

THE NARRATIVES OF “THE COMPANIONS OF
THE CAVE,” MOSES AND HIS SERVANT,
AND DHŪ ’L-QARNAYN IN SŪRAT AL-KAHF:
LATE ANTIQUE LORE WITHIN THE PURVIEW
OF THE QUR’ĀN

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Abstract

The Qur’ān’s accounts of the Companions of the Cave and the travels of Dhū ’l-Qarnayn strongly resonate with popular late antique Syriac Christian stories, namely, accounts of the so-called Sleepers of Ephesus and of Alexander the Great. Yet there is no evidence in the Qur’ān’s telling of these stories that it directly relied upon the specific form in which these stories have been preserved in Syriac. Rather, it is likely that oral versions of these narratives preceded their surviving written accounts and that the Qur’ān recalled aspects of these oral versions for its own purposes. Differences between the Qur’ānic accounts of the Companions of the Cave and Dhū ’l-Qarnayn, on the one hand, and their Syriac parallels, on the other, serve to highlight how the Qur’ānic telling of the stories under consideration is in line with and stresses the Qur’ān’s particular theological concerns. Similarly, the echoes between the story of Moses and his servant in Sūrat al-Kahf and motifs associated with Alexander should not be taken to mean that the Qur’ān is purposely creating a Moses-Alexander equivalence. Rather, the Islamic scripture may be read as utilizing familiar motifs in order to craft a new episode in the life of the biblical Moses, an episode that reports how Moses came to be prepared for his subsequent prophetic mission.

I. Introduction

Unlike the Qur’ān’s many reminiscences of the stories of the biblical patriarchs and prophets, found in both Meccan and Medinan *sūrahs*, in Sūrat al-Kahf the Arabic scripture somewhat unexpectedly also calls the attention of its audience to several stories not connected to the biblical or para-biblical tradition, which were nevertheless widely popular in Late Antiquity.

Outside of the Qurʾān, these stories are found only in extra-biblical Jewish and Christian texts. The Qurʾān recalls features of the Christian story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, echoes of Jewish and Christian stories of the exploits of a “Two-Horned” hero, most likely an evocation of the saga of Alexander the Great, and the extra-biblical story of the adventures of the patriarch Moses with his servant and with “one of Our servants” (v. 65), as the Qurʾān calls him; this account also recalls elements of the tales of Alexander the Great. Probably because this story of Moses is not to be found in the Bible, nor in rabbinic texts, Heinrich Speyer gave it short shrift in his ground-breaking book, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*.¹

While the stories of the so-called “Sleepers of Ephesus” and of the exploits of Alexander the Great appear in numerous texts in all the languages of late antique Christianity and in contemporaneous Jewish lore as well, the Qurʾān’s narratives involving them seem to many scholars to relate the most closely in the telling to Syriac narratives current in the first half of the seventh century CE,² and in particular to several metrical homilies (*mēmre*) in Syriac attributed to the fifth/sixth century “Jacobite” Christian writer, Jacob of Sarug (c. 451–521 CE),³ and as well to several Syriac versions of the ever popular “Legend of Alexander.” That Syriac homiletic texts and prose narratives should be among the closest contemporary, late antique literary locations in which rehearsals of the stories comparable to the Qurʾān’s recollection of the same narratives is to be found is not surprising. It has become increasingly clear in numerous recent scholarly studies of partic-

1. See Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Gräfenhainichen: C. Schulze and Co., 1931), 238–239.

2. While the story of the “Sleepers of Ephesus” is uniquely Christian in the form in which the Qurʾān recalls it, there is a tradition of “long sleepers” in Jewish tradition as well. See Pieter W. van der Horst, “Pious Long-Sleepers in Greek, Jewish and Christian Antiquity” (paper presentation, Thirteenth International Orion Symposium, Jerusalem, February 22–24, 2011). Both Jews and Christians recalled the story of Alexander the Great in various ways in their late antique traditions. For Alexander in Jewish tradition, see Jonathan Goldstein, “Alexander and the Jews,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 59 (1993), 59–101; Ory Amitay, *From Alexander to Jesus* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010). For Alexander in Christian tradition, see the appropriate articles in Z. David Zuwiwka (ed.), *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Christian Thru Djurslev, *Alexander the Great in Early Christian Tradition: Classical Reception and Patristic Literature* (London: J. B. Tauris, 2018).

3. On whom see Sebastian P. Brock, “Yaʿqūb of Serūgh,” in Sebastian P. Brock et al. (eds.), *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 433–435.

ular narratives that the biblical and Christian lore with which the Arabic Qur'ān is most familiar is most often seen to have a striking resonance with the texts and traditions of contemporary and neighboring Syriac-speaking Christian communities. The congruence of storyline and sometimes even of vocabulary, as we shall see, often strongly suggests that both Arabic-speaking non-Christians and Arabic-speaking Christians within the Qur'ān's purview inherited their knowledge of Christian tradition, in all likelihood for the most part orally, from Syriac-speaking interlocutors and co-religionists. But here is not the place to explore this likely hypothesis further.⁴ Rather, the point to be made now is that it is reasonable, albeit not exclusively as we shall see, to approach the study of the Qur'ān's accounts of the "Companions of the Cave" (*aṣḥāb al-kaḥf*) and Dhū 'l-Qarnayn in reference to the telling of their stories in Syriac homiletic and historical texts, both in terms of privileging the most likely channel of the currency of their stories in the late antique, Arabic-speaking milieu of the Qur'ān's origins and in the effort, hermeneutically speaking, at the same time to discern more specifically the Arabic scripture's didactic purpose in recalling and retelling the stories in a scriptural counter-discourse in accord with the Qur'ān's requirements of its own over-arching paradigm of prophetic revelation.

II. The Character and Structure of Sūrat al-Kahf

Sūrat al-Kahf is commonly taken in earlier, Western scholarship to have been first proclaimed in the middle Meccan period of Muḥammad's career as God's Messenger and Prophet.⁵ It is the period during which, in other more or less contemporary *sūrahs*, such as Sūrat al-Shu'arā' and Sūrat Maryām,

4. See in this connection, Sidney H. Griffith, "Al-Naṣārā in the Qur'ān: A Hermeneutical Reflection," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context 2* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 301–322; idem, "What Does Mecca Have to Do with Urhōy? Syriac Christianity, Islamic Origins, and the Qur'ān," in Maria Doerfler, Emanuel Fiano, and Kyle Smith (eds.), *Syriac Encounters: Papers from the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium, Duke University, 26-29 June 2011* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 369–399; idem, "The Qur'ān's 'Nazarenes' and Other Late Antique Christians: Arabic-Speaking 'Gospel People' in Qur'ānic Perspective," in S.H. Griffith and S. Grebenstein (eds.), *Christsein in der islamischen Welt: Festschrift für Martin Tamcke zum 60. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015), 81–106.

5. See *GdQ* 1.117–143. The position is not incompatible with the calculations of "mean verse length" in Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'ān: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 120.

one of the so-called *rahmān sūrahs*,⁶ one finds the Qur'ān's earliest, more inclusive listings of biblical and non-biblical messengers and prophets, and reminiscences of their stories, some of whom, like Noah, Abraham, and Moses, were already mentioned by name in the early Meccan period. It is notable too that these same middle Meccan *sūrahs*, and Sūrat Maryām in particular, where Jesus and his mother Mary are first mentioned, are also the earliest places in the Qur'ān in which one finds an appreciable number of reminiscences of the stories of biblical personalities that feature a high quotient of narrative coincidence with traditional, Christian lore about them, most particularly in late antique Syriac homiletic and exegetical texts.⁷

Within the parameters of its broad outline, which some recent scholarship analyzes as a ring composition,⁸ Sūrat al-Kahf includes reminiscences of several seemingly popular stories, which, given the mode of their introduction to the Qur'ān's audience, as I shall argue, must have been already current and widely known in late antique Arabia's store of religious lore. They are the story of the Sleepers of Ephesus, as it is called in Christian tradition (vv. 9–26); the parable of two men and their gardens (vv. 32–44); the otherwise unattested story of Moses in conversation with an unknown servant and travelling companion (vv. 60–82); and finally a recollection of the ever popular exploits of the late antique stories of Alexander the Great (vv. 83–98). The reminiscences are embedded in the *sūrah*'s overall mode of direct address to Muḥammad in the context of his relations with his audience and interlocutors. In the introductory verses to the *sūrah* (vv. 1–8) the emphasis is on God's address to His servant, Muḥammad, to whom He has sent down the scripture (*al-kitāb*), reminding him of his mission to warn and to announce good news to the believers; in particular, he is to warn “those who say, ‘God has taken a son (*walad*),’” about which neither they nor their fathers, the text says, have any real knowledge, albeit that they have much to say about it. What is more, God's servant is not grievously to

6. See Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen im Insel Verlag, 2010), 472–474.

7. See in particular the detailed analysis of Sūrat Maryam, with extensive bibliographical references, in Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 2/1, *Frümmittelmeckanische Suren: Handkommentar mit Übersetzung* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen im Insel Verlag, 2017), 584–658.

