely Prophesied

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## The Claims of Scholars

*But proclaiming the coming end of the world is the ultimate vision, which makes it all the more remarkable that the Qur'an refused to frame Muḥammad's prognostication in mantic terms—or, more accurately, that it was not feasible in the early stages of his career to do so. The preacher of the Qur'an was a mere messenger, with a limited mandate; the Qur'an might present the Hebrew prophets as a model, but Muḥammad could not yet be one of them. The ministry of Muḥammad is thus oddly restricted and circumscribed: he has no miracles, he is not part of a line of prophets from his own people, he can't prognosticate, and he is incapable of affecting anything. This limited role is undoubtedly partly because there was no natural setting for his mission, neither a polity to reform nor a king to inveigh against, nor an Israelite cult through to which claim authority. – Walid Saleh, "The Preacher of the Meccan Qur'an"<sup>1</sup>*

*Surely it is significant, then, that this prophecy, which is the only predictive passage in the Qur'ān, concludes by invoking the eschaton—the "affair" or "command" of God, or perhaps even better, the "reign" that belongs to God. Thus, in the Qur'ān's sole reference to contemporary world affairs, it addresses the most eschatologically charged political events of the era, the last Roman-Persian war, which excited apocalyptic expectations across the religious spectrum of the late ancient Near East. It is yet another sign that formative Islam, with its imminent eschatological hopes and a militant piety aimed at spreading its dominion throughout the world, was a movement fueled by the ideas of imperial apocalypticism that suffused its immediate cultural context. – Stephen Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire*<sup>2</sup>*

## The Proclamations of the Early Qur'ān

*The Hour has drawn near, and the moon has been split open! Yet if they see a sign, they turn away and say: "Non-stop magic!" They call it a lie and follow their own vain desires, yet everything is set. – Q 54 (Al-Qamar)*

*This man is a warner [naḍīr], of the warners of old. The impending is impending! No one can remove it other than God. Are you amazed at this proclamation? And do you laugh and not weep while you amuse yourselves? Prostrate yourselves before God and serve! – Q 53 (Al-Naḡm)*

*Have you not seen what your Lord did with the companions of the elephant? Did he not make their plot go astray? He sent against them birds abābīl, pelting them with stones of decree, and he made them like chewed-up husks of straw. – Q 105 (Al-Fīl)*

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<sup>1</sup> Walid A. Saleh, "The Preacher of the Meccan Qur'an: Deuteronomistic History and Confessionalism in Muḥammad's Early Preaching," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 20.2 (2018): 74-111, 83.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

## 1. Introduction and Summary

Scholars working in early Islamic history and Quranic Studies normally conceptualize Muḥammad as a messenger (*rasūl*) who did not prophesy, with a career that was narrowly circumscribed in its earliest stages. That prevailing model is, however, deeply inconsistent with the earliest surahs of the Qur'ān.<sup>3</sup>

Expanding upon the analysis of my recent book, *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*, this paper argues that Muḥammad began his prophetic career by assuming the role of a neo-Moses warner inveighing against the transgressions of a neo-Pharaoh—who was the Sasanian *šāhānšāh* Khusrow II, ruler over most of the Near East until his deposition and death in 628 CE.<sup>4</sup> In that respect, Muḥammad initially performed a classic mantic function, centered upon predictive prophesy regarding a visibly-manifesting divine judgment. Only secondarily did his career evolve into a much more localized prophetic function, constricted within the Ḥiḡāz, which suppressed the ur-quranic centrality of his predictive prophesy against the neo-Pharaoh opponent. The prophetic function was transformed by progressively asserting the prophet's authoritative communal leadership within the Ḥiḡāz. That Ḥiḡāzī condensation of quranic horizons was facilitated by a variety of Arabicizing innovations, such as the 'Medinan' shift of the believers' prayer direction from Jerusalem to Mecca.

The idea that Muḥammad began his career in the mold of an *archetypal prophet*, whose mission was driven by *contemporary world-historical events*, and whose basal message had centered on *the imminent decreed punishment against an oppressive tyrant*, may be foreign to readers accustomed to the traditional picture of a *rasūl*<sup>5</sup> whose career began at an essentially

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<sup>3</sup> The Qur'ān's 114 surahs are traditionally divided into 'Meccan' and 'Medinan' periods, with the latter being attributed to the prophet's life following his *hiḡrah* from Mecca to Medina (formerly Yatrib) in 622 CE. In his influential chronology, Nöldeke subdivided the 'Meccan' surahs into First, Second, and Third Meccan periods. Since Nöldeke's scheme is so well known, I will cite it here as a rough chronological framework. For improved chronology by Nicolai Sinai, however, see <http://corpuscoranicum.de/kommentar/uebersicht>. For the possibility and utility of diachronic analysis of the corpus, see Nicolai Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung: Studien zur frühen Koraninterpretation* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009); Nicolai Sinai, "The Qur'an as Process," in *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, eds. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai, M. Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 407–39. For an innovative mathematical analysis of quranic chronology, see Behnam Sadeghi, "The Chronology of the Qur'ān: A Stylometric Research Program," *Arabica* 58 (2011): 210-99.

<sup>4</sup> See Daniel A. Beck, *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān: From Anonymous Apocalypse to Charismatic Prophet*, Vol. 2 in *Apocalypticism: Cross-Disciplinary Explorations*, eds. Carlos A. Segovia, Isaac W. Oliver, and Anders K. Petersen (Peter Lang: New York, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> It is often noted that the word *nabī*, 'prophet,' is largely limited to Medinan surahs, suggesting that Muḥammad did not see himself as a *nabī* until the end of his mission. Rarely is it observed, however, that the word *rasūl*, meaning messenger, is likewise not used to identify a human prophetic addressee until the longer and later Meccan surahs. In the basal surahs, the addressee who is commanded to promulgate the divine speech is instead usually identified as a *naḍīr*, a warner, meaning one who comes with proclamations about impending judgment.

arbitrary time, and whose principal innovation consisted of preaching monotheism against polytheism within an isolated Meccan context. Scholars generally accept what Walid Saleh terms the “oddly restricted and circumscribed” early prophetic mission, as Islamic exegesis relates its contours. Yet close analysis of the earliest surahs demonstrates that the basal quranic message was not narrowly circumscribed in the manner that its Islamicizing exegesis asserts. Rather the basal message had centered upon the warner’s reminders about judgment that God had decreed in response to recent Sasanian transgressions; the quranic warner insisted that this judgment had begun to *visibly* manifest in human history, as the eschaton had come near. In this respect, the warner’s mantic message was structured in close continuity with apocalyptic expectations that were generated across the Near East during the final Byzantine-Sasanian war (602-28 CE).

As I will argue below, that ur-quranic message was transformed at a relatively early stage of Muḥammad’s prophetic career, beginning well before his *hiḡrah* to Yaṭrib in 622 CE. Because the expected anti-Sasanian judgment failed to continue visibly materializing within the progression of historical events, the prophetic function was restructured and asserted in a manner that did not hinge upon salvation by a progressively-manifesting world-historical judgment. Quranic soteriology was rearticulated to center, instead, upon the prophet’s nascent assertion of guiding authority over his Ḥiḡāzī community. Per this shift in quranic soteriology, obeying the Lord’s revealed verbal guidance would purge the prophet’s community of its ‘polytheism,’ which became articulated as the generalized enemy of the Lord’s final *amr* (“command” or “affair”). The vaguely-defined ‘unbelievers’ included not just the corrupt Sasanian dynasty led by Khusrow II (which had been the principal locus of the ur-quranic judgment), but all people aligned with its sins—including Ḥiḡāzī factions. By abstracting and generalizing the prophet’s opposition, a radical peripheralization of apocalyptic expectation became possible, and the prophet’s Ḥiḡāz-specific mission gained significance. Securing the repentance of Ḥiḡāzī ‘unbelievers’ could become understood in a way that was equivalent, theologically, to the parallel battles that the Byzantine were waging in the north against Khusrow II’s forces.

As basal anti-Sasanian apocalypticism was systematically displaced within quranic theology by the Lord’s more generalized assertion of his eschatological judgment against ‘polytheists’ and ‘deniers,’ the centrality of the warner’s neo-Pharaoh opponent, whose anticipated imminent punishment had *defined* quranic depictions of the warner’s initial commission (see Q 111, 108, 96, 74, 68), was displaced. In its stead, securing communal adherence to prophetic authority became the principal quranic concern. As asserting prophetic authority became its central locus, quranic soteriology was irrevocably split away from the era’s generalized apocalyptic expectations, which continued to be more closely tied to the progression of the Byzantine-Sasanian war.

With the Ḥiḡāzī condensation of its putative opposition, the prophetic mission was no longer dependent on mantic proclamations about the angelic judgment that God had sent down against Khusrow II and his forces. Muḥammad was no longer another warner, proclaiming that a decreed judgment had begun to visibly manifest against the oppressive forces of a tyrant who

had forgotten his place and rebelled against mankind's heavenly Lord.<sup>6</sup> The Arabian prophet instead became asserted as an enduring communal leader, a human *rasūl* delivering divine guidance that his Ḥiğāzī audiences were obliged to obey. The radical re-centering of the Lord's *amr* within the Ḥiğāz, and upon Mecca in particular, began several years before the *hiğrah* of 622 CE, and was largely completed before the prophet's death in 632 CE.

This transition efficiently explains many otherwise intractable problems and baffling references within the quranic corpus. Before using some of the most difficult early surahs as examples—Q 111, 108, 106, 105, 97, 85, 80, 74, 68, 54—I will discuss how the failure to account for substantive evolution in the prophetic function, during the prophet's own lifetime,<sup>7</sup> has impaired critical analysis of predictive prophecy in the Qur'ān.

## **2. Why Historians Struggle to Reconcile Predictive Prophecy with the Qur'ān**

Q 30:2-4 proclaims that the Romans have been defeated in a nearby land, but will later prevail against an unnamed enemy, which is certainly the Sasanian Empire under Khusrow II (reigned 590-628 CE). These 'Third Meccan' verses are often taken to reflect an emerging prophetic concern with events far beyond Mecca, borrowing from imperial propaganda that prophesied a Roman victory in the final Sasanian-Byzantine War (602-28 CE).<sup>8</sup> Against all odds, this predictive prophecy was later confirmed. Beginning in the winter of 622 CE, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius won the first of a stunning series of victories against the Sasanians, which ultimately culminated in Khusrow II's deposition and murder in 628 CE.

