

QS 32 Q 37:6 – 11

37.6 We adorned the lower sky with the adornment of stars,

37.7 A protection against every rebellious demon.

37.8 They cannot listen in on the Highest Assembly, And are pelted from every side,

37.9 Thrown back, and theirs is an eternal punishment;

37.10 Except for one who happens to catch a scrap,

And is then pursued by a shooting star.

37.11 So sound them out: “Are they more difficult to create, or those others We created?”

We created them from viscous clay.

37.6 Nous avons décoré le ciel le plus proche d’un décor: les étoiles,

37.7 afin de le protéger contre tout diable rebelle.

37.8 Ils ne pourront être à l’écoute des dignitaires suprêmes [les Anges]; car ils seront harcelés de tout côté,

37.9 et refoulés. Et ils auront un châtimement perpétuel.

37.10 Sauf celui qui saisit au vol quelque [information]; il est alors pourchassé par un météore transperçant.

37.11 Demande-leur s’ils sont plus difficiles à créer que ceux que Nous avons créés? Car Nous les avons créés de boue collante!

سورة الصافات

إِنَّا زَيَّنَّا السَّمَاءَ الدُّنْيَا بِزِينَةِ الْكَوَاكِبِ (6) وَحَفِظْنَا مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْطَانٍ مَارِدٍ (7) لَا يَسْمَعُونَ إِلَى الْمَلَأِ الْأَعْلَى وَيُقَذَّفُونَ مِنْ كُلِّ جَانِبٍ (8) دُخْرًا وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ وَاصِبٌ (9) إِلَّا مَنْ خَطِفَ الْخَطْفَةَ فَأَتْبَعَهُ شِهَابٌ ثَاقِبٌ (10) فَاسْتَنْقَذَهُمْ أَهْمُ أَشَدُّ خَلْقًا أَمْ مَنْ خَلَقْنَا إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاهُمْ مِنْ طِينٍ لَازِبٍ (11)

Crone

This is one out of many passages in the Qur’ān alluding to or telling the story of *ginn* or demons trying to penetrate the heavens in order to hear what is being decided there, only to be chased away by having fireballs thrown at them. Their knowledge is not always illicit: in two passages, including by far the longest, it is the recitation of Qur’ānic material that they hear, causing some of them to convert to Islam (Q 46:29 ff; 72:1 ff). In what follows I first comment on the passage line by line and next discuss the pre-history of the story, the use to which it is put in the Qur’ān, and what we can infer about the composition and chronology of the Qur’ān from the variant versions, with a few remarks on the reception of the story as well.

6. We’ve adorned the lower heaven with stars/planets (*kawākib*): The *kawākib* are elsewhere replaced by constellations (*burūğ*), cf. Q 15:16 – 18: “We have placed the constellations (*burūğ*) in the sky and adorned them (*zayyannāhā*) for those who look at them.” Also Q 25:61: “Blessed is He who placed the constellations in the sky and placed a lamp (*sirāğān*) in it and a moon giving off light.” Also Q 85:1: “By the sky endowed with constellations.”

The lower heaven: the one nearest to the earth. There are seven heavens in the Qur’ān (Q 2:29; 17:44; 23:86; 41:12; 65:12; 67:3; 71:15).

7. Protection against demons: It is not clear whether God sets up the lower heaven or the stars/planets/constellations to serve as protection. Two variants sug-

gest the former (Q 15:16; 67:5); one is ambivalent (Q 21:32), and two suggest the latter (Q 21:32; 41:12). Either way, the demons can't get to the higher heavens because they are stopped here. The idea also appears elsewhere in the Qur'an:

15:16–18: “We have placed the constellations (*burūġ*) in the sky and adorned them (*zayyannāhā*) for those who look at them; and We have protected them against every accursed demon (*šayṭān raġīm*), except for such as listens by stealth (*istarāqa l-sam'*) – and he is pursued by a bright fireball (*šihāb mubīn*).”

21:32: “We have made the sky a well-guarded roof (*saqfan mahfūzan*).”

41:12: “We adorned the lower heaven with lamps (*maṣābīḥ*) and [made them/ gave them?] protection.”

55:33: “O company of spirits and humans (*al-ġinn wa-l-ins*), if you can penetrate the regions of heaven and earth, then [go ahead and?] penetrate! You will not penetrate without authorization (*sulṭān*).”

67:5: “We adorned the lower heaven with lamps (*maṣābīḥ*) and set them up as missiles (*ruġūman*) against the demons (*šayāṭīn*), and prepared for them the punishment of the blaze (*'adāb al-sa'īr*).”

