

QS 39 Q 53

53.1 By the star when it plumed!
53.2 Your companion has not veered from the truth, nor is he misguided.
53.3 Nor is he uttering his own fancies.
53.4 It is but an inspiration, being inspired,
53.5 Taught him by one immense in power,
53.6 daunting. He took his stand,
53.7 being on the upper horizon,
53.8 Then came near and hung suspended,
53.9 And was two-bows length, or closer.
53.10 And He inspired His servant with what He inspired him.
53.11 The mind did not question what it saw.
53.12 Do you dispute with him what he saw?
53.13 And he saw him a second time,
53.14 By the lote-tree of the Extremity,
53.15 Near which is the Garden of Refuge,
53.16 When there covered the lote-tree that which covered it.
53.17 The eye neither veered nor overreached.
53.18 He saw some of his Lord's greatest wonders.
53.19 Have you considered al-Lat and al-'Uzza?
53.20 And Manat, the third, the other?
53.21 To you belong males and to Him females?
53.22 What a crooked way of sharing!
53.23 They are but names that you and your forefathers coined:
Regarding them God sent down no authority. They merely follow their caprice, and what their souls hanker for,
Even though Guidance has come to them from their Lord.
53.24 Or will man obtain what he longs for?
53.25 To God belong the Last and the First.
53.26 How many an angel there is in heaven whose intercession is of no avail,
Save when God permits it to whom He wills, and with whom He is well pleased.
53.27 Those who believe not in the hereafter give the angels female names,
53.28 But of this they have no knowledge,
And merely follow surmise,
Though surmise avails nothing when compared to truth.
53.29 Therefore, shun him who turns away from Our Remembrance,

53.1 Par l'étoile à son déclin!
53.2 Votre compagnon ne s'est pas égaré et n'a pas été induit en erreur
53.3 et il ne prononce rien sous l'effet de la passion;
53.4 ce n'est rien d'autre qu'une révélation inspirée.
53.5 Que lui a enseigné [l'Ange Gabriel] à la force prodigieuse,
53.6 doué de sagacité; c'est alors qu'il se montra sous sa forme réelle [angélique],
53.7 alors qu'il se trouvait à l'horizon supérieur.
53.8 Puis il se rapprocha et descendit encore plus bas,
53.9 et fut à deux portées d'arc, ou plus près encore.
53.10 Il révéla à Son serviteur ce qu'Il révéla.
53.11 Le cour n'a pas menti en ce qu'il a vu.
53.12 Lui contestez-vous donc ce qu'il voit?
53.13 Il l'a pourtant vu, lors d'une autre descente,
53.14 près de la Sidrat-ul-Muntahâ,
53.15 près d'elle se trouve le jardin de Ma'w?:
53.16 au moment où le lotus était couvert de ce qui le couvrait.
53.17 la vue n'a nullement dévié ni outrepassé la mesure.
53.18 Il a bien vu certaines des grandes merveilles de son Seigneur.
53.19 Que vous en semble [des divinités], Lât et Uuzzâ
53.20 ainsi que Manât, cette troisième autre?
53.21 Sera-ce à vous le garçon et à Lui la fille?
53.22 Que voilà donc un partage injuste!
53.23 Ce ne sont que des noms que vous avez inventés, vous et vos ancêtres. Allah n'a fait descendre aucune preuve à leur sujet. Ils ne suivent que la conjecture et les passions de [leurs] âmes, alors que la guidée leur est venue de leur Seigneur.
53.24 Ou bien l'homme aura-t-il tout ce qu'il désire?
53.25 A Allah appartiennent la vie future et la vie d'ici-bas.
53.26 Et que d'anges dans les cieux dont l'intercession ne sert à rien, sinon qu'après qu'Al-

And desires only the present world.
 53.30 Such is the extent of their knowledge.
 Your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path,
 And knows best who has found guidance.
 53.31 To God belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth,
 That He may requite the wicked for what they committed,
 And reward the good with good.
 53.32 And they who refrain from major sins and debaucheries, save minor misdemeanors –
 Towards them your Lord is assuredly expansive in His forgiveness.
 He knows you best, ever since He created you from the earth,
 Ever since you were embryos in your mothers' wombs.
 Therefore, do not acclaim your own virtue,
 For He knows best who is truly pious.
 53.33 Have you considered him who turned away?
 53.34 Who gave a little and then withheld?
 53.35 Does he possess knowledge of the Unseen, and hence can see far?
 53.36 Or was he not apprized of what is in the scrolls of Moses
 53.37 and of Abraham, he who kept faith?
 53.38 That no soul burdened shall bear the burden of another;
 53.39 That man shall gain only what he endeavors;
 53.40 That his endeavor shall be noted;
 53.41 Then He shall reward him with the most ample reward,
 53.42 And to your Lord is the final destination.
 53.43 That it is He who causes laughter and weeping;
 53.44 Who brings about death and life;
 53.45 Who created pairs, male and female,
 53.46 From a sperm-drop, when discharged;
 53.47 That it is He who shall undertake the Second Creation;
 53.48 And He who is richest and most bountiful;
 53.49 That He is Lord of Sirius,
 53.50 And He who destroyed ancient 'Ad
 53.51 and Thamud, leaving no trace of them,
 53.52 And before them the people of Noah—assuredly more wicked and transgressing.

lah l'aura permis, en faveur de qui Il veut et qu'Il agrée.
 53.27 Ceux qui ne croient pas en l'au-delà donnent aux Anges des noms de femmes,
 53.28 alors qu'ils n'en ont aucune science: ils ne suivent que la conjecture, alors que la conjecture ne sert à rien contre la vérité.
 53.29 Ecarte-toi donc, de celui qui tourne le dos à Notre rappel et qui ne désire que la vie présente.
 53.30 Voilà toute la portée de leur savoir. Certes ton Seigneur connaît parfaitement celui qui s'égaré de Son chemin et Il connaît parfaitement qui est bien guidé.
 53.31 A Allah appartient ce qui est dans les cieux et sur la terre afin qu'Il rétribue ceux qui font le mal selon ce qu'ils ouvrent, et récompense ceux qui font le bien par la meilleure [récompense],
 53.32 ceux qui évitent les plus grands péchés ainsi que les turpitudes et [qui ne commettent] que des fautes légères. Certes, le pardon de Ton Seigneur est immense. C'est Lui qui vous connaît le mieux quand Il vous a produits de terre, et aussi quand vous étiez des embryons dans les ventres de vos mères. Ne vantez pas vous-mêmes votre pureté; c'est Lui qui connaît mieux ceux qui [Le] craignent.
 53.33 Vois-tu celui qui s'est détourné,
 53.34 donné peu et a [finalement] cessé de donner?
 53.35 Détient-il la science de l'Inconnaissable en sorte qu'il voit?
 53.36 Ne lui a-t-on pas annoncé ce qu'il y avait dans les feuilles de Moïse
 53.37 et celles d'Abraham qui a tenu parfaitement [sa promesse de transmettre]
 53.38 qu'aucune [âme] ne portera le fardeau (le péché) d'autrui,
 53.39 et qu'en vérité, l'homme n'obtient que [le fruit] de ses efforts;
 53.40 et que son effort, en vérité, lui sera présenté (le jour du Jugement).
 53.41 Ensuite il en sera récompensé pleinement,
 53.42 et que tout aboutit, en vérité, vers ton Seigneur,
 53.43 et que c'est Lui qui a fait rire et qui a fait pleurer,