In his fine new monograph, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, Stephen Shoemaker corrects many misconceptions about Islam's emergence. Unfortunately, Shoemaker continues to conceptualize Muḥammad as a *prophet who did not truly prophesy*, in the sense of making predictive claims about future events. This conceptualization—genetically arising from traditional exegesis of the Qur'ān, which systematically overwrites predictive prophecy—is so omnipresent within Quranic Studies that it usually goes unnoticed. Muḥammad's prophetic message is generally depicted as an intense-but-vague eschatological expectation, tied to his disruptive faith in one God. Any monotheistic believer of the era, Jewish or Christian, might have asserted and shared that generic

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<sup>6</sup> This visible manifestation of angel-delivered judgment against the Sasanian dynasty is the point of the "split moon" of Q 54, a later reflex of Q 105, on which see Daniel A. Beck, *The Astral Messenger, the Lunar Revelation, the Solar Salvation: Dualist Cosmic Soteriology in the Early Qur'ān*, forthcoming in *Remapping Emergent Islam: Texts, Social Settings, and Ideological Trajectories*, ed. Carlos A. Segovia (Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Many critical scholars have followed John Wansbrough by attributing disjunctions in quranic theology and prophetology to multi-authorial composition, i.e. layers created by the prophet's followers after his death. While there are compelling arguments for a certain level of post-prophetic redactional activity, my analysis indicates that the primary quranic innovations must have been developed and promulgated within the prophet's own lifetime—if not in their final quranic textual form, at least as recognizable predecessor forms.

<sup>8</sup> For a sophisticated analysis of this quranic text, see Tommaso Tesei, "'The Romans Will Win!' Q 30:2-7 in Light of 7th c. Political Eschatology," *Der Islam* 95, vol. 1 (2018): 1-29.

eschatological expectation without thereby claiming prophetic status. Since he did not, allegedly, deliver mantic oracles, Muḥammad's distinctively prophetic function is instead depicted as his disruption of Meccan 'polytheism' via delivering revealed divine speech in the form of surahs.<sup>9</sup>

Like most scholars, Shoemaker takes Q 30:2-4 to be what he calls "the Qur'ān's sole reference to contemporary world affairs,"<sup>10</sup> and so treats its predictive anti-Sasanian prophecy as an *aberration* within the quranic corpus.<sup>11</sup> Invoking an early variant reading, Shoemaker even suggests that Q 30:2-4 may have originally proclaimed that the final Byzantine victory over the Sasanians in 628 CE would be followed, several years later, when the prophet's followers defeated the Byzantine forces during the early conquests. These verses would not be a genuine predictive prophecy at all, then, but rather a late composition that likely aimed to legitimate Muḥammad's prophetic authority *ex post facto* relative to the early Islamic conquests.<sup>12</sup> Shoemaker argues that this would explain why Q 30:2-4 appears to rejoice in a future Byzantine victory, when his analysis suggests that Muḥammad and his early followers probably held intensely anti-Byzantine views, and had planned to conquer Jerusalem. The Ḥiḡāz-centric ideology of Islam would have largely evolved later, after the prophet's death (and perhaps in reaction to its unexpectedly early date, prior to the conquests). Shoemaker's analysis exemplifies a "late-Ḥiḡāzification" view, which conceptualizes the re-centering of Islamic sacred geography as a relatively late, largely post-prophetic phenomenon; core innovations in apocalyptic orientation are assigned to the prophet's followers, after his death. That the Qur'ān could have initially emerged as a form of *anti-Sasanian apocalypse*, and that Muḥammad himself had made determinate predictive prophecies in that regard, remains largely unimaginable within such a framework, just as it remains unimaginable within traditional Islamic exegesis.

The opposing "originally Ḥiḡāz-centered" view of the prophetic mission is exemplified by *The Crucible of Islam*, in which historian G.W. Bowersock has followed Michael Lecker by connecting the prophetic *hiḡrah* from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE with the initial victory of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius against the Sasanians, which took place in Anatolia in the winter of that same year.<sup>13</sup> Lecker's idea is that the Byzantines used their Ḡassānid Arab clients to help form a loose new Ḥiḡāzī alliance (including Jews) in Yaṭrib, which would insulate the

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<sup>9</sup> That anti-polytheistic kerygma is a secondary development within the quranic corpus, which is why quranic invective against *širk* (polytheism, or more literally 'associating') first appears at a relatively late compositional juncture, largely coinciding with "Second Meccan" compositions. With traditional exegesis, this secondary kerygma is read back into the earliest surahs, assimilating them. As I will discuss below, there are grounds to believe that such strong re-interpretations of archaic surahs may trace back to the prophet, who eventually came to understand his basal oracular proclamations in a very different way.

<sup>10</sup> S. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire*, at p. 151.

<sup>11</sup> See also T. Tesei, "The Romans Will Win!," *Der Islam* 95 at p. 1, explaining in the abstract that "These verses [Q 30:2-7] are usually considered to be the only Qur'ānic allusion to a historical event that can be confirmed by sources external to the Islamic tradition."

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2017): 101-112.

Byzantines' Arabian flank against Persian advances—the Yaṭrib polity would not be an anti-Sasanian coalition, exactly, but more a sort of neutral buffer state. Bowersock characterizes this as what he calls “intervention from outside Arabia,” a *secondary intrusion* that belatedly penetrated and transformed what had originally been an isolated Meccan prophetic function. In contrast to his use of historical method for the prophet's Medinan period, Bowersock's analysis largely passes over the preceding Meccan period, where historical method has little yield, since the Qur'ān itself is our only direct source. Where he does touch upon the prophet's Meccan career, Bowersock consistently defers to traditional exegesis of the Qur'ān. Despite his book's ostensible focus on situating Islam's emergence within a broader regional context, *The Crucible of Islam* makes no mention of the predictive prophecy in Q 30:2-4. The Qur'ān's most specific reference to contemporary world history, set forth at the outset of a “Third Meccan” surah, does not fit the narrative about an isolated prophet who began preaching monotheism to Meccan pagans. Amazingly, Bowersock concludes his chapter on the Persian conquest of Jerusalem by asserting that “At the moment of Mohammed's own emigration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina in 622, the superpowers of the Near East were still Sassanian Persia and the Byzantine Empire—which was known everywhere in the region as Rome. One of these two were soon to be annihilated. Neither of them could possibly have expected this to happen. Neither did Muḥammad and his successors.”<sup>14</sup> For the historian, it is completely unthinkable that Muḥammad had not only expected the Sasanian regime's destruction, but had openly proclaimed its advent. Bowersock's mechanical application of historical method to traditional Islamic narrative does not permit predictive prophecy to enter his field of vision.

Absent from such historical scholarship on early Islam is a rigorous and systematic analysis of how the Qur'ān's earliest surahs relate to contemporary historical events, relative to the Near East's generalized eschatological expectations. Modern scholars almost invariably presume that the earliest surahs *do not* make such specific references to contemporary world affairs beyond the Ḥiǧāz. Instead, their references are usually understood (in alignment with traditional exegesis) to identify (1) obscure Meccan affairs and persons; or (2) distant Arabian history (e.g., the massacre of Christians in Naǧran in 523 CE, the putative reference of Q 85<sup>15</sup>). Alternatively, basal quranic references are viewed as (3) so cryptic as to be essentially indecipherable for later readers. We have, allegedly, lost the detailed pragmatic context, the ‘insider knowledge’ held by the original Meccan audiences, that had allowed for determinate interpretations. Whether explicit or implicit, that attitude precludes a coherent account of how Islam first emerged and differentiated itself from competing religious traditions.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 99-100. Bowersock presumably alternates “Mohammed” and “Muḥammad” in this text as an incomplete updating of earlier written material.

<sup>15</sup> Rather than being a reference to the Naǧrān massacre of 523 CE, Bowersock conflates the companions of the trench in Q 85 with the battle of the trench that purportedly took place near Yaṭrib in 627 CE, in the middle of the prophet's Medinan reign, arguing that “The spiraling deterioration of the position of the Believers in Medina led the Meccan opposition to lay siege to Medina. To safeguard themselves, the Believers surrounded themselves with a trench (*ukhdūd*) that became legendary in Muslim tradition as the scene of a Meccan retreat, which was commemorated in Sura 85 of the Qur'ān.” *The Crucible of Islam*, at pp. 112-13.

In *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*, I conclude<sup>16</sup> that the proclamations of imminent judgment in the earliest surahs were intensely anti-Sasanian in their focus, rather than being ahistorical or constrained to local Meccan concerns. Far from being an anomalous foreign intrusion, Q 30:2-4 thus reiterates the primary predictive prophecy that Muḥammad's career had begun with; it is a reflex of the basal prophetic function, which had become restated by the 'late Meccan' compositional stage to *abstract and generalize* the anonymous opposing forces who the Lord's final *amr* would punish. Q 30 prophesies how God would use the seemingly-defeated Byzantines to punish the Sasanian forces, just as Q 17:4-8 depicts God as having previously used Roman servants (also abstracted) to punish parallel transgressions by the Jews (who were associated with pro-Persian sympathies in late antiquity), destroying the Second Temple and permanently expelling the Jews from Jerusalem. Q 17:2-8 warns that God would surely punish any such returns, portraying that point as the decreed culmination of biblical *Straflegenden*. Such abstraction of military conflicts into theological terms and imagery was common in the imperial periphery, which was often neutral or hostile towards Byzantine power.<sup>17</sup>

To understand how pro-Byzantine and anti-Sasanian ideology was creatively adapted within quranic theology at the "Second and Third Meccan" compositional junctures (as with Q 30, 18, and 17), a precise understanding of the apocalyptic ideology embedded in more basal quranic strata is thus required. Against traditional views, I maintain that the basal quranic corpus constitutes a *facially intelligible apocalypse*, which repeatedly made predictive prophecies regarding contemporary world affairs. To illustrate this point, I will briefly summarize the analysis of eight key examples from *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*<sup>18</sup>: The earliest punishment story (Q 105), the earliest prophetic gift (Q 108), the earliest narration of a cosmic descent (Q 97), the three depictions of the initial prophetic commission (Q 96, 74, and 68); the earliest accusation of a specific crime against the believers (Q 85); and the earliest divine command for the prophet to minister to his community, rather than obsessing about whether a powerful man will repent for his sins (Q 80). Each example, I will suggest, is much more coherently explained when analyzed in a classic prophetic context, proclaiming the advent of final judgment in response to Sasanian transgressions. These surahs did not originally require an elaborate

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<sup>16</sup> This conclusion was not an outcome that I had expected prior to systematically applying my analytical method to the interpretive problems of the early corpus.