72:8: The *ġinn* examined the heaven and found it to be “filled with stern guards and fireballs (*ḥarasan šadīdan wa-šuhuban*).”

7. Demons trying to listen in: This, too, is mentioned elsewhere, though the *šayāṭīn* have a tendency to turn into spirits (*ġinn*) of a more benevolent kind when this part is told. What they are trying to hear is the reading of the revelations that the Messenger would recite (after they had been transmitted to him) during the congregational service. A session was known as a “reading” or “recitation” (*qur'ān*), which eventually became the name of the book in which they were collected. The demons do not manage to hear anything (Q 26:210–12), but two passages present the *ġinn* as listening to it in the same respectful manner as the Messenger's followers (Q 46:29f; 72:1–8), seated in places where they can avoid the stern guards and fireballs, an option they declare not to exist anymore (Q 72:9).

8. The highest council (*al-mala' al-a'lā*) (on which, see further *EQ*, s.v. “Court”): The idea that God presides over a council of lesser deities or, as here, angels is a very old one, clearly inspired by the councils of earthly kings; it appears in ancient Mesopotamian, Ugaritic and Phoenician literature, and in the Hebrew Bible. The term *mala'* without the qualification “highest” was presumably current in Arabia for earthly councils of advisers, for we hear of human councils, too (Pharaoh and his *mala'*, Q 12:43; the *mala'* of the unbelievers in Noah's time, Q 23:24; that of the Queen of Sheba, Q 27:32f, etc.). The other Qur'ānic reference to the highest council envisages its members as disputing (Q 38:69, where the Messenger disclaims any knowledge of *al-mala' al-a'lā id yaḥtašimūna*), which suggests Jewish transmitters: God is frequently disputing with the angels in rabbinic literature, inter alia in connection with the creation of man, and this, too, is reflected in the Qur'an (Q 2:30). The Christians did not to my knowledge envisage the angels as so forward as to argue with God, and they certainly denied that God was disputing with them when He created Adam.

10. The one who snatches away something: The demons are envisaged along the lines of wild animals or dogs who rush in and snatch some food, whereupon they are pelted with stones and run away.

10. Brilliant fireball (*šihāb tāqīb*): A *šihāb* is anything that shines brightly in the sky, including shooting stars (meteors), comets and asteroids. The reference (cf. Q 72:8; 55:35, which refers instead to *šuwāz* and *nuḥās*) is presumably to one or all of these.

11. So ask them (*fa-staftihim*), Are they more difficult to create (*ašaddu ḥalqan*) or those that We created (*am man ḥalaqnā*)? A similar question is asked in Q 79:27 (*a-antum ašaddu ḥalqan am al-samā'u banāhā*) and answered in 40:57 (*la-ḥalqu l-samawāti wa-l-arḍi akbaru min ḥalqi l-nās*). The variants show that the question is addressed to the Messenger's opponents, not to the spirits (*ǧinn*), and that the opponents are being asked whether they are more difficult than other beings to create (as in Paret's and Yusuf Ali's translations), not whether they are stronger in constitution (as in Arberry's). The opponents must have denied that God had created them; they scoff at the idea of bodily resurrection in the continuation (Q 37:16) and should perhaps be seen as belonging to the radicals who denied that there was any kind of afterlife and that it was God (as opposed to time) who made people die: the view that He did not kill people implies that He had not created them either (Q 45:24; cf. Crone 2012, esp. 471f). The Qur'ān responds that they were no more difficult to create than any (other) human beings He had created, or any other thing such as the sky (Q 79:27); indeed, creating the heavens and the earth was more difficult than creating people (Q 40:57). Q 37:11 forms the transition from the pericope about the demons to polemics against the infidels.

The pre-history of the story.

The Qur'ānic versions of the myth have Zoroastrian, Jewish and probably also Arabian roots. The idea of demons trying to penetrate the highest heaven, to be repelled by the stars and/or the divine beings inhabiting it, is Zoroastrian. According to the *Dādestānī dēnīk*, 36:15ff, Ohrmazd divided the sky (the first thing he created) into three parts. The top third, known as Garodman, was where Ohrmazd himself resided. It was a fortress inaccessible to the evil one, defended by the divine beings called *amahaspsands* and the righteous servants who fearlessly destroy demons. The bottom third was connected with darkness and Ahriman; and the middle third is where we find ourselves, and our job is also to do battle against the demons, though some of us have been seduced by them. When Ahriman attacked with his forces, the creation became dark “and the demons rushed from below and above; they even hastened to the uppermost third, where the pure Garodman is found,” but there they were stopped by the barricade over which the pure religion shines “like the star-studded and spirit-fashioned girdle of the good religion” (*Dd*, 36:35, Jaafari-Dehaghi; cf. the different transliteration and translation by Molé 1963: 438, here *Dd*, 37:25f). According to the *Bundahišn*, Ohrmazd set up the primordial creations as