8. See in particular George Archer, *A Place Between Two Places: The Qur'ānic Barzakh* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017), esp. 107–192. Regarding the proposal of a ring structure for the *sūrah*, with vv. 50–51 as the center point, Archer notes (p. 108, n. 1) his agreement in the main with the view of Muḥammad 'Ādil al-Qalqīlī, *al-Handasah al-ilāhiyyah fī Sūrat al-Kahf* (Amman: Dār 'Ammār, 1986).

trouble himself about the effects of their non-belief in “this message” (*hādhā 'l-ḥadīth*, v. 6), that is to say, this occasion of his proclamation of the Qur'ān. The concluding verses of the *sūrah* (vv. 100–110) are similarly addressed to the Messenger, and they speak of the recompense due to those who “disbelieve the signs (*āyāt*) of their Lord” (v. 105) and those who “take My signs and My messengers as a joke” (v. 106). The Messenger is instructed: “Say, I am only a man like you; it has been revealed to me that your God is a single God. Whoever hopes to meet His Lord should do good works and he must not associate anything with the worship of his Lord” (vv. 109–110). That is also the import of the reminiscences of the stories of God’s notable servants of the past included in the body of the *sūrah*, the recollections of the stories of the Companions of the Cave, of Moses’s travels, and of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn in particular.⁹ Similar passages addressed to the Messenger, assuring him in his vocation and instructing him in the scriptural message he is to deliver, appear at intervals between the narratives in the *sūrah*: between the story of the “Companions of the Cave” and the parable of two men and their gardens (vv. 27–31); and between the parable and the stories of Moses with his travelling companion and the reminiscence of the “Two-Horned One.” The *sūrah* outline may then be displayed as follows:

Opening Address to the Messenger: vv. 1–8.

The Companions of the Cave: vv. 9–26.

Intervening Instructions to the Messenger: vv. 27–31.

Parable of Two Men and their Gardens: vv. 32–44.

Intervening Instructions; Adam and Iblīs: vv. 45–59.

Moses and Dhū 'l-Qarnayn: vv. 60–82; 83–101.

Closing Peroration: vv. 102–110.

III. The Qur'ānic Account of the Companions of the Cave

The beginning of the Qur'ān’s reminiscence of the story of the Companions of the Cave (vv. 9–26) opens with the Speaker’s rhetorical question addressed to the Messenger: “Do you [singular] reckon the Companions

9. For an overall discussion of the structure of Sūrat al-Kahf, with an emphasis on form critical analysis, see the bibliographically rich discussion in Hannelies Koloska, *Offenbarung, Ästhetik und Koranexegese: Zwei Studien zu Sure 18 (al-Kahf)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015), 21–51. See also the discussion of earlier models and the alternative, form-critical proposal of Marianna Klar, “Re-Examining Textual Boundaries: Towards a Form-Critical Sūrat al-Kahf,” in Majid Daneshgar and Walid Saleh (eds.), *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 215–238.

of the Cave and the inscription¹⁰ are marvelous among Our signs?” (v. 9). One may then distinguish two phases in the following narrative. In the first phase (vv. 10–20), the Speaker directly addresses the Messenger in the second person singular, in familiar qur’ānic phraseology, and He recalls the central elements of the traditional story of the young companions’ sojourn in the cave. In the second phase (vv. 21–26), the Speaker addresses several points of interest that had arisen in tradition about the details of the story, particularly regarding the number of companions and their dog, and the length of time they were thought to have stayed in the cave; He issues instructions to the Messenger about how to deal with the discrepancies.

The first phase of the narrative proceeds in two stages. The Speaker first recounts the central scenario of the story (vv. 10–12), recalling how the companions first took refuge in the cave, calling on God’s mercy and asking for guidance, and how God put them to sleep for a number of years, until He would wake them up, in order to know which of two groups know best about how to reckon the length of their sleep. Secondly, the Speaker presents the story of the youthful companions in accord with the familiar narrative pattern and vocabulary of the Qur’ān’s usual portrait of righteous individuals of the past who believed in their Lord (v. 13), who called on none other than God (v. 14), whose people had taken on other gods without any show of power (v. 15). So too the companions, the Speaker says, after their refusal to worship any other than God, exhorted one another to take refuge in the cave, where their Lord’s mercy would unfold for them and God would provide a way out of their predicament (v. 16). The Speaker then discloses to the Messenger the miracle of the sun’s movements over the cave’s opening while the companions were inside, specifying that this too was one of God’s signs (*āyāt*, v. 17). The Speaker assures the Messenger that if he had come upon the scene he would have fled in terror (v. 18). Finally, the Speaker recalls the drama of the sleepers’ awakening and their dialogue with one another about how long they were asleep, and about the adventure of their envoy into the nearby city, centuries after their having taken refuge in the cave.

In the second and concluding phase of the narrative, the Speaker addresses points of controversy, which had arisen about some details of the

10. There has been considerable discussion among both the traditional commentators and modern scholars about the meaning of the *hapax legomenon* in qur’ānic lexicography, *al-raqīm*. See Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 168, n. 567, and 171–173. See the most common understandings listed in Elsaid M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 377–378.

traditional story, and he instructs the Messenger about how to deal with them. He mentions that opinion was divided about how many companions there were. The Speaker says about the companions, “We alerted [people] to them so that they would know that God’s promise is true; there is no doubt about the hour, albeit that [people] dispute among themselves about their (i.e., the companions’) experience” (v. 21). The Qur’ān then recalls that some people wanted to put up a building over them; those who prevailed opted for a place of worship (*masjid*, v. 21). Regarding the differing estimates about the number of companions, the Speaker instructs, “Say, ‘My Lord knows best ...’ Do not engage in dispute about them ... Do not ask anyone’s considered opinion about them” (v. 22). In the next two verses, the Speaker reminds the Messenger not ever to say about something on his own recognizance, “I will do that tomorrow” (v. 23). Should he forget to mention his Lord, he is to remember, “and say, ‘Perhaps my Lord will guide me ...’” (v. 24). Then, depending on how one understands the Arabic text, either the Speaker makes the declarative statement about the companions that “they stayed in their cave three hundred years; nine are to be added,” or He reports declaratively that this is an estimate commonly given (v. 25). In the end, the Speaker tells the Messenger, “Say, ‘God knows best how long they stayed ...’ They had no protector apart from Him, and He has not taken any other being as an associate in His governance” (v. 26).

IV. The Companions of the Cave and the Sleepers of Ephesus

Scholars have long called attention to the Syriac telling of the late antique, Christian legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus as providing the principal point of reference in their search for historical evidence of the currency of the story of the Sleepers in the proximate milieu of the Arabic Qur’ān’s origins with its reminiscence of “the Companions of the Cave and the inscription” in *Sūrat al-Kahf*.¹¹ The earliest texts in which the Christian story of the Seven Sleepers actually survives from antiquity are in fact in Syriac, albeit that it may well have been first told in Greek.¹² And the earliest Syriac texts

11. See the review of scholarship in Sidney H. Griffith, “Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur’ān: The ‘Companions of the Cave’ in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition,” in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur’ān in Its Historical Context* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 109–137. See also François Jourdan, *La tradition des Sept Dormants: Une rencontre entre chrétiens et musulmans* (Paris: Maisonneuve and Larose, 2001).

12. See A. Allgeier, “Untersuchungen zur syrischen Überlieferung der Siebenschläferlegende,” *Oriens Christianus* 4 (1915): 10–59; idem, *Die westsyrische Über-*

which feature the story of the “youths (*tlāyē*) of Ephesus,” as the “Companions of the Cave” or the “Seven Sleepers” are always called in Syriac, are two recensions of a liturgical homily (*mēm̄rā*) attributed to Jacob of Sarug, a “Syrian Orthodox” or “Jacobite” writer, the text of whose homilies were popular in Late Antiquity; there is every reason to think that they were still being copied and performed in Syriac, in Christian liturgies in the seventh and eighth centuries CE.¹³

Reading the Qurʾān’s narrative of the “Companions of the Cave” in *Sūrat al-Kahf* in tandem with the story of the “Youths of Ephesus” in Jacob of Sarug’s Syriac *mēm̄rā* reveals a number of striking coincidences of words, phrases, narrative details, and topical outline between the two texts, the earlier Syriac homily and the later Qurʾānic narrative.¹⁴ The reader nevertheless readily recognizes that while *Sūrat al-Kahf* does not retell the story in all its original narrative details, it does recall particular moments in the transmission of the legend and it does so in its own distinctive Qurʾānic idiom; particularly noticeable is the paradigmatic, formulaic phraseology of the Qurʾān’s reminiscence of the earlier messengers and prophets in *sūrah*s such as *Sūrat al-Shuʿarāʾ*, *Sūrat Hūd*, and *Sūrat al-Aʿrāf*.¹⁵ Accordingly, the Speaker calls the Messenger’s attention to the Companions of the Cave and to the inscription, asking, “Do you reckon that the Companions of the Cave and the inscription are marvelous among Our signs (*āyāt*)?” (v. 9). The question assumes the Messenger’s familiarity with details of the traditional story and the Speaker goes on without further elaboration to address issues

lieferung der Siebenschläferlegende (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1915); idem, “Die älteste Gestalt der Siebenschläferlegende,” *Oriens Christianus* 6 (1916): 1–43, and *Oriens Christianus* 7 and 8 (1918): 33–87.