<sup>17</sup> Christians frequently minimized the Roman military role in Khusrow II's defeat, describing it instead as divine salvation, a mercy that forgave the believers' collective sin. Philip Wood describes how the Chalcedonian patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius, pictured the return of Christian rule: "Where his Constantinopolitan counterpart presents the emperor as the sole agent of peace, Sophronius attributes that peace to the sacred power of the Cross itself, and to God's implied compassion for previous sin." Philip Wood, "Sophronius of Jerusalem and the End of Roman History," in *History and Identity in the Late Antique Near East*, ed. P. Wood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 1–28, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Only summaries of these conclusions are possible in this paper. For much more detailed discussion of the supporting arguments and citations, see *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*.

apparatus of extrinsic prophetic biography to be comprehended by their audiences. By contrast, each example remains essentially indecipherable for traditional analytical approaches.<sup>19</sup>

### 3(a). Q 105 – The Ur-Quranic Omen, Reminding Its Addressee About The Visible Angelic Destruction Of A Sasanian Military Force

**Traditional exegesis:** Q 105 refers to a punitive expedition that the South Arabian king Abraha allegedly launched against Mecca in 570 CE, the year of Muḥammad’s birth. Abraha had built a church in San‘ā’ to divert the pilgrimage to the Ka‘bah in Mecca. When angry Quraysh desecrated this competing church, Abraha led an expedition against Mecca, bringing elephants that he intended to use to pull down the Ka‘bah. Abraha’s expedition was obliterated, however, when God sent swarms of birds (*tayran abābīl*) that pelted the South Arabian soldiers with stones made of clay.

The tradition does not explain why this message was so important that it would constitute one of the prophet’s very first revelations. It is also uncertain why God would remind his prophet how he had protected the pagan Quraysh by annihilating a Christian expedition. Generally, Q 105 is taken to warn the Quraysh that God would protect the Ka‘bah. No explanation is given, however, for what was actually threatening the Ka‘bah when Q 105 was delivered. No new South Arabian threat had been looming at the time.

**Anti-Sasanian exegesis:** Q 105 adapts the pervasive Christian practice of using Maccabean imagery to characterize defeats of oppressive Persian armies. In such Maccabean narratives, Sasanian defeats were normally conceptualized as instances of divine salvation that rewarded God’s beleaguered believers for persevering in faith against their ‘polytheist’ Persian oppressors (e.g., Ephrem’s hymns on the Sasanian sieges of his home town of Nisibis<sup>20</sup>). From the Seleucid era until the fall of the Sasanian dynasty, Indian war elephants were a dominant symbol of royal Persian power. Persian rulers made intensive use of Indian elephants (*Elephas maximus indicus*) in warfare right up into the Islamic conquests. By contrast, the use of African war elephants (*Loxodonta african*) in warfare is—apart from Abraha’s alleged attack on Mecca in 570 CE—unattested, historically, after the north African battle of Thapsus in 46 BCE. In the late antique Near East, proclaiming the defeat of a force that included war elephants was, for centuries, synonymous with proclaiming a defeat of the Persian military.

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<sup>19</sup> For a summary of traditional Islamic exegesis for each of my examples, see *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (HarperCollins Publishers: New York 2015). For classical *tafsīr* literature on these surahs, al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kaṭīr are standard references.

<sup>20</sup> As Ephrem described the defeat of the final Sasanian siege: “Let the day of your deliverance arouse you from sloth! When the wall was broken through, when the elephants pressed in, when the javelins showered, when men died valiantly, there was then a sight for the heavenly ones. Iniquity fought there; mercy triumphed there; lovingkindness prevailed below; the watchers shouted on high.” Ephrem the Syrian, *Nisibene Hymns*, Hymn 2, verse 17, tr. J. T. Stopford, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 13, eds. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1890). This hymn exemplifies generic Maccabean imagery, which Christians continuously reused and recycled when relating Sasanian defeats.



Q 105 thus reminds its addressee about how God had recently destroyed a Sasanian military force. As an omen of God's anti-Sasanian stance, this visible sign confirmed that an intensified judgment would soon manifest in full against Khusrow II's transgressions. The *ṭayran abābīl* of Q 105:3, a phrase that has no credible explanation in traditional Islamic exegesis (and is normally rendered as "birds in swarms"), just means "Babylonian birds,"<sup>21</sup> and identifies the angelic forces that had delivered God's inscribed judgments against the Sasanian force.

This theme of punishing Babylonian birds derives from the Jubilees 11 narrative, which relates how demonic birds had punished Chaldea's polytheists<sup>22</sup> until the young prophet Abraham repelled the avian punishment, thereby raising his reputation across all Chaldea.<sup>23</sup> Abraham was able to repel these punishing birds because he was devoted to God alone, a loyal servant, unlike the Chaldean polytheists. The Jubilaic punishment imagery of Q105 emphasizes how the 'polytheistic' Sasanians, being contemporary Chaldeans, cannot repel or evade the decreed punishments that God's angelic forces hurl against them. By contrast, God's devoted Abrahamic servants (like the quranic warner) would be saved when the Lord's final *amr* completed its manifestation.

Historically, the destruction of a Sasanian force that Q 105 depicts as a visible omen of the impending final judgment was probably the battle of Ḍū Qār, which took place on the outskirts of al-Ḥīrah in southwestern Iraq between 604-11 CE.<sup>24</sup> At Ḍū Qār, the northeastern Arab tribes won their first battle against Sasanian military power, defeating a punitive force that

<sup>21</sup> Thus *ṭayran abābīl* means "Babylonian birds," as normal Arabic, rather than being a baffling phrase referring to birds in "groups" or "swarms." De Prémare once suggested this reading, and Marijn van Putten has independently reminded me of it.

<sup>22</sup> For the influence of Jubilaic narratives on quranic theology, see Suleyman Dost, *An Arabian Qur'ān: Towards a Theory of Peninsula Origins* (dissertation draft, University of Chicago, June 2018): 164-207.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Q 94:4, in which God proclaims that he had raised high the prophet's *dīkraka*, "your reputation." Islamic tradition struggled to explain why God made this claim in one of the earliest surahs. As discussed in *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*, the theme of God guiding a young man into a special prophetic servant by raising his communal reputation *prior* to the prophetic commission was generic prophetology, exemplified by the story of young Abraham in Jubilees 11. The adjacent Q 93 similarly aligns the quranic warner with a basic Moses-at-the-burning-bush prophetic typology, with the divine speaker explaining that he has given his servant parallel Moses-type gifts. Q 95 in turn portrays the purified warner as entering paradisaal land in his devotions, which is equated with the holy land where Moses was called to witness the burning bush. Walid Saleh's claim that the early Meccan warner was not a classic prophet is dependent upon Islamicizing exegesis, which relentlessly erases all such basic prophetological structures from the interpretation of early surahs, replacing them with biographical speculation.

<sup>24</sup> This was first suggested by A. L. de Prémare, "Il Voulut Détruire Le Temple: L'attaque de la Ka'ba par les rois yéménites avant l'islam. Aḥbār et Histoire," *Journal Asiatique* 288.2 (2000): 261–367. For a summary of this battle, see <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/du-qar>. For a traditional account, see also Al-Ṭabarī, *History*, 1016-38. For the conflict's history, see Fred Donner, "The Bakr b. Wā'il Tribes and Politics in Northeastern Arabia on the Eve of Islam," *Stud. Isl.* 51 (1980): 5-38.

(per al-Ṭabarī) included war elephants, as typical for a large Sasanian military force. With Q 105, the prophet interprets this initial Sasanian defeat as an extraordinary prefiguring omen, sent down to confirm that the final judgment was imminent. As a warning comprehensible to general Arabian audiences, Q 105 naturally depicts the Sasanian defeat with Maccabean imagery, aligning this omen with the divine punishments that God had previously delivered against those Sasanian rulers who arrogantly attempted to exceed the limits that God had decreed for their worldly rule—most notably, the Byzantine annihilation of Khusrow I’s Anatolian field expedition in 570 CE, which forced the greatest of all *šāhānšāhs* to desperately flee back to Seleucia-Ctesiphon, leaving his war elephants and ruined army behind.<sup>25</sup>

The ur-quranic significance of the adjacent Q 106, as a prayer for security on the trade routes by which Quraysh interacted with the Arabophone populations around al-Ḥīrah each year, is also efficiently explained in this context. Quraysh trade was likely threatened by the disruption that followed Khusrow II’s abolition of the Laḥmid dynasty. The *šāhānšāh* had executed al-Nu‘mān III in 602 CE,<sup>26</sup> as part of his efforts to assert more direct control over the Sasanian empire’s Arabophone periphery. That expansion precipitated the conflict with mobile Arab tribes that led to the battle of Dū Qār.

### **3(b). Q 108 – The Neo-Moses Warner Has Been Given the Gift of Perseverance, and With His Continuous Devotion to God, His Neo-Pharaoh Hater Will Be Destroyed**

**Traditional exegesis:** Q 108 refers to the prophet having been given a mysterious gift called *al-kawṭar*, which is usually identified as a river in paradise, or else something like ‘the abundant good.’ In thanks for this mysterious gift, the prophet should constantly pray to his Lord and sacrifice (the imperative *nḥar*, literally a command for him to ‘slaughter,’ which is taken to mean persevering in sacrificing animals to his God). If he does that, his “hater” [*šāni-aka*] will be “cut off.” The prophet’s “hater” is usually identified with various postulated Meccan figures, or else is taken to be a generic term for any prophetic opponent.

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<sup>25</sup> As Pseudo-Sebeos described this Sasanian defeat, using typical Maccabean imagery, “[T]he Persian king, called Khusro Anushirwan, came in person with a multitude of armed men and many elephants. ... And he advanced and came to Melitene and camped opposite it. On the morning of the following day, with great speed they drew up, contingent facing contingent and line facing line, and they engaged one another in battle. The battle intensified over the face of the earth and the battle was fought fiercely. And the Lord delivered defeat to the Persian king and all his forces. They were crushed before the enemies by the edge of the sword and fled from their faces in extreme anxiety. Not knowing the roads of their flight, they went and threw themselves into the great river which is called Euphrates. The swollen river carried away the multitude of fugitives like a swarm of locusts, and not many were able to save themselves on that day. But the king escaped by a hair with a few others, taking refuge in the elephants and cavalry.” Pseudo-Sebeos, 68.18–69.8/7–8, tr. in Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars* (London: Routledge, 2002): 155–56.

<sup>26</sup> The last Laḥmid king was reportedly executed via being crushed by Khusrow II’s elephants. Although doubtless fictional, such accounts repeat the characteristic association between elephants and the violent assertion of royal Persian power.