53.53 And it was He who toppled the towns,
now in ruins,
53.54 When there enveloped them what enveloped.
53.55 So which of your Lord's bounties do you
wish to question?
53.56 Here now is a warner, one among others
before him.
53.57 The Imminent Event is at hand!
53.58 It shall have no revealer apart from God.
53.59 So is it this discourse that you find so
strange?
53.60 And you laugh instead of weeping –
53.61 lost in your frivolity?
53.62 Bow to God and worship!

53.44 et que c'est Lui qui a fait mourir et qui a
ramené à la vie,
53.45 et que c'est Lui qui a créé les deux élé-
ments de couple, le mâle et la femelle,
53.46 d'une goutte de sperme quand elle est
éjaculée
53.47 et que la seconde création Lui incombe,
53.48 et c'est Lui qui a enrichi et qui a fait ac-
quérir.
53.49 Et c'est Lui qui est le Seigneur de Sirius,
53.50 et c'est Lui qui a fait périr les anciens
'Aad,
53.51 ainsi que les Thamûd, et Il fit que rien
n'en subsistât,
53.52 ainsi que le peuple de Noé antérieure-
ment, car ils étaient encore plus injustes et
plus violents,
53.53 de même qu'Il anéantit les villes renver-
sées.
53.54 Et les recouvrit de ce dont Il les recouvrit.
53.55 Lequel donc des bienfaits de ton Seigneur
mets-tu en doute?
53.56 Voici un avertisseur analogue aux avertis-
seurs anciens:
53.57 l'Imminente (L'heure du Jugement) s'ap-
proche.
53.58 Rien d'autre en dehors d'Allah ne peut la
dévoiler.
53.59 Quoi! vous étonnez-vous de ce discours
(le Coran)?
53.60 Et vous [en] riez et n'[en] pleurez point?
53.61 absorbés [que vous êtes] par votre dis-
traction.
53.62 Prosternez-vous donc à Allah et adorez-
Le.

سورة النجم
وَالنَّجْمِ إِذَا هَوَىٰ (1) مَا ضَلَّ صَاحِبُكُمْ وَمَا غَوَىٰ (2) وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ (3) إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ (4) عَلَّمَهُ شَدِيدُ
الْقُوَىٰ (5) ذُو مِرَّةٍ فَاسْتَوَىٰ (6) وَهُوَ بِالْأُفُقِ الْأَعْلَىٰ (7) ثُمَّ دَنَا فَتَدَلَّىٰ (8) فَكَانَ قَابَ قَوْسَيْنِ أَوْ أَدْنَىٰ (9) فَأَوْحَىٰ إِلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ
مَا أَوْحَىٰ (10) مَا كَذَبَ الْفُؤَادُ مَا رَأَىٰ (11) أَفَتُمَارُونَهُ عَلَىٰ مَا يَرَىٰ (12) وَلَقَدْ رَآهُ نَزْلَةً أُخْرَىٰ (13) عِنْدَ سِدْرَةِ الْمُنْتَهَىٰ
(14) عِنْدَهَا جَنَّةُ الْمَأْوَىٰ (15) إِذْ يَغْشَى السَّنَدْرَ مَا بَعْشَىٰ (16) مَا زَاغَ الْبَصَرُ وَمَا طَغَىٰ (17) لَقَدْ رَأَىٰ مِنْ آيَاتِ رَبِّهِ
الْكُبْرَىٰ (18) أَفَرَأَيْتُمُ اللَّاتَ وَالْعُزَّىٰ (19) وَمَنَاةَ الثَّالِثَةَ الْأُخْرَىٰ (20) أَلَكُمُ الذَّكْرُ وَلَهُ الْأُنثَىٰ (21) تِلْكَ إِذًا قِسْمَةٌ ضِيزَىٰ
(22) إِنْ هِيَ إِلَّا أَسْمَاءٌ سَمَّيْتُمُوهَا أَنْتُمْ وَأَبَاؤُكُمْ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ بِهَا مِنْ سُلْطَانٍ إِنْ يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا الظَّنَّ وَمَا تَهْوَى الْأَنْفُسُ وَلَقَدْ
جَاءَهُمْ مِنْ رَبِّهِمُ الْهُدَىٰ (23) أَمْ لِلْإِنْسَانِ مَا تَمَنَّىٰ (24) فَلِلَّهِ الْأَخْرَةُ وَالْأُولَىٰ (25) وَكَمْ مِنْ مَلَكٍ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ لَا تُغْنِي
شِفَاعَتُهُمْ شَيْئًا إِلَّا مَنْ عِلَّمَ إِنَّ يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا الظَّنَّ وَإِنَّ الظَّنَّ لَا يُغْنِي مِنَ الْحَقِّ شَيْئًا (28) فَأَعْرَضَ عَنْ مَنْ تَوَلَّىٰ عَنْ
ذِكْرِنَا وَلَمْ يُرِدْ إِلَّا الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا (29) ذَلِكَ مَبْلَغُهُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ اهْتَدَىٰ (30)
وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ لِيَجْزِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسَاءُوا بِمَا عَمِلُوا وَيَجْزِيَ الَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا بِالْحُسْنَىٰ (31) الَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ

كَبَانِرِ الْإِثْمِ وَالْفَوَاحِشِ إِلَّا اللَّمَمَ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ وَاسِعُ الْمَغْفِرَةِ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِكُمْ إِذْ أَنْشَأَكُمْ مِنَ الْأَرْضِ وَإِذْ أَنْتُمْ أَجِنَّةٌ فِي بُطُونِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ فَلَا تُزَكُّوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ اتَّقَى (32) أَفَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي تَوَلَّى (33) وَأَعْطَى قَلِيلًا وَأَكْدَى (34) أَعِنْدَهُ عِلْمُ الْغَيْبِ فَهوَ يَرَى (35) أَمْ لَمْ يُنَبِّأْ بِمَا فِي صُحُفِ مُوسَى (36) وَإِذْ رَأَيْتُمُ الْمَاءَ الَّذِي فِيهَا (37) أَلَّا تَنْزَرُوهُ وَارْتَبَتْ رَأْسَهُ فَخَشِيَ لِلإِنْسَانِ أَنَّ مَاءَهُ كَالْحَمِيمِ (38) وَأَنْ لَيْسَ لِلإِنْسَانِ إِلَّا مَا سَعَى (39) وَأَنَّ سَعْيَهُ سَوْفَ يَرَى (40) ثُمَّ يُجْزَاهُ الْجَزَاءَ الْأَوْفَى (41) وَأَنَّ إِلَى رَبِّكَ الْمُنْتَهَى (42) وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَصْحَبُكَ وَإِذْ يَسْتَكْبِرُ (43) وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَمَاتَ وَأَحْيَا (44) وَأَنَّهُ خَلَقَ الزُّوجِينَ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَى (45) مِنْ نَفْثَةٍ إِذَا تُنْفَخُ (46) وَأَنَّ عَلَيْهِ النَّشْأَةَ الْأُخْرَى (47) وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَعْنَى وَأَقْنَى (48) وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ رَبُّ الشَّعْرَى (49) وَأَنَّهُ أَهْلَكَ عَادًا الْأُولَى (50) وَتَمُودَ فَمَا أَبْقَى (51) وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ مِنْ قَبْلُ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا هُمْ أَظْلَمَ وَأَطْعَى (52) وَالْمُؤْتَفِكَةَ أَهْوَى (53) فَغَشَّاهَا مَا عَشَى (54) فَيَأْتِي آلَاءَهُ رَبِّكَ تَتَمَارَى (55) هَذَا نَذِيرٌ مِنَ النَّذْرِ الْأُولَى (56) أَرَأَيْتَ الْأَرْفَةَ (57) لَيْسَ لَهَا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ كَاشِفَةٌ (58) أَفَمِنْ هَذَا الْحَدِيثِ تَعْجَبُونَ (59) وَتَضْحَكُونَ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُونَ (60) وَأَنْتُمْ سَامِعُونَ (61) فَاسْمِعُوا لِلَّهِ وَاعْبُدُوا (62)

Azaiez

Les versets 4 à 18 constituent une figure de composition où les unités en rapport deux à deux sont disposées de manière parallèle ABCD x A'B'C'D'. Cette construction a un élément central qui est une question et qui oriente le sens de l'ensemble. La cohérence de cette composition est renforcée par la présence d'une paronomase (*kuwa-kubra*) et une assertion centrale qui oriente le sens de l'ensemble:

4. إن هو إلا وحي يوحى
5. علمه شديد القوى (*kuwa*)

- a. ذو مرة فاستوى
b. وهو بالأفق الأعلى
8. ثم دنا فتدلى
9. فكان قاب قوسين أو أدنى
c. فأوحى إلى عبده ما أوحى
d. ما كذب الفواد ما رأى

(12) أفتمارونه على ما يرى

- a' 13. ولقد رآه نزلة أخرى
b' 14. عند سدرة المنتهى
15. عندها جنة المأوى
c' 16. إذ يبعثى السدرة ما يبعثى
d' 17. ما زاع البصر وما طغى

18. لقد رأى من آيات ربه الكبر (*kubra*)

Crone²

Q 53, *al-Nağm*, “The Star,” is a famous short *sūra* describing a vision of God or His angel. It consists of 62 verses in rhymed prose, with the same rhyme used in all but the last six verses, and it falls into four parts.

I. The disputed *ṣāhib*

This unit opens with an oracular verdict on the credibility of “your man (*ṣāhibukum*)” narrated in the style of a pre-Islamic diviner (*kāhin*) delivering a verdict in a dispute brought to him, if we may trust the tradition on *ǧāhili* Arabia.³ The verdict is that the disputed person is speaking the truth when he claims to have seen a heavenly being and is neither mistaken nor trying to mislead: he has indeed received a revelation from a mighty power. The *sūra* proceeds to describe how this revelation was imparted and concludes by rhetorically asking why the opponents refuse to believe what he says (53:1–18).

There are several problems in this section. Leaving aside the oddity of the *fa-* in verse 6, where it introduces an earlier event rather than a subsequent one, a major problem is the identity of the speaker; I shall leave that question till the end of part I. Another problem is the identity of the heavenly being imparting revelation to the disputed person. One takes the revealer to be to God, since the recipient is identified as “His servant” (53:10), but this identification has always been controversial, and a parallel passage in Q 81 identifies the power as the angel by the throne:

² A later version of this commentary has been published as “Problems in Sura 53,” *BSOAS* 78 (2015) 1, 15–23.

³ For *kāhins* (of whom there were several different kinds) acting in dispute settlements, see Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq*, ed. Ḥ. A. Fāriq (Hyderabad: Dā’irat al-Ma’ārif, 1964). The procedures are particularly well described in the cases at 114–6 (disputed presence at a *mağlis*) and 118–20 (accusation of adultery; also in other works). Ibn Ḥabīb strangely calls both cases a *munāfara*, a boasting competition, perhaps because honour was the issue in both of them, but real boasting competitions were about the relative merit and nobility of two men and normally settled by *hakams*, usually translated “umpires” or “arbitrators” (correctly, if by that one means judges whose verdict cannot be enforced). There were several kinds of them too. The key difference between *hakams* and *kāhins* was that *hakams* were knowledgeable about tribal law, whereas *kāhins* had knowledge of the supernatural. *Hakams* were chosen on the basis of their “nobility, truthfulness, reliability, leadership, age, dignity and experience”, as al-Ya’qūbī says (*Ta’rīḥ*, ed. M. Th. Houtsma [Leiden: Brill, 1883], 2:299), and many were chiefs. By contrast, diviners had opted out of their tribes and lived in isolation, or they were women, sometimes slave women, who stood outside the tribal system of authority. It was for their supernatural knowledge that they were chosen, and they were always tested for their access to the unseen before being asked to deliver a verdict. Ibn Ḥaldūn saw this very well (T. Fahd, *La divination arabe* [Leiden: Brill, 1966], 118, citing his *Muqaddima*, ed. M. Quatremère, Paris 1858, I, 196; trans. F. Rosenthal, 2nd ed. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967], 1:218 ff., on ‘*arrāfs* and *kuh-hān*). Diviners always delivered their verdict in rhymed prose (*saj’*). Al-Ġāhiz, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, ed. ‘A.-S. M. Hārūn, 2nd printing (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ḥanğī, 1960–61), 1:284, 289 f, claims that *ḥukkām* (enumerated by name) did so as well, thereby starting a confusion that has endured to this day.