13. The texts are published in I. Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti sopra I Sette Dormienti di Efeso* (Roma: Tipografia dell R. Accademia dei Lincei, 1885), 18–29. One of the recensions is also published in H. Gismondi, *Linguae Syriacae Grammatica et Chrestomathia cum Glossario*, 4th ed. (Rome: C. De Luigi, 1913), 45–53. On the copying and manuscript circulation of Jacob’s homily on “The Youths of Ephesus,” see A. Vööbus, *Handschriftliche Überlieferung der Mēm̄rē des Jaʿqōb von Serūg*, CSCO vols. 344 and 345, 421 and 422 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CSCO, 1973 and 1980), vol. 344, esp. 51–52.

14. See pertinent, parallel passages quoted in English translation in Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 450–458.

15. See in this connection Sidney H. Griffith, “The Sunna of Our Messengers: The Qurʾān’s Paradigm for Messengers and Prophets; A Reading of *Sūrat ash-Shuʿarāʾ*,” in Angelika Neuwirth and Michael Sells (eds.), *Qurʾānic Studies Today* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 208–227.

of interpretation and differing opinions about the length of time the Companions spent in the cave. He says, “We are going to tell you their story truthfully” (v. 13).

The centerpiece of the qur'ānic narrative of the Companions of the Cave according to most commentators is found in verses 17–18, which give voice to the Arabic scripture's original contributions to the telling, features of the account not found anywhere else in writing in any other late antique texts that have survived. Addressing the Messenger, the Speaker says:

¹⁷ You could see the sun when it rose declining away from their cave to the right, and when it set, turning away from them to the left, while they were in an open part of it. That is one of God's signs (*āyāt*). Whomever God guides is guided aright; whomever He leads astray, you will never find a patron for him, to guide him aright.

¹⁸ You would reckon them to be awake while they were asleep. We would turn them to the right and to the left. Their dog would stretch out his paws at the threshold. Were you to come upon them you would turn away from them in flight; you would be full of fear of them.

The vivid details in this passage highlight the notice that here indeed was “one of God's signs (*āyāt*),” an affirmation that is typical of the Qur'ān's recollections of narratives of God's messengers and prophets, albeit that the text does not explicitly include the Companions of the Cave among their number. Rather, the story is presented as yet another instance of the Qur'ān's insistence on the revelatory power of historical reminiscence for those endowed with the wit to understand its message correctly. The verses leading up to the narrative suggest that the Qur'ān's telling of the story is in fact intended as a corrective to the understanding of it current among the local Christians, whom the Arabic scripture most likely has in mind when in an earlier verse it speaks of its role to warn “those who say, ‘God has taken a son’” (v. 4). This expression, which occurs in a number of other places in the Qur'ān, in passages addressing “Scripture People,” echoes language reminiscent of Syriac usage in late antique Christological texts, just as the Qur'ān's immediately following reminiscence of the story of the “Companions of the Cave” closely recalls the telling of the story of the “Youths of Ephesus” in Jacob of Sarug's Syriac homily on the same event. The Syriac dialect of Aramaic was the dominant, liturgical language of the Christian communities who lived within the purview of the Arabic scripture in the milieu of its origins in the first half of the seventh century. So it is not surprising that the Qur'ān's recollections of Christian lore should reflect the discursive patterns and even the vocabulary of the idiom in which it orig-

inally circulated among the Christian near-neighbors of the Arabic-speaking peoples of Late Antiquity. The same phenomenon is noticeable in the Qur'ān's reminiscence of the story of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn later in Sūrat al-Kahf.

V. The Qur'ānic Account of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn

The Qur'ān's reminiscence of the story of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn (vv. 83–101) comes as the final historical narrative in the *sūrah*'s evocation of several exemplary instances of God's intervention in past human affairs, including the story of the biblical Moses's apocryphal adventures with his travelling companions, a young disciple and a mysterious stranger (vv. 60–82). One might even structurally pair the memory of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn with the story of the Companions of the Cave to set up the *sūrah*'s reminiscences of the two stories of largely Christian hagiographical background as the opening and closing narratives of the whole of Sūrat al-Kahf. As in the instance of the story of the Companions, so here too the Speaker introduces the reminiscence addressing the Messenger and instructing him to share the memory of the “Two-Horned One” with his interlocutors, “They will ask you [singular] about Dhū 'l-Qarnayn. Say, ‘I will recount a memory (*dhikr*) of him for you’” (v. 83). And the Speaker goes on to tell the Messenger, “We have made a place for him on the earth and in everything We have given him a way forward (*sabab*)” (v. 84).¹⁶ Muslim commentators have for the most part

16. Interpreters have for the most part understood the term *sabab* to mean a “way” or a “means” of accomplishing something. It occurs four times in this pericope, three of them marking Dhū 'l-Qarnayn's progress on his journey. See Arne A. Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2004), 126–127. See also Koloska, *Offenbarung, Ästhetik und Koranexegese*, 146 and n. 524, rejecting the suggestion that in the present instance the term recalls “sky-cords” or “heaven's ropes,” as suggested in Kevin van Bladel, “Heavenly Cords and Prophetic Authority in the Qur'ān and its Late Antique Context,” *BSOAS* 70 (2007): 223–247. More plausible is the suggestion of Tommaso Tesei that the *asbāb* in the reminiscence of the story of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn refer to the “sky-ways” along which Alexander travelled according to the “Legend of Alexander.” See Tommaso Tesei, “The Prophecy of Dhū-l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83–102) and the Origins of the Qur'ānic Corpus,” in Angelo Arioli (ed.), *Miscellanea Arabica 2013–2014* (Rome: Aracne, 2014), 273–290. It is interesting to note in passing that in the present context, early and late Muslim commentators have associated the term *sabab* (pl. *asbāb*) with *ṭarīq* (pl. *ṭuruq*), i.e., “road” and “way,” including knowledge of the earth's ways and roads. See *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd (3 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1424/2003), 2.299; *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn li'l-imāmayn al-jalīlayn* (Saudi Arabia: Dār al-Salām, 1422/2002), 314.

identified Dhū 'l-Qarnayn with the historical Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) of Hellenistic times, whom late antique Christians had adopted as the legendary hero who by divine providence had historically prepared the way for the dawn of the Christian era.¹⁷ And as we shall see below, in its outline and in some details the Qur'ān's reminiscence of the "Two Horned One" is in fact broadly congruent with the narrative of the "Legend of Alexander" as it circulated especially among Syriac-speaking Christians contemporaneous with the Qur'ān in its origins.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Islamic tradition and some modern scholars too have also proposed other figures as candidates for the role of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn in Sūrat al-Kahf, most notably the biblical patriarch Moses, a suggestion to be discussed below.

The story of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn proceeds in three narrative steps, each one introduced with the recurrent, formulaic phrase, "He followed a way forward until, when he arrived ..." (*atba'ā sababan ḥattā idhā balagha ...*; vv. 85–86; 89–90; 92–93). The "Two Horned One" is first of all said to have followed the course of the sun westward to its setting "in a muddied spring" (v. 86), settling by the side of which he is further said to have found a people. In answer to God's question to him, he avers that he will punish the wrongdoers among them and reward the believers who do good deeds. Then the text says he followed a way forward until he came to the place of the sun's rising, where he found a people "for whom We had not provided any covering under it" (v. 90). Here the Speaker says only, "We have full knowledge (*khubr*) of what concerned him" (v. 91). Finally, the text says that Dhū 'l-Qarnayn followed a way forward until he came to an otherwise unidentified place where there were double ramparts, behind which he found "a people who were scarcely able to understand [his] speech" (v. 93). They urged him to build a rampart (*saddan*) between themselves and Gog and Magog, who were despoiling the land. The final portion of the narrative describes how Dhū 'l-Qarnayn complied with the request and with God's help built a wall (*radman*) against the marauders (vv. 95–98). The final verses invoke the familiar qur'ānic warning of the end-time, concluding with a remark that resumes the mention of the "memory" (*dhikr*) of the "Two-Horned One" that the Speaker had initially bidden the Messenger to recount to his in-

17. See especially H. J. Gleixner, "Das Alexanderbild der Byzantiner" (Ph.D. diss., University of Munich, 1961); Stephen Gero, "The Alexander Legend in Byzantium: Some Literary Gleanings," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 46 (1992): 83–87.

18. See the detailed analysis by Kevin van Bladel, "The *Alexander Legend* in the Qur'ān 18:83–102," in Reynolds, *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, 175–203. See also pertinent, parallel passages in English translation in Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible*, 467–471.

terlocutors. Proposing to leave Gehenna wide open on “that day” for the unbelievers, the Speaker describes them as “those whose eyes were in the dark about My memory (*‘an dhikrī*) and they were unable to hear” (v. 101).