**Anti-Sasanian exegesis:** Following the linguistic analysis by Martin Baasten, Q 108 declares that God has given the recitation's addressee *the perseverance*, with *kawṭar* borrowing the Syriac sense of *temporal constancy*, rather than the root's normal Arabic sense of *abstract quantity*.<sup>27</sup> In turn, the consonants in Q 108:2 that Islamic tradition disambiguates as *nḥar*, a command *to slaughter* (as animal sacrifice), should instead be read as *nḡar*, a divine command *to endure*.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Q 108 proclaims that because God has given his addressee the prophetic gift of *perseverance* [*al-kawṭar*], the warner must constantly pray and *endure* [*nḡar*] the oppressive situation. Because his divine gifts enable him to remain unflinchingly constant in his devotion to his deity, his *hater* [*šāni-aka*] will certainly be the one who perishes [*al-aṭḡar*].

Rather than Q 108 constituting God's promise that he will destroy an obscure Meccan man, as one of the first revelations, the addressee's hater here is Khusrow II, who had begun arrogantly expanding Sasanian power across the Near East. With Q 108, the deity declares that his servant's devotion will be rewarded when God's judgment inevitably destroys this tyrannical opponent, just as Pharaoh was destroyed by the Red Sea.

### 3(c). Q 97 – God Had Recently Decreed The Time of His Final Judgment, And Sent Angelic Forces Down to Begin Effectuating That Decree, Meaning the Day of the Believers' Final Salvation Was Radically Immanent

**Traditional exegesis:** The *laylat al-qadr* of Q 97 was the extraordinary night when the Qur'ān, understood as verbal revelation and guidance, was first sent down to the prophet. Since the prophet self-evidently did not receive all of the Qur'ān's verses on one night, however, the Qur'ān is said to have descended on this singular night to a mystical "House of Might," from whence the angel Ġibrīl successively transmitted its verses over the ensuing years to the prophet. Islamic tradition did not preserve when exactly this night had happened, and the *laylat al-qadr* is understood to repeat annually as one of the last ten days of the month of Ramaḍān—albeit which day, exactly, is not known.

**Anti-Sasanian exegesis:** Q 97 exalts the typological night when God determines the date for his saving judgment to manifest in human history; the quranic Arabic term *qadr* primarily identifies a process of 'measuring,' which in this context refers to God's *decision that set the date for a division of the people*. This night of decree, of God issuing a date-certain for the punishment, happened for every prophetic cycle, ending in the decreed judgment that concluded each *amr*. A simple example is Noah's flood in Q 54:12, *fa-ltaqā al-māu 'alā amrin qad quḍir*, "and so met the waters for a decreed *amr*." For each salvation cycle, God decided when his punishment would fall, dividing a gathered people into the saved believers and the destroyed rebels. What descends with the angels on the night of the *qadr* is thus not *a verbal revelation to a prophet*, but

<sup>27</sup> Martin F. J. Baasten, "A Syriac Reading of the Qur'ān? The Case of Sūrat al-Kawṭar," in *Arabic in Context: 400 Years of Arabic at Leiden University*, ed. A. Al-Jallad (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 372–92. Baasten improves significantly upon the prior analysis by Christoph Luxenberg, who was the first to identify *al-kawṭar* as a Syriacism.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Note that similar use of *nḡr* as meaning "to endure" is also attested in pre-Islamic Safaitic, as Baasten discusses, and so its use in this sense by Q 108:2 may reflect an internal development within Old Arabic, rather than being an imported Aramaicism.

rather *a decreed divine judgment to a people*. God's decreed judgment, its terms inscribed by angelic scribes in unchangeable tablets, is brought down by the angelic collectivity that will soon manifest that judgment in full, pursuant to its terms. As a secondary mercy, signs of the Lord's impending and inescapable judgment (including prophetic revelations) are scattered by the descending angelic forces, but those revelatory signs were not what had been sent down on the night of *qadr*. Salvation itself had been 'conceived' by God's nocturnal decree of the specific date and form for his judgment. Made determinate by this act of divine will, the decreed salvation had descended and begun manifesting in the lower human world via the descent of its effectuating angelic collectivity. The collectivity included angels who scatter reminders about what is impending (i.e. its prefiguring signs), but also angels who would divide with a division, i.e. the punishing angels who forcibly effectuate the decree.<sup>29</sup>

Q 97 articulates this judgment-centered soteriology in terms that mirror, but correct, the ritual Christian soteriology exemplified by Ephrem's Nativity Hymn No. 21. Q 97 portrays repetitive Christian ritual as useless. It asserts a counter-clerical soteriology, where believers are saved via their Lord's 'incarnated' judgments.<sup>30</sup> Conceived by the Lord's decree on the Night of the *qadr*, and brought down by angels in unchangeable written form, the 'gestating' salvation would be 'born' by angelic agency on its decreed Day. That Day was soteriologically equivalent to Noah's flood and the Red Sea's destruction of Pharaoh's forces. Notably, God's judgment would manifest as it had been decreed, regardless of whether the warner lived or died. The warner's role at this stage was almost purely mantic, and his proclamations were just a reminder.

As quranic theology developed, however, the soteriological centrality of this angelic transmission of *the decreed judgment* was steadily eliminated from its core. Salvation of the Lord's servants by the visibly-manifesting final judgment became replaced by a hypertrophied role for *salvation by conformity to the revealed verbal signs* of temporally-indeterminate eschatological judgment. This soteriological innovation implicitly required the warner's community to obey his solitary prophetic authority. Unlike the basal signs of salvation, the perception of which was not prophet-limited—any believer in the era could have heard about the visible angelic punishment of Q 105 and recognized it as an omen, without requiring prophetic mediation, which is why Q 54, as a later restatement of this ideology, refers to the visibly-manifesting signs of salvation<sup>31</sup>—the revealed verbal signs were mediated and delivered solely by the Arabian prophet.

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<sup>29</sup> Compare Q 77:1-7, which swears "By the ones sent forth in succession, and the ones blasting (with their) blast! By the scatterers (with their) scattering, and the ones splitting asunder [*fa-al-fāriqāti farqan*], and the ones casting a reminder, as an excuse or warning! Surely what you are promised is indeed going to fall!"

<sup>30</sup> In this soteriology, God would have sent salvation down with the birth of Jesus, but that salvation manifested by the destruction of the people who rejected and killed him—i.e., by the Roman punishment of the Jews, cf. Q 17:1-8—rather than by the atoning crucifixion of Jesus.

<sup>31</sup> It is also why Q 54:44-46 declares "Or do they say 'We shall all be victorious'? They will be routed and turn their back! Yes! The Hour is their appointed time, and the Hour is grievous and bitter." The Cairo edition of the Qur'ān identifies Q 54:44-46 as a Medinan addition, since

**3(d). Q 111, 96, 74, and 68 – At Muḥammad’s Prophetic Commission, God Castigates The Prophet’s ‘Independent’ Opponent for his Transgressions, and Promises that He will Suffer Terrible Punishment**

**Traditional exegesis:** Q 111 promises that a man called Abu Lahab, the “Father of Flame,” will be punished in hell for unspecified reasons, with his woman being the carrier of firewood. Abu Lahab is identified as Muḥammad’s uncle, and he is said to have been called “Abu Lahab” because he had reddish (i.e. ‘fiery’) cheeks. He opposed and insulted Muḥammad. He was eventually killed in Mecca in 624 CE, when his sister-in-law struck him with a tent pole.

Q 96 relates the initial prophetic commission, and is traditionally identified as the first revelation.<sup>32</sup> Most of Q 96, however, consists of divine speech by which God fiercely castigates a specific human who wrongly considers himself independent, demands obedience, and forbids God’s servants from prayer (Q 96:6-18). These verses are sometimes claimed to have been added to Q 96:1-5 several years later. They are said to refer to a Quraysh leader called “Abu Jahl,” meaning the “Father of Ignorance,” who had tried to hinder Islam. This Abu Jahl is said to have been killed in 624 CE, fighting the prophet’s followers at the battle of Badr.

Q 74 also relates the initial prophetic commission, and for that reason is traditionally identified as either the second or first revelation. Again, much of the surah consists of divine speech castigating a specific powerful man, and promising that God will punish him. God states that he created this man as a unique person (*ḥalaqtu waḥīdan*, Q 74:11), and granted him wealth, ease, and sons as witnesses (*ṣuhūdan*) to his exalted status (Q 74:12-14). Yet this man has demanded even more, and set himself against God’s signs. God criticizes this man for plotting and making an awful decision (Q 74:18-20). After that decision, the man witnessed something terrible. But then he returned and was arrogant, declaring that his chastisement was nothing but sorcery and human speech (Q 74:21-25). God promises that he will be cast into hellfire (Q 74:26). The tradition usually identifies this man with al-Walīd ibn al-Muḡīrah, said to be one of the wealthiest of the Quraysh, with seven or ten sons. He was another staunch opponent of the prophet, and is said (continuing the common theme!) to have died in 624 CE. The tradition gives very unclear explanations about what the specific references by Q 74 to his decisions, frowning, returning, and arrogance mean. It also does not explain why Q 74 depicts God as having created this man like a unique and exalted human.

Q 68 consists of divine speech that declares the prophet is *ḥuluqin ‘aẓīm*, a puzzling phrase traditionally rendered as “of great character.” God promises that soon everybody will see who will be punished. Q 68:8-9 commands God’s servant not to compromise with the ‘deniers,’

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traditional exegesis struggles to explain why the defeat of an army of arrogant unbelievers was prophesied at this early compositional juncture. Again, this is a *reflex* of the Q 105 anti-Sasanian omen.

<sup>32</sup> In my view, this is not correct. Short archaic surahs like Q 111, Q 108, Q 106, and Q 105 are likely the earliest quranic recitations. Q 96 and 74 are later compositions that—like Q 93, 94, and 95—attempt *ex post facto* to align the emergent prophetic function with a Moses-centered prophetic typology, explaining how God had formed and commissioned his new Arabian prophet in a manner precisely like God’s commissioning of young Moses at the burning bush.

who want everybody to compromise. This command is followed by Q 68:10-16, whereby God instructs his prophet not to obey a specific wealthy and powerful human, castigates that human, and promises that he will be punished. These verses are usually taken to refer to al-Walīd ibn al-Muğīrah, like Q 74, though the tradition does not reach agreement on this point.