an army in divisions for battle so that they could save the creations when the assault came. First he created the twelve constellations, each one of them a soldier, followed by 6,480,000 stars to assist them. He also appointed four generals over the constellations, and a chieftain to be in overall charge, with more stars as their assistants, and ensured the safety of the highest zone by placing unmixable stars there, appointing the glory (*khwarra*) of the good religion as its general. *Khwarra* is a word with many meanings, but the relevant meaning here is overwhelming and terrifying brilliance (cf. Crone, 2012: 321f). Then he created the sun and the moon and made them leaders of those stars (*GrBd*, 2:1–12, Anklesaria). In short, every single “good” heavenly body was a warrior (the “bad” heavenly bodies were the planets and other mobile heavenly bodies). When Gayomard woke up after Ahriman’s attack, the world of the living was resounding with the thundering of the giant *dēvs* fighting the constellations (*GrBd*, 4:23, Anklesaria). The spirit of heaven itself (*mēnog ī asmān*) was an invisible armoured force which resisted the destructive spirit until Ohrmazd had built a stronger fortress (*GrBd*, 60:11, Bailey 1971: 142f; cf. also Henning 1942; Raffaelli 2009). In *Zādspram* (ch. 2, Gignoux & Tafazzoli), Ahriman makes a whole series of incursions. In the first Ohrmazd leaves the earth, where he has apparently been up to now, and goes to heaven where he builds a better fortress (2:8; compare the similar versions known to Abu ʿĪsā in Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *Muʿtamad*, 2nd ed., 639, quoted in many other sources at diverse length). All these things are still going on, for every night Ahriman and the demons rush forth to destroy Ohrmazd’s creatures (*PrDd*, 64:14, Williams), and the sun, moon and stars participate in this: Ohrmazd had fixed the luminous sun and resplendent moon and glorious stars at the summit of the middle third containing the earth and arranged them so that they would destroy the “sorcerers and witches” who rushed from below to destroy the creatures (*Dh*, 36:1f, J-D – it is the good creatures on the earth, not the heavenly world above the sun and the moon, that are being protected here).

All these works were composed well after the Qurʾān, but the idea of the mobile comets and planets as part of the evil forces of Ahriman fighting the fixed stars, sun and moon, representing Ohrmazd, is of Avestic origin (Raffaelli 2009: 105f; cf. Panaino 1990: 20). What is more, the military model is so pervasive, with endless exhortations to fight evil in any form (clearly including the Romans), that the material must reflect the militant Sasanian empire, not the emasculated Zoroastrian community left behind in Iran of the post-conquest period.

The Qurʾānic demons/spirits are not warriors, however. Like the Iranian demons they are trying to penetrate the heavens, but their aim is not to destroy God or the angels; what they are after is knowledge of what God and the angels are talking about. This takes us to Judaism. It is in Jewish works, and Christian works so early that they are still Jewish, that the demons listen in. The starting point is presumably Job 15:8, where Eliphaz the Temanite tells Job that he does not know anything about God: “Have you listened in the council of God?” The Qurʾānic Messenger seems to have been faced with a similar question by opponents who thought that he did not know anything about God, for he openly admits that he does not know what

is going on in the highest council (Q 38:69 f); but he claims supernatural knowledge even so, by way of revelation. What came in between the two?

There must have been plenty of exegetical attempts at the Job passage, but I don't know of any until we reach the *Testament of Solomon*. This work was composed or redacted in Greek in the first, second or early third century by a Christian, but it contains material reflecting first-century Palestinian Judaism (see Duling 1983: 940 ff). It is in this work that Solomon subdues the demons and forces them to build the temple, an idea which is also familiar to the Qur'ān (Q 21:82; 38:37 f). In the *Testament of Solomon* the demon Orniās tells Solomon that "We demons go up to the firmament of heaven, fly around among the stars, and hear the decisions which issue from God concerning the lives of men" (20:12). This is pretty close to what the Qur'ān tells us about the *ġinn*: what is missing is only the sense that this is an illicit activity which the defensive mechanisms of heaven prevent them from bringing to fruition. In the *Testament of Solomon* the demons are not chased away either; rather, they fall down on their own "like leaves from a tree" out of sheer exhaustion because they do not have a resting place in the heavens (whereas the *ġinn* of Q 72:9 do have places to sit on *maqā'id*). It is the demons themselves who are shooting stars; more precisely, this is what people think when they see them fall, we are told, with the assurance that it is not correct (ch. 20). This suggests that the Zoroastrian conception of shooting stars as demonic had reached Palestine already before the rise of the Sasanians. There has been much debate about the question of how far Zoroastrianism affected the Jews in the centuries before and after the rise of Christianity (esp. in connection with the Dead Sea Scrolls), much of it by scholars with insufficient knowledge and by now dated ideas about Zoroastrianism; but as a leading Iranianist well informed about Judaism notes, there are too many similarities between the two sides for them to have developed independently (Shaked 1984: 324).