here the oracular verdict on the disputed person's claim is that "This is the statement of a noble messenger (*rasūl karīm*), a powerful one by the firm throne whom your *ṣāhib* did see in the clear horizon" (81:19–23), presumably giving us the oracular verdict on the disputed person's claim again (the passage is preceded by an oath of the type used by *kāhins*, but is otherwise unexplained). Maybe there is no contradiction, for in the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere angels are sometimes manifestations of God, not least the angel of the throne; but it is at odds with the rest of the Qur'ān, for the Messenger devotes immense energy to distinguishing angels from God, stressing that they are beings created by Him, not His "partners," as the pagans reputedly claimed; in other words, they did not share in His divinity and could not do anything on their own initiative. This point seems to be unknown to Q 53. It is also noteworthy that the word used for the angel in 81:19 is *rasūl*. This term does indeed appear elsewhere in the Qur'ān in the sense of angel (e.g. 11:69 f. and 51:26 f., on how the *rusul* did not touch the calf that Abraham prepared for them; cf. also the angels of death as now *rusul* and now *malā'ika* in 4:97; 6:61; 7:37; 16:28). But normally the Messenger prefers the term *malak*. In his understanding a *rasūl* was a human messenger (*apostolos*), such as he claimed to be himself. He sometimes clarifies this by glossing *rasūl* as *nabī*, prophet (e.g. 19:51), or by using *nabī* alone (e.g. 7:157). He even asserts that all the *rusul* sent before him were human (12:109; 13:38; cf. also 2:98, where the *malā'ika* and *rusul* appear together as angels and human messengers respectively). It is his opponents who think that a *rasūl* is an angel (*angelos*) and who mockingly ask what sort of *rasūl* it is that eats food and walks about in the markets (25:7).⁴ The *rasūl karīm* also appears in the account of the exodus from Egypt in Q 44:17, where one takes him to be the angel of the throne (as in Q 81) identified with the angel of the Lord who accompanied the Israelites on their exodus from Egypt in the Bible (Exod. 14:19: Hebrew *mal'āk YHWH*, Greek *angelos tou theou*); but he is now understood as Moses. Here the Messenger is reshaping material that he seems to owe to Jews or Christians with a Greek-speaking past.⁵ In Q 53, by contrast, he seems to be sharing not only their terminology, but also their conception of the relationship between angels and God.

Another oddity is that the divine being descends to the human recipient of the revelation: he drew near and came down, *danā fa-tadallā* (v. 8), as we are told; the image is of a bucket being lowered down a well. The second occasion on which the disputed person saw the divine being is explicitly called a *nazlatan uhrā*, a second descent. This suggests that the divine being is indeed envisaged as an angel here. One would otherwise have expected the human recipient of divine knowledge to ascend to the divine realm. In fact, Fossum takes it for granted that

⁴ See further P. Crone, "Angels versus Humans as Messengers of God," in P. Townsend and M. Vidas (eds.), *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 316–18.

⁵ Cf. Crone, "Angels versus Humans," esp. 320–23.

Q 53:13–18 (the second vision) records an ascent to heaven,⁶ and one has to grant him that we do seem to be in the heavenly realm here; but contrary to what Fossum says, the Messenger never claims to have ascended to heaven in the Qurʾān but only in the tradition, in the light of which Fossum unwittingly reads Q 53:13–18 and 17:1. It is the Messenger’s opponents who undertake, or just read about, heavenly journeys: as the Messenger says, they would not believe in him unless he ascended to heaven and brought down a book (17:95). He sarcastically asks them whether they have a ladder for climbing to heaven (52:36–38) and challenges them to ascend on the heavenly cords (38:10),⁷ declaring that they would not believe even if God opened a gate of heaven for them so that they could go on ascending (15:14 f). He never speaks of going on such a journey himself. On the contrary, he repeatedly stresses that the book has been sent *down* to him.⁸ If a heavenly journey is indeed described in Q 53, the Messenger is once more sharing the conception of his opponents.

Yet another problem is where the first section ends. The traditional answer is at verse 18, but it is difficult to see why, for verses 18–22 are written in the same oracular style as the beginning, whereas polemics in a more prosaic style with long sentences begin in verse 23 and continue till the end of part II in verse 32. What is more, practically all of this polemical section is generally regarded as a later addition,⁹ so that if part I ends at verse 18, we are left with 5 verses constituting an unmotivated section of their own. It seems considerably more likely that these seemingly unmotivated verses belong in part I and should be read in the light of it.

The verses in question ask a famous question, or rather two: “Have you seen al-Lāt and al-‘Uzzā and Manāt, the third, the other? Have you [opponents] got males and He females? That would be an unjust division.” The precise significance of this hinges on the meaning of “have you seen” (*a-fa-ra’aytum*). It is normally held to have the sense of “have you thought about/reflected on?”, and this is certainly what it often means in the Qurʾān, as also in the forms *a-ra’aytum*, *a-lam tarā* and *a-lam tarā ilā*. But a more idiomatic translation would usually be “haven’t you seen” or “can’t you see” in the sense of “haven’t you understood” (e.g. 36:71;

6 J. Fossum, “The Apostle Concept in the Qur’an and Pre-Islamic Near Eastern Literature,” in M. Mir (ed.), *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 157. Similarly Th. Nöldeke, *GdQ*², 1:100.

7 On them, see K. van Bladel, “Heavenly Cords and Prophetic Authority in the Quran and its Late Antique Context,” *BSOAS* 70 (2007) 2, 223–46.

8 Cf. Crone, “Angels versus Humans,” 334 ff.

9 The exceptions are verses 24 and 25, cf. Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 1:103 (one of the many examples where current academic orthodoxy turns out to rest on one line in this book). Nöldeke saw these verses as forming part of the original composition, presumably because they retain the oracular style. But verse 24 makes sense only against the background of verse 23 (i.e. the polemical addition) for verse 23 assures us that the devotees of the female angels are following nothing but conjecture and “what [their] souls fancy” (*mā tahwā l-anfus*), and verse 24 continues this line of thought by rhetorically asking, “Shall man have whatever he desires?” (*am li-l-insāni mā tamannā*). Verse 25, on the other hand, is just a nondescript claim that this world and the next belong to God.