Unlike *Sūrat al-Kahf*’s reminiscence of the story of the “Companions of the Cave,” which for the most part is phrased in a readily recognizable Qur’ānic idiom, there is only a scant echo in the recollection of Dhū ’l-Qarnayn’s exploits of the Qur’ān’s typical language of prophetism and messengership, save for the wording of his promise to punish the wrongdoers and reward the believers who do good deeds among those whom he came upon in his journey, who were living by the muddy spring at the place of the sun’s setting (vv. 87–88). Rather, the emphasis in the narrative is only briefly on Dhū ’l-Qarnayn’s journeys west and east and the peoples he encounters there, and more pointedly on the episode of his building the wall against the incursions of Gog and Magog in the mountainous region where he finds people who did not readily understand his speech (vv. 93–101). This narrative sequence of the Two-Horned One’s journeys to the ends of the earth and of his building the wall against Gog and Magog is the feature of *Sūrat al-Kahf*’s reminiscence of Dhū ’l-Qarnayn that for most scholars, strongly, if succinctly, mirrors in outline and narrative sequence the telling of the story of Alexander the Great’s exploits as it circulated in writing among the Syriac-speaking Christians of the Qur’ān’s late antique origins. As scholars have pointed out, this narrative sequence is particularly evident in the prose texts of the Syriac “Legend of Alexander” and in the so-called Syriac *Alexanderlied*, composed on the model of a Syriac *mēmra* written in the style of the above-mentioned Jacob of Sarug.¹⁹ Tommaso Tesei suc-

19. For recent scholarly discussions of the late antique narratives of the legend of Alexander the Great and the congruence between the Qur’ān’s narrative and that found in contemporary Syriac texts, see, Stephen Gero, “The Legend of Alexander the Great in the Christian Orient,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 75 (1993): 3–9; see in particular: G. J. Reinink, *Das syrische Alexanderlied: Die drei Rezensionen*, CSCO vols. 454 and 455 (Louvain: Peeters, 1983); idem, “Die Entstehung der syrischen Alexanderlegende als politisch-religiöse Propagandaschrift für Herakleios’ Kirkenpolitik,” in C. Laga, J. A. Munitiz, and L. van Rompai (eds.), *After Chalcedon: Studies in Theology and Church History Offered to Professor Albert van Roey for his Seventieth Birthday* (Leuven: Peeters, 1985), 263–281; idem, “Alexander the Great in Seventh-Century Syriac ‘Apocalyptic’ Texts,” *Byzantinorossica* 2 (2003), 150–178; Kevin van Bladel, “The Syriac Sources of the Early Arabic Narratives of Alexander,” in H. P. Ray and D. T. Potts (eds.), *Memory as History: The Legacy of Alexander in Asia* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2007), 54–75; idem, “The *Alexander Legend* in the Qur’ān 18:83–102”; Tesei, “The Prophecy of Dhū-l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83–102) and the Origins of the Qur’ānic Corpus”; Koloska, *Of*

cinctly states the conclusion: “Not only [do] the two Syriac sources and the Qur'ānic pericope evocate the same stories, but they also share the order in which previous traditions are organized in the narration. It is also noticeable that the three sources reflect how previous materials have been re-worked.”²⁰ They are re-worked to reflect the concerns of their authors and just as in the two Syriac texts, this is clearly also the case with the Speaker's reminiscence of the story in the Qur'ān, as we shall see.

The coincidence of storyline and narrative details has made it evident to most commentators, both ancient and modern, that the Qur'ān's Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, the “Two-Horned One,” is indeed none other than Alexander the Great, Late Antiquity's religiously appropriated, imperial hero par excellence. As Kevin van Bladel has put it, “The details of the Arabic account are all matched only by this Syriac *Alexander Legend*,”²¹ albeit that Alexander is not named in the Qur'ān, nor is the epithet “Two-Horned One” to be found applied to him in the “Legend of Alexander.”

While most scholars both early and late, both Muslims and non-Muslims, have concurred with the identification of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, the “Two-Horned One,” as Alexander the Great, there have over the centuries been dissenters from this view.²² Perhaps the most interesting counter-proposal has been the suggestion tentatively put forward by some Muslim and some Western scholars that the biblical Moses is the “Two-Horned One” envisioned here.²³ After all, the passage concerning Dhū 'l-Qarnayn immediately follows the account of Moses's travels with his servant and with “one of Our servants” in Sūrat al-Kahf, vv. 60–82. The suggestion of Moses as Dhū 'l-Qarnayn was no doubt prompted in the west by the Latin Vulgate translation of Exodus 34:29–30, recording the moment when Moses came down from Mount Sinai having received the tablets of the Law: “Cumque descenderet Moyses de monte Sinai, tenebat duas tabulas testimonii, et ignorabat quod cornuta esset facies sua ex consortio sermonis Domini. Videntes autem Aaron et filii Israel cornutam Moysi faciem, timuerunt prope accedere.” The phrase, “cor-

fenbarung, Ästhetik und Koranexegese, 144–159; Archer, *A Place between Two Places*, 142–161.

20. Tesei, “The Prophecy of Dhū-l-Qarnayn,” 277.

21. Van Bladel, “The *Alexander Legend* in the Qur'ān,” 181.

22. See the discussion in Koloska, *Offenbarung, Ästhetik und Koranexegese*, 153–159. For a selection of commentaries by Muslim exegetes in English translation, see Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London: Continuum, 2002), 227–237.

23. See, e.g., Abraham Geiger, *Was hat Muhammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* (Bonn: F. Baaden, 1831), 168.

nuta esset facies sua,” a seeming misunderstanding of the original Hebrew on the part of St. Jerome (347–420), was interpreted to mean that Moses’s countenance was horned, an understanding shared by the western medieval Jewish commentator, Solomon ben Isaac Rashi (1040–1105), and dramatically portrayed by Michelangelo Buonrotti (1475–1564) in his portraits of Moses in fresco and statue.²⁴ As tempting as the identification of Moses as the Qur’ān’s Dhū ’l-Qarnayn might initially seem to be, the exploits of the “Horned One” described in the Qur’ān’s pericope are undoubtedly more in accord with those of Alexander the Great, even if it may be thought in some quarters that the epic hero shares an epithet with the biblical Moses.

An interesting modern example of Islamic exegesis of the Dhū ’l-Qarnayn pericope that challenges the identification with Alexander the Great is the opinion of Muhammad Asad, who in the commentary on his translation of Sūrat al-Kahf makes the following remark.

It is precisely the Qur’anic stress on his faith in God that makes it impossible to identify Dhu ’l-Qarnayn, as most of the commentators do, with Alexander the Great ... or with one or another of the pre-Islamic, Himyaritic kings of Yemen. All those historic personages were pagans and worshipped a plurality of deities as a matter of course, whereas our Dhu ’l-Qarnayn is depicted as a firm believer in the One God: indeed, it is this aspect of his personality that provides the innermost reason of the Qur’anic allegory. We must, therefore, conclude that the latter has nothing to do with history or even legend, and that its sole purport is a parabolic discourse on faith and ethics, with specific reference to the problem of worldly power ...²⁵

While the literary historian will not readily accept Asad’s essentially theological interpretation of Dhū ’l-Qarnayn’s identity, his exegetical reasoning nevertheless does call attention to an important aspect of Qur’anic interreligious rhetoric to be brought up below, in the discussion of the Qur’ān’s counter-discourse to the concurrent narratives circulating among the “Scripture People” that also feature the “Companions of the Cave,” of Dhū ’l-Qarnayn, and of Moses’s travels with an unnamed companion. More immediately, the question that now calls for attention has to do with the literary and historical relationship between the seventh century Arabic and Syriac texts, the Arabic Qur’ān, the Syriac “Legend of Alexander,” and the

24. See Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Qur’ān and Islamic Exegesis* (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), esp. 26–34; idem, “Moses,” in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 248–265.

25. Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’ān: Translated and Explained* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), 452, n. 81.

Syriac *mēm̄rē* of Jacob of Sarug, in which the congruent accounts of the “Companions of the Cave” and of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn are included.

VI. Dhū 'l-Qarnayn and Alexander the Great: Dating the *Sūrah*

The textual evidence of the Arabic Qur'ān, taken together with the evidence of multiple texts in Syriac circulating in the first third of the seventh century, testify to the currency of the Christian stories of the “Companions of the Cave” and of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn among the Syriac and Arabic-speaking peoples of the Levant in the milieu of the Qur'ān's origins. The Syriac *mēm̄rē* on the “Youths of Ephesus” composed by Jacob of Sarug, in which the storyline of the account and notable narrative details are, as we have seen, congruent with the Arabic Qur'ān's reminiscence of the “Companions of the Cave and the inscription,” circulated widely in the Syriac-speaking, Christian communities, especially the “Jacobites,” of the sixth and seventh centuries.²⁶ Similarly, the Syriac “Legend of Alexander,” which was most likely composed around the year 628 CE, and the Syriac *Alexanderlied*, which was composed somewhat subsequently and in response to the political agenda of the “Legend,” seems likewise to have circulated widely within the Syriac-speaking communities from the first third of the seventh century onward. As Gerrit Reinink has put it, “[t]he Syriac Alexander Legend and the Syriac Alexander Poem had formulated different responses to the events of the first decades of the seventh century.”²⁷ And here too the storyline and notable narrative details are seen to be congruent with Sūrat al-Kahf's reminiscence of the story of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn.²⁸ The immediately evident difference between the Syriac narratives and the Arabic Qur'ān's reminiscences of the same stories is that unlike the Syriac narratives, the Qur'ān's reminiscences are more on the order of highly abbreviated references to well-known stories than they are narrative translations of them into another language. In its recollections of the stories, the Qur'ān can be seen simply to put its own construction of meaning on the memory (*dhikr*) of the familiar characters in the narrative, according to its own distinctive hermeneutic of religious significance. It remains, then, briefly to describe this hermeneutic of memory and narrative

26. See Griffith, “Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān,” esp. 120–129.

27. Reinink, “Alexander the Great in Seventh-Century Syriac ‘Apocalyptic’ Texts,” 168.

28. See Van Bladel, “The *Alexander Legend* in the Qur'ān,” and Tessei, “The Prophecy of Dhū-l-Qarnayn.”

recall, and to explore the relationship, if any, between the Syriac and Arabic texts, circulating simultaneously in the seventh century, in which the tales of the main characters are recollected.