Demons listening in also figure in the Babylonian Talmud, where the (perfectly amiable) demon Ashmodai is envisaged as going up to the "academy in heaven" every day to study there and as participating in academies on earth as well, with the result that he has knowledge of the future (*Babylonian Talmud*, Gittin 68a). Another Talmudic passage claims that the demons, like the ministering angels, know what will happen, whereupon it is objected, "You cannot mean that! Rather, they hear from behind the veil like the ministering angels" (*Hagigah* 16a; cf. *Fathers*, ch. 37, without the objection). The objection is to the effect that the demons do not *know*: only God does. Both the ministering angels and the demons learn from behind the curtain or veil in front of God's throne (a mode of revelation also mentioned in Q 42:51).¹ In practice, then, it is fully accepted that the demons have knowledge of the future, and that they do so in precisely the same way as the ministering angels.

1 I am indebted to Peter Schäfer for an explanation of this piece of rabbinic reasoning.

Again, there is nothing illicit about their knowledge; this feature seems to be unique to the Qur'ān.

The presumed Arabian input shows in the transformation of the demons (*šayāṭīn*) into spirits (*ǧinn*), who are not intrinsically good or evil, but simply members of a parallel society. Whereas the *šayāṭīn* who are being shot down by flaming missiles are clearly envisaged as evil, the *ǧinn* who overhear the Qur'ān in Q 72 react just like the Messenger's own people: some convert and some remain foolish. In Q 46:29 they react like the Messenger himself by becoming warners to their own people. According to these *ǧinn*, it is only *now* that anyone trying to do the same would be chased away by a fireball (Q 72:9). Eichler is probably right to suspect that here we have an Arabian development of a Jewish or, as I would say, Irano-Jewish theme (Eichler 1928, 30 ff).

From where had the theme been transmitted to Arabia? The combination of Jewish and Zoroastrian elements obviously suggests Babylonia, or in other words Sasanian Iraq. It was also in Iraq that the Zoroastrian *amahraspands* Hordād and Amordād turned into the fallen angels of the Book of Enoch, Hārūt and Mārūt (Crone 2013: 28), and probably there that Enoch acquired the name of Idrīs as well (Crone 2016). If the Qur'ānic 'Uzayr is a corruption of Azael (a possibility examined in Crone 2013: 41–50), he, too, has his roots in Iraq. In all four cases the material is likely to have been transmitted by Babylonian Jews to their coreligionists in Arabia, and to have passed from them to the Arabs. Perhaps there was also an input from Palestine, as suggested by the presence in the Qur'ān of the story of Solomon and the demons from the *Testament of Solomon*, but that work could have been read, or known from paraphrases, in Babylonia as well. Either way, the presence of Zoroastrians in Arabia before the rise of Islam means that the myth is likely to have been told and retold with further Zoroastrian and Arabian elements.

The use of the myth in the Qur'ān.

The myth seems to have been well known to the Messenger's audience, for he does not usually tell it in full, but rather briefly refers or alludes to it, taking knowledge of it for granted. But as Hawting notes, it is not always easy to see why the myth is being adduced where it is or how it relates to a larger argument (Hawting 2006). In Q 37 it seems to be used to illustrate God's power: He is the lord of the heavens, the earth and everything in between (Q 37:6) and He has created all of it, as we are told numerous times in the Qur'ān; and on top of that He has made the heavens impenetrable to demons, or almost so. It is also in the context of God's powers that the myth is mentioned in Q 15:17 ff. But in Q 46:29 ff and 72:1 ff the *ǧinn* serve as model Muslims. Their speech forms the first half of a monotheist sermon, and it is hard to tell where they stop speaking and the Messenger (or, in Q 72:17, God) takes over.

The variant versions.