56:58, 63; 58:7), and the dividing line between seeing in the literal sense and understanding is often thin (e. g. 22:65; 31:31; 36:71; 105:1).¹⁰ Here we should probably take the question to be about literal seeing, for there is no doubt that visual evidence was an issue in connection with the pagan angels. “Have you seen your partners (*a-fara’aytum šurakā’akum*) whom you call upon apart from God?” the Messenger asks in another *sūra*, using the same expression as in 53:19 and clearly meaning seeing in a literal sense: “Show me (*arūnī*) what they have created,” he continues, “or do they have a partnership (*širk*) in the heavens, or have We given them a book providing them with clear evidence?” (35:40; similarly 46:4). The answer to all four questions is clearly negative: the unbelievers have not seen their alleged deities; they cannot point to any creative activity by the deities in question; they have no partnership in heaven endowing them with privileged knowledge; and God has not given them a book vouchsafing the existence of their alleged deities. In short, the unbelievers have no evidence at all. By contrast, we are told no less than five times that the disputed person *saw* the heavenly being, a point repeated in Q 81 (v. 23): “The heart [of the viewer] did not lie about what it saw” (53:11). The reference is clearly to seeing in the literal sense, and the five passages are closely bunched together: “Will you then dispute about what he saw?” (v. 12); “He also saw him at another descent” (v. 13); “His sight never swerved” (v. 17); “He saw the greatest of the signs of the lord” (v. 18). When the continuation asks, “Have you seen al-Lāt, al-‘Uzzā and Manāt?” it is accordingly somewhat artificial not to understand the question literally here as well: what the oracular verdict is saying is that *he*, the disputed person, has seen a divine being whereas *they*, his opponents, have never seen their false deities, because these deities do not actually exist.¹¹ They are empty concepts devised by the

10 Q 105:1 has, “Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant?” (*a-lam tarā kayfa fa’ala rabbuka bi-aṣḥābi ‘l-fil*). Compare Zuhayr in Th. Nöldeke (ed.), *Delectus Veterum Carminum Arabicorum* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1933; repr.1961), 106.9: “Have you not seen Ibn Sinān, how he favoured him (*a-lam tarā bna Sinānin kayfa faḍḍalahu*); he does not buy people’s praise of him for a price.” Obviously Zuhayr is speaking of what one should learn from Ibn Sinān’s example, but he presupposes that his audience has seen Ibn Sinān’s behaviour. As regards 105:1, an African elephant was brought by a man from Ayla to Anastasius I in 496, almost certainly as a gift from the ruler of Axum; an extremely rare sight, it was depicted in a papyrus (S. M. Burstein, “An Elephant for Anastasius: a Note on P. Mich. Inv. 4290,” in id. *Graeco-Africana* [New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas 1994], 215–17.) Compare the enormous impression made by an elephant sent by an embassy from western Sudan to Marrakesh in 1593, or that made by the Indian elephant Hanno sent to Pope Leo X around 1510 (M. García-Arenal, *Ahmad al-Mansur: The Beginnings of Modern Morocco* [Oxford: OneWorld, 2009], 2.) It is presumably the elephant seen at Ayla that *sūra* 105 is referring to, though it fuses it with some other story, identified in the tradition as Abraham’s campaign against Mecca; cf. 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 (2000) 2, 261–367.

11 Similarly Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans*, 1:100, cited in J. Hämeen-Anttila, “Qur. 53:19, The Prophetic Experience and the ‘Satanic Verses’ – A Reconsideration,” *Acta Orientalia* 58 (1997), 26, cf. also p. 30 (drawn to my attention by J. Witztum). Hämeen-Anttila plays it safe by interpreting the seeing as both literal and metaphorical.

pagans without any authority (53:23; similarly 7:71; 12:40); or they are misconstructions of genuine angels by the unbelievers, who wrongly give them female names (53:27). Either way, the pagans are venerating figments of their own imagination.

In the rest of the Qur'ān the Messenger frequently asks his opponents whether they were present at an event of which they claim knowledge, such as when Jacob died (2:133), or when God enjoined something (6:144); but in these passages he never claims that he was present or saw these events himself. On the contrary, he denies it (3:44; 12:102; 28:44–46). He has no knowledge of the occult (*al-ġayb*), as he frequently declares: the only reason he knows better than his opponents is that revelation has been sent down to him. One has to separate verses 19–22 from 1–18 in Q 53 in order not to see that he is saying something quite different here.

This brings us to the question of the identity of the speaker in part I. The answer cannot be God, for the speaker is addressing his audience directly (“Your man (*ṣāhibukum*) is not in error or misled,” 53:2; also 53:12). God does not speak directly to human beings; more precisely, he did speak to Moses, but He did not make a public statement, as the speaker does here: the verdict is addressed to a set of people who had doubted or denied the disputed person’s claims, and this rules out the voice being God’s. It cannot be the Messenger who is the speaker either, for one assumes him to be the disputed *ṣāhib*. The oracular section is spoken by an external authority delivering a verdict on the disputed person, whose visions he declares to be genuine and whose sanity he endorses: this evidently is not a role that the disputed person himself could fulfil.

Who then is the speaker? Who had the authority to sit in judgement of the Messenger’s claim to contact with the divine? In the rest of the Qur'ān, the Messenger regards himself as the direct representative of God and thus the ultimate authority on earth. But he does describe the recipients of the earlier book (presumably meaning that of Moses) as a source of authoritative knowledge second only to God Himself, and in a passage in which he himself doubts the veracity of his revelations, God assures him that “If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who recited/read the book before you” (10:94). Is he following God’s instructions in Q 53? The speaker would in that case be a Jewish or Christian *kāhīn*, meaning a person renowned for his knowledge of the unknown who used the techniques of his pagan counterparts. But in 10:94 it is the divine origin of what was sent down to the Messenger that the recipients of the earlier book can confirm, and God is not sending down anything to the disputed *ṣāhib* in Q 53. What the *kāhīn* is confirming is that the disputed person saw God, if perhaps only in the form of an angel, and received oral revelation (*waḥy*) from Him; we are not told anything about the contents of the revelation, nor is there any reference to a book. All this is so different from the manner in which the Messenger normally speaks that one wonders whether the disputed *ṣāhib* is really the Messenger after all. Did the latter have a predecessor who envisaged revelation as taking place by direct contact with a divine being rather than by a book being sent down (whether as a whole or in installments), who claimed to have enjoyed such contact himself, and who objected to the pagan angels, not

because they violated the dividing line between God and created beings (which appears to have played no role in his thinking), but rather because they were female? We do not hear of such a predecessor elsewhere in the Qur'ān, but we do learn that the Messenger had competitors in his own time, at least in Yaṭrib (2:79, where they share his concept of revelation as a book), so there is nothing implausible about the proposition that there were preachers before him too, including some whose preaching anticipated features of his own. If we accept the existence of such a predecessor, we could postulate that part I had come to form part of the literary corpus of the Messenger's community before the latter appeared on the scene, for example by incorporation in a book of oracular decisions. The Messenger would in that case have liked the piece for its relevance to his own situation and recited it as he found it without taking everything it said as reflecting his own experience or, more probably, without noticing that it was not consistent with his own claims. It is striking that his comments in part II of Q 53 say nothing further about the visions and revelations of the disputed person, only about the female angels. He is equally silent about the visions and revelations elsewhere in the Qur'ān, whereas polemics against the pagan angels abound. It suggests that he had no personal experience of the visions and revelations in question.