There is no evidence in the Arabic Qurʾān that any portion of either the Syriac story of the “Youths of Ephesus” or the Syriac “Legend of Alexander” and the *Alexanderlied* had been translated from Syriac into Arabic; the narrative idiom in the Arabic scripture is characteristically qurʾānic. Nor is there any evidence of any textual relationship in writing between the Qurʾān and the Syriac texts; the Syriac texts are not as such “sources” for the Qurʾān, nor are they aptly described as textual “influences” on the Arabic Scripture. Rather, they are texts in a non-Arabic language that transmit stories that the Qurʾān recollects orally in its own language. On the face of it, the Qurʾān recalls two stories, which also circulated among contemporary Christians, which in outline and content are known to have circulated in writing in the first third of the seventh century in Syriac. The Qurʾān’s contemporaneous reminiscence of them within its own frame of reference is their first appearance in any form in Arabic. As in the case of other instances of the Qurʾān’s seemingly eccentric reminiscences of Jewish or Christian lore, the transmission from Syriac or from any other late antique language into Arabic is most likely to have occurred orally and not textually, that is, not in writing. After all, the Qurʾān itself is widely taken to be the first Arabic book.

In the instance of the Qurʾān’s reminiscence of the story of Dhū ʾl-Qarnayn, as we have seen, scholars have proposed that both the Syriac “Legend of Alexander” and the *Alexanderlied* were first composed in writing only sometime after the year 628 CE. On this basis, some scholars have then concluded that due to the congruence in outline and some narrative detail of the Qurʾān’s brief reminiscence of the “Two-Horned One” with the storyline in the much longer and more detailed Syriac texts that the Arabic Qurʾān’s reminiscence of the story could only have come about sometime after the year 630 CE. The scholarly reasoning would seem to be that the oral tradition in either Syriac or Arabic could only postdate the first appearance of the narrative in writing in Syriac, in the congruent form in which it is found in the Qurʾān.²⁹ The problem with this line of reasoning is that from a historiographical perspective and anthropologically speaking the more plausible sequence would have been that the story line and the

29. See in particular the argument put forward in Tommaso Tesei, “The Chronological Problems of the Qurʾān: The Case of the Story of Dhū l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83–102),” *Rivista degli Studi Orientali Nuova Serie* 84 (2011): 457–464.

major features of such a popular narrative as that of the “Two-Horned One” in Late Antiquity would have first circulated orally and would have only subsequently been incorporated into written compositions intended to play a role in the ongoing political scene in the Levant in the middle years of the seventh century CE.³⁰ Given this hypothesis, it seems further more likely that such was the case with both the Syriac “Legend of Alexander” and the *Alexanderlied*; their stories most likely circulated orally in broad outline and narrative detail prior to their being composed in writing for any particular political or religious purpose. Their simple storyline featuring Alexander’s journeys westward and then eastward, culminating with the barrier against God and Magog,³¹ which is at the heart of the Qur’ān’s brief reminiscence of the story of Dhū ’l-Qarnayn, would most likely have already have been current orally well before the composition of either of the Syriac texts in writing. In other words, the written compositions more probably made use of an already popular storyline in oral circulation in order to commend the verity of their several political and religious agendas. Therefore, there is no compelling reason to posit the year 630 CE as the necessary date *post quem* for the Qur’ān’s reminiscence of the story of the exploits of Alexander the Great. Given the wealth of pre-existing Alexander stories in Late Antiquity, one might more reasonably suppose that the basic storyline that the Qur’ān shares with both the Syriac “Legend of Alexander” and the *Alexanderlied* could just as plausibly have been in circulation orally in both Syriac and Arabic in the “middle Meccan” period of the Qur’ān’s origins as at any later time in the seventh century.

According to Islamic tradition and modern historical-critical scholarship as well, in its origins the Qur’ān was primarily an oral composition, even an oral “scripture” (*kitāb*), well before it progressed from “memory” (*dhikr*) to the status of a written “book” (*muṣḥaf*).³² This oral process of the Qur’ān’s

30. Here is not the place to develop this line reasoning in detail. See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000 [originally published Methuen, 1982]), esp. 136–152. See now the important study by Andrew G. Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur’ān* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), who emphasizes the fact that “a new paradigm, an *oral paradigm*, is needed in qur’anic studies” (p. 274).

31. For the record, it is interesting to note in passing that whereas the Qur’ān speaks of Alexander building a “rampart” or “barrier” (*saddan*) (v. 94), or a “wall” (*radman*) (v. 95), the Syriac texts constantly speak rather of a “gate,” “door,” or “entrance” (*tar‘ā*).

32. See in particular the work of Gregor Schoeler, *Écrire et transmettre dans les débuts de l’Islam* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002); idem, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); idem, “Writing and Publish-

coming to be makes it methodologically implausible to suppose that the composer of the Qurʾān's text in its origins would have in the process been inclined to consult any pre-existing, written text in any of the non-Arabic, late antique languages available in the milieu of the Arabic-speaking peoples of the seventh century CE. Rather, the evidence of the Qurʾān itself, which does not literally quote any one of the Syriac narratives of the "Youths of Ephesus" or any part of either the "Legend of Alexander" or the *Alexanderlied*, assuming that their stories are already well-known to its Arabic-speaking audience, strongly suggests that the transmission of the stories in Arabic came about orally and not textually. That the Qurʾān recalled the stories in its own idiom and in accord with its own distinctive paradigm of prophetic discourse, in large part meant in this instance that it re-constructed the message of the already currently popular and widely known late antique lore of the "Scripture People," circulating in the Arabic-speaking milieu of the Qurʾān's origins.³³

VII. Retelling Para-Biblical Lore in the Qurʾān

The Qurʾān's earliest reminiscence of distinctly Christian biblical and para-biblical lore comes first in the middle Meccan *sūrah*s, Sūrat al-Kahf and Sūrat Maryam, *sūrah*s that modern structuralist commentators list among those they call "chapter pairs." They note that in the instance of Sūrat al-Kahf and Sūrat Maryam, "at their outer ends they are tied by strong rejection of the Christian claim that God has a son (18:4–5 and 19:88–95)."³⁴ Within this broader context, the recollection in particular of the "Companions of the Cave" and of the "Two-Horned One" in Sūrat al-Kahf readily remind one of the Christian stories of the "Youths of Ephesus" and of the saga of Alexander the Great, both stories probably circulating orally in Arabic within the

ing: On the Use and Function of Writing in Early Islam," in Gregor Schoeler (ed.), *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 62–86. See too François Déroche, *La transmission écrite du Coran dans les débuts de l'Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Angelika Neuwirth, "The 'Discovery of Writing' in the Qurʾān: Tracing an Epistemic Revolution in Arab Late Antiquity," *JSAI* 42 (2015): 1–29.

33. On this point see Sidney H. Griffith, "Script, Text, and the Bible in Arabic: The Evidence of the Qurʾān," in the series *Late Antique and Medieval Islamic Near East* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, forthcoming)

34. Raymond Farrin, *Structure and Qurʾanic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text* (Ashland: White Cloud Press, 2014), 102. It is important to note that in both cases the word here translated "son" is not *ibn* but *walad*, more properly simply "offspring" or "child."

Qur'ān's purview and circulating in writing in Syriac in *mēmre* attributed to Jacob of Sarug and in the "Legend of Alexander" and the *Alexanderlied*, respectively. As we have seen, the storylines in both instances, in the Syriac texts and in the Arabic Qur'ān, are broadly congruent, while they are significantly different in narrative detail. The differences record the Qur'ān's re-construal, or re-direction of the meaning, of the two popular stories that it presumes were already familiar to its audience, both of which on the evidence of the Qur'ān itself were no doubt circulating orally in Arabic at the time of the Qur'ān's origins.