There are numerous variations in the wording of the relevant passages, but they all sound like the Messenger ringing the changes. In terms of contents, the most obvious feature to call for explanation is obviously the identification, in some *sūras*, of the supernatural beings as demons (*šayāṭīn*) roundly condemned as accursed and destined for hell (esp. Q 15:17; 37:9; 67:5) and, in other *sūras*, as spirits (*ǧinn*) who hear the reading (Qur'ān) that the Messenger himself was to receive and convert to warn their own peoples (Q 46:29 ff; 72:1 ff). The tradition assigns one *sūra* in which they are converted *ǧinn* to the Meccan period and another to the Medinese period (72 and 46, respectively), identifying the rest as Meccan, while Nöldeke assigns all the passages in question to the second and third Meccan periods regardless of whether the supernatural beings are demons or *ǧinn*. This shows the traditional chronology to be untenable, as has in fact been suspected for a while (cf. Reynolds 2011b). But should we explain the coexistence of these two different evaluations with a theory of authorial development or in terms of different versions of the same account collected from a number of communities who claimed to preserve the Messenger's words? I do not know the answer.

The reception of the story.

A poem ascribed to Umayya b. Abi l-Ṣalt refers to the inaccessible nature of the seventh heaven and to shooting stars as missiles launched to chase away demons (cf. Seidensticker 1996: 95 f). It does not add anything to the Qur'ān. There is a more interesting adaptation of the story in the *Sirr al-ḥalīqa* attributed to Balīnūs al-Ḥakīm (II, 15:15). Here we are told that the demons and their offspring (*šayāṭīn* and their offspring on a second occurrence) try to listen in on the highest council, here explained as the spiritual beings in charge of the sphere of the sun; when the sun rises in the east, these spiritual beings know everything that will happen that day, so the angels in charge of the sun tell the angels in charge of the moon, and the latter rub the stars until they become fiery and use them to chase the demons away. This certainly comes from pre-Islamic sources along with the Qur'ān. How far the story is used in other Islamic cosmological works I don't know, but the idea of shooting stars as anti-demonic missiles is so colorful that one would expect it to be widely used. Not everyone liked it, though. There were Dahrīs who found it ridiculous: it was absurd, they said, to suppose that creatures endowed with superior intelligence should go on trying to eavesdrop instead of learning from the Qur'ān that God always does as He threatens, quite apart from the fact that they would have learned from long experience (al-Ġāḥiḏ, *Ḥayawān*, VI, 4 f.; Crone 2010 – 11: 70). Al-Ġubbā'ī tries to meet their objections in his comments on 37:10 (Gimaret 1994).

The *aḥbārīs* handle the myth quite differently. According to Ibn Hišām's recension of Ibn Ishāq (I:204 ff., al-Ṣaqqā and others; trans. Guillaume: 90 ff.), the Qur'ān is targeting soothsayers. The latter owed their knowledge to the *ǧinn*, who had snatched their information from the lower heavens (not the highest council)

and mixed it with falsehood. But God put an end to this by having the *ġinn* chased away, and so soothsaying disappeared. This is also widely told in the exegetical tradition. The ancient Arab fear of falling stars does get a mention in Ibn Hišām (I:206; trans. 91), but the rest of the traditional accounts first encountered in Ibn Išhāq illustrate the discontinuity between, on the one hand, the Arabian and Syrian traditions (if we may take Balīnūs to represent the Syrian tradition) and, on the other hand, that of ‘Abbāsīd Iraq, including the Medinese heritage patronized there. It was from the Iraqi tradition, not that of western Arabia and Syria, that classical Islamic culture was formed.

Dye

Ce passage doit être rapproché de textes parallèles, notamment Q 15:16–18, Q 21:32, Q 41:12, Q 67:5, Q 72:8–9. Certes, le Coran est moins un livre qu’un *corpus* (au demeurant fort composite), et on court parfois le risque, en interprétant le Coran par lui-même, de postuler une cohérence et une systématisme qui peuvent être étrangères aux textes originellement épars et indépendants qui, réunis en un codex, ont fini par constituer le Coran. Néanmoins, dans le cas présent, l’ensemble des passages parallèles permet de dégager une image cohérente, à savoir : Dieu empêche les démons (vv. 6–10, Q 15:16–18, Q 67:5) ou les *ġinns* (Q 72:8–9) de pénétrer les cieux, mettant une protection, une barrière, au niveau du ciel le plus bas ; les démons et les *ġinns* ne peuvent donc pas entendre ce qu’ils voudraient entendre, en l’occurrence les chants de louange des anges, et le conciliabule divin.