**Anti-Sasanian exegesis:** These fierce, sustained condemnations by the divine speaker are all directed at the same man: Khusrow II, the neo-Pharaoh who the prophet opposed in his capacity as a neo-Moses. The prophetic commission is portrayed like a repetition of Moses at the burning bush; having stepped onto sacred ground and been commissioned by God’s representative,<sup>33</sup> he is commanded to go forth and warn about the decreed day of salvation that will inevitably punish the wrongdoers and save the believers.<sup>34</sup>

In Q 111, God promises that he will punish the *šāhānšāh* with hellfire. He is not called the “Father of Flame” because Abu Lahab had reddish cheeks (as with traditional exegesis), but because Khusrow II had cast the Near East into raging warfare by launching his campaign of radical Sasanian expansion from 602 CE onwards. In the mid 7th century, the Armenian historian Pseudo-Sebeos describes him as “the Sasanian brigand Apruēz Khosrov, who consumed with fire the whole inner [land], disturbing the sea and the dry land, to bring destruction on the whole earth.”<sup>35</sup> As there was no plausible “Meccan” equivalent for that function, the tradition was compelled to take *lahab* as referring to a minor physical trait of an obscure Meccan man. Additionally, the Sasanian *šāhānšāh* was commonly identified with fire in Christian rhetoric of late antiquity, which reflected not only the Sasanian kings’ penchant for oppressive violence against the believers, but also their imperial Zoroastrian cult, which centered on reverence for holy fire.

In Q 96, God promises that he will soon punish the prophetic opponent by sending his angelic forces, against whom this opponent will be powerless. God criticizes this man’s primary sin as being that he imagines he is *independent*, like a rebellious vassal, and does not understand that his power is only a gift from his Lord, to whom he must return for judgment. Q 96 describes this man as demanding obedience from the populace and suppressing pious faith, which does not fit an obscure Quraysh figure called “Abu Jahl”—a naked pejorative, rather than a real name—but perfectly fits the *šāhānšāh* who was attempting to seize rule over most of the earth.

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<sup>33</sup> This is the point of Q 95, which depicts the prophet as entering upon the base of the paradisaal mountain in his devotions (this paradisaal land being the ‘secure land’ that the prophet is told he may enter, as one of the purified, rather than being “Mecca”), akin to Moses stepping onto holy land at the burning bush. In the late antique Near East (e.g. in Ephrem’s Syriac Christian theology), paradise was commonly construed as a unified sacred mountain, which was segregated into different levels that became increasingly holy the further one ascended.

<sup>34</sup> This opponent, who had *defined* the prophetic commission articulated by the basal corpus, is traditionally treated like a minor quranic curiosity. He is exegetically dissolved into a constellation of vaguely-postulated Meccan opponents, who had little bearing on the prophet’s core mission, and soon allegedly disappeared for disparate reasons.

<sup>35</sup> Pseudo-Sebeos, Ch. 9, tr. R. W. Thomson in *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, 13.

In Q 74, God again promises certain punishment against the prophetic opponent as part of the initial prophetic commission. In an anti-Sasanian context, the peculiar references that God uses when criticizing this specific human opponent are all efficiently explained. God explains that he had made this man unique (*ḥalaqtu waḥīdan*, Q 74:11), and granted him wealth, ease, and sons as witnesses (*ṣuhūdān*)<sup>36</sup> to his exalted status (Q 74:12-14). Yet this man, when we identify him with Khusrow II, had seized the Sasanian throne in 590 CE by joining a wicked plot against his own father, Hormozd IV, who was blinded and then later murdered by the conspirators (Q 74:18-20).<sup>37</sup> After taking power, Khusrow II almost immediately fled from Seleucia-Ctesiphon in fear of the approaching rebel forces who were led by the messianic figure Bahrām-i Chūbīn (Q 74:21-22). Khusrow II was then restored as Sasanian ruler by Byzantine military power in 591 CE, via an expedition that crushed Bahrām-i Chūbīn (Q 74:23). But having been restored to a position of incredible wealth and power, this man then decided to take even more than God had given him, launching his unparalleled campaign of Sasanian expansion from 602 CE onwards (Q 74:15). For basal quranic theology, God had set ordained limits to the Sasanian regime's borders. Those limits were demonstrated by the signs of scripture and by prior punishment omens. In particular, God's prior revelations had permanently entrusted the Holy Land to his new servants (Q 74:16, 24-25, cf. Q 17:1-8). In attempting to go beyond what God had given him, Khusrow II had transgressed. God would soon punish this neo-Pharaoh, who arrogantly believed that he was independent and could seize whatever he pleased (Q 74:17, 26).

Q 68 articulates this oppositional conflict in a more abstracted state, tying it to the 'deniers' who want the prophet to compromise (presumably by dropping his adamantly anti-Sasanian stance). Even among the northeastern Arab tribes, there was tremendous division over the degree to which the Sasanian regime should be either fought against or compromised with.<sup>38</sup> As Sasanian power expanded, that same tension would naturally extend throughout Arabophone populaces across the region. Q 68:4 declares that the prophet is a "great creation" (*ḥuluqin 'aẓīm*)—not just "of great moral character"—meaning that God had formed him into a purified servant who would succeed at the prophetic task, just as God concludes his narrative of Moses' prior life at the burning bush by declaring *is 'tana tuka* in Q 20:41, "I have built you up." The Lord's uniquely-created servant is contrasted with the unworthy opposing man who was cruel, and after that illegitimate (Q 68:13—this referring to Khusrow II's complicity in the palace plot that had first blinded and then murdered his own father, Hormozd IV, a complicity that rendered

<sup>36</sup> Khusrow II had five sons who are known by name. More broadly, in late antique imperial rhetoric, vassals were commonly addressed as the 'sons' of the ruler, while political equals (e.g., the Byzantine emperor) were addressed as 'brothers.' Interestingly, this convention of royal address can be traced back for millennia in Mesopotamian royal correspondence.

<sup>37</sup> For the life of Khusrow II, see <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/khosrow-ii>; see also Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> See Fred Donner, "The Bakr b. Wā'il Tribes and Politics in Northeastern Arabia on the Eve of Islam," *Stud. Isl.* 51 (1980): 5-38.

his regime illegitimate). This arrogant man rejects the idea that he will be punished for his transgressions, as God's prior revelations have indicated.<sup>39</sup> But he will indeed be punished.

Rather than quranic revelation beginning with God directing his ire against a relatively arbitrary series of minor prophetic opponents, who were confined within Mecca and soon disappeared from later quranic recitations, these early surahs embody a classic prophetic function, tied to the transgressions of the most oppressive and famous tyrant of the prophet's era. The uniqueness of the quranic format, in which mankind's true Lord speaks to his prophet by mocking and criticizing the opposing rebellious vassal for his pretensions of independence, has obscured the intensity of that conflict. For the absolute Lord of the heavens and earth, Khusrow II was merely an arrogant upstart who had forgotten his dependence on his Creator. Quranic divine speech naturally addresses him accordingly; his transgressions would be answered for. For his human opponents in the era, however, Khusrow II was a terrifying figure who demanded obedience, despite his immoral and oppressive actions. Much of the early corpus depicts the quranic warner as a neo-Moses who God instructs to have absolute confidence that his service will be rewarded, like a repetition of the Moses/Pharaoh cycle, by the judgment that had already begun manifesting against this tyrant.

### 3(e). Q 85 – God Promises Terrible Punishment in Response to the Atrocities Committed by Sasanian Forces During the Siege and Conquest of Jerusalem in 614 CE

**Traditional exegesis:** The tradition did not agree on what historical event Q 85 refers to, but it is most commonly taken to relate how the “companions of the trench” (*aṣḥābu l-uh' dūdī*), who were allegedly followers of Dū Nuwās, the Jewish king of pre-Islamic Ḥimyar, massacred South Arabian Christians in a fiery trench. This massacre took place near Naḡrān in 523 CE. Ironically, King Abraha, the putative leader of the Q 105 punitive expedition, was one of the Ethiopian commanders who helped depose Dū Nuwās, having been sent by King Kaleb of Axum as part of a military expedition that avenged this atrocity.

**Anti-Sasanian exegesis:** Manfred Kropp has analyzed Q 85 as a *present tense* promise by its divine speaker that the accursed “Inferno People” will surely burn in hell, which is the trench, *al-uh' dūd*.<sup>40</sup> Following that semantic structure, this surah embodies popular Arabian perception of the atrocities that were committed by the Sasanians during their brutal siege and conquest of

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<sup>39</sup> God's signs were not limited to the warner's Ḥiḡāzī Arabic recitations. Early surahs frequently describe God's revealed signs as encompassing the signs of prior scriptures, prior prophets, visible natural phenomena, and visible divine punishments. As such, a statement that God's signs had been recited to a quranic opponent, who denied them, should not be carelessly equated with a claim that *the quranic warner himself* had directly recited his Arabic proclamations to that opponent, who then denied them.

<sup>40</sup> Manfred Kropp, “Koranische Texte als Sprechakte: am Beispiel der Sure 85,” in *Vom Koran zum Islam*, Vol. 4, eds. M. Gross and Karl-Heinz Ohlig (Berlin: Schiler, 2008), 483–91. For *qutla* in Q 85:4 as optative, rather than a genuine past tense, see also *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary*, 405 ff.



Jerusalem in 614 CE.<sup>41</sup> Because Byzantine forces in Syria had been routed in 613 CE, the defenseless city initially surrendered to Sasanian rule without a fight, and it was placed under the governance of Jewish militants (who, with stereotypical pro-Persian sympathies, had supported Khusrow II's expansion campaign). Shortly afterwards, however, the city's Christian populace rebelled and killed their new rulers. In Christian perception, the Christ-denying Jews had defied God's command by plotting with the Persians to return to the Holy City (cf. Q 17:4–8). After the surviving Jews fled to the Sasanian encampment at Casearea, the Sasanian military reconquered Jerusalem. Strategios and Pseudo-Sebeos lament how Khusrow II's forces massacred much of the city's Christian populace. That is why Q 85 bitterly criticizes the Sasanians—who are the *aṣḥābu l-uh' dūdi*—and accuses them of 'taking vengeance' against the believers' piety.

For Christians, the Maccabean believers of Jerusalem had obeyed God's decree by repulsing the Jewish return. But the Jews' Sasanian conspirators had responded to that piety by savagely martyring the Lord's servants. As Philip Wood summarizes *On the Capture of Jerusalem*, a poem composed by Sophronius, the Chalcedonian patriarch of Jerusalem:<sup>42</sup>

[T]he poem is nearly Manichaean in its moral vision. The Persians are presented both as barbaric, wielding 'murderous swords' and 'accomplishing with all cruelty'; and demonic, blaspheming against God and inspired through 'the mania of demons.' The Christians of Palestine, in contrast, are the passive victims of Persian aggression ... Jerusalem is inhabited 'as a heaven', and its virgins 'appear like angels upon the earth'. The devastation is thus conceived as both the clash of unfettered barbarous aggression against settled civilization and the sacrificial slaughter of an angelic Christian nation by demonic pagans.