In the reminiscence of the story of the "Companions of the Cave," the first obvious difference is in the Qur'ān's initial reference to the story; there is no explicit reference to the "Youths of Ephesus"; there is simply the question addressed to the Messenger, "Do you reckon that the Companions of the Cave and the inscription are marvelous among our signs (*āyāt*)?" In context, the question arises in connection with the Speaker's concern about the Messenger's fretting over the behavior of those in his audience who would, to their peril, not accept what he had been preaching to them (v. 6). The Speaker then recalls for him the time "when the youths (*fityah*) took refuge in the cave" (v. 10). He recalls that they said a prayer, "O Lord, bring us mercy from Your presence and put our affairs aright for us" (v. 10). After briefly telling the Messenger how He had put the youths asleep for a number of years and having then awakened them, the Speaker says that He did this in order to know which of two factions were the best in computing how long the youths remained in the cave (vv. 11–12). The remark highlights the inter-communal, even polemical context of the Speaker's reminiscence of the popular story. He says to the Messenger (vv. 13–14):

¹³ We are going to recount their story to you truthfully. They were youths who believed in their Lord, and We gave them increased guidance.

¹⁴ They said, "Our Lord, Lord of the heavens and of the earth, we will never call upon any other than Him as a god; otherwise we would say something outrageous."

As the Speaker then evokes a verbal icon of the shifting sun and its shadows along with the disposition of the sleeping youths in the cave, with their dog at the entrance, He says, "That is one of God's signs (*āyāt*). Whomever God guides is rightly guided; whomever He leads astray, you [Messenger] will never find a patron for him, to guide him aright" (v. 17). The Speaker recalls accounts of peoples' reactions to the youths' experiences in an oral style of narrative discourse that readily shifts forms of address, person, and number, and displaces attention from the youths themselves to those who

on encountering their situation are said to have reacted in various ways. The Speaker remarks that “those who prevailed in their affair said, ‘Let us provide a place of prayer (*masjid*) over them’” (v. 21).³⁵ The Speaker then turns to recalling the controversy over the number of the companions, plus their dog,³⁶ as an unknowing and frivolous concern. He abruptly announces that the youths’ stay in the cave was for 309 years (v. 25). In closing, the Speaker’s instruction to the Messenger is (v. 26): “Say, ‘God knows best how long they stayed. His is the mystery of the heavens and the earth; He is the one who best sees and hears. They had no protector apart from Him, and He has not taken any other being as an associate in His governance.’”

One notices that the Speaker recalls the story of the youths in the cave in a familiar, qur’ānic idiom, most obviously perhaps in the notice that the sun’s movements relative to the sleeping youths’ disposition in the mouth of the cave were among “God’s signs (*āyāt*)” (v. 17), a remark that echoes the Speaker’s initial question to the Messenger, “Do you reckon that the Companions of the Cave and the inscription are marvelous among Our signs (*āyāt*)?” (v. 9). There is no more revelatory a phenomenon ever mentioned in the Qur’ān than one of God’s *āyāt*, which may be a natural event, a miracle, a person or persons, most notably, the careers of God’s messengers and prophets, and conversion stories of those who have foresworn polytheism for monotheism, such as Sūrat al-Kahf’s reminiscence of the story of the “Companions of the Cave.”³⁷ The Qur’ān’s reminiscence of their story is told in a discourse that is counter to that of the story’s recollection recorded elsewhere—in this instance most notably in the Syriac accounts of the “Youths of Ephesus.” The historical, geographical, and overtly Christian frame of reference, so much a feature of the Syriac tradition, is left out altogether in favor of highlighting recognizably qur’ānic themes.

The same is the case in the Qur’ān’s reminiscence of the “Two-Horned One” in Sūrat al-Kahf (vv. 83–101). The Speaker tells the Messenger that people will ask him about Dhū ’l-Qarnayn, and He instructs him to say,

35. This notice seems obviously to counter the Christian account of the construction of a *martyrium*.

36. Only the Qur’ān mentions the dog; the Christian, Syriac account speaks of an angelic “watcher” (*īrā*) stationed at the cave’s entrance. See Griffith, “Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur’ān,” 127–128. See George Archer, “The Hellhound of the Qur’ān: A Dog at the Gate of the Underworld,” *JQS* 18.3 (2016): 1–33.

37. Non-Muslim scholars in particular have not paid sufficient attention to the overwhelmingly important qur’ānic *theologoumenon* expressed in the designation of a phenomenon as being God’s *āyah* (pl. *āyāt*). See Binyamin Abrahamov, “Signs,” *EQ*, s.v. (2006).

“I will recount a memory (*dhikr*) of him for you [plural]” (v. 83).³⁸ And the Speaker goes on to say in the very next verse, “We have made a place for him on the earth and in everything We have given him a way forward” (v. 84). The text then proceeds to recall the three opportunities in particular, which in the Qur’ān’s narrative the “Two-Horned One” is said to have followed up on. Significantly, in the verses that come immediately after the account of Dhū ’l-Qarnayn’s construction of the barrier against Gog and Magog, just as in the Christian Syriac accounts, the Speaker’s thoughts turn to the turmoil of the end-time. His concern is with the trumpet blast that in the Qur’ānic view will announce the gathering of all humankind for judgment and with the fate of the unbelievers, “whose eyes are in the dark about My way of remembering (*dhikrī*) and who are unable to hear” (v. 101). The Speaker asks, “Have those who have disbelieved reckoned that they would take My servants instead of Me as patrons? We have prepared Hell as an abode for the unbelievers” (v. 102). His words recall the familiar Qur’ānic themes of the one God, of “the Day,” of the resurrection and the judgment. His way of remembrance leaves out entirely the Christian, Syriac, typological and apocalyptic vision of Alexander, in both the “Legend of Alexander” and in the *Alexanderlied*, which envision the eschatological return of the kingdom of the Romans, to rule the world from Jerusalem at the second coming of Christ, and replaces it with the Qur’ān’s vision of the *yawm al-dīn*. In this way the Qur’ān has almost literally provided what in another context Emran El-Badawi has called a process of “dogmatic re-articulation.”³⁹ It describes the process whereby the Qur’ān systematically re-appropriates, re-writes and re-interprets, or replaces Jewish or Christian expressions of belief that are at variance with its own strict monotheism and its rejection in particular of the Christian Christology of Late Antiquity, which speaks of Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God.

38. To interpret the multifaceted term *dhikr*, to mean a “way of remembering” seems justified in the context. For the variety of its meanings, see Arne A. Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic*, 104; Badawi and Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary*, 330–331. Note Asad’s translation, “I will convey unto you something by which he ought to be remembered.” See Asad, *The Message of the Qur’ān*, 451.

39. See Emran Iqbal El-Badawi, *The Qur’ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), esp. 5–10. While the present writer rejects the author’s application of his methodological concept of “dogmatic re-articulation” to passages allegedly quoted in the Qur’ān from the Gospels in Aramaic, the concept itself nevertheless provides a fruitful hermeneutical principle for understanding the fuller import of the Qur’ān’s distinctive reminiscences of scriptural and non-scriptural Jewish and Christian lore. See Sidney H. Griffith, “Review of Emran I. El-Badawi, *The Qur’ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*,” *Ilahiyat Studies* 5 (2014): 115–121.

VIII. The Qur'ānic Account of Moses's Journey

Recalling that some scholars have suggested that the epithet Dhū 'l-Qarnayn in Sūrat al-Kahf actually refers to the biblical patriarch Moses and not to Alexander the Great, or, alternatively, that it refers to both of them, we note that scholars have also argued that just a few verses earlier in the same *sūrah*, in verses often taken together as a unit of discourse with the Dhū 'l-Qarnayn pericope, the Qur'ān has seemingly substituted Moses for Alexander the Great in a story that recalls another event in Late Antiquity's widespread lore of the Macedonian king. The passage in Sūrat al-Kahf (vv. 60–64) speaks of a journey that Moses and his servant undertook in search of the place in the world where the two seas meet. When they arrived at a certain point in the journey, at a location called simply “the rock” (*al-ṣakhrāh*) in the Qur'ān (v. 63),⁴⁰ they realized that they had forgotten a fish they had caught, intended for their meal; the Qur'ān says that it had miraculously escaped back into the sea (vv. 61 and 63). Many scholars have proposed that this snippet of the larger Moses story in Sūrat al-Kahf (vv. 60–82) is in fact a qur'ānic echo of an incident in the widely reported, earlier tale of Alexander the Great, his cook, and a salted fish, which is said to have been mysteriously revived at one point in their journey together, in the waters of the fountain of life, a story repeated, among other late antique literary places, most proximately to the Qur'ān in the aforementioned Syriac *Alexanderlied* attributed to Jacob of Sarug.⁴¹ This narrative echo has in turn reminded scholars of the Alexander tradition's own perceived echo of comparable episodes in the ancient Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, and in the story of a revived, salted fish in the Babylonian Talmud.⁴² The suggestion is that the Speaker in the Qur'ān, as Jacob of Sarug had done earlier, “borrowed” these same motifs, found also in earlier narratives, and for His own reasons integrated them into His narratives of Moses's travels with his

40. Tommaso Tesei has suggested that the “rock” refers to the sacred rock of Jerusalem, the *even shetiyya*, now sheltered under the Dome of the Rock. See Tommaso Tesei, “Some Cosmological Notions from Late Antiquity in Q 18:60–65: The Quran in Light of Its Cultural Context,” *JAOS* 135 (2015): 29–31.