Il semble bien que les *ginns* soient assimilés à des démons (et peut-être aussi à des anges déchus). Il faut voir là un phénomène d’acculturation, similaire à ce qu’il s’est passé ailleurs dans le monde antique : on interprète des croyances et des entités pré-juives, pré-chrétiennes, pré-islamiques..., selon une nouvelle cosmologie – on ne nie pas l’existence de ces entités (tout le monde croyait aux démons et aux esprits dans l’Antiquité), mais on en donne une autre interprétation, dans un nouveau cadre hiérarchique. De ce point de vue, le Coran se situe à la fin d’une longue histoire, celle des traditions énochiennes sur les anges déchus (cf. le *Livre des Veilleurs*, dans 1 Enoch 1–36), et de leurs réinterprétations, notamment dans la littérature hérésio-graphique et démonologique chrétienne. C’est probablement une confiance excessive dans la tradition musulmane, et dans le « grand récit » (*master narrative*) qu’elle met en place pour rendre compte de l’émergence de l’islam, qui explique l’incapacité de nombreux commentateurs à placer cette polémique coranique dans sa juste perspective, à savoir la démonologie et l’angélologie.

V. 7 : *mārid* est un hapax, vraisemblablement justifié par des raisons de rime. On rencontre plutôt, dans ce contexte, l’expression *kull šayṭān raġīm* (Q 15:17 ; Q 16:98 ; Q 81:25), « tout diable (ou démon) maudit », selon le sens de l’éthiopien *rəgəmt* (cf. Kropp 2005).

El-Badawi

The discourse on the “inhabitants of the firmaments” (*al-mala’ al-a’lā*; cf. also Q 38:69) seems to be in dialogue with the angelic hierarchy in the Hebrew Bible, Rabbinic and Early Church literature, especially the “Sons of God” (*benē hā elōhīm*; e.g., Genesis 6). The “demon” (*šayṭān*) does not seem to be referencing the reified “Devil” (*al-šayṭān*) as much as one of an evil/fallen class of angels (*šayatīn*) embodied in the constellations—perhaps “watchers” (Aram. *’ir*; cf. Dan 4; 1 Enoch 6–36). Similarly, throughout the Qur’ān “demons” (*[al-]šayāṭīn*) appear to offer alternate—misguided—divine knowledge (Q 2:102; 6:121; 7:30; 38:37) and yet they are accountable for their deeds in the hereafter along with human beings (Q 17:27; 19:68).

Although the Qur’ān’s cosmology taps into the vast reservoir of Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern imagery, it is sobering that the text subverts actions of *šayāṭīn* to God’s will (e.g., Q 26:210–21).

Grodzki

The motifs of the shooting star and “decorating”/ “guarding” the sky, whose origins may be probably traced back to the Jewish or Christian religious literature (as the Book of Job) or other ancient (Middle Eastern) myths or imagery, appear in different Qur’ānic passages, e.g., *al-samā’* has *al-burūğ* (Q 85:1; 25:61; 15:16), has (or has not?) *furūğ* (Q 50:6), *al-samā’ al-dunyā* is decorated by *maṣābīḥ* (Q 41:12) and *al-kawākib* (Q 37:6) etc. However the question is whether the different Qur’ānic passages altogether, with their allusive and unsystematic descriptions, propose a coherent and unique picture of the celestial world (if so, what is it?) or does the Qur’ān only recast previous traditions in a way for its own purpose? Or is it, as Günter Lüling suggests (2003: 393) that the editorial reworking of the pre-Islamic Christian texts (e.g., hymns) and the modification of their original (strophic) structure has blurred the text so much that its original meaning as a Qur’ānic variant of the well-known shooting-star-myth got totally lost.

Hawting

In v. 6 *al-samā’ al-dunyā* (cf. 67:5) is presumably “the lowest heaven,” rather than – as some translators want – “the lower heaven”; it reflects the idea of the seven heavens (e.g., Q 2:29, Q 41:12). In v. 7 *šayṭān mārid* (cf. *šayṭān marid* in Q 4:117 and Q 22:3) seems to allude to the myth of the rebellion against God of Satan and the rebel angels, as does the rest of the passage. Why is the heavenly council/assembly called *al-malā’ al-a’lā* in v. 8? In Q 2:246 there is reference to the *malā’* of the children of Israel after Moses (evidently alluding to the elders of Israel who assembled and asked Samuel to appoint a king for them in 1 Sam 8:4–5). In the Islamic historical tradition we read of the *malā’* of Mecca before Islam – apparently some sort of council of leaders. Presumably *malā’* in the sense of assembly derives from the root sense of fullness and plenitude?