Sophronius punctuates his poem with doublets that predict Christ will soon intervene and deliver fiery punishment against the Persians: "Weep, nations of the blessed Christians, for the holy Jerusalemites are slain," "Christ, may you see to it that Persia is soon seen burning in revenge for the holy places," and "Christ, may you subdue the ill-starred children of God-hating Persia by the hands of the Christians."<sup>43</sup> As an aligned apocalypse, Q 85 proclaims that the Lord would punish the Sasanians with hellfire for this atrocity, just as he had punished Pharaoh and ʿĀmūd.

Islamic tradition maintains that Muḥammad and his followers originally prayed towards Jerusalem, multiple times every day, until the prophet later ordered their change of prayer direction after his *hiḡrah* to Medina, more than twelve years after his prophetic mission began in 610 CE. If so, the prophet can hardly have reacted with indifference to reports about the awful

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<sup>41</sup> The Q 85 narrative parallels how contemporary Christians had perceived the Sasanian siege. Archaeology confirms that massacres took place in Jerusalem in this period, but their scope seems to have been exaggerated, and the city suffered much less physical destruction than the Christian accounts describe. See Gideon Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem (614 C.E.)—An Archaeological Assessment," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 357 (Feb. 2010): 35–48; see also G. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam*, 91–98.

<sup>42</sup> P. Wood, "Sophronius of Jerusalem and the End of Roman History," 7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. (P. Wood translation from Sophronius, *On the Capture of Jerusalem*, ed. M. Gigante, *Sophronii Anacreontica* (Rome 1957): 102–7).

massacres that took place in the Holy City in 614 CE. If we suspend the standard practice of imposing Arabian obscurity upon every early quranic reference, and instead ask which historically-attested massacre of believers would most naturally concern the prophet during his early career, this would axiomatically be the massacre that took place at the center of the prophet's *qiblah* in 614 CE, which ignited apocalyptic expectations across the Near East—as opposed to being an uncertain reference to an old Nağrān massacre in 523 CE, which replicated the same theme (Jewish aggression against Christian martyrs), but was disconnected from contemporary historical events.

Rather than being produced by a logical analysis of the simple oracle that Q 85 proclaims—a terrible transgression had been committed against the believers, and so God's fiery judgment would inevitably come down upon the guilty men—Q 85 became exegetically associated with an old South Arabian massacre as part of the programmatic erasure of all predictive prophetic function from the early corpus. Early quranic references were systematically disconnected from predictive prophecy by substituting usefully-obscure putative Arabian referents. This secondary substitution of new Meccan “context” obliterated, on purpose, the apocalyptic continuity that had originally existed between the Jerusalem references of Q 85 and Q 17:1-10, leaving Q 85 an enigmatic relic. It also severed the continuity that had once existed between the anti-Sasanian references of Q 105 and Q 30:2-4, rendering the visible omen of Q 105 (and by extension, its restatement as the proclamation of Q 54:1-4) a discontinuous curiosity, buried in the past. Interjecting speculative South Arabian referents was an efficient means for neutralizing and abstracting the specific mantic claims that the warner had originally made. Those oracles had later become obsolete and distracting.

### **3(f). Q 80 – God Commands His Servant to Cease Obsessing About Khusrow II's Potential Repentance, and Instead Minister More to his Local Ḥiğāzī Community.**

**Traditional exegesis:** Q 80:1-10 is normally taken to relate a perplexing episode when Muḥammad rebuffed ‘the blind man’ in favor of attending to a powerful man. With these verses, God castigates his prophet for paying attention to the wealthy man, rather than the poor man. The identity of this wealthy man is left very unclear in the tradition's accounts. The *Study Qur'an* simply describes the prophet as having been speaking to the “leaders of the idolators.” Ibn Kaṭīr identifies the unnamed man as “one of the great leaders of the Quraysh.” He is often identified with al-Walīd ibn al-Muğīrah.

To permit this interpretation, Q 80:1-10 is traditionally understood to embody a bizarre grammatical shift, beginning with God narrating how an anonymous third-person man (‘he’) had turned away from ‘the blind man,’ but may yet repent of that sin, after which God suddenly addresses this same ‘he’ as the second-person ‘you,’ who is now taken to be the prophet. This grammatical shift is explained as a stylistic device.

**Anti-Sasanian exegesis:** In an anti-Sasanian context, these verses have perfectly natural grammar, and invoke a dominant critique of Khusrow II—his rule was illegitimate because he

ascended the Sasanian throne in 590 CE via a palace coup that deposed his father, Hormozd IV,<sup>44</sup> a champion of social justice whom the conspirators viciously blinded, and then later murdered.<sup>45</sup> As the rebel forces of Bahrām-i Chūbīn advanced upon the Sasanian capital, the newly-crowned Khusrow II fled and sought refuge in Byzantine territory. The charge that Khusrow II was complicit in the murder of his own cruelly-blinded father, making his Sasanian regime illegitimate (cf. Q 68:13, charging the prophet’s opponent with cruelty followed by illegitimacy), was used to justify the continuing rebellion of the messianic figure Bahrām-i Chūbīn. As Pourshariati explains, “Recall that in the midst of his rebellion, when the Ispahbudhān brothers had first blinded Hormozd IV and then had him killed, Bahrām-i Chūbīn justified the continuation of his revolt on the basis of revenge for the murdered king.”<sup>46</sup> Arabic speakers in the early 7th century would easily recognize this simple polemic, delivered by God’s speech to his prophet, just as modern audiences would easily comprehend similar invective directed against leaders like Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin. Only the relentless imposition of Mecca-confined interpretive context—the dogma that the prophet’s early career *could not possibly* have been concerned with any world-historical events that were taking place beyond Mecca’s limited environs, making him entirely unlike a normal prophet, and his message entirely unlike the era’s normal apocalyptic ideology—renders these verses artificially obscure.

With Q 80:1-10, God commands his servant to stop focusing on proclaiming that Khusrow II will be punished if he does not repent, and focus instead on addressing the people in his own local Ḥiǧāzī community, who desperately need his ministry. The prophetic function was steadily transformed by that localizing shift of its focus, and the soteriological centrality of the solitary prophetic opponent was deliberately minimized (hence the neo-Pharaoh figure, so central to the early Meccan surahs, disappears from later Meccan surahs). This God-commanded transformation of the prophetic function, as set forth in a relatively early Meccan surah, was decisive for the prophet’s transition away from (1) proclaiming anonymous regional apocalypse, and towards (2) asserting charismatic prophetic authority over his community.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> For a summary of the reign of Khusrow II’s father, Hormozd IV, see <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hormozd-iv>

<sup>45</sup> For a summary of the coup, see <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bestam-o-bendoy>

<sup>46</sup> Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008): 413.

<sup>47</sup> Addressing the intensifying conflicts over prophetic authority that are evidenced by the later Meccan surahs, Walid Saleh argues that these surahs reflect the prophet’s frustration with his Meccan audiences’ refusal to voluntarily convert. See Walid Saleh, “End of Hope: Suras 10–15, Despair, and a Way Out of Mecca,” in *Qur’ānic Studies Today*, eds. A. Neuwirth and M. Sells (New York: Routledge, 2016), 105–23. That is, I think, the reverse of how this quranic phenomenon should be understood. Saleh essentially presumes that the prophet’s demands for audience conversion were not an *innovation* in his prophetic mission, by which he and his followers had begun demanding that his community accept and obey his direct prophetic authority (and so generating new conflicts within it). In the earliest surahs, conversion to prophetic obedience is not demanded or expected; instead, repentance in the face of looming judgment is counseled by God’s divine speech, which functions as a reminder. By the later

For that same reason, Islamic exegesis was precluded from interpreting Q 80:1-10 in a way that evidenced or suggested any such transformation of the early prophetic mission. The prophet's basal mission was exegetically constricted, always, within his local Meccan environment. Rather than being interpreted as a facially-intelligible proclamation, Q 80:1-10 thus had to be interpreted as describing local Meccan events known only to 'quranic insiders,' even if that required disregarding the verses' grammar.

#### **4. The Systematic Suppression of Predictive Prophecy Within Quranic Theology**

Readers may find the preceding analysis surprising. The idea that basal surahs constitute a logical, integrated, and facially-intelligible apocalypse is still foreign to Quranic Studies. After all, we "know" that the early quranic corpus consists of a series of enigmatic proclamations about local Meccan affairs and distant Arabian events, with uncertain relation to the core prophetic task. We "know" that the earliest quranic depictions of the prophetic commission had centered on obscure Meccan opponents with pejorative nicknames like Abu Lahab and Abu Jahl, who all conveniently died in 624 CE, when the battle of Badr took place. We "know" that these uncertain Quraysh opponents, despite being so central to the earliest corpus, were no longer cited by the middle Meccan surahs. We also "know" that South Arabian events like Abraha's punitive expedition and the Naḡrān massacre, although alleged referents of the earliest surahs, became irrelevant by the middle Meccan period, for unclear reasons. We "know" that the prophet was not initially concerned with the same world-historical apocalyptic expectations that had consumed the rest of the Near East during his lifetime. We "know" that the prophet did not make predictive prophecies about contemporary events, apart from the aberration of Q 30:2-4 (if even that can be granted). We thus "know" that the prophet was not concerned about the massacre of believers that took place at the center of his daily *qiblah* in 614 CE—that massacre had involved Palestinian Christians, and so it was irrelevant to his Ḥiḡāz-isolated mission. We "know" that the extraordinarily-indeterminate Arabian referents in traditional interpretations of the early surahs do not reflect a later program of strong reinterpretation, which helped assimilate their contents to subsequent developments in quranic theology. We "know" that Muḥammad did not begin his career like a classic prophet who made predictive prophesies about the decreed judgment that had finally begun to visibly manifest against the greatest tyrant of his era, but rather by teaching monotheism to pagans.

Not one of those points is known in an epistemologically reliable sense, however, and none is even facially plausible. If such claims are to be accepted, against what one would normally expect for a biblically-grounded prophetic function that had emerged in the late antique Near East, then each such claim must be *independently proven valid with compelling evidence*

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Meccan period, however, the warner's prophetic authority is asserted with extraordinary intensity against an elaborately-defined set of opposing unbelievers. Saleh rightly identifies this late-Meccan shift as reflecting the emergence of proto-Medinan ideology, but his close adherence to traditional exegesis (notwithstanding his protestations to the contrary) precludes him from tracing this shift to a substantive transformation of the prophetic message itself. He instead explains the transition as reflecting the prophet's increasing frustration and despair over the years, because the Quraysh would not accept his largely-unchanged message.