The alternative would be to accept the identification of the disputed *ṣāhib* as the Messenger and see the opening part of the *sūra* as reflecting an early stage in his religious life when he still shared the religious views of the pagans, including their non-exclusive concept of religious authority. But was there ever such a stage? With the exception of the Messenger's diminishing use of the term *rasūl* in the sense of angel, there is no sign of a transition from the one to the other in the Qur'ān. If there was indeed such a stage, one would have expected the Messenger to do his best to suppress it when he had reached his mature convictions; but in fact he highlights it in Q 53, seemingly oblivious to the implications. It is above all the apparent innocence with which he recites a piece endorsing ideas far from his own which suggests that he is reciting something old. But it has to be admitted that this solution is somewhat speculative. Maybe other reconstructions are possible.

(a) The Satanic verses

The tradition claims that after reciting "Have you seen al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt, the third, the other?", Muḥammad was prompted by Satan to insert the verse, "These are the high-flying cranes whose intercession is sought," as a concession to the Qurayš, who reacted by being very pleased until Muḥammad withdrew it. This story has usually been accepted as true by Western historians on the grounds that it is so unflattering to Muḥammad that no Muslim could have invented it. According to Peters, for example, the story is "indubitably authentic" because "it is impossible to imagine a Muslim inventing such an inauspicious tale."¹² But this rather

12 F. E. Peters, *Muḥammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 161.

presupposes that the quality of inauspiciousness, whatever exactly that may be, is an unchanging universal. Certainly, the story became problematic when the doctrine of prophetic infallibility was accepted; and today it is regarded as quite unacceptable.¹³ But why should this have been how it was seen back in the early days? The story is no more unflattering to Muḥammad than is that about Gethsemane to Jesus. Jesus prays that the cup be taken from him, in fear of death; Muḥammad compromises with his kinsmen, in fear of ostracism. Both display a human weakness that makes it easier for us to identify with them. The only problem with the story of the Satanic verse is that it does not fit its supposed Qurʾānic context. The question whether the opponents have seen the three deities is clearly posed in a hostile vein, and the continuation is sharply polemical. There simply is no room for a concession here. Presumably the exegetes (or the story-tellers who preceded them) were inspired by Q 7:200 or 22:52, on Satanic suggestions assailing the Messenger's mind, and picked on Q 53 to show exactly where the Messenger's mind had been temporarily subverted.

II. Polemics against the false angels/deities

Unlike the oracular part I, the prosaic part II voices views familiar from the rest of the Qurʾān, mostly in the form of polemics against the angels or deities of the opponents. We are assured that the alleged deities are just names that the opponents and their fathers have made up without authority from God and that the culprits are just following conjecture (*ẓann*, fallible human reasoning as opposed to revelation) and their own fancies (vv. 23–25, an unflattering synonym for the same); no angel (*malak*) can intercede without God's permission (v. 26); those who give the angels (*al-malāʾika*) female names are "those who don't believe in the afterlife" (*lā yuʾminūna bi-l-āḥira*, v. 27); they follow mere conjecture (*al-ẓann*), as we are told again (v. 28). God knows better and to Him belongs everything in heaven and on earth. He will punish those who do evil and reward those who do good, and He is forgiving of those who only commit minor sins. As noted already, the prosaic polemics of part II are generally regarded as a later addition, except for verses 24–25, and this makes good sense if we take part I to predate the Messenger and part II (including verses 24–25) to have been added by the Messenger himself.¹⁴ For example, he could have started his preaching on a particular day by reciting the oracular part I during the communal morning service (cf. 17:78) and then commented on it in the prosaic style that comes naturally in a sermon. He will in any case have thought of all of it as revelation from God (which is why it was all preserved together), for he saw the book he had received not just as confirmation (*taṣdīq*) of earlier revelations, but also as *tafṣīl*, a spelling out or explanation, and held both the verses

¹³ Cf. S. Ahmed, "Satanic Verses," *EQ*, 4:531–35; idem, forthcoming book entitled *The Formation of Islamic Orthodoxy in Early Islam: The Problem of the Satanic Verses in the First Two Centuries*.

¹⁴ Cf. above, note 9.

and the explanation to come from God: God established the verses first and then explained their meaning, as emerges from 11:1 (*kitābun uḥkimat āyātuḥu tumma fuṣṣilat min ladun ḥakīmīn ḥabīrīn*; cf. also 7:52). It is similarly God who has spelt out (*faṣṣala*) the types of food He has forbidden (6:119), and the verses or signs (*faṣṣalnā al-āyāt*, 6:126). As Sinai observes, only God can act as the exegete of the heavenly book.¹⁵ The Qur'ān is *tafṣīl al-kitāb*, an explanation of the (heavenly) book (10:37); it was sent down *mufaṣṣalan*, endowed with an explanation (6:114); the verses of the heavenly book were “unpacked” in the form of an Arabic recitation (*fuṣṣilat qur'ānan 'arabiyyan*, 41:3).¹⁶ The Qur'ān is both a translation and an explanation of the heavenly book, as Sinai remarks; but whereas some of the formulations suggest that the two were indistinguishable, Q 11:1 (cited above) envisages them as consecutive. This is the scenario proposed here in connection with Q 53:23 ff: first the Messenger recites the “translation,” then he proceeds to the explanation. The abrupt transition from the oracular to the prosaic style probably struck both him and his audience as perfectly natural.