Pregill

The invocation in vv. 1–5 seems to me to be indispensable for understanding the larger cosmological and angelological context of vv. 6–11: the ministering angels described in the opening verses are contrasted with the satans denounced in the following ones. The key phrase *al-tāliyāt dīkran* is surely not “reciting scripture” as it is sometimes rendered, but rather something like “chanting [His] remembrance,” a reference to the angels reciting the Trisagion as is depicted in Isaiah 6:3 and elsewhere.

In light of the direct parallels between this passage, Q 15:16–18 (where it is *kull šayṭān raḡīm*, “every cast-down satan”), and Q 72:8–9 (where the description of the attempt at eavesdropping and the eavesdroppers being chased away by the *šihāb* is put in the mouth of a *ḡinn*), it is puzzling to me why modern commentators have hesitated to simply identify the *ḡinns* as fallen angels. The entire complex mythology surrounding angels, satans, *Iblīs*, *ḡinns*, and the Daughters of Allah in Qur’ānic discourse is essentially angelological, and largely drawn from older late antique precedents and materials, especially the so-called Enochic literature. The Qur’ān’s references to these entities have generally been seen as incoherent, and confusion seems to stem at least in part from the tradition’s insistence on casting the Daughters as pagan goddesses and not angels, as well as its obscuring of the basic identity of satans and *ḡinns* by often (but not always) asserting that they are separate species.

Given the *sūra*’s overarching emphasis on divine sovereignty and unity, its use of the image of the divine council is ironic. The Biblical precursors to this image originated as an Israelite domestication of the older Canaanite concept of the council of gods, transforming it into a court of angels or spirits subordinated to El/Elohim/YHWH (cf., e.g., 1 Kgs 22, Job 1). By emphasizing that God’s fellow inhabitants in the heavens are His created ministers and servants and not His equals, the Qur’ān is largely recapitulating a much older theological discourse and repurposing it in a new context – which is presumably not so different from the ancient Israelite context, insofar as such a construct functions to polemicize against people who exalt these secondary beings too much, making them equal to God Himself. (This is one major function of the image of the divine retinue; the other – which is more in keeping with the traditional emphasis of the Enochic literature – is theodical, which is actually the main purpose behind the Qur’ān’s other use of this theme in the story of *Iblīs*.)

Reynolds

The term *hifẓ* (“protection”) of v. 7 suggests that the stars really act as guardians of heaven, here presented as a celestial fortress (in Q 15:16 the stars are described as *burūġ* – which may mean not “constellations” but “towers”). This cosmological imagery should be understood in light of the expulsion of *Iblīs* from heaven after his refusal to prostrate before Adam. *Iblīs* (and his hosts, see Q 26:95) were sent “down” (Q 7:13) from the heavenly realm and now cannot get back in despite their

best efforts. When they try to do so they are *yuqḍafūna* (v. 8), that is, “cast away” (not “shot at” [Quli Qara’i] or “pelted” [Arberry, Pickthall], translations which rely on the idea that God stones the demons with the stars or other bits of celestial matter).

Rippin

v. 10: *man ḥaṭifa’ l-ḥaṭfa*, “he who snaps up the snapping up” [translations: “snatches a fragment,” “eavesdropped once”] (note the parallels cited in Paret 1977: 414 to Q 15:18 and Q 72:8 depend on the following use of “comet”/“shooting star” *ṣihāb* – Q 15:18 associates this with “eavesdropping” in a more explicit way). Other uses of the root are in Q 2:20, “snatch away their sight” and Q 22:31, “snatched by birds.” The sense of “eavesdropping” then depends upon the reference back to v. 8 “They do not listen to the higher assembly” followed then by this “exception” who “snatches,” and the parallel back to Q 15:18, *man istaraqa l-sam’a*, “he who steals the sound.”

Tengour

Ce début de la trente-septième sourate met en scène la représentation d’un ciel coranique dorénavant protégé et gardé par les *Ṣāffāt* qui font mur et se tiennent prêtes, en cas d’intrusion d’un djinn-démon rebelle, *ṣayṭān mārid* (ici le mot *ṣayṭān*, djinn-démon, précédé du partitif *kull*, tout, est encore employé comme nom commun et non encore comme nom propre servant à désigner le Satan coranique), à décocher des traits de feu qui atteignent leur cible, *ṣihāb tāqib*. Dans le même temps, ce début de sourate confirme a contrario que les djinns pouvaient accéder au ciel et au *Ġayb* pour capter subrepticement l’écoute (*istirāq al-sam’*) qu’ils transmettaient, selon les croyances des anciens Arabes, aux hommes qui avaient le pouvoir de communiquer avec eux comme le sorcier (*sāḥir*), le poète (*ṣā’ir*) ou le devin (*kāhin*).