*and logic*, rather than presumed as the somnolent default. It must be shown that such contentions efficiently, coherently, and systematically explain the varied references and language used in the early corpus, without continuous reliance upon pseudo-explanatory devices (and particularly by invoking indeterminate Meccan referents that the tradition does not agree upon).

It is not my ambition, with this short paper, to convince the reader of each interpretation that I summarize in the preceding sections. Rather I aim to suggest more broadly the epistemological limitations of the frameworks that scholars normally apply to the early quranic corpus—and which historians, by extension, rely upon to analyze early Islam. Proceeding from defective foundations, historians cannot produce a coherent account of how Islam emerged relative to the quranic corpus. The Qur’ān is left an impenetrable analytical subject. Consequently, historians are obliged to either assign core Ḥiğāz-isolating innovations an implausibly late *post-prophetic* date (like Shoemaker), or else they accept the traditional picture of a Meccan prophetic function that was already distinct and Ḥiğāz-isolated *at its inception* (like Bowersock). In either case, historians remain subordinated to an underlying exegetical structure that functions, at every level, to erase, minimize, and deny any substantive evolution of the prophetic function during Muḥammad’s own lifetime.

Yet the Qur’ān itself is relatively direct and explicit about the progressive transformation and Ḥiğāzification of the prophetic mission. Islamic tradition acknowledges that the Qur’ān affirms a disputed change in the believers’ prayer direction, which had shifted from Palestinian Jerusalem to Arabian Mecca during the prophet’s Medinan career (Q 2:143-44). This change of the believers’ ritual orientation to a new Meccan focus was directed by live prophetic authority. But was that the only such change? Comparatively little attention is given to the Qur’ān’s affirmation that there had been something fundamentally mistaken about the prophet’s earliest proclamations, in connection with his hopes about the Hour’s imminence. Q 22:42-57 complains that the people call the Arab prophet a liar, just as people had done with prior prophets who had proclaimed an impending judgment. Q 22:47-48 states “They seek to hurry you with the punishment. God will not break his promise. Surely a day with your Lord is like a thousand years of what you count. How many a town have I spared while I was doing it evil! Then I seized it.” After a warning about striving against God’s signs, Q 22:52 claims that for every prophet “when he begins to wish, Satan cast (something) into his wishful thinking. But God cancels what Satan cast, (and) then God clearly composes His verses—surely God is knowing, wise—so that He may make what Satan casts a test for those in whose hearts is a sickness, and whose hearts are hardened—and surely the evildoers are indeed in extreme defiance.” The prophet’s initial proclamation that a specific divine judgment was temporally imminent, which God later corrected via delivering composed verses to his prophet, was not exactly a quranic secret.<sup>48</sup>

That earlier surahs were altered via later prophetic revelations was also no quranic secret. Q 16:101 declares “When We exchange a verse in place of (another) verse – and God knows

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<sup>48</sup> Nor has this point gone unrecognized by critical scholars. Paul Casanova is probably the best-known exponent of the view that the prophet’s expectations of an imminent eschatological judgment were suppressed at a later juncture. See Paul Casanova, *Mohammed et la fin du monde, Étude critique sur l’Islam primitif* (Paris: Geuthner, 911).

what He sends down – they say ‘You are only a forger!’ No! But most of them do not (anything).” Q 2:106 states “Whatever verse We cancel or cause to be forgotten, we bring a better (one) than it, or (one) similar to it.” Q 13:9 proclaims “God blots out whatever he pleases and He confirms (whatever He pleases). With him is the mother of the Book.” Such alteration of earlier quranic recitations via adding and substituting new verses is freely acknowledged by the tradition, of course, which attributes this ‘abrogation’ to the prophet’s later receipt of new revelations. Yet a parallel process of exegetical abrogation was also used to change the meaning of early surahs. Such exegetical abrogation functioned to obscure the plain meaning of verses that later became disfavored (cf. God causing verses to be ‘forgotten’ in Q 2:106), and even to outright bar their interpretation. Thus Q 3:7 declares that “some verses are clearly composed – they are the mother of the Book – but others are ambiguous. As for those in whose hearts (there is) a turning aside, they follow the ambiguous part of it, seeking (to cause) trouble and seeking its interpretation. No one knows its interpretation except God.”

Q 74:30-31 is a wonderful example that combines (1) explicit abrogation by a clarifying verse interpolation with (2) implied abrogation by enjoining interpretation. When relating the initial prophetic commission, Q 74:30 declares that the warner’s human opponent will be cast into hellfire presided over by “nineteen.” In Late Antiquity, this was an unmistakable proclamation that the prophetic opponent would be trapped in hellfire by the cosmic forces of fate, which consisted of the twelve zodiacal houses and the seven classical planets, commonly called “the seven and the twelve” in late antique discourse.<sup>49</sup> The quranic use of this concept later became disfavored, however, presumably because it was felt to be too ‘polytheistic.’ Q 74:31, which is a long interpolated verse (even by traditional accounts), thus disrupts this early surah by instructing its audience not to inquire into what Q 74:30 means. Q 74:31 castigates those who attempt to analyze their Lord’s angelic forces. Paralleling Q 22:52 and Q 3:7, the interpolated verse proclaims that people who seek to interpret the meaning of its preceding basal verse have hearts in which there is “sickness.”

In short, if we take the quranic statements on this subject seriously—as we should—then the obscurity of many basal surahs within traditional exegesis was not just accidental. An active program to prevent disfavored interpretations of earlier recitations appears to have been developed and promulgated, at least in part, while quranic composition was live. *Pace* Wansbrough and his acolytes, such corrections were likely imposed via direct prophetic authority, which sought to ‘correct’ the facial sense of basal oracles by a variety of devices, ranging from clarifying interpolations to interpretive directions. This explains in part why

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<sup>49</sup> “The notion of the seven and the twelve, that is, the angels of the planets and of the zodiac, is omnipresent in the religions of Syria and Mesopotamia.” Heinz Halm, *Die Kosmologie und Heilslehre der frühen Ismā‘īliya: Eine Studie zur Islamischen Gnosis* (Wiesbaden 1978), 98. Mārūtā of Maypherqat describes the Manichaeans as follows: “They proclaim the seven and the twelve. They speak of the existence of fates, destinies, and zodiacal signs, and they practice the Chaldean sciences and are accomplished in divination.” Mārūtā of Maypherqat, *On Heresies* 24.9–16 (ed. Vööbus), tr. J. Reeves in John C. Reeves, *Prolegomena to a History of Islamicate Manichaeism* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2011), 144–45. Proclaiming the rule of the “nineteen” was synonymous with proclaiming the rule of cosmic fate over the lower world.

Islamic tradition did not retain clarity about the referents of many basal surahs. The plain meaning of such recitations was evidently subjected to exegetical suppression before the prophet died, as exemplified by how Q 74:31 had ‘corrected’ Q 74. Indeed, I suggest, this process likely began well before the prophetic *hiğrah* in 622 CE, and so the tradition could not have recalled or reversed such an archaic interpretive transition.

If basal surahs had originally articulated a generalized anti-Sasanian apocalypse, as I maintain, then we want to know how that apocalyptic structure was transformed into the Ḥiğāz-centered prophetic function that is already discernible in later ‘Meccan’ surahs, and which becomes asserted as a mandatory article of faith in ‘Medinan’ surahs. This raises many questions. How did believers come to expect that their Lord’s final *amr* would primarily manifest in the Ḥiğāz, under Muḥammad’s direct authority, rather than by eschatological judgment that angelic forces would hurl against the Sasanian regime? How, when, and why did these two clades of apocalyptic expectation split? Why did predictive prophecy disappear from quranic theology, becoming replaced by the community’s enduring subordination to charismatic prophetic authority? Why does Q 30:2-4 lack clear progeny in the Medinan corpus? Shouldn’t the believers have cared that their prophet’s “Meccan” prophecy came true when Khusrow II was deposed in 628 CE? Or had intervening developments already dogmatically isolated the prophetic mission from any further dependence upon the progression of the Sasanian-Byzantine war, making such Meccan reflexes of the basal prophetic function *anathema* for the later Medinan prophetic authority?

I will address these questions in more detail below, but the short answer is that quranic horizons were indeed dogmatically redefined into Ḥiğāzī isolation by the prophet’s late Meccan period. And with the battle of Badr in 624 CE, the quranic split away from regional apocalyptic expectations became cemented into an irrevocable new format. At the battle of Badr, angelic salvation had manifested in the Ḥiğāz under Muḥammad’s own authority, as a day of salvation (*furqān*) that came against the Quraysh. The ur-quranic *furqān* that had previously come down against a Sasanian force at Dū Qār between 604-11 CE (this being the subject of Q 105), without any personal involvement by Muḥammad, was displaced by this quranic *furqān* of 624 CE, which was equivalent to the Red Sea drowning Pharaoh’s men. With the new Ḥiğāzī manifestation of God’s saving judgment, Q 105 became an outmoded old oracle. The Ḥiğāz became construed and articulated as the new principal theater for the expected manifestation of the Lord’s *amr*. An Arabian neo-Moses would lead the believers to their decreed victory against the ‘polytheist’ forces.<sup>50</sup> The fate of Jerusalem consequently became less important than the fate of Mecca, which was creatively construed as a Jerusalem-equivalent in the Ḥiğāz, now asserted to be the object of mandatory pilgrimage ritual and *qiblah* for all believers. The subsequent death of Khusrow II in 628 CE could no longer matter within the confines of this innovative Ḥiğāz-isolated ideology. Contrary to Islamic tradition, quranic theology’s irrevocable split from competing clades of apocalyptic expectation, its Mecca-centered turn, was not present at the

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<sup>50</sup> A key distinction being that no opposing neo-Pharaoh was involved in this perceived Ḥiğāzī repetition, unlike the ur-quranic stage reflected by Q 105.

prophetic mission's inception. Contrary to much recent critical scholarship, this split was not a post-prophetic development either.