III. Polemics against the miser

After the polemics against the female angels the sentences become short again and we are back in the oracular style of the beginning, including the peculiar use of *fa-* to explain an antecedent (v. 35). Once again the question, “Have you seen?” is asked, this time addressed to “you” in the singular: “Have you seen the one who turns back, gives a little, then hardens [his heart]: does *he* have knowledge of the unseen, having seen it?” This is plainly a continuation of the question whether the opponents have seen the three goddesses. Here the first “have you seen” should probably be understood in the normal Qur'ānic sense of “have you considered” or “haven't you seen how”, but what the next line denies is that the miser has actually seen the unseen. (The variation is undoubtedly deliberate.) The passage continues by asking, “Has he not been told what is in the scrolls of Moses and Abraham, who fulfilled [their obligations], [namely] that no [soul] bearing a burden can bear the burden of another [soul], that man shall have only as he has striven, that his striving will be seen, and that then he will be amply rewarded for it” (vv. 36–41). In other words, has the miser not learnt from the writings of those two prophets that people will be requited for what they have done? The implicit contrast is with people who think they can rely on the merits of their forefathers (presumably the Israelites, cf. e.g. Q 2:47 ff., 80). It is followed by some Qur'ānic commonplaces on how God is the bringer of death and life (53:44, where the Messenger uses the Deuteronomic word order also current among his opponents),¹⁷ as well as the creator of male and female, the bring-

¹⁵ N. Sinai, “Qur'ānic Self-Referentiality as a Strategy of Self-Authorization”, in S. Wild (ed.), *Self-Referentiality in the Qur'ān* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 127. (I owe my knowledge of this study to J. Witztum).

¹⁶ The formulation here is Sinai's (“Self-Referentiality,” 121).

¹⁷ Cf. P. Crone, “The Qur'ānic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection, Part I,” *BSOAS* 75 (2012) 3, 461 ff.

er of a second creation, and the destroyer of the people of Noah, ‘Ād and Ṭamūd, all of which one can read in many other *sūras*. The passage culminates in yet another question: “So what benefits of your lord will you dispute? This is a warner from among the warners of old” (vv. 55f).¹⁸

This passage is a mirror image of the first. Both contrast the fanciful ideas of the opponents with the certainty possessed by prophets: have you polytheists seen your alleged deities, has the miserly person seen the *ḡayb*? (vv. 19, 34). Why then do you dispute your *ṣāhib*'s claims, why do you dispute the benefits of your lord, who has sent you a warner? (vv. 12, 55f). The two units are built around the same themes of seeing and wrongly disputing, and the passage about the uncharitable person also echoes the first by re-using the same words: *nazlatan uḥrā* is echoed in *wizra uḥrā* and *al-naš'ata l-uḥrā* (vv. 13, 38, 47), *sidrati l-muntahā* is echoed in *ilā rabbika l-muntahā* (vv. 14, 42), *ṭaḡā* in *aṭḡā* (vv. 17, 52), *yaḡšā* in *ḡašā* (vv. 16, 54), and *untā* in *al-ḡakarū wa-l-untā* (vv. 21, 45). The piece on the uncharitable person is not nearly so striking a composition as the first oracular section, however, and it voices views that accords with the rest of the book, suggesting that it is the Messenger himself who is composing here. If he is citing an earlier work in part I, here he is simply imitating it, composing a continuation in the same style.

IV. Warnings of the imminent end

The last six verses retain the oracular style but introduce new rhymes in a manner suggesting a deliberate variation to wake people up. “The end is imminent; nobody but God can unveil it [different translations are possible]. So do you marvel at this talk? Will you laugh rather than weep, diverting yourselves? Rather, prostrate to God and worship!” (vv. 57–62). This sounds like the Messenger composing again.

Dye

Cette sourate entend répondre à l'accusation selon laquelle le messager serait fou ou possédé. Il s'agit donc d'affirmer l'origine divine de la révélation, et d'en fournir les preuves (même si le raisonnement est circulaire) en faisant référence aux « visions » reçues par le messager. Le reproche de « possession » adressé à un messager (pas nécessairement Muḥammad) n'est pas inhabituel dans le Coran (Q 23:25 ; Q 34:8 ; Q 51:52).

Les vv. 1–18, très ambigus, doivent être rapprochés de Q 81:15–29.

Vv. 1–2 : Le sujet de *hawā* est-il l'étoile, ou *ṣāhibukum*, comme le suggère Lutzenberg 2011: 282–284 ? Le parallèle avec Q 81:15–16 conforte plutôt la lecture traditionnelle. Néanmoins, le v. 3 concerne très directement *ṣāhibukum*...

¹⁸ The precise meaning of this is open to debate since no benefits have been mentioned, only punishments, but we can leave that aside here.

V. 5 : on considère généralement qu'il est question ici d'un ange à la force prodigieuse (Gabriel ?) qui enseigne la révélation au messager. Mais noter Q 55:2, qui dit que c'est Dieu (*al-Rahmān*) qui a enseigné *al-Qur'ān* (sans mentionner le destinataire de cet enseignement).

V. 10 : ce verset concerne Dieu (et non l'ange), ce qui pose un problème de composition, car les vv. 5–9 sont censés parler de l'ange.

V. 17 : l'usage de *ṭagā* est curieux. Que signifie « la vue n'a pas outrepassé les limites » ? Luxenberg (2011: 296) suggère de voir ici le syriaque *ṭ'ā*, « errer, être trompé », et il n'a peut-être pas tort.

V. 18 : quel est l'objet de la vision ? Rien ne contraint ni n'interdit de penser que Dieu est *l'objet même* de la vision. Le v. 10 ne dit rien de précis sur ce qui est révélé (et ne parle pas de vision) ; le v. 18 parle des signes du Seigneur, ce qui reste évasif. Un sous-texte possible est la troisième *Hymne sur le paradis* d'Éphrem, comme le note Tesei. J'ajoute un autre sous-texte (cf. Van Reeth 2010), également eschatologique, à savoir le *Pasteur d'Herma*s 67. 8. 1 (œuvre très populaire dans l'Antiquité). Il y est question d'un saule gigantesque auprès duquel se tient un ange immense : l'ange coupe une partie des branches de cet arbre ; il donne une branche, un rameau, à chacun des trépassés qui se trouvent sous l'arbre, et leur degré de sainteté et de pureté est déterminé par l'état de la branche qu'ils ont reçue...

El-Badawi

This *sūra* articulates the shift away from astrolatry-syncretism towards a renewed worship of God (*Allāh*) alone. Al-Lāt, Manāt, 'Uzzā and Shu'rā were associated with constellations worshiped throughout the Ancient Near East, cf. Venus-Aphrodite, Mitra, Sirius-Tishtria-Sopdet.

The vision of the speaker (presumably Muḥammad) in vv. 1–18 is aimed at adherents of these star cults, in order that they appreciate the signs (*āyāt*) of God, but not worship them. V. 1 relegates these heavenly deities into mere stars that were created stating, “by the star when it became [was created? Cf. Syr. *H-W-Y*].”