41. See Reinink, *Das syrische Alexanderlied*, Syriac text, ll. 170–197 (pp. 46–53).

42. See the discussion in Armand Abel, “Dū 'l Qarnayn, Prophète de l'Universalité,” *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves* 11 (1951): 5–18; Brannon M. Wheeler, “Moses or Alexander? Early Islamic Exegesis of Qur'ān 18:60–65; Van Bladel, “The Syriac Sources of the Early Arabic Narratives of Alexander,” esp., 58–60; Tesei, “Some Cosmological Notions from Late Antiquity,” 19–31.

unnamed servant, often identified in later Islamic Qur'ān exegesis as the biblical Joshua, son of Nun.⁴³

There are significant hermeneutical problems with scholarly hypotheses that suppose that the story of Moses's journey with his servant to the meeting point of the two waters (*majma' al-baḥrayn*) (v. 60),⁴⁴ where the fish they had forgotten along the way is said to have "taken its way into the sea" (vv. 61 and 63), actually constitutes a qur'ānic "reference" to the somewhat similar story of Alexander the Great's journey with his cook to "a spring in which there was living water," which, on his orders, his cook "approached to wash the [dried] fish in the water and it came alive and fled."⁴⁵ To speak of a "reference" to, or a "borrowing" on the Qur'ān's part from the story of Alexander, or to suppose that the story of Alexander was somehow a "source" for the Qur'ān's story of Moses's journey to the meeting of the two seas, suggests an intentional authorial or editorial choice to echo, or to draw on motifs from earlier narratives in the process of composing the Qur'ān, almost as if it were a library project, put together in a scholarly study. The problem is not only that the Moses story is not the Alexander story, which it resembles only in its recollection of a common narrative motif, but that the Qur'ān in its origins is not a textual but an oral composition, only latterly edited and set down in writing. That much said, the fact remains that the wide familiarity in Late Antiquity with episodes in the Alexander legend could not but have come to the mind of the Qur'ān's Speaker, who seems to have intended to invest the biblical Moses in the garb not only of the Jewish and Christian, biblical "lawgiver" but also in the corrective guise of a qur'ānic "messenger" and "warner," even a qur'ānic epic hero.

As it happens, Zishan Ahmad Ghaffar has discerned yet another instance of the echo of the Alexander epic in the Qur'ān, in Q al-Naml 27:15–44, in the Qur'ān's recollection of the biblical narrative of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1–13). Ghaffar calls attention to narrative elements and motifs also found elsewhere, in Jacob of Sarug's aforementioned *Alexanderlied*, which in Ghaffar's view seem to have given form to the Qur'ān's presentation of the biblical Solomon as a believing ruler in contrast to what he calls the *Herrschergestalt* of the epic ruler, Alexander, presented in the *Alexanderlied*.⁴⁶ Not insignificantly, as Ghaffar argues, pseudo-Jacob of Sarug's own purpose in composing the *Alexanderlied* was in all likelihood

43. See, e.g., Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, 2.294.

44. On the significance of the gathering place of the heavenly and earthly bodies of water, see Tesei, "Some Cosmological Notions," 19–29.

45. Reinink, *Das syrische Alexanderlied*, Syriac text, ll. 182–183 (p. 48).

46. See Zishan Ahmad Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtli-*

to support the political and religious program of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641), even creating an “Alexander-Heraclius typology” in the process, as G. J. Reinink had proposed.⁴⁷ In other words, at the time of the Qur’ān’s origins, the Alexander traditions were already widespread in the late antique intellectual milieu, commending lines of thought clearly critiqued in the Qur’ān, in reminiscences of the locally circulating, popular, and familiar stories.

It is interesting to note that following the story in Sūrat al-Kahf of Moses’s journey to the meeting of the two seas in the company of his servant and the episode of the dried fish, which is reminiscent of an event also recounted in the late antique Alexander legend (vv. 60–64), the *sūrah* proceeds with an account of Moses’s journey with “one of Our Servants” (v. 65), whom Moses begs to accompany. The interesting thing here is that just as in Dhū ’l-Qarnayn’s qur’ānic journey (vv. 83–101), the preceding, non-canonical account of Moses’s journey with “one of Our Servants” (vv. 65–82) similarly features three stages,⁴⁸ which recount three learning moments for Moses, along with the Qur’ān’s interpretation of each moment (vv. 78–82). In the Qur’ān’s account of Moses’s travels with “one of Our Servants,” unlike that of Dhū ’l-Qarnayn’s three-stage journey, Moses is presented as the disciple, not the master. While scholars have not so far found any scriptural or traditional accounts of Moses’s adventures with “one of Our Servants” in any late antique Jewish or Christian telling, the Qur’ān’s account does accent Moses’s humanity in accord with qur’ānic prophetology, thereby seemingly countering any tendency there might have been among the contemporary “Scripture People” or others to elevate Moses’s stature beyond the merely human.⁴⁹ In the end, broadly speaking, it seems not unreasonable to suppose that the very popular legend of the epic hero

chen Kontext: Eschatologie und Apokalyptik in den mittelmekkanischen Suren (Leiden: Ferdinand Schönningh, 2019), 75–110.

47. See the article cited above by G. J. Reinink, “Die Entstehung der syrischen Alexanderlegende als politisch-religiöse Propagandaschrift für Herakleios’ Kirchenpolitik,” esp. 280.

48. Marianna Klar makes this connection in a private communication and calls attention to the repetition of vocabulary in the two narratives. See her article, “Qur’ānic Exempla and Late Antique Narratives,” in Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qur’anic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 128–139. See also the remarks of Reyhan Durmaz, “Stories, Saints, and Sanctity between Christianity and Islam in the Middle Ages” (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2019), esp. 149–169.

49. Here following ideas discussed by Patricia Crone, “Angels versus Humans as Messengers of God: The View of the Qur’ānic Pagans,” in Philippa Townsend and

Alexander in its broad outlines of travel, suggested the narrative framework for the Qur'ān's counter-narrative of both the travels of Moses and Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, in both instances emphasizing their purely human stature and their providential mission, in accord with the requirements of the Qur'ān's own "*sunnah* of Our Messengers."

But a question has arisen in recent scholarship about the identity of the Mūsā whose story is recounted in Sūrat al-Kahf, vv. 60–82. Is he meant to be the biblical patriarch Mūsā or another, otherwise now unrecognized Mūsā, whose story was nevertheless well enough known in the late antique milieu of the Qur'ān's origins to be distinctly familiar to the Arabic scripture's original audience? Recalling the fact that in this *sūrah*, the Speaker effectively presents Mūsā as the befuddled disciple of "one of Our servants, to whom We had given a mercy from Us and taught him knowledge from Us" (v. 65, in the translation of Alan Jones), some scholars have cautioned that this Mūsā should not immediately be assumed to have been the biblical Moses. They reason that since his servile behavior and obsequious manner described here is unlike that described in the traditional lore of the biblical figure, his name might rather have been meant to be taken in this instance as a code name for someone else. He who is called Moses in this passage, these scholars suggest, might more aptly be identified as Alexander the Great, who was an ideal political figure from the past whose memory was cherished by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, the contemporary of Muḥammad. What is more, they argue, nothing of what is recorded about Mūsā in Sūrah 18 actually relates to the familiar, biblical Moses, but it does accord well with the standard, late antique Alexander lore. As for the "one of Our servants" who tutors Mūsā, he might most plausibly be thought to have been an angel, they suggest. Furthermore, these scholars point out that Mūsā is obviously portrayed as inferior in rank to the "servant of God"; he is rebuked by him and he is finally sent away—all of this amounting to conduct unbecoming a biblical or qur'ānic prophet and messenger. Mūsā therefore should reasonably be considered, so the argument goes, a pseudonym or by-name, most plausibly for Alexander the Great / Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, they suggest, the story of whose travels immediately precedes the story of Mūsā in the *sūrah*, and in the text the recollection of the story of Mūsā also structurally mirrors the preceding Alexander narrative, thereby providing an immediate point of reference for the Mūsā pericope

Moulie Vidas (eds.), *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 315–336.

in Q 18.⁵⁰ But why would this not totally implausible exegesis be the case? Why would the Qurʾān want to invest the biblical figure, or his namesake, in the likeness of Alexander? Why would the Qurʾān seemingly invent an otherwise unknown Moses, or subtly accord Alexander the Great the name of a well-known Prophet and Messenger of God?