## **5. How Mantic Proclamations About World-Historical Judgment Were Progressively Replaced By A Ḥiḡāz-Centered *Amr* Under Prophetic Direction**

Having argued that Muḥammad began his career as a predictive prophet, and that his divinations were eventually proven correct by Khusrow II's deposition in 628 CE—albeit that was much later than originally expected—I will briefly outline one model for how quranic theology became differentiated, as an integrated set of theological innovations, long before the Sasanian king's downfall. Like biological mitosis, the Lord's *amr* was first peripheralized into an Arabian context, then 'twinning' into Ḥiḡāzī equivalent functions, and finally split into irreconcilable soteriological models, purposefully divided along sacred geography.<sup>51</sup>

1. As the ur-quranic omen that ignited prophetic function, the Lord's final judgment was perceived to have begun *visibly* manifesting in the conflict between mobile Arab tribes and the Sasanian empire on the outskirts of Al-Ḥīrah (Q 105). Khusrow II's new advances into Arabian regions threatened Quraysh trade (Q 106). This preliminary manifestation of final judgment in southwestern Iraq, as the destruction of a Sasanian force at the hands of Arab tribes, generated a distinctively Arabian eschatological ideology, peripheralized away from Byzantine dogma.
2. Having correctly grasped the significance of this visible omen (if not the exact timing for its future culmination), the warner perceived himself to be a neo-Moses, who God had sent to warn about the decreed judgment. Believers must remain steadfast in devotion to their Lord. The Sasanian regime would certainly be punished by angelic forces which would complete the dividing judgment (*furqān*) that God had decreed for a specific day.
3. Anger at reports about the Sasanian massacre in Jerusalem in 614 CE, along with heightened anticipation of the imminent eschatological judgment (Q 85).
4. Growing disappointment that the 'decreed' judgment was not manifesting further, as the years passed by, and Sasanian advances continued unabated (Heraclius' first victory only came in the winter of 622 CE). Intensifying criticism by the warner's community that his proclamations of an imminent judgment were not coming true.
5. Increased focus on asserting the prophetic authority against perceived equivalents of the wicked Sasanian forces within the prophet's local (i.e. Meccan) context. Alignment of the 'believers' against opposing factions who counseled compromise with the apparent new reality of Sasanian regional dominance.
6. A perceived divine command for the prophet to cease focusing on Khusrow II's repentance, and instead focus more on ministering to his local community. (Q 80).

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<sup>51</sup> Each point can be contested, of course, as can their order. This is just one model for how the progression may have occurred. A monograph would be required to do justice to this subject.



7. “Second Meccan” introduction of intense invective against the sin of *širk*, polytheism, which was identified within the warner’s own community.
8. Intensified calls for repentance of those who do not believe, and for acceptance of the prophet’s revelatory authority. Increased uncertainty about the temporal imminence of eschatological judgment. Quranic soteriology begins being redefined in a manner that did not depend entirely upon the continuous manifestation of a temporally-imminent judgment.
9. In the basal conception of the descending angelic collectivity that effectuated the *amr*, God sent down *al-mulqiyāti dīkran* (those who bring down a reminder, meaning revelatory angels), but he also sent down *al-fāriqāti farqan* (those who divide with a division, meaning those who administered the dividing judgment against the gathered people); see Q 77:4-5. But as the soteriological function of immediate angelic punishment was suppressed, revealed verbal signs (which originally were a preliminary manifestation of the decreed salvation) became construed as an equivalent type of *furqān*, equated with the community’s divided reception of the prophetic revelation.<sup>52</sup> Prophetic revelation was asserted as a type of self-contained salvation.
10. Denials that an angel had come with the prophet—in contrast to basal claims about an angelic emissary, who had remained distant in the heavens, and who carried the Lord’s full authority, like a divine counterpart of the *šāhānšāh*’s emissary (Q 53, 81). Replacement of that separate angel figure with the *rūḥ*, the spirit of God, which is portrayed as having come down upon and merged with the human prophet as a spirit of divine authority.
11. Explicit quranic equation of the human warner with the Lord’s noble *rasūl*, a term which in the basal surahs had primarily referred to the Lord’s angelic emissary.
12. Explicit prophetic aspiration to achieve an exalted status through heavenly ascent and return, which was to be achieved in devotional activity via repeating oral formulae declaring the warner’s status as the Lord’s pure and devoted servant. (Q 17:79-81, Q 72).
13. Perception and articulation of new peripheral equivalents of older biblical sacred geography, generating “quranic twins” located within the Ḥiğāz. This process was continuous with anti-Chalcedonian Christian efforts to construct a sanctified periphery against Jerusalem, which had been ‘corrupted’ by the Byzantine imposition of Chalcedonian clergy.
14. Depiction of the prophet as having been sent to warn the polytheistic “mother of cities” about the judgment coming against it (Q 42:7, 6:92), a region now identified as Mecca and its environs. This displaced the more basal function of warning about God’s judgment against Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital that was commonly equated in late antiquity with Babylon, the biblical mother of all human cities. Mecca is construed as a new type of counter-Babylon, its Ḥiğāzī ‘twin.’

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<sup>52</sup> Hence the genesis of the alleged inconsistency in the quranic term *furqān*, literally ‘divider,’ used to designate both (1) salvation by judgment and (2) revelation given to prior prophets. For the scholarly debate over this term, see Fred Donner, “Qur’anic Furqān.” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 52, no. 2 (2007): 279–300; Walid Saleh, “A Piecemeal Qur’ān: Furqān and its Meaning in Classical Islam and in Modern Qur’ānic Studies,” *JSAI* 42 (2015): 31-71.

15. Articulation of quranic counter-narratives regarding the eschatological expectations that were circulating in connection with the Byzantine-Sasanian war (Q 17, 18, 30). These counter-narratives minimized the role of Byzantine imperial authority and generalized the Lord's opponents into a sinful aggregation of anonymous unbelievers, who were equally present in the Ḥiğāz (Q 30:2-4). The quranic *amr* was still loosely connected to the war's progress, but its anticipated culmination did not remain centered on Jerusalem or Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and it was not led by Byzantine power.
16. Intensified demands for the community's obedience to direct prophetic authority. Intensified conflicts with 'compromising' Ḥiğāzī factions.
17. *Hiğrah* to Yaṭrib. Joinder of the prophetic function with militant Ḥiğāzī factions who opposed Sasanian influence, but also distrusted Byzantine power.<sup>53</sup>
18. The battle of Badr, 624 CE. A new descent of visible angelic salvation, confirming the Ḥiğāz-centered *amr*. Rapid dissolution of remaining connections to pro-Byzantine eschatological ideology, and rapid construction of full Ḥiğāz-isolating sacred geography.
19. Change of the believers' *qiblah* from Jerusalem to Mecca. Change of primary target for purification by conquest from Jerusalem to Mecca. Change of mandatory object of ritual pilgrimage from Jerusalem to Mecca. Rejection of intercalated calendars, severing ritual continuity with Christianity and Judaism. Mecca articulated as a counter-Jerusalem.
20. Formation of a parallel military campaign, which believers were required to join, that would subordinate all unbelievers to God's authority, mediated by his prophet. Implementation of Arabian eschatological ideology, which mirrored Byzantine eschatological ideology, but was no longer reconcilable with it. Muḥammad functions as a counter-Heraclius, a divinely-appointed commander of the believers and governor of their society.
21. Conquest of Mecca, c. 630 CE. Death of the prophet, c. 632 CE.

Interestingly, this structure of transitions corresponds closely to traditional Islamic chronology for the prophetic mission. While these transitions can also be reconciled with more protracted models of quranic composition, which encompass some degree of post-prophetic contributions (as Tesei, for example, suggests<sup>54</sup>), they nonetheless evidence a very early and active process of quranic differentiation, relative to more generalized regional currents of apocalyptic expectation.

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<sup>53</sup> Although Michael Lecker depicts the Ġassānid factions in Yaṭrib as vectors of Byzantine influence, the relationship between the Byzantines and their Ġassānid (more properly, Jafnid) allies had largely collapsed into animosity at the end of the 6th century. The emperor Maurice abolished Jafnid rule in 582 CE, in large part because the Byzantines presciently feared the extreme anti-Chalcedonian stance of the Ġassānid Arabs. The militant extreme monophysitism of northwestern Arabs, which scholars have correctly characterized as a precursor to Islamic ideology, had become an obvious threat to Byzantine hegemony in the region.

<sup>54</sup> For a refined discussion of this issue, see, e.g., T. Tesei, "The Romans Will Win!"

## 6. Conclusion—The Incomplete Quranicization of Early Conquest Ideologies

Early conquest ideologies likely remained aligned with the prophet's more basal ideology, which had sought to reverse Sasanian dominance and purify Jerusalem (first by expelling Sasanian rule, and second by expelling the 'corrupt' Byzantine-Chalcedonian regime). Such counter-imperial ideology was already diffused along the Arabian periphery, particularly with Arabophone anti-Chalcedonian factions, prior to Muḥammad's initial assertion of neo-prophetic authority. By contrast, the early conquests were probably not yet dominated by the more specialized quranic innovations that had emerged in the prophet's later career. Although the Ḥiḡāzī mitosis was essentially completed within quranic theology itself, its parameters would not have become authoritative across all Arabian contexts by the time of the prophet's death.<sup>55</sup> The Ḥiḡāz-isolating innovations embedded in later quranic recitations would only slowly, and selectively, come to displace the less-specialized forms of counter-imperial ideology that motivated the early conquests. Fred Donner's concept of 'quranicization' is probably an apt term for this process.<sup>56</sup>

A fascinating related problem is raised by Pourshariati's revised chronology for the initial Arab invasions of Sasanian Iraq. Analyzing the Sasanian sources, she concludes that "the striking fact is that these wars fall, not as it has been conventionally believed, following the hijra calendar, in the years 633–634 CE, but rather between 628–632 CE, when the Sasanian monarchy was engulfed in factional strife spearheaded by its nobility."<sup>57</sup> If so, these wars would have begun prior to the prophet's death, and in fact before his conquest of Mecca. If Pourshariati is right, then the earliest invasions of Sasanian lands probably embodied a militant Arabian ideology that closely paralleled the prophet's basal anti-Sasanian ideology. But like the battle at Ḍū Qār (604–11 CE), the initial invasions of Iraq would have been conducted without strict dependence upon the prophet's charismatic authority—and certainly without embodying his late Ḥiḡāz-isolating innovations. The earliest Arab combatants would likely have invoked the neo-prophetic authority, if at all, in a relatively talismanic sense. For subsequent Arab incursions against Palestine, the invocation of neo-prophetic authority would have become more prominent.

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<sup>55</sup> This is a median position. Unlike Wansbrough's framework, it does not primarily assign quranic innovations a post-prophetic date. Unlike traditional narrative, it does not homogenize quranic theology by attributing quranic innovations to the inception of the prophetic mission.

<sup>56</sup> Fred Donner, "Qur'ānicization of Religio-Political Discourse in the Umayyad Period," *REMMM* 129 (2011): 79–92.

<sup>57</sup> P. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, at p. 169.