Ce passage qui devra être mis en chronologie avec celui de Q 72:8–9 marque l’entrée définitive des djinns dans le discours coranique qui dans un premier temps avait cherché à les exclure. Cette tentative a échoué après que l’accusation d’une mauvaise emprise djinnique sur l’homme Muḥammad n’a pu être écartée et la parole coranique a dû se résoudre à les intégrer en son sein au prix d’une dépossession progressive de la plupart de leurs fonctions, à commencer par la principale, celle de pouvoir monter jusqu’au ciel et en capturer les secrets du *Ġayb* (*istirāq al-sam’*) pour ensuite les transmettre à autres devins et sorciers.

Mais que l’on ne s’y méprenne pas, car c’est uniquement pour servir sa cause que la parole coranique s’en est prise à cette fonction majeure des djinns. L’accès au ciel devait absolument leur être interdit pour qu’ils ne puissent plus avoir accès au *Ġayb* et que Muḥammad puisse, lui, de son côté, continuer à s’y référer sans risquer d’être accusé d’imposture comme il n’a cessé de l’être durant toute la période mecquoise. Pourtant, cette dépossession des djinns n’aura pas le résultat attendu et Muḥammad continuera à être dénié par les hommes de sa tribu jusqu’à sa sortie forcée, *’iḥrāḡ*, de La Mecque.

Tesei

[1] Context: the populations of late antique Near East had two diverse and somehow conflicting cosmological models. The first – usually labeled as Greco-Roman, or Aristotelian – describes the Earth as located at the center of a Universe composed by different heavens (usually seven), represented as concentric spheres. The second model derives from ancient Semitic traditions and is predominant in the Biblical descriptions of the Universe. This model represents the Earth as a flat disk encircled by waters and surmounted by a dome-like sky. During Late Antiquity, the two different views generated a dispute among the erudite Christians of the Byzantine Empire who debated about which was the true one (cf. van Bladel 2007a). As interestingly as surprisingly, the Qur’ān refers at once to both cosmological models widespread among the communities of its cultural environment.

[2] The expression *al-samā’ al-dūnyā*, “lowest sky” (v. 6), occurs with much the same features in two other Qur’ānic passages (41:12, 67:5): it acts as a protection and it is adorned with lamps (*bi-maṣābih*), that stand for the stars mentioned in Q 37:6). Q 41:12 makes it clear that *al-samā’ al-dūnyā* designates the first of seven heavens. The cosmological picture that emerges is an interesting one. In fact, on the one hand, the author(s) of these Qur’ānic passages refer(s) to a multiple heavens concept of the cosmos. However, on the other hand, the presence of the stars in the first heaven is surprising, as in the “multiple heavens” model the (fixed) stars are usually located in the last heaven. Furthermore, the stars’ function as protection against Satan suggests the presence of the firmament, a feature that, however, is usually absent in the “multiple heavens” model. On the contrary, the image of “the lowest sky” adorned with stars finds quite precise parallelisms in late antique exegesis on the Biblical cosmology. For instance, according to Ephrem’s commentary of Genesis “the firmament was adorned with the sun and the moon and the stars” (1994: 89). Thus, the Qur’ānic passage mingles elements drawn from both Greco-Roman and Biblical representations of the cosmos. In general terms, it is not clear whether the Qur’ān has coherent imagery about the shape of the world and to what extent it mediates between the two models it refers to. Of course, the necessity of providing a coherent cosmological picture is not a main point of the Qur’ān’s theological agenda and thus we have only incidental hints and allusions to it.

Younes

One is left wondering why the two words *bi-zīnatin* and *yassamma’ūn* are rendered the way they are in the standard reading of this passage instead of the more straightforward *bi-zīnati* and *yasma’ūn* as a normal reading of these verses would be on the basis of the Arabic text without the diacritics.

Zīnat al-kawākib, the construct phrase, with no *nunation* on *zīna*, would mean *the ornament of the planets*. The standard reading treats *al-kawākib* as a noun in apposition with *zīna*, resulting in a linguistically awkward construction: *an ornament, the planets*.

Yassamm'ūn, a *hapax legomenon*, is based on the Form V verb *yatasamma'ūn* and is obtained by deleting the *a* that follows the *t* and then merging the *t* with the following *s* (like *yataḍakkarūn* → *yaddakkarūn*.) The obvious goal is to give the word the meaning “they eavesdrop” as opposed to “they hear” or “listen.” The simpler *yasma'ūn*, based on the Form I verb *sami'* is quite common in the Qur'ān, with 78 occurrences (Badawi and Abdel Haleem 2008:455).