Vv. 19–30 condemn these adherents on account of their unfair (*ḍīzā*) identification of angels as females (ostensibly because they and their forefathers simply made it up), their limited knowledge (*mablaḡuhum min al-'ilm*) and their recourse to speculation (*ẓann*).

Vv. 31–56 warns and guides these adherents by demonstrating the wonder of God's signs, including the stories of Arabian and Biblical prophets. V. 55 shares most of the otherwise unique formulas articulated in Q 55, namely “so by which of the favors of your Lord will you...?”

The rhyme in vv. 57–62 changes along with the content, calling for the audience to turn away from extravagance and laughter towards weeping and worship.

The structure of Q 53 appears to be composite, with longer Medinan-style verses providing legislation and commentary inserted. This includes v. 26 which suggests at this stage that the “intercession/abundance” (*ṣafā'āh*, Syr. *šēp'ā*) of angels is still

possible, given God's permission (not their gender). There are at least 2 literary layers (for more see Uri Rubin, "Muḥammad," *EQ*):

Layer I: 1–22... 24–25... 33–62

Layer II: ...23... 26–32... (52?)

Carl Ernst (2011: 100–3) does not find Tabari's account of the "Satanic Verses" "*qissat al-ġarāniq*" consistent with the stylistic features and structure of Q 53. I agree.

Khalfallah

Il conviendrait d'exploiter cette sourate, notamment ses débuts, pour rediscuter des modalités du *waḥy* dans une optique comparée. A dessein, je laisse de côté la question des versets dits sataniques, couramment repris par tous. J'attire cependant l'attention sur la nouvelle explication, plutôt originale, que propose Ibn 'Ašūr, ainsi sur l'analyse de Djaït (2008) dans *La vie de Muḥammad*.

Le début de cette sourate fait allusion aux trois modalités exclusives, expliquées dans Q. 42:51–53, selon lesquelles la Parole d'Allah se transforme en message intelligible par les humains. Décortiquer ces divers cheminements pourrait aider à instaurer une nouvelle théorie comparée des modes de reproduction de la Parole divine, selon les trois religions monothéistes, mais aussi selon les autres formes de la créativité artistique. Retrouve-t-on ces mêmes modalités dans la Bible et la Torah, sachant que le Coran décrit la manière dont Moïse avait reçu cette Parole, et qu'il présente Jésus comme la Parole même de Dieu.

Au long terme, mon objet, je l'espère, est d'aboutir à des éléments de réponse, aux énigmes du transfert du vouloir-dire de Dieu en langage humain, ou le passage du *kalām nafsi* au *kalām lafzi* qui, autrefois, intriguaient les théologiens musulmans.

Fait abstrait et subtil, ce passage de l'état « psychique » à l'état verbal avait plusieurs raisons d'échapper aux contemporains de Muḥammad qui l'avaient accusé d'être devin, fou ou sorcier...

Rippin

These vision passages (vv. 5–12 and 13–18) tend to be interpreted in tradition as a vision of Gabriel as the divine messenger. The idea that they are visions of God has been suggested, partially on the basis of v. 10 and its use of *ilā 'abdihi*. It also makes some sense when put with vv. 19ff where the audience is asked if they have seen their own gods, al-Lāt, al-'Uzza and Manāt. This then makes the parallel suggested by some to the Mosaic paradigm and the suggested reference in v. 10 not to Muḥammad but Moses (and Deut 34:4) somewhat possible.

Sirry

The first eighteen verses are highly allusive and ambiguous in the sense that the identity of the subject and object is so unclear. Assuming that "your companion"

in v. 2 means “Muḥammad,” who is not going astray and that the words he uttered do not arise out of his own desires, who did teach him in “He was taught by one mighty in power” (v. 5)? Who is this “one mighty in power”? Is it God or Gabriel? Does it make any difference? Most *mufassirūn* are inclined to the idea that it was Gabriel who taught Muḥammad. However, the problem with this interpretation is that in v. 10 “he revealed to his servant what he revealed,” which seems to suggest that it is God who taught and revealed, because it is unthinkable that Muḥammad is called “Gabriel’s servant.” The object of Muḥammad’s vision in vv. 11–13 is also unclear. According to van Ess (1999), the object of Muḥammad’s vision was initially understood to be God, but later on was explained as Gabriel because of theological reason of associating God with a physical presence. In fact, this unnamed character identified simply with “one mighty in power” opens the possibility for theological differences. In addition, the inclusion of this passage in the account of the prophet’s ascension is difficult to understand because it is He who descended (v. 4) rather than Muḥammad who ascended. V. 13: Muḥammad saw him at another descent. But, again, who is the identity of “he” who descended and whom Muḥammad saw is unclear. This passage provides a good example of how allusive the Qur’ān is. It lacks words or units of information which might otherwise be considered essential to a clear expression of meaning, which gives the impression of being addressed to an audience which could supply the missing details to which the text only alludes.

Tesei

In his article in *QHC*², Luxenberg argues that the word *sidra* is in fact the Syriac term *sedrā*, meaning veil. He then proposes to read v. 16 as *id taḡšā l-sidratu mā taḡšā*, “although the veil covered what it covered” (2011: 294–5). Nevertheless, this reading is complicated by the absence of the suffix *-hu* after the final verb. In fact, one would expect the sentence to be *id taḡšā l-sidratu mā taḡšāhu*. It seems to me that, keeping the meaning of *sidra* as tree, we have an almost perfect parallelism with Ephrem’s description of Paradise found in the third *Hymn on Paradise*. In fact, Ephrem describes the tree of knowledge as marking the boundary between the two levels of Paradise (*Hymn on Paradise* III. 3). This image is recalled by the Qur’ānic expression *sidrat al-muntahā* (v. 14), while that of *ḡannat al-ma’wā* suggests that the scene occurs at the boundary between different (two?) sections of the Garden (the idea of the two levels of Paradise is possibly alluded to as the *ḡannatāni* mentioned in Q 55:46). At the same time, Ephrem states that the tree of knowledge veils and hides the sanctuary, namely the Holy of Holies (*Hymn on Paradise* III. 5). In this case, the sentence at v. 16 could be read as *id taḡšā l-sidratu mā tuḡšā*, “as the tree covers what is covered” (which could be better interpreted as “what must/ought be covered,” as Christian Lange suggested to me). In this case, the following sentence at v. 17 would mean that the visionary has looked at what is found beyond the tree, that is directly into the Holy of Holies. This reading is confirmed by the closing sen-

tence at v. 18, *laqad ra'ā min āyati rabbihi l-kubrā*, stating that the visionary has seen the greatest sign of his Lord.