Contrary to the Mūsā = Alexander hypothesis, it seems unlikely on the face of it to the present writer that the Mūsā named in v. 60 of Sūrat al-Kahf would be anyone other than the well-known biblical patriarch, named some 135 times elsewhere in the Qurʾān. Just because there is no counterpart or precedent for what is said of Mūsā in the present pericope in any known contemporary or earlier Jewish or Christian “source” or “subtext” does not of itself preclude his identity here as the biblical patriarch. Nor does the fact that the storyline seems to feature behavior unbecoming for one of the Qurʾān’s most prominent messengers of God mean that he could not be the prophet Moses, with the Qurʾān having its own reasons for relating his early experience as a disciple of an unexpected master here. Why could it not be the case that the Qurʾān, being a self-proclaimed inspired scripture, has here disclosed a hitherto unknown revelation about the early career of the biblical Moses, before the beginning of his apostolic mission, together with his brother Aaron, to Pharaoh in Egypt and what follows thereafter in the earlier scriptural narratives? The newly revealed episode, in which Moses is putatively tutored by an angel, “one of Our servants,” might then plausibly be interpreted to have been intended as a preparatory teaching moment, a prolegomenon to the account of his eventual commission as one of God’s most prominent prophets and messengers. One might well imagine that the encounter happened in the course of Moses’s biblically well-known sojourn to Midian and his wanderings there before his prophetic “call” (Exod 2:15–25). It was there too that “an angel of the Lord appeared to him in fire flaming out of a bush” (Exod 3:2; cf. Q al-Qaṣaṣ 28:29–30). The inclusion of the recognizable “echo” of Alexander lore in the telling of the story in Q 18:60–64, the journey to where the waters meet and the episode of the escaped fish, could then be understood most readily as the Qurʾān’s use of narrative motifs already familiar in the immediate cultural lore of its origins, namely, the motif of the journey experiences of heroes from Gilgamesh to Alexander. From this point of view, this narrative could more likely be characterized as a qurʾānic *praeparatio prophetica* for Moses’s

50. See this line of reasoning adumbrated in Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext*. See also the studies by Angelika Neuwirth and Dirk Hartwig, “Mūsā und sein Bursche,” and “Mūsā und der Gottesdiener,” in their forthcoming commentary on Sūrat al-Kahf.

scriptural mission, not unlike the role of the Qur'ān's non-biblical narrative of Abraham's engagement with his father in preparation for his mission as God's prophet and messenger (Q al-An'ām 6:74–87).

To paraphrase what Andrew Bannister has said about his analysis of another qur'ānic theme—namely, the seven qur'ānic tellings of the Adam/Iblis story, one of which actually comes in Sūrat al-Kahf (vv. 45–59)⁵¹—it is clear that the Qur'ān “does not simply lift,” as Bannister says, the tale of the “Youths of Ephesus,” or the story of Moses's travels, or those of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn and Alexander the Great's adventures, “verbatim” from pre-existing, late antique traditions that predate the Qur'ān's recollections of them. Rather, one might say that the Qur'ān's Speaker fishes from a “common pool of oral tradition,” “shaping” the well-known stories found there for His own purposes, with the result that each of the accounts is as qur'ānic as it once was biblical, para-biblical, hagiographical, or epical.⁵² The “common pool of oral tradition” of which Bannister speaks includes a collection of narrative motifs and modes of expression, common in the late antique religious narratives, which the Qur'ān had within its purview at its origins. It recollects earlier stories only in the terms of its own distinctive narrative idiom, thereby investing the popular lore with its own interpretive construction of meaning. The Qur'ān sets aright what it regards as wrong or misleading understandings of tradition by others within its milieu. The traditional stories would have furnished the only narrative idiom readily available to the Speaker of the oral Qur'ān, who chose to promulgate a distinctive message of warning and proclamation to the Arabic-speaking peoples in the first third of the seventh century CE.

In the case of the Moses pericope in Sūrat al-Kahf, scholars have noticed, as explained above, that the elements of the Alexander Legend recollected in the *sūrah* reflect narrative patterns of the legend also found in near-contemporary compositions in Syriac attributed to Jacob of Sarug. It has been argued in particular that the Syriac *Alexanderlied* attributed to Jacob reflects the contemporary use of the legend in support of the religio-political agenda of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, whose reign was coeval with the years of the Qur'ān's origins.⁵³ The contemporary political relevance of the Alexander Legend suggests to some scholars in turn that the prom-

51. See Tommaso Tesei, “The Fall of Iblis and its Enochic Background,” in T. Kadari, V. Tohar, M. Poorthuis, and A. Houtman (eds.), *Stories and Traditions in Transformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 66–81; Marianna Klar, “An Exploration of the Qur'ānic Fall of Iblis in the Wider Context of *Sūrat al Kahf*,” unpublished typescript.

52. Bannister, *The Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an*, 271.

53. See the references in n. 19 above.

inence of Alexander motifs in the Moses pericope in Sūrat al-Kahf reflects the Qurʾān's own awareness of the political situation in the Romano-Per-sian milieu of its origins.⁵⁴ While this is a plausible historical interpretation, it is unclear why it would also plausibly suggest that there must have been a Mūsā other than the biblical Moses as the recipient of the tutelage of “one of Our Servants” in the narrative. Rather, the Qurʾān employs the Alexander motifs in order to highlight the epic stature of God's Messenger Moses in contemporary terms as leader of the people on their journey out of servi-tude, recipient of the Torah, and hero on the order of both Alexander of old and perhaps even the emperor Heraclius.

IX. Concluding Remarks

Sūrat al-Kahf, together with its companion, Sūrat Maryam, is noticeably distinctive in that already in the middle Meccan period it calls the atten-tion of the Arabic Qurʾān's original audience to recognizably Jewish and Christian themes, recalling popular biblical, para-biblical, and hagiog-raphical narratives and recasting them in notably qurʾānic terms that re-reflect in particular the Arabic scripture's signature idiom of prophecy and messengership. Whereas Sūrat Maryam deftly weaves its reminiscences of the Gospel narratives of Zachary, John the Baptist, Jesus and his mother Mary, as they circulated in the Christian lore of Late Antiquity, into the Qurʾān's distinctive, interpretive, narrative framework of the sequence of God's messengers and prophets, Sūrat al-Kahf recalls the non-scriptural stories of three sets of persons whose renown was widespread among late antique Scripture People, and presents them as distinctly qurʾānic personae. Interestingly, with the exception of Moses, no personal names are given in the *sūrah*. We hear the story of the “Companions of the Cave,” the “youths who believed in their Lord” (vv. 10 and 13); they are not called the “Youths of Ephesus,” as in Christian tradition, nor are their names mentioned, as they are in Christian and later Islamic traditions. We hear the story of “two men” and their God-given gardens (v. 32), but there is no hint of a textual echo of the Gospel parables, which modern scholars are reminded of. We hear a non-biblical story of Moses and of his journey to the meeting of the two seas, like Alexander the Great after him, during which a presumably dead fish escapes alive into the water (vv. 60–64). As we have seen, it re-minds modern scholars of a similar story told in the late antique lore of the Macedonian king, but there is no hint in the telling of a textual relationship

54. See the references in n. 50 above.

between the stories. Then there is the story of Moses's travels with "one of Our servants" (vv. 65–82), which some modern scholars again want to connect with the lore of Alexander the Great,⁵⁵ albeit that there is no evident textual relationship between the two stories, nor is there any mention of al-Khidr, whom later Islamic tradition identifies as the "servant of God" accompanied by Moses. Finally, we hear the story of the "Two-Horned One," which is plausibly seen as a reminiscence of the travels and exploits of Alexander the Great, but again, without mention of his name.

What the reader of the popular stories reminisced in Sūrat al-Kahf does readily notice is that none of the dramatis personae, with the exception of Moses, is known as a messenger or prophet in the Qur'ān, albeit that the language of the *sūrah* is replete with the repetitive, even formulaic vocabulary of the Qur'ān's distinctive "prophetology," terms such as "scripture" (*al-kitāb*), "warning" (verb: *andhara*), "announcing" (verb: *bashshara*), "We will tell you their story" (*naḥnu naquṣṣu 'alayka naba'ahum*), "remembrance" (*dhikrā*), "God's signs" (*āyāt allāh*), and more. In the central framing passage there is even the following verse: "We do not dispatch messengers except as warners and announcers; they also debate with those who falsely disbelieve, thereby weakening the truth and taking My signs and what I put forth in warning as a mockery" (v. 56). Clearly, the Qur'ān intends that the aura of prophetism and messengership should hover over the "believing youths," "Our servant," and Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, even if they are not scriptural personalities. Perhaps the purpose was on the one hand to divest the recollection of these well-known personae of their Christian associations, the better to commend the qur'ānic message, and, on the other hand, to demythologize, as it were, tales that might otherwise, in the Qur'ān's estimation, readily invite infidel magical or ritual observances, such as reverence for martyrs' bones in the case of the "Companions of the Cave," or the virtual deification of the hero Alexander the Great in the story of the "Two-Horned One."

When all is said and done, it has become clear that the narratives of the "Companions of the Cave," of Moses's travels, and of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn in Sūrat al-Kahf can only be passably well understood relative to their places within the *sūrah*'s overall rhetorical design. It is furthermore also the case that for hermeneutical reasons, the message of Sūrat al-Kahf is itself best understood when it is read as a sequel to that of its companion, Sūrat Maryam, which precedes it according to both the Nöldeke and Egyptian chronologies of the *sūrahs*, albeit that their order in the canonical *muṣḥaf* is the reverse. Together the two *sūrahs* present the Qur'ān's Meccan, correc-

55. See Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible*, 465.

tive response to the popular kerygma of Christianity in the Arabic-speaking milieu of its origins. In its Medinan phase, the Qur'ān turns its attention more polemically to the rebuttal of the doctrinal and practical claims of those among the "Israelites" (*banī isrā'il*) whom it now calls "Jews" and "Nazarenes" (*an-naṣārā*).⁵⁶

56. See in this connection, Sidney H. Griffith, "*Al-Naṣārā* in the Qur'ān: A Hermeneutical Reflection"; idem, "The Qur'ān's 'Nazarenes' and Other Late Antique Christians."